

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR NATION-BUILDING: NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *The focus of this paper was to show the instrumentality of youth empowerment to nation-building in Nigeria. It observed that the National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC), the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) as agencies of youth empowerment had accelerated the socio-economic development of the country. The NYSC established by Decree 24 of 1973 encouraged members of the Corps to seek employment all over the country, thus promoting occupational mobility. Participants were exposed to the mode of living of the people in different parts of the country with a view to removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance and confirming, at first hand, the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups. The NDE ran the National Youth Employment and Vocational Skills Development Programme, Small Scale Industries and Graduate Employment Programme, Agriculture Sector Employment Programme and Special Public Works Programme. NAPEP had employed, over 1,500,000 youths under the Capacity Acquisition Programme and 1,000,000 unemployed graduates under the Mandatory Acquisition Programme. Providing employment to youths was a prudent way of making them better not bitter and therefore fighting crimes often associated with idle hands. The paper recommended that more Nigerian youths be trained as craftsmen and technicians to make for self-reliance. Indeed, the presence of unemployed youths could pose serious challenges to existing peace in any community.*

KEYWORDS: Empowerment, Employment, Nation-building, NDE, NAPEP Youths.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian youths constitute the most active segment of the entire population of over 140 million people (2006 census figure). They are the social engineers and a veritable channel or catalyst for positive changes in the rural community, in school or urban setting. Their energy, vigour, inventiveness, character and orientation define the pace of development and security of any society. The focus of this paper was to show the instrumentality of youth empowerment to nation-building in Nigeria. These youths need love and a fair share of the national wealth. They are people with high hopes, great expectations from parents and elders in the society. Unfortunately, Nigerian youths had been exported to the most trying time imaginable. Millions of them have been left wallowing in poverty as they roam the streets of major cities in search of non-existent jobs and opportunities. Several graduates of tertiary institutions have been forced into crimes and criminality, and those of them who are not very physically daring have taken to frauds and all sorts of shady pre-occupation. The young women in this frustrated class have taken to disguised prostitution or full-blown harlotry.

At this point, it is necessary to examine the concept of youth as a prelude to an appraisal of this social group. It should be noted that differences exist in perception of the term “youth” by governments, international organizations, and the public. However, the term “youth” generally implies a period of life between childhood and adulthood. In most countries of the world, adult

status is officially attained at the age of 21 years. Non-the-less, in many African countries, the ability of a person to enter into or sustain a marriage signifies to the public that one has attained adulthood. Hence, chronological age alone does not determine an adult status. It is noteworthy that with increasing modernization, there is a tendency for most African countries, at least in their official transactions, to follow the United Nations or the British Commonwealth definitions of youths as people within the age of 15 - 24 and 15 - 29 years respectively (Egbue, 2006). Quite appreciably, susceptibility of youth to parental and societal influences, which shape their lives and determine their well-being, constitutes a major characteristic of youth. This implies a period of life between childhood and adulthood. This issue has been examined by Gelles (1987), Wallerstein and Kelly (1992).

Accordingly, a large part of the problem of youths in all societies hinges on this factor: There is the tendency to associate youth sub-culture with deviance. Igbo (2000) describes this situation as one in which they are socialized into and committed to a set of values, standards, expectations and behaviour pattern, distinguishable from those of adult society. Commenting on this, Jupp (1970) observes that youth sub-culture (contra-culture existing mainly as a reaction against the dominant culture) rejects the adult world; it is confined effectively to those between puberty and thirty; it creates its own leaders and symbols; it demands "liberation," requires less and less adult cooperation for its sub-society to function; it frightens the adult world. In Jupp's view, the obvious divergence between youth sub-culture and the adult world tends to be quite bewildering for adults. This situation, of course, signifies what is generally termed "generation gap". Igbo finds this situation very worrying because the youths not only reject indigenous articles of clothing and other symbols of national and ethnic identity, but also manifest a wholesale rejection of Nigerian cultural beliefs. Indeed, youth sub-culture, a result of sustained frustration, tends to be delinquent. In this connection, Alaezi (1989) points out that the learner's rejection of the society will result in the learner's passivity, inaction in contributing to societal development, his withdrawal behaviour from social responsibility and service and his perception of the society as not contributing anything to his well-being, progress and social living. Igbo observes that areas of youth's rejection include values of community ownership, assistance to others as demonstrated in extended family relationships, sanctity of human life and female chastity before marriage. According to Egbue (2006) while seeking independence from adult expectations and demands, the youths enter into what may be regarded as a form of almost compulsive conformity and loyalty to the peer group. This is often marked by intolerance of deviance to the sub culture; a situation which helps to increase the cultural gap between youths and the older generation, thus further distancing the former from involvement in mainstream societal goal. Surely, youth violence is quite often viewed by social scientists as an expression of frustration. The militia activities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria speak volumes on the level of frustration of Nigerian youths in that region.

