

## **YOUTHS AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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**ABSTRACT:** *For many years the people of Nigeria especially since independence have been yearning for development. Any meaningful development anchors on very many indices – strong institutions, availability and good management of resources. Resources in itself comprise of human and natural resources. However, the development processes are sabotaged by socio-economic challenges, which include hunger, poverty, unemployment, poor health, illiteracy, corruption, greed, insecurity, among others. The paper concludes that for a meaningful development, and for the youths to be part of the global system, the Nigerian state must arrest and address the issues of poverty, unemployment, corruption, greed, besides provide free health and free education to all at all levels. Today good education is power. The youths must work hard, be focused, be curious and ready to sharpen their intellect and create ideas that must be revolutionary for them to claim the future.*

**KEYWORDS:** Youths, Contemporary challenge, Socio-economic, Nigerian development

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria is the second largest economy next to South Africa in Africa. She has about 150 million people with the youths making about 51 percent. For many years especially since independence, Nigerian people are much in a hurry to develop. The main aim now is for her to belong to the comity of the developed states and by extension one of the 20th biggest economies in the world by 2020. But unfortunately, development has tended to elude the state. However, all hopes are not lost.

Indeed, it is not enough to say that 51 percent of the Nigerian population are made up of youths. It would be worthwhile to say what is the quality of the youth population? Or how healthy is the population and what is the effect on productivity? And because the population is not healthy, it explains the low productivity, which in turn has negative effect on the growth of the Nigerian economy. There are many factors to be considered before one can say that a given population is healthy. This includes levels of poverty, state of employment and underemployment, levels of education, access to safe drinking water and the quality of environment. Against this background, that the present crop of Nigerian youths are facing the socio-economic challenges. These issues would be discussed later.

### **Understanding the Youths**

Within the Nigerian context, it is difficult to explain who the youths are? Many people see it quite differently. On the economic rating and production within the system, Professor Akpan H. Ekpo, an economist defined youths as persons between the ages of 17 and 35 years. In this

connection, they are supposed to be strong as well as be able to give and take the best society offers. It is not surprising therefore, that during the dubious Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, those who were shipped to Americas and Europe to work under harsh and unhuman conditions were basically youths. The hard infrastructure built in the USA, for example, was undertaken with slave labour (Williams, 1964; Uya, 2005; Ekpo, 2011).

In the areas of interaction, the World Football Body, Federation of International Football Association FIFA defines youths as people between the ages of 17 and 20 years. On a more simplistic way, youths are persons from the ages of 12 and 30 years.

### **Conceptualizing Development**

Development, like other concepts has many explanations depending on the meaning intended to convey to the user. It is increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being (Rodney, 1972). Nnoli in Nnadozie (2004), sees development as a phenomena associated with changes in man's ability and creative energies not in things. It is an unending improvement in the capacity of the individual and society to control and manipulate the forces of nature as well as themselves and other individuals and societies for own benefits and that of humanity at large. It is a process of actualizing man's inherent capacity to live a better and more rewarding life.

It is one's ability to have good and affordable food to eat, access to safe drinking water, good shelter, access to good medical facilities, being able to communicate, have access to good education, have access to use decent and sustained infrastructural facilities. It does not convey want.

### **Conceptualizing Productivity**

Productivity is a buzz word and almost everyone uses it. Yet the term productivity means different things to different persons. In spite of what appears like confusion, there are several characteristic features that represent the concept of productivity that could be identified. However, productivity in industrial engineering, is defined as the relation of output (i.e. produced goods) to input (i.e. consumed resources) in the manufacturing transformation process (Akerle, 1991). Productivity could therefore be seen as closely related to the use and availability of resources. Mali (1978) defines productivity as the measure of how resources are being brought together in organisations and utilised for accomplishing a set of results. Thus, by this definition, productivity is seen to be strongly linked to the creation of value. High productivity is achieved when activities and resources in the organisation is transformed and in the process create sustainable value. Nigerian youths today face many challenges such as poverty, unemployment, poor health, corruption, greed, insecurity.

### **Poverty**

Poverty indicates people who hardly afford a meal a day, cannot clothe themselves, have no access to good drinking water, no access to basic education, no access to good shelter. To say the least a person that lacks the basic means of living are considered poor. Poverty therefore induces hunger. Hunger is a condition in which persons do not have access to good food (diet), and perhaps can go for days without food and less hope in sight. This condition bestrides our society and common among students in higher institutions and rural dwellers with poor economic background, low wages but with large families.

