
**YOUTH VOLUNTEERISM IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT: *The desire to help others or contribute to the society has been an essential aspect of human nature. Volunteerism is the act of donating time, energy knowledge, skills etc. for the benefit of other people in the community as a social responsibility rather for any financial benefit or remuneration. The success of any nation depends on the involvement of the young adults in the socio-economic development, especially at this time of recession that youth unemployment is very high. For the youth, volunteering offer opportunities for self-development and provide a valuable grounding in the practice of citizenship. With the right education for all the citizens, the large expanded youth population could provide the continuing growth and thus sustainable development. With the view of these, volunteer groups should be formed at the primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions as means of promoting sustainable development. Mass media houses should advertise success stories of volunteer effort and promote volunteerism for sustainable development.*

KEYWORDS: Socio-economic development, Sustainable development, Volunteerism, Youth.

INTRODUCTION

The desire to help others appears to be an essential aspect of human nature. According to Widjaja (2010), one particular type of helping behaviour is volunteerism. Voluntary action has been a consistent feature of our society, but with the current socio-economic problems facing the vast majority of the people, the weight of expectation about the contribution that volunteerism can make to individual development, social cohesion and addressing social need has never been greater. Volunteering offers skills, energy, expertise and local knowledge, all of which have the potential to assist governments in delivering better public programmes and policies. The potential for voluntary action to contribute to the fight against key global issues (including the fight against economic depression) was also recognized by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1978 by the designation of 2001 as the international year of volunteers (IYV), (UN General Assembly, 2005).

With the huge human resources in Nigeria, particularly the teeming youth population, it can be anticipated that when the voluntary sector is fully mobilized, trained and supported it can provide the much needed manpower in fighting the social and economic unease bedeviling the nation now.

Volunteerism; Volunteers

Volunteerism is simply the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community and this can take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain (Kearney, 2007:6). Volunteers can be described as those who help others without expectation of monetary rewards. Volunteers in non-formal education are therefore, all those who, without being financially remunerated, provide services in organizations as facilitators, organizers, supervisors, instructional material developers, members of committees or boards of adult education associations, etc. It should be pointed out, however, that volunteers do receive financial incentives such as honoraria and/or small tokens of appreciation, out of pocket expenses, travelling allowances, and other fees in the course of performing their duties. However, these should not be regarded as payment for services performed.

Adewumi (2005) showed that volunteerism has been defined as the process through which individuals or corporate bodies offer their time, experience and resources freely to alleviate suffering and improve lives. She further indicated that the art of volunteering has several benefits which range from the economic, the social, to the intrinsic. The intrinsic value, she showed, lies in the fact that it gives a feeling of self-worth and well-being that no other act or drug can give. Adewumi (2005) conclusively expressed the view that volunteerism is also a well-known national development strategy that has been found effective in several nations of the world where millions of dollars worth of services are yearly provided freely by volunteers and this promotes economic prosperity, thus sustainable development. UN volunteerism and global goal (2018) asserted that volunteerism by its very nature is an important vehicle for sustainable development. Volunteerism lets people and communities participate in their own group. Through volunteering, citizens build their resilience, enhance their knowledge base and gain a sense of responsibility for their own community. Social cohesion and trust is strengthened through individual and collective volunteer action leading to sustainable outcomes for people by people. Volunteerism strengthens civic engagement, safeguards social inclusion, deepens solidarity and solidifies ownership of development result. Importantly, volunteering has a ripple effect. It inspires others and advances the transformations required for sustainable development to take root in the communities.

Johnson, Timothy, Jeylon (2010) carried out a study on the effect of youth's volunteerism which involves both the volunteers and non-volunteers. The findings revealed that the youths or adolescents who became involved in volunteer activities have higher education plans and aspirations, higher grade point averages, self-esteem, and higher intrinsic motivation towards school work and it inculcates the importance of community involvement on the youth. Education cannot be separated from development because it is an eye-opener, when acquired liberate man from constraint, ignorance, poverty, disease, inferiority complex and exploitation; which in essence, brings about self-development and development in the society which could be sustained. United Nations Volunteers (2016) asserts that the contribution of volunteerism to sustainable development is particularly striking in the context of the new SDGs because volunteering enables people become responsible actors in their own development as well as being active models of change. Volunteerism is one of the most basic expressions of solidarity and societal cohesion, after arising out of long established traditions of sharing and reciprocal exchanges. When the values of volunteerism are structurally integrated into global efforts to eradicate poverty and sustain peace and development, volunteerism becomes a powerful means of engaging people in these challenges.