All said, there is a rising wave of maladaptive behaviour among youths today, which has posed a big challenge to everybody. Nwafor (2006) succinctly asserts that most youths who are not gainfully employed become agents of social destabilization and disunity, economic sabotage and thuggery. The economic implication of this unhealthy climate could be dire. However, youths are children of present households of this nation and have learnt much of their current loose habits in their environment. These days in Nigeria there are not enough motivating examples for the youths to copy, such as made for juvenile discipline and natural law-abiding propensity.

Youth empowerment and its agencies

Empowerment is a process of opening up something that has absolutely unlimited potentials. It means reducing vulnerability and dependency. This implies action not passivity and being at the centre, not on the periphery. Everett (1991) looks at empowerment of women as the broadening of choice; the expansion of opinions and alternatives available to women in determining the course of events, which will shape their lives and determine their own destinies. This suggests that individuals so empowered will be involved in the crucial issues of the nation. Living together peacefully; interacting and sharing in the same national issue is something that the youths can do effectively when empowered. Indeed, massive and conscious empowerment of youths would automatically discourage them from violence-related activities.

Over the years, the Federal Government of Nigeria has put in place some youth programmes. Some of them will be described here: The National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC), the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and the National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP).

In 1973, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria came out with the brilliant idea of the National Youth Service Corps Scheme created by Decree 24 of May, 1973. The aims of the Scheme, according to Fadeye (1978), are:

- i) To inculcate discipline in our youths by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work and of patriotic and loyal service to the nation in any situation they may find themselves.
- ii) To raise the moral tone of our youths by giving them the opportunity to learn about higher ideals of national achievement, social and cultural improvement.
- iii) To develop in our youths attitude of mind acquired through shared experiences and suitable training which will make them more amenable to mobilization in the national interest;
- iv) To develop common ties among our youths and to promote national unity by ensuring that:
 - a. As far as possible, youths are assigned to jobs in states other than their state of origin.
 - b. Each group assigned to work together is a representative of the country as possible.
 - c. The youths are exposed to the modes of living of the people in different parts of the country with a view to removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance and confirming at firsthand the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups.
 - d. To encourage members of the Corps to seek at the end of their corps service, career employment all over the country thus promoting free movement of labour.

- e. To induce employers, partly through their experience with corps members, to employ more readily, qualified Nigerians, irrespective of their state of origin.
- f. To enable our youths to acquire the spirit of self-reliance. (p. 25).

In 1986, the Federal Government of Nigeria established the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). This Scheme was aimed at concentrating effort on the reactivation of public works, promotion of direct labour, promotion of self-employment, organization of artisans into cooperatives, and encouragement of a culture of maintenance and repairs.

The programmes under NDE are:

National Youths Employment and Vocational Skills Development Programme which emanated from the realization that majority of the unemployed are youths without productive and marketable skills. The aim is to provide unemployed youths with the basic skills. Under this programme there is the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme aimed at providing unemployed youths with basic skills that are needed in the economy. This is achieved by attaching them as apprentices to companies, ministries, parastatals and professional craftsmen and women. Under this programme, the various artisans in our cities and villages are being organized into cooperative societies to facilitate the provision of financial and other assistance from government and the organized private sector. There is an expanding array of skills being learned. Some examples are: auto-mechanics, electrical/electronic maintenance, welding/foundry/metal fabrication, plumbing works, carpentry/joinery, leather works, photography, interior design, architectural draughtmanship, painting, computer operation, catering/bakery/confectionery, hairdressing, auxiliary nursing, typing and shorthand, tailoring/fashion designing and modeling.

The second Scheme under this programme is Waste to Wealth. This Scheme is created to encourage the conversion of hitherto neglected raw materials and other scraps and waste materials into useful, marketable products. For example, by sheer inventiveness, it is possible to use snail shells and other scrap materials to make furniture items, house décor objects, ashtrays, apparels, containers, toys and other functional items. Apart from creating employment opportunities for those concerned, this Scheme helps in developing a culture of inventiveness and self-reliance in resource use, thereby curtailing wastefulness and importation of items that can be produced locally.