Nigeria is a rich country by the current oil production sold in the international market for the past twenty years or so, yet majority of Nigerians are poor. It is estimated that 55.8 million Nigerians are very poor and live below the universal poverty line of 1 US dollar a day. It indicates that these poor people are found mainly in rural areas. The youths of this country constitute the majority living in these rural communities. Because, they are poor and cannot feed adequately, provide for themselves good shelter and health facilities, the future for them is punctured. This ugly condition thus give birth to prostitution, armed robbery, drug taking, it is also from this group that Nigerian bourgeoisies politicians recruit and armed as political thugs and aids during elections - and by extension increases the social problems in our communities.

Poverty is often times to HIV/AIDS. In this connection HIV/AIDS is mainly a disease of the low strata of people in the society and it is to a large extent the product of dire need arising from poverty. Research has indicated that HIV/AIDS is common among the youths between 15 and 25 years (Omoragan and Okeke, 2010; Kogbara, 2010). In the case of HIV/AIDS, two things are important – it has negative effect on the economy because it reduces productivity; on the other hand, it brings about or causes social divide among members of the public through stigmatization. HIV/AIDS have for reaching impact on poverty and hunger. HIV/AIDS aggravates poverty and hunger and vice versa. HIV/AIDS affects the quantum and quality of education. Poverty and hunger daily arrest youth of this country's capacity to think straight arising from poor governance.

### **Unemployment**

Unemployment is everywhere both in the developing and developed economies. The significant thing is what is the rate between them? It is difficult to say the number of unemployed Nigerians. Unfortunately, neither the Manpower Board nor Ministry of Labour nor Federal Office of Statistics have accurate data on the unemployment rate in Nigeria. However, about six years ago, the Federal Office of Statistics claimed that the national unemployment figure was 3.6 percent outside those who have not registered with Labour Exchanges. Comparatively in countries such as USA and Britain it is only one digit ranging between 0.4 and 1 percent. The number is much higher since Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education and Allied Institutions are turning out graduates in thousands into already saturated labour market. The other pool in the rural areas who did not attend higher school are part of the system. Recently, Chief Kola Jamodu, the President of Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) estimates that in 2009 alone, 834 businesses, mostly small and medium enterprises, closed shops due to the hostile and uncompetitive operational environment, with an estimated 83, 400 redundancies. One can imagine the figure today (Manuaka, 2010; Kogbara, 2010; Oshiomode, 2011).

Besides unemployment, many Nigerians are underemployed, or better still exploited because they lack an alternative for a basic living. It is not uncommon to see even master's degree holders earning ten thousand naira a month against the real salary. It is also not uncommon to see Nigeria university graduates becoming bus conductors – all because of frustration and perhaps maintain family names. Some, too, are Okada drivers. It is because of these odd jobs engaged by this group of Nigerians that Gbenro Adesina and Femi Ayodele of the News Magazine described them as “The Wasted Generation” (Adesina & Ayodele, 2011).

Unemployment have thrown the youths into very many illegal business orbits – many are used for drug trade in overseas countries; some as political thugs as earlier mentioned, some as prostitutes locally and abroad. Apart from greed, unemployment have sentenced young Nigerians and are serving jail terms abroad. According to a statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the statement indicates that 52 Nigerians were on death row in foreign countries; 3, 132 in foreign prisons, 1, 640 in detention 5,145 (mostly young girls) estimates as trafficked victims; while 3, 719 were awaiting deportation (Umukoro, 2009). There are other youths who are trying to cross the Sahara Desert to Europe in search of jobs, but many found themselves perished in such attempts. Apart from environmental degradation that gave birth to militancy in the Niger Delta, frustration caused by lack of employment or underemployment were responsible for kidnapping and hostage taking of company workers. Today kidnapping and hostage taking for ransom have become part of Nigeria's culture and are carried out by youths.

However, the important thing is that youths are part of the society and progressively turned to its development. Good or gainful employment has a linkage effect on the health of individuals. Good health translates and in turn gingers or motivates one to contribute positively to the economy. So when a large pool of youths finds themselves in the swamp of unproductivity, where lies the hope for Nigeria's future?

### **Education and the Nigerian Youths**

Education is the power for development. It liberates the mind. It is a tool that prepares manpower to meet the requirement for modern world in areas such as agriculture, health, security etc. Research indicates that about 45 percent of Nigerians do not have access to basic education, and out of this number women are the most affected and are youths. The ratio of persons acquiring education has nothing to do with population. The percentage of people accessing education is an indication that when people are educated it is a plus because they would know the value to themselves – care for themselves and the environment which they live. They would also contribute positively to economy thereby stimulating development. Meaning that education is the most potent instrument for alleviating and eventually abolishing poverty. Indeed, Nigeria education system is in shambles – educational policies are somersaults (today 6 years primary and 5 years secondary; the next 6.6.4.4 system and the next moment something else).

