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YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABOLADE, S. B. and OLANIYI, ABIODUN JUBRIL

Abstract

This paper discussed the issue of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria, the challenges and prospects in the 21st century. In the process, it examined the concept of youth empowerment with reference to the Nigerian situation, as well as the challenges and prospects of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria. The discussion featured historical analysis in the examination of the concepts and in considering the implications for the Nigerian nation. It was found that Nigerian government had embarked, and is still embarking on a number of youth empowerment programmes. This paper concludes that though the challenges of these empowerment programmes in Nigeria are many and varied, their prospects are bright. Thus, the paper recommends that there should be a better funding and administrative regime on the part of government, devoid of selfish politico-economic calculations. It is also recommended that government and other stakeholders in education should ensure that Nigerian youth empowerment programmes are made more relevant to provide the beneficiaries (i.e. youth) with the kind of training needed to empower them meaningfully and to be able to cope adequately with the 21st century global and national challenges

Key words: youth empowerment, issues, challenges, prospects

Introduction

The youth represents a significant stakeholder in any society. In Nigeria, there has been tremendous increase in students' enrolment and their turnout from various institutions of learning. Those who could not continue formal education also form part of the population. In order for the youth to become useful in the Nigerian project, they should be adequately empowered to be gainfully employed. However, available statistics have revealed that youth unemployment is prevalent in Nigeria with far reaching implications (Emeruwa, 2005; Abati, 2011; Adejumobi, 2011).

It is important to note that successive governments in Nigeria had, at one time or the other introduced several youth empowerment programmes aimed at equipping the youth with the necessary wherewithal to become self-reliant. Most of such programmes have been found not to have imparted the purported target. This unfortunate situation is partly responsible for frequent cases of youth insurgency in parts of the country. In view of the fact that Nigerian government has been unable to provide white collar job to the teeming youth, the youth empowerment initiative (economic empowerment) became the veritable option for addressing the issue (Nmodu, 2014).

To attain a viable national economy, the youth must be knowledgeable and skilled sufficiently to face the current challenges of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria. The significance of youth empowerment programmes to the nation in general and individual youth in particular cannot be over emphasized. Possession and effective use of practical skills are identified by Chizoba (2011) as vehicles for national and individual youth development.

The purpose of youth empowerment programmes as encapsulated by Nmodu (2014) are:

- i. to provide equal opportunities 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 employers of labour (mentoring) and creating entrepreneurial spirit in them;
- v. to reduce poverty, jettison vices and enhance peace, stability and development (pp. 124-125).

It is against the above background that this paper sets to look into the concept of youth empowerment, the past and present youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria. Moreover, the challenges of youth empowerment and prospects for development of the Nigerian nation are briefly considered.

Youth Empowerment: The Nigerian Situation

Here, attention is paid to the understanding and application of youth empowerment as a strategy aimed at combating unemployment, under-employment and poverty in Nigeria. According to Nmodu (2014), youth empowerment is an approach to stop all sorts of marginalization and negligence against the youth and to give them opportunity and unhindered access to education, financial control, political participation and so forth; regardless of gender or level of education. Nmodu stated further that youth empowerment is an initiative with a view to re-engineering the youthful potentials and energies of Nigerians for peace, stability, gainful employment, reduction in crime rate as well as poverty reduction.

It is important to note that in the Nigerian context, the youthful age ranges between 1 to 45 years represents the most active and viable stage in life (Agholor, Afatakpa and Kent-Onah ; 2011). During the period quoted above, individuals are endowed with potentials and resources which, if not properly tapped and directed towards productive means could be used negatively in so many ways. This is in agreement with a popular dictum that any society that fails to engage (empower) the youth, would definitely be engaged by the youth.

The youth forms the fulcrum in a nation's development equation because they drive the systems and structures within the government, the public and the private sectors (Ofodum, 2015). Thus, youth empowerment remains a critical element in national development.

It follows therefore, that Nigerian youth are the wealth of the nation and their success (in terms of meaningful empowerment) actually holds the key to our stability, sustainability, as well as the source of our global competitiveness as a nation. Ofodum (2015) submitted that any nation that will flow with the waves of the 21st century tide must engage its brightest and empower its young talents.

Youth empowerment, as a developmental concept, has however, been misapplied for misconstrued by both the government and citizens within the Nigerian context. This is because it has been mostly associated with the large scale purchase of motor-cycles, tricycles commonly called 'Keke Maruwa' or 'Keke NAPEP', grinding machines, sewing machines or even

buses to give out to the youth as a tool for earning a living. These models of empowerment is stereotypical, skeletal and a far cry from what the concept really means. It is only noted for its systematic failure to take into serious consideration, the future of the individuals being supposedly empowered.

It follows that Nigeria as a developing nation, needs to be more serious in its pursuit of youth empowerment programmes in order to be able to cope with the developmental challenges of the 21st century and to continue to be relevant within the comity of civilized nations of the world. But it would be necessary to examine some of the national youth empowerment strategies so far adopted by Nigeria with a view to seeing what efforts had been made so far, and what the country can still do to bring about realistic youth empowerment.

