

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AS A CATALYST FOR PEACE, STABILITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper examined the concept of youth empowerment as an antidote to insecurity and unemployment in Nigeria. It identified the need to re-engineer youthful potentials towards productive social enterprises through skill acquisition, education and socio – cultural value orientation. The paper mentioned, there should be an effective youth empowerment policy and programme on sustainable basis. The paper discussed significant roles of youth empowerment, national initiatives towards youth empowerment, challenges, prospect and consequences of failure to empower the youths. However, it was recommended that there should be an understanding between government and private sector or individuals to prioritize such laudable programmes for sustainability. It concluded that an effective youth empowerment policy and programme can guarantee peace, stability and development in Nigeria.

In Nigeria there has been rapid increase in school enrolment and turnout products from various institutions and those who could not continue formal education form part of the population. The vulnerable groups of unemployment or under-employment are mainly the youths who thereby constitute security risk for the country. Previous governments introduced several programmes to empower the youths but did not impart the purported target. Hence, the youths insurgency in the country.

The fact that the government is unable to provide white collar jobs to every Nigerian youth (educated or uneducated) is the crux of the social problems steering and tearing the nation apart. The worrisome scenario made government to have a re-think on ways to combat the problem. The youth empowerment initiative (economic-empowerment) became best option to address this issue. Orah and Odei (2011) observed that, self – reliance and self – employment are very vital to the teaming Nigeria youths because government jobs or paid employment are not easy to come by.

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Conceptual Framework

Youth Empowerment: This is an approach to stop all sort of marginalisation and negligence against the youths and to give them equal opportunity and access to education, financial control, political participation, leadership etc regardless of gender or educational level. Economic empowerment enables the youths to take critical decision on how to fix their life long experience and self development by it. The youths form the fulcrum trustees and occupy core centre of the politico-economy of a nation. A youth in Nigeria may be described as being energetic, full of life, vigor, stamina, vitality and endowed with drive and fearless. These potentials and resourcefulness if not directed towards productive ventures could be used negatively to disrupt social, economic and political structures. According to Agholor, Afatakpa and Kent – Onah, (2011) youthful age is between ages 1 – 45 years, the most viable stage in the life of humans. If individuals at this stage of development are not occupied by positive activities, the tendencies to take to negative vices will be extremely high.

Youth empowerment is an initiative with a view to re-engineering their potentials and energies for peace and stability to reduce poverty, un-employment and criminality. To buttress this view, Chikamayo (2013) asserted that, self-employment is being driven to the zenith by training and equipping youths with both financial support and the asset base to enhance the growth of their businesses. He further added that the interventionist programme in Abia State has attained enviable height in peace and security management. In the same vein, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, (2005) emphasized in its thrust towards empowering people to improve lives through plans for creating jobs, strengthening the skill base, protecting the vulnerable and promoting peace and security.

Peace and Stability

Peace is a pattern of cooperation and understanding between major human groups in a society. Without peace there can hardly be a meaningful economic, political and social stability. Stability is therefore, the attainment of national cohesion and integration for wholistic development. It is as a result of this, that the Nigerian government has adopted several strategies to promote peace in her national life through inter-religious advisory council, establishment and equipment of security agencies to combat crimes and introduction of youth empowerment programmes etc.

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) realized the need for peace and stability and therefore, stipulated an over-all national philosophy that Nigerians need to:

- i. Live in unity and harmony as an indivisible democratic and sovereign nation found on the principles of freedom, equality and justice.
- ii. Promote inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding. For peace and stability to reign supreme in the nation we must learn to appreciate our

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socio-cultural diversity, respect for human dignity, religious differences, political differences and empower youths and other vulnerable groups. These concepts are some of the possible routes whereby sectarian disputes and crises are formed and manifested to destabilize the nation.

It beholds therefore that socio-cultural values, skills, attitudes and activities that help to promote unity, peace and stability be introduced into school curriculum as well as modify national life style of the citizenry.

National Development

Development as a concept has different definitions by different people depending on their field of study. To a classical economist, development is growth in the Gross National Product (GNP), per capital income and infrastructural facilities. To a political scientist development constitutes political stability and liberation from oppression. An educationist sees it as doing away with illiteracy and path-way to self – actualization.

Development involves structural transformation of the economy, polity and culture of the people which permits self generating and self perpetuating use of people's potentials. Development or under development of a nation is a function of the individuals that make up the nation. Their contributions mentally and physically leads to development or under-development. Under-development in this perspective is the inability of the people and the nation to fully harness their talents, skills, abilities and resources to transform their environment for the benefit of mankind and the nation (Idakwoji, 2006). This is the cross road the Nigerian nation found herself and now strategizing to ameliorate the menaces through youth empowerment programmes. According to Olojoba (2003) development is the transformation of the social, cultural, political and economic life of society to bring about an improvement in the quality of life of the people.

