

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: A PATHWAY TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The youth remains one of the greatest assets that any nation can possess. Potentially, they are the greatest investment for a society's sustainable development and future. This is why it is universally acknowledged that positive fundamental and meaningful changes across cultural setting are usually engineered, fostered or shaped by the generation of youths in that society. Therefore, any culture, community and nation, whether macro or micro that allows a good percentage of her youths to be misdirected, risk her future viability and survival as sustainable future must include her youths. In Nigeria, youth empowerment has brought about a decrease in breakdown of law and order, low crime rate and intra-ethnic hostilities, increase in job creation and high productivity which have elicited national development. This paper examines youth empowerment for sustainable future as a pathway to national development in Nigeria. It was concluded that youth empowerment is a panacea for sustainable future and national development. The paper recommended that youths should be geared towards developing human and material resources, process and technological skills. This will sustain them occupationally and equip them better for technical work and self employment.

The concept of empowerment came to the limelight in the 1980s when it was embraced by community development specialists who saw citizens' political and social roles as critical ingredients of development (Independence Policy Group, 2003). To them, once citizens are empowered to play these roles they can change their condition now and for the future, and the total awareness on concept of values for self

sustenance and reliance is a *sin-quo-non* to every growing youth (Isibor, 2011). For youth empowerment for sustainable future to be realistic, they must be inculcated with proper education for work and living with visual practical work. With appropriate skills and compliance, youths should be able to work with their hands. Youths who undergo training and studies are conceptualized in the transformation of known facts and accepted principles, skills and attributes into potentially profitable new applications for national development.

Bello (2004) analyzing the population of youths in Nigeria used the 1991 population census as his yardstick to classify the population of Nigeria youths, between 15 and 34 years as one third of the nations' population. Youths are the most vulnerable segment of the population socio-economically, emotionally, culturally, religiously, politically and otherwise. Their group of people lives with peculiar and unmet needs and aspirations which lead them into lot of socio problems. The problems range from poor or inadequate parental care, poor education, cult activities, which have grown to a higher level of militancy, unemployment and underemployment, moral decadence, health and negative political manipulation of youth organization, disabilities without adequate rehabilitation centers and ill-equipped vocational training. According to Isibor (2011) approximately 33% of youths in Nigeria have no access to formal education, youths that lack protection from their families or responsible adults have turned to take the streets, unoccupied buildings, wastelands, bus stops, abandoned vehicles, under bridges, etc as their places of abodes as well as source of livelihood. To this

end, youths empowerment is imperative in Nigeria to sustain their future for national development.

Concept of Empowerment

Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of those choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibilities for the consequences of those actions. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms rather than at the direction of others.

These enabling conditions include:

1. an economic and social base.
2. political will, adequate resource allocation and supportive legal and administrative framework.
3. a stable environment of equality, peace and democracy.
4. access to knowledge, information and skills, and a positive value system.

Youth empowerment occurs in homes, at schools, through youth organizations, government policy-making and community organizing campaigns. Major structural activities where youth empowerment happens throughout society include community decision-making, organization planning, and education reforms.

Youth Empowerment

Youth Empowerment is an attitudinal, structural and cultural process where young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement changes in their own lives and lives of other people including youth and adults (Vavrus and Fletcher, 2006). Youth empowerment is often addressed as a pathway to intergenerational equity, civic engagement and democracy building. Many local, state, provincial, regional, national and

international government agencies and non-profit community-based organizations provide programmes centered on youth empowerment. Activities involved therein may focus on youth-led media, youth rights, youth councils, youth activism, youth involvement in community decision-making and other methods (Sazawa and Young, 2006). Youth empowerment is also central tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which every country in the world including Nigeria (minus U.S and Somalia) has signed into law.

Youth Empowerment in Nigeria for Sustainable Future

The Nigerian President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, while launching youth empowerment scheme in Nigeria stated that, the Nigerian government has budgeted five million naira to focus on youth employment as part of efforts to create about 50, 000 new jobs and 6, 000 young entrepreneurs within the next three years. The scheme was tagged Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria – (YOU WIN), to assist unemployed youths. He stated further that by working directly with talented Nigerians, the much needed wealth and job creation would be realized.

The YOU WIN project is a youth empowerment and entrepreneurship programme conceived by the Nigerian Ministry of Finance in conjunction with the Nigerian Ministry of Communication and Technology, Nigerian Ministry of Youth Development, the private sector and the World Bank. Commenting on YOU WIN, Finance Minister and Coordinating Minister of Economy, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said the project was in line with the president's vision of economic development. She added that the main objective of the project was to generate jobs by encouraging and supporting aspiring entrepreneurial youths in Nigeria to develop and execute business ideas that will lead to job creation. She was quoted as saying: "The

programme will provide aspiring youths with a platform to showcase their business acumen, skills and aspiration to business leaders, investors and mentors in Nigeria.” Okonjo-Iweala explained that the YOU WIN project will be an annual Business Competition Plan (BPC), for aspiring young entrepreneurs in line with government’s drive to create more jobs for Nigerians.