The Schools on Wheels Scheme involves taking fully equipped mobile vocational training facilities to the rural areas. This Scheme becomes a cornerstone of rural employment and development. The Directorate has initiated Schemes to bring the disabled into the mainstream of the gainfully employed by providing them with special facilities. This is to enable them to acquire appropriate skills and training, which would lead to self-employment or gainful employment. Many disabled people lack only ambulatory capability but usually possess full mental and manual dexterity. They can therefore be trained in such areas as assembly of electronic equipment and computer operations.

Small Scale Industries and Graduate Employment Programme is designed to encourage and aid unemployed Nigerians to set up and run their own businesses. In order to help the participants translate their business ideas into viable commercial ventures, the NDE conducts courses in entrepreneurship prior to making loans available to them through its Job Creation

Loan Guaranteed Scheme. An applicant is required to submit to the NDE a comprehensive feasibility report of the intended business, the amount of loan needed, names and addresses of two guarantors and his or her own curriculum vitae. The applicants' feasibility studies are submitted to banks for their scrutiny and approval.

Small scale industry ventures in operation include candle making, soap and detergent making, foundry works/metal fabrication, used products recycling, restaurants, fashion designing/tailoring, refuse collection, agricultural production, agricultural processing, printing and publishing, textile and garment making, polythene bag, manufacturing, furniture/cabinet works, timber marketing, auto- engineering services, refrigeration and air-conditioning services, block and concrete making and butchering and cold store.

Entrepreneurship, which involves recognizing a business opportunity, mobilizing resources and persisting to exploit that opportunity, is a necessary ingredient for self- employment. The NDE recognizes the importance of developing entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour among Nigerian youths. In this vein, all applicants to the Small Scale Industries Scheme are given an intensive two-week orientation course under an Entrepreneurship Development Programme. The programme covers self-evaluation, business identification, market research and feasibility studies marshalling of resources to start a business, obtaining a bank loan, .managing a business, record keeping and accounting, marketing management, legal aspects of business, etc.

Agriculture Sector Employment Programme is designed to provide self-employment in agriculture for school leavers and graduates with Degrees, Higher National Diploma (HND), Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) and Ordinary National Diploma (OND) in agriculture or related disciplines. Those who are interested in farming are given the relevant training and orientation and provided with land and loans to start farming ventures.

The NDE implements its agricultural programmes at the state level in collaboration with State Governments. Each state has an NDE Agricultural Programme Committee, which sees to the organization and implementation of the programme. The state government recruits the participants and also provides the land needed for farming. Rural communities also provide land through the appropriate local governments. In each case, land allocation certificates are issued to the NDE for land acquired.

There is also the school leavers' agricultural Scheme in the NDE programme. There are two options open to school leavers within this Scheme. For those un-trained in agricultural methods the NDE arranges that each state provides two fully-staffed training farms of 250 hectares each. Special Public Works is designed to provide an immediate temporary employment to a large number of the unemployed. The objective is to utilize this valuable manpower resource in carrying out necessary public works using labour- intensive techniques and enable the participants to' obtain short-term employment whilst acquiring new skills and trade experience.

The Obasanjo Administration in 2001 came up with the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) consisting of Youth Empowerment Scheme, National Resources Development Conservation Scheme (NRDCS), Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme (RIDS); and Social Welfare Services Scheme (SOWESS). The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has devised many Schemes aimed at combating poverty in the nation's littoral region. What NDDC does, according to Adegbamigbe (2008), is to partner with computer training centres to assist in teaching youths information technology skills. Examples

in Bayelsa are Blessed Initiative, Sagbama Local Government Area; SGS Technical Limited, Sunway Telecoms and Niger Delta Wetland. The NDDC pays N15, 000 on each student for the period of training after which the Commission gives them starter packs.

Youth empowerment and nation-building

Nation-building is associated with national integration, national consciousness, national unity, construction and modification of socio-political and economic structures so as to move with the times (Gotep, 2000). It is concerned with the overall development of a nation economically, politically and socially. This view is corroborated by Mezieobi (1994) who submits that nation-building is a multi-faceted, complex process of building the socio-political and economic dynamics of a political society in such a way as to facilitate the polity's continued independent sustenance, development and growth. In the process, there is a concerted effort by the political leaders to integrate citizens who are naturally diverse in terms of culture, religion, language, economy, education and politics so as to form a united and stable society.