Well supported and facilitated volunteerism gives people and communities the opportunity to directly engage in their own development and have impact not only locally but nationally and globally.

Okolo (2000) saw volunteerism as an act of kindness in which a significant amount of time is committed to helping and fulfilling a particular need of a church, a charity organization, or the community. For the above reason he sees volunteerism as:

A selfless act performed not necessarily for the benefit of the volunteer organization but more for the benefit of the wider community. Volunteers are persons who share their time, talents, skills, experience and resources towards community development, based on personal conviction. They are usually selfless and with no material gain in mind. They volunteer because of the need to satisfy the passion to serve the people by giving back their experience and talents in appreciation for what they have gained and enjoyed in the community. A volunteer is a person or group of persons who spend time, resources, skills and talents or abilities to help others and for community development without expectation of remuneration.

Volunteerism has also been seen from the perspective of functions. Thus, Oluseyi (2006) defined volunteerism as the willingness of people to work on behalf of others without pecuniary interest or any other tangible gain. He indicated that volunteers may have special training as medical personnel, guides, assistants, teachers, missionaries and other professions. For Oluseyi, the vast majority work on impromptu basis, recognizing a need and filling it, whether it is the dramatic search for a lost child or the mundane giving of direction to a lost visitor. The concept of volunteerism may best be captured from the very simplistic perception of a longtime volunteer called Lucile, aged 78 by 2001. According to the International Bible Students Association (2001) Lucile was quoted by Baxter as saying: "If the need is there and I can be of assistance I will be there". Nwakaire (2010) showed that this reference is the appraised of life shared by millions of people around the world. They offer a helping hand on construction sites and in offices, factories, nursing homes, hospitals, refugee camps, centers for the homeless, fire departments, crisis centres, animal shelters and recession. They are virtually everywhere. They use their skills for activities that run the gamut, from barn raising to fund raising, and from cuddling abandoned babies to soothing the terminally ill.

Abdussalami (2006) saw volunteerism as the willingness of people to work on behalf of others without the expectation of pay or other tangible gain. According to him, volunteers may have special training as rescuers, guides, assistants, teachers and missionaries. Abdussalami (2006) expressed the views that:

Traditionally, volunteering, whether by individuals or organization is usually identified with an activity that is non-governmental. It could be by individuals, or in groups that may decide to provide certain services that are not provided by governments. They may decide to build hospitals, classrooms, provide teaching aids, and take responsibilities for the payment of teachers, doctors or other workers that supply services to communities. The motives of these volunteer groups may be purely altruistic, or they may be pursuing religious, cultural, or even political objectives.

Benefits of Volunteerism

Volunteerism has many benefits for which it should be harnessed in social and economic development of a nation. These benefits are outlined below:

- It contributes economically to national development. The contributions are estimated at between 8% and 14% of Gross Domestic Product. (UN Volunteers 1999).
- It contributes to good governance and development by building trust and reciprocity among citizens which in turn contributes to a more cohesive, stable society.
- For young people, volunteering offers opportunities for self-development and provides a valuable grounding in the practice of citizenship.
- For older people, volunteering contributes positively to the process of “active ageing” by helping the newly retired adjust to life without the structure of the work place and by improving physical and mental well-being.
- It promotes full employment by enhancing the employability of unemployed people. It boosts self-confidence, provides access to work place networks and an opportunity for the development of specific marketable skills.
- Self-satisfaction, discovering more about oneself; Altruism (the fact of caring about the needs and happiness of other people more than your own), potential for learning or acquiring new skills/talents, career opportunities, socialization/friendships, community improvement.

Having understood the concept of volunteerism, it is appropriate that the concept of youth be fully understood.

Why should the youth engage to volunteerism?

Youth should be engaged to volunteer because;

1. They bring a different level of energy to enthusiasm, interest and curiosity.
2. Young people are far more zealous and submissive than expected because of the exposure expected of them, this creates a good opportunity for many looking for a way to develop their skills and contribute in a meaningful way.
3. Young people can provide relatable ideas and mentorship when working with other youth or children.
4. Youth possess a broad range of skills and interest, especially with regard to technology, many receive practical training at schools and capable of incredible things.