Youth Empowerment Strategies in Nigeria

This part of the paper does not consider all strategies embarked upon by the government of Nigeria in the area of youth empowerment. It only considers a few of such strategies as examples of governmental efforts geared towards empowering the Nigerian youth, such strategies include the following, among others:

- **National Directorate of Employment (NDE):** This agency was established in November, 1986 by the federal military government of Nigeria, headed by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (now retired). It started operations fully in January, 1987. The birth of the Directorate was predicated on the effects of economic recession of the 1980s which led to a drastic reduction in capacity utilization and consequent closure of many industries in Nigeria. According to Nmodu (2014), the NDE has the responsibility to train, equip and empower vulnerable groups and youth with necessary support and start-up capital in form of revolving loan scheme. However, Gabriel (2009) observed that effective educational policy implementation has for long, remained a problem of educational development in Nigeria. According to her, if both the Junior and Senior Secondary Schools curricula have been rightly implemented, the current trend whereby the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and other organizations train school leavers for skills acquisition would not have arisen. She stated further that the curricula for both arms of Nigerian secondary schools are sufficiently rich to engage and train the students within and outside the schools.
- **The YouWin Programme:** The Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWin) was another governmental strategy towards youth empowerment in Nigeria. This initiative was introduced by the federal

government of Nigeria to showcase young entrepreneurs and create job opportunities in the country. Chiejina and Agiounim (2013) stated that at least, 15,000 jobs had been created in the first phase of the YouWin entrepreneurial initiative. In this regard, a former Minister of Finance, Dr. (Mrs) Ngozi Okonjo Iweala was said to have commended the beneficiaries of the programme for their creativity, ingenuity and managerial capabilities (Nmodu, 2014).

- **National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Post Service Scheme:** This scheme is a Federal Government initiative within the framework of public-private partnership in youth empowerment. On the essence of the scheme, a former Minister of Youth Development, Inuwa Abdulkadir once requested that enough fund be promptly released for the implementation of its core programmes and for the conduct of skill acquisition training and empowerment.
- **The Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS):** This scheme was introduced in October, 2012 as a youth empowerment strategy by the federal government of Nigeria. This was done in collaboration with subsidy Re-investment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P), established in January, 2012 to provide avenues for building skills and enhancing youth employability. It is implemented by the Federal Ministry of Finance with a mandate to provide short-term employment for graduates. Anuforo (2013) pointed out that the scheme seeks to provide unemployed graduate youth with job apprenticeship opportunities that would expose them to skill experiences relevant to current labour market and enhance their employability. Since January 2012, government had to ensure that the proceeds of the subsidy funds are applied to empower youth within the context of the social safety programme (Nmodu, 2014).
- **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):** At the United Nations Millennium Summit, held in September 2000, the world leaders adopted the Millennium Declaration and a set of accompanying Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed at reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and so forth by the year 2015. At the summit, it was agreed that developing countries 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 pursuit of the strategy, a former Nigerian Minister of Youth Development, Inuwa Abdulkadir has observed that 658 corps members were trained and empowered to establish agro-allied enterprises and not less than 131,659 corps members were given skill acquisition and entrepreneurship training in the year 2012 (The Nation, 2013).

Some Challenges of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria

Some of the challenges confronting the policy implementation of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria are briefly considered in this part of the paper. This is with a view to seeing what the nation can do in order to ensure a conducive atmosphere for these empowerment programmes to thrive and develop, and how the development could be sustained.

In spite of the laudable objectives and programmes of youth empowerment as initiated by Nigerian government at various levels, a major challenge has been inappropriate placement of youth related programmes in some ministries, departments and agencies. This situation actually, constitutes an impediment to the implementation and successful execution of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria.

In connection with the above is the issue of poor implementation of existing youth related policies such as those of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) loan scheme and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). With reference to the NDE loan scheme, experience has shown that in Nigeria, most beneficiaries of the scheme are more often than not, unwilling to pay back at right time, thus, they either delay or deny other prospective beneficiaries from being considered for the loan scheme. As regards the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), the prospective beneficiaries have been reduced to mere victims of over-politicization. This is because political affiliation is accorded a greater respect rather than qualification being based on merit. This unfortunate situation has remained the bane of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria.

Another serious challenge confronting youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria is the negative attitude of Nigerian youth themselves towards skill acquisition related programmes. This attitude stems from the popular misconception held against such programmes as a preserve of less intelligent youth or school dropouts. Nmodu (2014) observed that such youth find it difficult to unchain themselves from the clutches of poverty. Anuforo (2013) stated that most unemployed Nigerian youth holding Ordinary National Diploma (OND), Higher National Diploma (HND) and University degree feel too big to go for youth empowerment training.

Furthermore, Nigerian students and graduates are generally apathetic towards practical oriented disciplines (Federal Ministry of Education, 2005).

Prospects of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria

In spite of the enormous challenges of youth empowerment as briefly examine above, Nigerian youth empowerment programmes have bright prospects if adequately funded and effectively managed. The prospects include having in place a National youth policy that will stimulate the creation of an Inter-Ministerial Council to oversee youth related matters in Nigeria. In this way, the needs of the youth would be easily identified and efficient measures meeting same would be adopted. It therefore follows that destructive tendencies capable of destabilizing national peace and development would be drastically reduced.

Effective youth empowerment programmes could facilitate the completion of national youth development centres in all the six geo-political zones of the country. This would go a long way towards ensuring that Nigerian youth are gainfully employed. This is because the unemployed young graduates would be given required entrepreneurial, vocational and skill training in specialized areas, leading to wealth creation. It follows that there would be a decrease in criminal tendencies such as kidnapping, armed banditry, terrorism, robbery, prostitution and other social vices among the youth.

The recently launched N-power scheme, targeted towards empowering Nigerian youth, if not unduly politicized is observed to be a bold step at making Nigerian unemployed graduates to be socially relevant. Also, the involvement of Subsidy Reinvestment Programme (SURE-P) in funding youth development programmes in the country will rekindle the hope of participants in terms of financial and technical support after training (Nmodu, 2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be concluded that an improved and sustainable global and national economic development depends on sound youth empowerment programmes. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian government at all levels, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders should ensure that youth empowerment programmes provided are relevant to the kind of skills, craft or trade needed by Nigerian youth. In this way, they would be able to cope effectively with the global and national challenges of the 21st century.

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