The issue of youth empowerment and sustainable development has understandably taken the front burner in national discourse of many countries especially Nigeria. This is contingent on the ground that the youth are the engine room of national development and any forward looking nation must take cognizance of the fact that, her youth must be empowered economically, politically and social-culturally. History has shown time and again that the youth are
dependable agents of change. Their very rebellious nature, their seeming illusions of invincibility and their fearless idealism serve as catalysts that are capable of propelling society to the apogee of development.

Interestingly, nature has given the youth the gift of energy, through their young and seemingly indefatigable bodies. Empowering these seemingly indefatigable bodies requires people, programmes, institutions and systems which will provide all the youth with the support and opportunities they need to empower themselves in order to move the society forward.

On the strength of the above, Olarewaju (2011) asserts that,

“effective policy and strategy for youth development and empowerment must focus on youth having right of belonging and ownership, develop youth self-worth, promote youth self discovery, youth developing quality relationships with peers and adults, youth feeling the pride and accountability that comes with mastery, youth expanding their capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible”.

As we all know, the hopes and aspirations of the youth are; a world free of poverty, unemployment, inequality and exploitation of man by man; a world free of discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, language and gender, and a world full of creative challenges and opportunities to conquer them.

The analysis of this discourse will therefore be hinged on youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria and empowering the youth for sustainable development in Nigeria. At the end of this discourse, we will establish whether or not, youth empowerment has brought sustainable development in Nigeria.

Clarification of Concepts

Every rigorous academic exercise of this nature requires clarification of concepts. To this end, the concepts of youth, youth empowerment and sustainable development will be clarified.

Who is a Youth? Around the world, the terms youth, adolescent, teenager, kid and young person are interchangeably used, often meaning the same thing, but occasionally differentiated. Youth generally refers to a time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood, but rather somewhere in between.

According to Konopka (1973) “The age limit in which a person is considered a youth, and thus eligible for special treatment varies around the world.” Hence, the United Nations General Assembly and World Bank consider a youth to be between the ages of 15 and 24 years. However, the World Health Organization has a different age bracket for a youth. The organization sees a youth as any member of the society that falls between the ages of 15 and 34 years. Note that, Nigeria belongs to the above
mentioned organizations and can therefore describe her youths within the age bracket of those organizations.

**Youth Empowerment:** The concept of youth empowerment as used in this work derives its meaning hugely from the concept of empowerment. In this wise, Page (2003) defined empowerment to mean:

> A multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and their societies, by acting on issues that they define as important.

This definition suggests that empowerment is a process with every aspect of the journey or path leading to a wholesome gain at the end of the process. Empowerment is the opportunity and means to effectively participate and share authority. It gives the power for self expression arising from personal experiences, the ability to critically examine these experiences, and draw workable conclusions that will lead to a change in behaviour of many parties. It calls old habits to question and reveals conflicts of interest borne out of a need to share power.

From the foregoing, one would recognize the elements of empowerment to be access to information because we analyze only available information. It is usually all-inclusive or participatory in nature with every one listening to and respecting the opinion of others. Often, there is the need for it to have local organization, which leads to capacity building. Because of the participatory nature, it calls on all to be reliable and dependable. The argument here is that if the Nigerian youth are empowered they become more careful so as to be seen to be capable of acquiring empowerment which in this write-up is taken to mean the establishment of an enabling environment capable of facilitating the full realization of the potentials inherent in the Nigerian youth.

Youth empowerment is therefore an altitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people in the society,(Sazama and Young 2006). This is why youth empowerment is often addressed as a gateway to intergenerational equity, civic engagement and democracy building. When the youth are empowered, they develop themselves and invariably develop their society. On this note, Olarewaju (2011) described youth development as the:

ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and to build skills and competency that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.
Sustainable Development: The concept of development does not confine itself to one definition. It is a concept that is multivariate in meaning, as such, different scholars have defined it using different semantics. According to Senwua (2007) cited in JOWICE (2008:17):

Development involves the achievement of self-fulfilment goals by individual beings; able to participate actively in structuring and restructuring their own affairs, their environment and matters that affect their daily lives. It is therefore an attitude of mind and approach to life in which an individual accepts to a greater degree that he is the master of his own fortunes and can personally participate and intervene in the social engineering of his community.