From the above discussion national development is seen to be measured by broader indices as obtained in various sectors of the economy. For a nation to be termed developed, a high percentage of her citizenry must have been educated including computer literacy. Thus, education is sacrosanct to attaining peace, stability and development. Education aims at producing human beings that are intelligent, knowledgeable and hopefully leaders in their various fields of endeavour. These qualities when imparted on youths will go a long way in promoting national development (Etesike, 2011). The concept was described by Jega (2002) as a creation of a new nation-state striving to move from backwardness into modernity, progress and development. National development fundamentally may be described as an attempt to improve per capital income and output, critical infrastructure, social and administrative

structures, radical transformation in institutions, change in attitudes, beliefs, customs and increase in quality and quantity of employed workforce of a nation.

Purpose of Youth Empowerment

The purpose of youth empowerment may include the following:

- i. To provide equal opportunity and access to gainful employment either government or self employment.
- ii. To provide second chance opportunity for school dropouts to develop.
- iii. To encourage skill acquisition among youths by providing vocational/ professional and technical training.
- iv. To generate employer of labour (mentoring) and creating entrepreneurial spirit in them.
- v. To reduce poverty, jettison vices and enhance peace, stability and development.

Skill Acquisition Re-engineering for Youths

To attain a viable economy the youths must be knowledgeable and skilled sufficiently to face the challenges of peace, stability and development. Abokede (2005) cited in Chizoba (2011) described skill acquisition as a process of equipping an individual with saleable skills for empowerment and help others to update their job skills and instruction in vocational and technical education. For Nigerian youths to stay away from maladjusted behaviours and acts capable of truncating the development of the country, they must be given sound education and empowered with necessary employable skills. According to Joshua (2012) one way of doing this is education and training for self-reliance or self-employment through integrated curriculum required to reduce the high rate of unemployment and under-employment in the economy which find expression in youth restiveness.

In the light of the above assertion, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, (2005) highlighted that the future prosperity of Nigeria depends on producing children and youths who are well prepared to take their place in tomorrow's society. Furthermore, it plans to promote peace and security through a national action plan which will reform the security personnel and equipment.

Significant Role of Youth Empowerment

The significance of empowerment to an individual and a nation cannot be over-emphasized. Education remains a powerful instrument for empowering people (male and female) because without education the foundation for developing a better future for individuals would not see the light of the day (Amachukwu and Elechi, 2012). An educated man or woman is an asset to his or her community because development activities and social amenities can be influenced.

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The domestication of youth empowerment agenda will mean using local resources and manpower to brace up to the challenges of youth unemployment and its negative effects. The possession and use of practical skills are fast vehicles for youth empowerment and invariably for national development (Chizoba, 2011). When the youths are equipped with the skills and knowledge required by the society through education, they will secure employment easily or can be self-reliant. Hence, the issue of security challenge, unemployment, poverty, instability and under-development will be addressed gradually. Youths who acquire saleable skills in different spheres of life are sure to be either self – employed or secure related employment in government agencies or private business organisations. One way of empowering and sustaining our youths is to make adequate provision for early and qualitative education for them.

The significance of youth empowerment was further stressed by Ojekunle (2011) that, it was necessary to improve the educational and entrepreneurial capacities of the youths so as to empower them and to earn a livelihood as well as enable them to contribute to the upliftment of their society. The inclusion of human endeavours such as sports, agriculture, music and entertainment, tourism, art and craft, entrepreneurial skills etc. will impact the youths greatly. According to Aruna (2012) the young adult population as the live wire of any country must, indeed be empowered appropriately with relevant knowledge and skills in order to enable them to be job creators instead of job seekers and wealth creators instead of wealth consumers. This, tends to suggest that youths can initiate the processes of acquiring these knowledge and skills for self employment in Nigeria.

National Youth Empowerment Strategies

Following the unabated security problems and youth unemployment, the government of Nigeria had realized the need to appropriately adopt certain strategies to address the unwholesome behaviours of youths. These laudable strategies include the following:

1. **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):** At the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit, world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration and a set of accompanying Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy etc by 2015. It was instructive that developing countries before then should be able to develop and implement policies for enabling economic climate, like sound policies, good governance and appropriate financial support and physical infrastructure to be able to reach the target.

In pursuance of this strategy, the minister of Youth Development Inuwa Abdulkadir had said that 658 corps members were trained and empowered to establish agro – enterprises and not less than 131, 659 corps members were given

skill acquisition and entrepreneurship development training in the year 2012 (“Why Government Can’t Empower Every Nigerian youth”, 2013).