As a vibrant group, the educated and empowered youths can easily be mobilized positively. They can form formidable pressure groups to press home desirable changes in the political leadership in any tier of government. They can use their energy, determination and enlightened position to disseminate information to others so as to create political awareness and consciousness against evil and selfish political machinations. If youths are empowered, one can predict with some degree of certainty, a more transformed Nigerian nation, most probably devoid of corruption, nepotism, political manipulation which have, for long, characterized Nigeria's political landscape.

Youth employment in agriculture not only ensures food sufficiency but also reduces unemployment rate, idleness and poverty. Sidi (2004) observes that unemployment compounds the problems the youths are facing in Nigeria. By being idle, they are prone to such vices as prostitution, armed robbery, and rape. Nigerian girls in the rural areas could be mobilized and taught to keep poultry farms so as to have more meat for the home. Educated girls develop self-confidence in themselves, are more capable of accommodating others, can take decisions of their own and make choices according to their own independent judgments. This would be a great political investment of a high value for Nigeria.

The NYSC has helped to promote unity in a multi-ethnic country. The participants in the Scheme are drawn from various universities and other "higher institutions of learning". They are from diverse ethnic groups. The Scheme encourages inter-state movement of Nigerian youths, affording them the unique opportunity of meeting and mixing freely with one another, knowing one another's anxieties, hopes, desires and aspirations as well as giving them the opportunity of discussing national and international affairs and making lasting friendship. This promotes mutual respect, trust and confidence and a clear understanding among the youths.

The Scheme gives the corps members the opportunity to know more about other parts of the country, particularly the geographical features, the cultural backgrounds of the various ethnic groups making up the country, the diverse occupations of the people, the rate of the socio-economic development and a host of other valuable pieces of information. The Scheme equally provides job opportunities for graduates in states where they serve depending on the manpower needs of such states. Also, the Scheme encourages inter-tribal and inter-state marriages.

The NDE and NAPEP are agencies that generate employment for the teeming Nigerian youths. Atojoko (2007) reports that:

Over 1,500,000 unemployed youths were registered under the capacity Acquisition Programme, CAP, and 1,000,000 unemployed graduates under the _ Mandatory Acquisition Programme. Another group of about 140,000 unemployed youths were trained in over 190 different trades under the CAP. Under NAPEP's MAP, 40,000 graduates have been attached to manufacturing industries, construction companies and financial institutions since 2001. The fastest growing employer of labour in Nigeria today, is the telecom industry, specifically the wireless telephone sector that provides services to individual customers using the Global System for Mobile Communication, GSM. As at March, 2004, 5000 new jobs had been directly created out of the telecom sector. The spin- offs in new businesses dealerships, retail outlets for GSM handsets and accessories, and one-man phone boot operations have admittedly been very healthy for the employment market. Indirect employment spin- off is put at 400,000 new jobs. Many young Nigerians who would otherwise have remained unemployed are finding steady employment as phone boot operators and recharge card dealers (p. 20).

For the people of Delta State, Nigerian businesses in the throes of death have resurrected from financial doldrums and are bubbling with life and driving the growth of the State's economy with interest-free credits. A total of 10,439 cluster groups of entrepreneurs made up of 111,321 persons comprising 67,861 females and 43,451 males have been emphasized in their micro and small businesses and some of the products manufactured by these entrepreneurs have gone global. Presently, insecticides, air fresheners and toilet wash are being produced by Chujat Nigeria Enterprises supported by the state government at Issele – Azagba; dry, crisp and Sweet Garri by Oganishu Garri group in Onicha Olona. Soap at Ofeda Farms, Isheagwu; Akwa-Ocha (ethnic clothing) by Out Omenka Weavers at Ubuluku; Cassava Snacks by Cassa Snacks; exotics and ceremonial beads by Adanne Beads; Cererokpe; Plantain Flour by Akanon Plantian Flour, Ughelli; high quality shoes by Creative Hands Group, Warri and other groups. From Fish Farmers, Plantain Farmers to Palm Oil Milers to Shoemakers and Cottage Industry beneficiaries, the life transforming testimonies are endless. (THE NATION, Wednesday, May 6, 2015).