Other areas of youths empowerment in Nigeria are as follows:

1. Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Youth Empowerment Scheme (NLNG YES)

NLNG YES is a sustainable development initiative of the following companies: NNPC, Shell Gas B. V., Total LNG Nigeria Limited and Eni International, specifically targeted at youths within NLNG communities to make them more economically and socially responsible and self reliant via business and vocational skills acquisition through technical and managerial training. YES is the product of a paradigm shift in community development and is a conscious effort to promote self-reliance, encourage the growth of small scale businesses and promote economic empowerment. Over 660 Nigerian youths have graduated from the NLNG YES in the following areas:

- (a) Photography and video production
- (b) Hair dressing and cosmetology
- (c) Fashion design and sewing
- (d) Welding and fabrication
- (e) Air conditioning and refrigeration
- (f) Woodwork and furniture making
- (g) Horticulture and landscaping (NLNGYES, 1989). The overall objective of the NLNG YES is to equip the youths with knowledge and life skills to make them self reliant and economically empowered as well as enhance their socio-economic status.

2. Youth Empowerment in the School System

The quest for youth empowerment is a project that has gained both national and international concern. The political consciousness being expressed worldwide in youths nowadays is a strong indication. The emergence of youths in the field of arts, sciences and beyond has shown that the huge investments made on them are already yielding positive results (Okoye, 2007). The Ministry of Youth, Sports and Women Development in many nations of the world and institutions of the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), commonly called the United Nations Children’s Fund, are indications that the youth empowerment project is both a national and international one which requires a collective effort for its full utilization. The school provides the child with virtually all the empowerment constituents he or she needs apart from the parental training the child got from his or her immediate nuclear family. Some of these youth empowerment constituent which include acquisition of religious, moral, scientific and artistic values enable the child to forge ahead and take on the world with its challenges. The school system is serving as a very strong platform for youth empowerment in terms of human investment and development which encourages the youth to acquire formal education, leadership skills and full self realization in all endeavors. This has enabled the youths to be able to face and manage life challenges and to participate in changing the world for the benefits of mankind.

3. Youth Empowerment for Innovation

Jidaw (2012) opined that a sustainable future must include the youths but it is not just about being young. The

youths are not going anywhere unless they are empowerment and innovation are in the picture. Not youth activities that are limited to excitement or stimulation but purpose driven youth issues that drive positive change. Only then are young people truly the hope of the future. Jidaw recently shared ideas and perspectives with members of the Nigerian Association of Computer Science Students (NACOSS) at their recent NACOSS South-South zone conference held in Delta State University, Abraka. NACOSS is a professional body with presence in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria (both private and government owned). It provides avenues for students in any IT related field to highlight and champion issues of interest.

NACOSS members (NACOSSites) are students studying in tertiary institutions in computer related disciplines including: Computer Science, Computer Engineering, Information Technology, etc. It is essential to encourage and celebrate NACOSS and other proactive, youth-led organizations that work to empower youths and enable them to contribute to the economic and social development of their people, societies and communities. Jidaw commends the worthy and noble effort of NACOSS and its leadership which have resulted in the provision of platforms that foster and promote youth empowerment and achievement in the field in ICT. NACOSS is recognized as an interest group by the Nigeria Computer Society and has also been engaged in leading, coordinating and initiating several projects to help Nigerian Youths live their dreams and make a difference in the Nigerian society and economy.

4. I.T and Youth Empowerment in Nigeria

The acronym ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is fast

becoming a popular one in the country today. In fact, one of the greatest achievements of the present government which has been repeatedly touted many at a symposium, press conference and party convention is the re-markeable in-road made in the telecommunications sector in form of the Global System of Mobile (GSM) communication revolution. Recently, the Nigerian Information Technology Development Agency (NIITDA) commissioned its Mobile Internet Units (MIUs) to enable greater access to the internet by Nigerians. All these are commendable but much still needs to be done in terms of meaningful ICT growth in our country. Also, the president of Nigeria talked about the Computer-In-School-Initiative (CISI) which was a programme that was also very commendable as it was meant to serve as a platform for leapfrogging the Nigerian youth into the ICT age and also empower them to be self-reliant.

Conclusion

Youth empowerment should be geared towards development of human and material resources, process and technological skills. Gradually education in Nigeria is being shifted back to private and non-governmental agencies, including religious bodies. As a result of this, those who are unable to meet the high fees end up at home and grow to become a problem to the society. If the national goal of education of building a great and dynamic economy has to be achieved, entrepreneurial education should be encouraged, and for youth empowerment for sustainable future to be realistic, they must be inculcated with proper entrepreneurial education for work and living with visual practical work. With appropriate skills, attitude and compliance, youths should be able to work with their hands which will elicit national development.

Recommendations

To further enhance youth empowerment in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

1. All stakeholders must strive to increase the participation of youths in civic processes of community and nation building. The bottom line is to empower young people to contribute positively to the economic and social progress of the nation and instill in them, a sense of purpose and discourage youth violence. Since government alone no longer has the capacity to provide jobs for this large population, it has become pertinent to reach out to parents and other stakeholders who will assist to engage the youths in productive ventures while government provides the enabling environment.
2. Youth education should be geared towards developing human and material resources, process and technological skills. These will sustain them occupationally and equip them better for technical work and self employment.

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