Youth

Pilcher (1995) argues that “the concept of youth, like that of childhood, is a way of understanding the “growing up” stages in the life course. Pilcher claims that youths are seen both in terms of their future – they have not yet become adults. She therefore indicates that youth is best understood as a stage of transition between childhood and adulthood. Cultural perspective of the youth is a factor to reckon with. But for Nigeria, the ceiling is about thirty given the fact that beyond that age one may not be permitted to serve as a youth corps member.

The adult educator may use the expression “young adult” to identify the youth because the legal categorization of an adult may place the young adult from 18 years to about 35. You may have to do your categorization of the youth and place yourself appropriately. The need to understand what development is, is appropriate at this point.

Development

Development could be positive or negative. The pre-occupation in this paper is positive development which Watson (1984) saw as “growth plus change.” The growth is economic as well as social; political as well as cultural while change implies continuous progress in the quality and span of life of people. If we adopt this very simplistic definition of development we are inclined to see the failure of the country to develop. Our desire is to look at sustainable development in the economic and social realms.

Development in the Economic Realm

In its economic sense Oreh, (1999) indicated that development is used to refer to the capacity of a national economy which initially had been static for a long time but which now sustains an annual increase of its gross national product at rates of 5 – 7 percent or more. It means growth of per capita income. Oreh lumped the objectives of economic development into eleven (11) main sub-themes.

- An increase in the real income of the average citizen;
- A more even distribution of income among individuals and socio-economic groups;
- Reduction in the level of unemployment and under-employment;
- Increase in the supply of skilled manpower;
- Reduction in the dependence of economy on a narrow range of activities;
- Achievement of better balance in the development of different sectors of the economy in various geographical areas of the country;
- Increased participation of citizens in the ownership and management of enterprises;
- Greater self-reliance, i.e. increased dependence on our own resources in seeking to achieve the various objectives of the society, and optimum utilization of our human and material resources;
- Development of technology;
- Increased productivity;
- Development of new national orientation conducive to greater discipline, better attitude to work and cleaner environment.

If all these objectives of development were being vigorously pursued, then we would have sustainable development. Nevertheless, it is vital to give attention to development in the social realm.

Development in the Social Realm

The social situation in Nigeria today is one characterized by poverty, crime, illiteracy, women disempowerment, examination malpractice, depletion of the environment in the Niger Delta Region, increase in youth restiveness, religious/ethnic conflict, to mention but a few. Although these problems are glaring, government efforts to curb them have not yielded much dividends. Many still lack the basic necessities that will lift them of the quagmire of poverty, such as self-esteem, shelter, freedom from servitude and ensure good health (Nwakaire, 2010).

Unemployment is another social reality in Nigeria and this has engendered criminality especially among youths who band themselves together to fight against the society which they perceive as unfair to them. Social development therefore will mean a positive shift from this sad social situation to a more progressive society devoid of all this malaise. When this is achieved and is

passed on to posterity as values to continue with, then it could be safely asserted that sustainable social development has been put in place. This takes us to the understanding of the concept of sustainable development.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a new development paradigm that has caught the fancy of many researchers and currently is the United Nations prime paradigm in its development agenda. Khor (1997) described sustainable development as the new development paradigm which the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

According to Goodland and Ledec (1987), ‘sustainable development is defined as a pattern of social and structural economic transformation (i.e. “development”) which optimizes the economic and social benefits available in the present, without jeopardizing the likely potential for similar benefits in the future. A primary goal of sustainable development is to achieve a reasonable and equitably distributed level of economic wellbeing that can be perpetrated continually for many human generations”.

The Roles of Youth Volunteers in Promoting Sustainable Development

As one mused over the issue on hand and thought critically about the country’s present recession, and liking it with an axiom that defines the youth role, in promoting sustainable development.

“If we sit back and criticize, we will ever regret our past, ever criticize our present and never shift our future correctionally – the very essence of sustainable development”. From the point of shifting our future correctionally, it must become clear that sustainability and education are intractably interwoven. The youth must be educated to ensure sustainability. Ontario Learning for Sustainability Partnership (1998) saw sustainability and education as interwoven.

Sustainability is not an option for the future, it is an imperative. If we are to ensure that humanity meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, then we must create policies that are in the direction of sustainability. This includes policies in education which evolve in the direction of sustainability, or in such a way as to take into account the emerging needs of the sustainability agenda.