2. **The Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS).** This was introduced as a youth empowerment strategy in collaboration with Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) to provide window for building skills and enhancing employability. Primarily, it seeks to provide un-employed graduate youths with job apprenticeship opportunities that would expose them to skills and experiences relevant to current labour market and enhance their employability (Anuforo, 2013). Since January 2012, government had to see that the proceeds of the subsidy funds are applied to empower youths within the context of the social safety programme.
3. **The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Post Service Scheme:** This was instituted by government within the framework of public-private partnership in youth empowerment. The Minister of Youth Development, Inuwa Abdulkadir, remarked that, more funds have been released to the National Youth Service Scheme for the implementation of its core programmes and for the conduct of skill acquisition training/empowerment.
4. **You Win Programme:** Chiejina and Agiounim (2013) reported that at least 15,000 jobs had been created in the first phase of the YouWin entrepreneurial initiative. Minister of Finance, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, in this regard commended the young entrepreneurs creativity, ingenuity and managerial capacities.
5. **The National Directorate of Employment (NDE):** The National Directorate of Employment is an agency set up to train, equip and empower vulnerable groups and youths with technical support and start up capital in form of revolving loan scheme.

Some Challenges

In the course of policy implementation the youth programme is faced with a lot of problems which include the following. In spite of the laudable objectives and programmes of youth empowerment as initiated by governments at various levels, it can be stated that the policy had been facing a lot of challenges. One of the challenges is the inappropriate placement of youth related programmes in some ministries, departments and agencies. Furthermore, is the issue of poor implementation of existing policy such as that of the National Directorate of Employment loan scheme. It is a challenge because the beneficiaries often do not pay back at the right time, thereby denying/delaying others who are interested.

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Again, the non – challant attitude of youths towards skill acquisition and self development programme is rampant especially among school dropouts. Some of the youth find it difficult to un-chain themselves from the cycle of poverty due to ego centricism. According to Luka (2011) most of our unemployed youths with OND, HND and Degree feel too big to go for such training. In the same vein, most Nigerian students are generally apathetic towards practically oriented disciplines (Federal Ministry of Education, 2005). The misconception for vocational courses as not having prestige is a contributing factor.

Prospect of Youth Empowerment

Inspite of these challenges, there is high prospect for the programme. The Nigeria youth empowerment policy and programme have bright future if sustained by adequate funding and effective management. The prospect includes the desire to have in place the National Youth Policy which provides that, there will be an inter – ministerial council referred to as the National Youth Development Council under the presidency. This will serve as forum and clearing house on all youth policy matters of national interest.

A plan to actualize the completion of on going national youth development centres in all the six geo – political zones of the country with a view to ensuring more young unemployed graduates are given required entrepreneurial, vocational and skill training in specialized/professional areas to grow youth economy thereby create wealth. Articulating integrated leadership and skill development impetus in the training of youths will enhance human capacity development as future leaders of Nigeria.

The involvement of Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P) funding youth programmes will rekindle the hope of participants in terms of financial and technical support after training.

Consequences of Failure to Empower the Youths

In a society where youths are not empowered or employed, they seldomly become readily available tools for mischiefs. Some of the consequences include destructive tendencies that can destabilize peace and development. It leads to increase in crimes and criminal enrichment such as armed banditry, robbery, kidnapping, abduction, mass killing, terrorism, unrest, prostitution, civil strives etc. Another effect of not empowering youths is that it will lead to increase in the level of illiteracy, ignorance, disease, hunger and low life expectancy ratio among them.

It brings about involvement of youths through peer influence in drug use and drug abuse. It also brings untold hardship, economic stress and over – dependence on wealthy/employed members of society (family members inclusive) who stand more at risk point for refusal to oblige requests. Generally speaking, it weakens the economy

because of low per capital income and Gross National Product (GNP) for non – participation of foreign investment in the national economy.

Conclusion

A nation that is regularly involved in crises cannot attain development in the absence of peace, tranquility and stability. These concepts form part of the national problems confronting the nation. As highlighted so far, the new initiatives by governments are to address youth unemployment and associated social vices. The youth skill acquisition mechanism will empower many of them that were hitherto unemployed, this will bring about desired transformation in social, economic and political spheres.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for implementation to enhance better management of youth programmes and to achieve set objectives on continuous basis. There is need for more youth development centres for all classes of un-employed youths in the formal or non – formal education system across the country. Adequate funding of various youth programmes free from corrupt practices will encourage effective participation and positive response towards attaining national development. It is a truism that where the youths are fully employed or engaged through adequate education, restiveness, poverty, un-employment etc. will as well reduce. Therefore, there is urgent need to equip existing technical schools and colleges and their expansion, so that skill development can start early enough in life.

For sustainability of the youth programme, private sector partnership is required for effective goal attainment. Youths should be presented with learning activities and experiences by schools to prepare and challenge them for peace and development e.g. leadership role, modeling, drama, debate, field trip, exhibition work etc. Youths should drop pride to key into available programmes and have confidence that they can make it through self – employment.

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