Although we agree that the concept of development is multivariate, the definition presented by Senwua would do for this work. If that is the case, what then is sustainable development? Sustainable development is a pattern of economic growth in which resource use aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these need can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come. The term sustainable development was used according to Asheim (1999) by the Brundtland Commission which coined what has become the most often quoted definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The import of this definition regarding our topic of discussion is that, as long as the Nigerian nation exists, sustainable development should be driven by the youth who are the hub of society. Alternatively, Needham (2011) viewed sustainable development “as the ability to meet the needs of the present while contributing to the future generations needs”.

It is therefore safe to conclude that, sustainable development which has three constituent parts; environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and socio-political sustainability, ties together concern for the carrying capacity of natural systems with the social challenges faced by humanity.

Youth Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying that the youth are the leaders of tomorrow in any nation. Relying on this assertion, every responsible government formulates national policies geared towards present and future development which demonstrates its efforts in ensuring that the youth of today will have a better tomorrow. On the contrary an irresponsible government negates youth empowerment with the resultant consequences of unemployment, political thuggery, poverty, disease, drug abuse just to mention but a few. In this direction, Eze (2007) asserted that “in many Third World countries today, unemployment has pushed a lot of youths into political thuggery and armed robbery.
Political leaders, instead of rehabilitating these youths, prefer to invest in people and agencies that will help them to perpetuate themselves in office for many years”.

In order to avoid the collapse of the Nigerian state, government over the years has institutionalized programmes as well as embarked upon social campaigns to better the lot of the Nigerian people, especially the youths. Notably amongst the programmes include:
1. National Directorate of Employment (NDE)
2. Green Revolution (GR)
3. National Youth Service Corp (NYSC)
4. Farm Settlement Scheme (FSS)
5. Micro Credit Youth Empowerment Programme
6. National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)
7. Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP)
8. Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE)
etc.

Our attention will however be focused on the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) and the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE). Our reason for this selection is contingent on the fact that the NYSC programme deals with the educated youth while SURE cuts across all categories of youth in Nigeria.

National Youth Service Corp (NYSC)

One example of youth empowerment and job creation institution is the NYSC which was introduced in Nigeria in 1973 by decree No 24 by the Gen Gowan’s administration. The aims of this scheme include; to inculcate discipline in youths and loyalty to the nation, to raise morality in youths, to promote national unity among youths irrespective of their ethnic nationality in the country, to encourage the Corp members to seek career employment all over the country; thus, promoting the mobility of labour, to induce employers to employ the youth irrespective of their states of origin in the country and to enable the youth acquire the spirit of self reliance.

Commendably, the NYSC scheme in Nigeria has helped a lot of Nigerian graduates to be self employed and to gain employment in some organizations where they carried out their national service. Up till date, the NYSC scheme is still active in Nigeria though with some challenges like funding and security which the Nigerian government is battling to solve.

Subsidy Reinvestment and Employment Programme (SURE)

This is an empowerment programme introduced by the present administration of President Goodluck Jonathan. This programme has a component known as public works and women/youth employment (PW/WYE) which has the objective of generating 370,000 new jobs in the country before the end of the year. The PW/WYE project according to Usigbe (2012) is a component of the subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme designed to create immediate employment...
opportunities for women and youths in labour intensive public work. The project is expected to generate 50,000 skilled jobs and 320,000 unskilled job opportunities and would be implemented in partnership with the states, the local governments and the private sector.

According to President Jonathan, this administration views the prevailing high rate of unemployment among our youths with great concern especially with the rising spate of youth militancy, violent crimes and other social vices inimical to the political and economic stability of the nation. He stated further that, the burden of frontal addressing and reversing the trend should involve every segment of our society. To him, the SURE programme seeks to target the largest population of unskilled, unemployed and underemployed poor women and youth as well as other vulnerable groups in our society by presenting them with ample opportunities in the public works programmes and internship in firms for the skilled and educated. This SURE programme has also factored in the post amnesty programme and beneficiaries have been sent to recognized colleges, skills centres and universities at home and abroad with recognized accreditation and certification. Furthermore, over 100 youths have acquired Automotive ICT training skills in the post Amnesty training programme of the Niger Delta.

Beautiful as these empowerment programmes might seem on paper, they have failed in many respects to meet the yearnings and aspirations of the Nigerian youth. It is rather unfortunate that these programmes have made little or no meaning since they have individually or collectively failed to change the fortunes of the youth and the Nigerian people.

Scholars have painstakingly, highlighted reasons for the abysmal failure of these empowerment programmes. Among them is Senwua (2007) who attributed the failure of these programmes to frequent changes in governance, inconsistency in policy formulation and implementation, but above all, lack of political will on the part of our leaders to implement polices and plans of annual budgets religiously. How then can the Nigerian youth be empowered to realize sustainable development? Our next topic of discussion will attempt to answer this question.