Therefore, sustainability education is very important at community level without which sustainable community development cannot thrive. This is the core of the opinion expressed by O’Brien (1998) when she stated that throughout all academic disciplines the need to discover mechanisms for including those who have been marginalized into a process that builds on knowledge diversity and cultural diversity becomes imminent. Then, she showed, multiple visions of sustainable societies and communities that may emerge along with multiple solutions and mechanisms for action.

O’Brien (1998) stated in this regard:

If this is linked to a participatory development process we could see education working to build sustainable communities. We could see communities determining their own development vision and molding an education programme that supports their objectives. We could see both

development and education being reinvented with broad ranging influence on other sectors of society, culture, ecology and modes of knowledge production.

Arising from all the above, it becomes clear that sustainable development will succeed with education or with educated populace who are either resident within the community or outside but who are willing to volunteer their knowledge and experience for such an undertaking. Since it is humans that possess this much needed knowledge, Edvinsson and Malone (1997) preferred using human capital to synthesize the relationship between the various components of intellectual capital. They said:

Human capital: The combined knowledge, skill, innovativeness, and ability of the nation's individuals to meet the tasks at hand, including values, culture and philosophy. This includes knowledge, wisdom, expertise, intuition, and the ability of individuals to carry out value creating tasks and goals. Human capital is the property of individuals.

OECD (2004) report noted that this wealth is multifaceted and includes knowledge about facts, laws and principles, as well as the less definable knowledge of specialized, teamwork and communication skills. Soludo (2006) indicated that Nigeria has a reserve of resourceful youth population to deploy to its growth process. In his opinion, more than 50 percent of Nigeria's population are under 18 years of age, and the annual growth rate is about 2.8 percent. For Nigeria, its youthful population provides the potential of a sound bridge to the future. With the right education for all the citizens the large and expanding youth population could provide the continuing growth dynamite, and even export labour to the ageing world.

The University of Texas (2002) compiled a number of volunteer activities which took place in that university. It is a youth based volunteerism, and shows that about 74 percent of undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Austin provided nearly three million hours of volunteer service helping in community and university projects during the 2001 – 2002 academic year, according to a privately funded study by the RGK Center for Philanthropy and community Service and the University's Office of Survey Research. The survey, released April 28 in conjunction with National Volunteer Week, April 27 – May 3, showed these students performed volunteer service that totaled 2,997,000 hours for the academic year. The volunteer work included 45 percent serving in the community, 25 percent in university and community functions, and 4 percent solely in university functions. Students who volunteered were most likely to have done so because they felt compassion towards people in need or because wanted to gain a new perspective. The student volunteer work included 29 percent for education-related activities, 23 percent for religious organizations, 17 percent for professional groups and organizations, 17 percent for youth development/mentoring programmes and 16 percent student government and related work.

Women accounted for 55 percent of the volunteers and men 45 percent. Seventy- seven percent of African American and Hispanic students volunteered, followed by 74 percent of Anglos, 73 percent of Asian American and 65 percent of International students. "It is very encouraging to see many students from the University of Texas at Austin engaged in volunteering to help others. It bodes well for our state and nation that while seeking an education for future leadership, they are

also preparing to shape and support more caring and civil societies, here and around the world.” (The University of Texas, 2002)

Other volunteer activities by youths include the following

- Nearly two- thirds of college students say they have recently volunteered in community service; 89 % of this group volunteered in high school. Students believe volunteerism is an effective form of public service to solve problems on both the local and national levels. Eighty percent of undergraduates performed direct service in high school. (The Institute of Politics Survey of Students Attitudes, 2002)
- According to researchers, positive outcomes associated with volunteering while in college in the short- term are that students are more likely to show a commitment to their communities, helping others in difficulty, promoting racial understanding, and influencing social values. Volunteering also influences the development of life skills among undergraduates, including: leadership ability, social self- confidence, critical thinking skills and conflict resolution. The fact is that with proper education and the needed infrastructure put in place, it will be possible to harness the potentials of the youth in promoting volunteerism. The awareness must be created and the willingness of the youth to volunteer must be developed.