This is economic empowerment, par excellence, which reduces social inequalities, and improves standard of living. It makes the youths better not bitter and checks crimes that are often perpetrated by idle hands. This is important in view of Ukpong's (1995) observation that the woes of Nigeria for the past 35 years are enormous. They manifest in recurring rigging of political elections, irresponsible manipulation of political powers, and rape on democracy culminating in political instability, bad leadership, religious intolerance, language diversities, engrained ethnic consciousness, moral decadence and majority-minority syndrome.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper considers the following recommendations apposite:

- (1). Mentoring and leadership empowerment remain the most powerful tools to positively impact the next generation of leaders. The younger generation needs to be guided, inspired, encouraged and taught to imbibe the essential ingredients

of success which include hard work, right attitude, moral values, determination, perseverance, passion and can-do spirit among several others (Akioye, 2015).

- (2) Entrepreneurship education has a central role to play as far as empowering our youths for national development is concerned. This has become necessary in all our manpower development efforts in Nigeria principally because few new employments are being created by government departments and private organizations for the employable graduates from our secondary and tertiary educational institutions.
- (3). More Nigerian youths should be trained as craftsmen, technicians to make for self- reliance. Anya (2005) laments that lack of the technical and vocational orientation and content in Nigerian education had limited ultimately the achievement of the growth potential of the economy. The outcome constrained the opportunities for employment leading to the high unemployment rate seen among products at all levels of the educational system but, much more, so among university graduates.
- (4). Excessive reliance on the public sector for the provision of socio-economic resources and the creation of jobs has been the bane of development efforts in Nigeria. It has now been fully realized that the public sector alone cannot provide these facilities because of the limited resources at its disposal. Government must realize its limitations and create an enabling environment for the private sector participation in this regard.
- (5). Non-government organizations (NGOs) have a crucial role to play in poverty alleviation. One of the areas requiring an urgent attention is the mobilization and sensitization of the people and communities to perform their expected roles. These include enhancement of the political awareness of the people through formal and informal local organizations, leadership and citizenship training in the communities, promotion of the spirit of self- help and self-reliance among the youths.
- (6). The study of popular culture and its wider implications for teenagers is an essential part of the education of young people in secondary schools and further education. Its attractions and distractions exert a major influence on the consciousness and action of people of this age. Essentially, all aspects of youth culture should be examined including their interrelationships: popular music, fashion and trends in terms of clothes and lifestyles and related subjects such as films and magazines.
- (7). There is a growing need for creativity in the modern day society. The society is characterized by complexity and interdependence, technological and communications advances. Rising expectations certainly call for increased levels of creativity.
- (8). Youths generally have a way of reinvigorating a society. They should adhere stubbornly to the do's and don'ts of their faith in order not to be distracted from their focus of nation-building.

- (9). Parents should bear in mind that if they do not invest in their children who are around them, such children will not have peace. Parents should also live a godly life so as to lead their children aright. No child grows right under baneful influences at home since no straight wood can come out of the crooked timber.
- (10). It is advisable that the present generation does not become indulged into so many free services which may prove to be an over-bearing burden on the nation's resource base in the future, particularly when such lavish commitment of resources is based on the income from single depleting asset like petroleum. I look forward to a Nigeria where her honourable youths, leaders and indeed every citizen will rise up and build the nation of our dream. A nation where we will sincerely fight corruption, tribal and religious sentiments as well as all other things that create the divide and focus on the one thing we have in common: Nigeria/Poverty (Oputa, 2015).
- (11). Zonal youth development centres should be established in the country for entrepreneurial training which would enable the youths to establish their own businesses.

CONCLUSION

Lack of commensurate opportunities is clearly a major factor in youth alienation and violence. Indeed, the issue of unemployment poses a major problem for youths and requires both public sector and private sector participation to address it if we are to curtail youth marginalization. It should be noted that there appears to be a close link among poverty, poor dietary habits and crimes in any human society. Poverty could be a result of lack of creative ideas, initiatives, and an income so low that it limits opportunities for self-actualization. There is no doubt that an enlightened and effectively mobilized youths is a critical factor for good governance, political stability as well as growth and development. The slogan for the Federal Government of Nigeria should be "build the youths, build the nation". Our youths are precious resources of the country because they symbolize the hope for quality adult society. It is the way the youths are mobilized for national development that will determine the growth of any nation. Government should inculcate in the youths a sense of discipline towards making them socially responsible and accountable capturing the spirit, essence, purpose of a new national youth agenda. Youths therefore should be adequately prepared for the challenges they will face in this millennium.

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