Empowering the Youth for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Based on the relevance of technology in reducing discomfort in human environment, this work argues for the technological empowerment of the Nigerian youth for sustainable development. This is because nations that are not sound in technology can hardly be economically developed. And as we know, countries that are not economically developed are contending with extreme poverty, violent crimes, disease, and unemployment and so on and so forth.

Social and infrastructural amenities are well created and maintained in an economy where science and technology are highly appreciated and
utilized. Transport system, communication system, electricity, pipe borne water, hospitals and schools are some products of science and technology. On this note, Nwosu and Nnabuenyi (2006) submit that “the level of technological know-how of a nation determines its developmental level and viability. High level of viability accords a nation more respect in international affairs”.

Imparting technological consciousness in the Nigerian youth is a means of achieving sustainable development. Nigeria cannot talk of sustainable development without a sound acquisition and nurturing of science and technology. Adequate exposure to science and technology can make the Nigerian youth creative and innovative, thereby being able to contribute to socio-economic advancement of Nigeria.

Nigerians should realize that the nation has socio-economic problems due to her poor state of science and technology. So, there is this urgency to promote science and technology among the youth for sustainable development. We further argue that, though science and technology is the key to Nigeria’s development, its applicability should have a colouration of indigenous technology. Thus, Garba (2003) views indigenous technology as “co-ordinate system of techniques developed by indigenes themselves and for themselves based on the available raw materials and tailored to meet local needs and conditions”. A great human resource that should acquire indigenous technology for the development of Nigeria is the Nigerian youth. When the Nigerian youth, acquire high technology education which teaches scientific knowledge and practical skills, they can then indigenize such technology to meet our local needs. If Nigeria is able to develop her own technology, the nation will be economically viable thereby exporting goods and services rather than importing products.

Empowering the Nigerian youth in the area of information and communication Technology (ICT) would help boost sustainable development in Nigeria. Information and communication Technology supports activities involving the creation, storage, manipulation and communication of information. We live in an information age and as we know, information is very important in man’s activities as it is needed to ensure that a changing society like ours make wise decisions and have desirable revolution. Nwosu and Chijioke (2005) noted that internet which is an instrument of ICT, provides information that goes a long way in enhancing the socio-economic development of its users because it enables one to be knowledgeable and enlightened and also develops ones potentials and capabilities. To them, internet makes it possible to have E-mail, E-commerce, E-banking, E-library and E-learning which can be employed by the youth for nation building.

Note that, a step in showing technological consciousness for
improvement of science and technology in Nigeria is by no small measure aimed at ensuring effective science and technology education in Nigerian schools. Investment on the youth through education is of great gain because education is a great resource for nation building. Another means of inculcating science and technology is through support and encouragement from government, people and organizations. Government should encourage and motivate science teachers. It will be appreciated if government finances researches and projects being handled by people with science and technology ingenuity especially those that lack the finance and formal education to proceed further.

Conclusion

The Nigerian youth can play critical roles in sustainable development if the energy, intelligence and resources of the youth are fully and properly utilized. The youth would need to aspire for entrepreneurship rather than conventional employment. The hopes of young people can be fulfilled only under condition of peace, only in a civilized and cooperative society. Young people are full of vibrant ideas. When properly motivated and sufficiently guided, they succeed in life, and as we know, the success story of one youth in Nigeria, translates into the success story of the Nigerian nation.

For Nigeria to attain sustainable development, she must empower the youth through programmes and policies that are science and technology inclined. Then, the youth of Nigeria should be made to believe that; instead of brain drain, our country can be the magnet for bright minds world over, that our judicial system could be a model for fairness, promptness and incorruptibility; that our executive can be a symbol of good governance, that our environment could be clean with abundant public services, that our youth can be the Olympic champions, that we can have 100 percent literacy, that the per capita income can go up in geometric proportions, that we can have full employment, that we can earn the reputation of being the most transparent and honest nation and above all, we can be the most prosperous and competitive nation in the world.

Recommendations

To ensure youth empowerment and sustainable development in Nigeria, the following are recommended;

1. There must be the political will from government to pursue youth empowerment programmes and policies consistently,

2. Government should provide enough facilities and resources necessary for promotion of quality science and technology education in Nigerian schools.

3. The youth should have strong orientation towards the growth and development of indigenous technology to be initiated by government at the local level.

4. The youth should be encouraged to invest heavily in information and communication Technology (ICT). This is because we live in an
“information age” where information has made many nations of the world prosperous and competitive.

References