Creating a scenario to capture what can be done:

A man has a family of six children. Five of them are male and one is female. He suddenly lost his job and the family cannot afford three square meals. They manage to eat one meal a day. The young men are between the ages of 18 and 28 while their sister is 30. The eldest son invites the rest of his siblings and reminds them about the efforts their father had made to provide for the family with the help of their mother. He suggests that they voluntarily assume the family responsibility to feed, clothe and take care of other needs. The rest agree and they decide that one take their wheelbarrow each morning to see what income he can come home with. The other decides to hire out his service and farm for people. The other two decided to go to the traditional ruler for allocation of farm land to cultivate and sow cash crops since it is still farming season. The eldest decided to develop the poultry farm which had been abandoned. With unity, they are able to put bread on the table. Their sister who was working as a youth corps volunteered in her place of work to continue to teach the children in her class though she had finished her service. Two weeks after volunteering, vacancy was declared and she was immediately employed. Two months after, she received salaries, others brought in their gains, their father was recalled to his job and the family was once more thriving in all ramifications.

What lesson can be drawn from the scenario? You can volunteer as a youth to fill many local spaces requiring expertise. A youth saw the epileptic nature of power supply to his area. He then assessed the situation and came up with a solution: there is a need to decongest the transformer and redirect the phases. He drew up his plan and boldly went to the NEPA office and convincingly tabled what should be done. Surprisingly, the management consented and deployed staff who went with him and did the necessary decongestion. The power problem was solved. You can volunteer your knowledge. There are some youth voluntary organizations like the Boy’s Scout, Girls Guild, Boys Brigade etc. that collectively volunteer in one way or the other to enrich the society.

Individual youths can also do it alone. There are some youth that assist with traffic control when there is congestion. Individual youth can also do it alone by helping disaster victims through voluntary blood donation. This takes place once a while at University of Port Harcourt, organized by Military Hospital, Port Harcourt and many students volunteered and donated blood. Community youths volunteer to fill pot-holes caused by erosions to make the roads motorable during the dry season or at festive period in various communities in Anambra state. Youths can help to provide free security services during the day or night as time permits. These are ways and even more, youths can volunteer for sustainable development of the community. In some communities in Nigeria, youth corps volunteer their time, energy and talent for the passion they have for education and knowledge to teach in some primary and secondary schools, community computer centres, skills acquisition centres, literacy centres etc. to showcase their talents and knowledge for the benefits of the learners and the society at large.

Youth volunteerism is very obvious in the churches, youth association of St. Nicolas Anglican Church, Aluu, University of Port Harcourt contribute to day to day cleaning of the church and the church environment. They engage on Bob- a- Job to raise some money for one project or the other for the growth of the church.

What Youths Can Do!

Volunteer groups should be formed at the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions as means of promoting sustainable development. Volunteering as the key that opens the door to a bright future; Youths can form young farmers club and help in educating the rural communities on the use of improved seeds or farming technique for a better yield. They can volunteer in the cleaning and draining of drainages/culverts and construction of rural feeder roads. They can form youth clubs and engage in enlightenment of fellow youths on HIV/ AIDS, child labour, crime prevention, peacemaking or conflict resolution and development in all ramification as the need maybe identify. Youth in Nigeria should be given the enabling environment to participate in volunteerism. Universities and colleges in the United States of America and some other Western world, corporations, organization and government provide opportunities for those who wish to volunteer. Such opportunities are needed here in Nigeria too for the youths. Most of work experiences which employers require on their advertisement on employment criteria could be met through volunteerism. Volunteerism exposes youths to work of live and equip them with experiences they could start with. It is necessary that the enabling environment should be provided and youth spur to accept to take to it since it is already known that government alone cannot provide all our needs. When volunteerism has become part and parcel of the society, it could now be sustained which obviously leads to sustainable community development. Mass Media houses should advertise success stories of volunteer efforts and thus promote volunteerism for sustainable development. Awards may be given to youths whose volunteer efforts are noticeable on occasions such as the International Day of Volunteers.

CONCLUSION

We cannot watch the economy keep depreciating, we cannot watch the social condition keep deteriorating. As in the case of the pseudo family above all hands have to be on the deck to save

the sinking ship. Rather than keep complaining, youths should volunteer their knowledge, vigour, and wherewithal voluntarily.

Youth volunteerism is needed now. It is the way forward. It is the way of life. It is important for the youth to embrace volunteerism; it is act of service to humanity. Every youth can volunteer something like time, energy, skill and many other resources as can afford. It is all about making our society better place to live.

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