However, within the sector, many youths do not have access to tertiary education. Nigeria parades about ninety-five Universities (private inclusive) and well over thirty polytechnics, over forty colleges of education, and, in addition institutes and allied institutions, yet many cannot secure a place to study. Some have attempted JAMB for more than three times without success. It is from this frustrating group that fall easy prey and become willing tools in the hands of dubious politicians and drug 'masters' or peddlers. The state of education is very poor in Nigeria and that explains why some Nigerian elite pride themselves in sending their children to schools abroad, and even our next door neighbour Ghana. In most of our universities, we are producing more educated illiterates. The number of Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education should not give an impression that we are doing fine. No. in 2008, the Times Higher Education ranked the universities in the world. No Nigerian university made the list of the top 500 universities worldwide. No African country made the 100 best universities (Akintunde, 2009; Osuagwu, 2011; Ekpo, 2011).

Nigeria over the years have not funded education properly and has not adhered to the international standard recommendations for countries the world over. For instance UNESCO recommended that 26 percent of the Nations budget as a global benchmarked to fighting illiteracy especially in developing economies (Asiru, 2011). The United Nations recommend that developing nations set aside at least 2 percent of their GDP on Research and Development. In the same corollary, the organisation of African Unity (O.A.U) now African Union (A. U.), in its Lagos Plan of Action of 1980 recommended that member states commit at least 1 percent of their GDP to Science and Technology. Between 1985 and now Nigeria's percentage of GDP commitment to R & D lingers between 0.1 percent and 0.6 percent. Comparatively, industrialised countries such as Britain, Japan, Germany, U.S.A that have attained development devote not less than 2.5 percent of their GDP to R & D Nigeria hoping to belong to the clique of developed economies by 2020 are still galloping behind in Science and Technology (CBN, 1994; Akpan, 2005; Akpan, 2008). The youths therefore are in position to watch the nation.

### **Health and the Nigerian Youths**

On the health sector, Nigerian youths also face some challenges. Many youths do not have access to affordable medical treatment because of its high cost. Often times, one may misconstrue the fact that one is well, when in actual fact or with examination very sick. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (Achalun and Achalu, 1999). From the above corollary how many Nigerians or indeed youths are healthy taking into consideration the earlier used indices.

For more than two decades, Nigerian health care system was and still in coma, and was attributed to the country's poor governance and leadership of the military era. The questions usually asked was this, were the military rulers not human beings? With the advent of democracy in 1999, it was expected the situation would change, that was not to be. Between 1990 and 2003, the federal government for instance budgeted between 0.2 and 2.7 for this sector (Ali-Akpajiake, 2003).

Apart from the migration of qualified medical personnels abroad for greener pasture, the major challenge to Health care in Nigeria is underfunding as mentioned earlier. It is estimated that over 40,000 Nigerian medical doctors are based in North America and Europe, leaving the country with rising dearth of qualified medical doctors (Omoragbo, 2011). Indeed, Nigeria have been ranked poorly in major health care indices globally. Nigeria is persistently challenged by diseases and ailment such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, typhoid fever, cholera, guinea worm, meningitis etc. Poverty, poor health system, hunger among others have driven Nigerians and recorded a dwindling life expectancy which currently stands at 47 years. If life expectancy is 47, how many years of productivity would the youths put in for the development of Nigerian economy? Very little. Good health is a pivot to increase productivity. When the youths and indeed the working population are healthy, other things being equal such as adequate manpower and security, there is expansion in economy and that too affects the wellbeing of her citizens.

### **Leadership**

Nigeria since independence have been a victim of poor leadership and it would appear the scenario have shaded other strata of Nigerian leadership sphere. The term leadership is

derived from the meaning to occupy the first position. It translates to mean guiding, motivating, persuading and exemplifying.

A cursory look at Nigeria, there are more than a million youth organisations or associations scattered all over. But none of these groups have been able to throw up one to lead them positively. Going through history, it would be recalled that Nigerians youths organisation led by Solanke fought alongside with a forebears to obtain independence for Nigeria; it was youth group who battled Tafawa Balewa's government to abolish a military pact Nigeria signed with Britain at independence. That, it is known the implication of such pact.

However, in the 1970s National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) used to be a force to be reckoned with especially during Mr. Okewo's days as a leader. since then nothing is heard except that they belong to 'settlement' camp. Meaning that they are suppose to be leaders who should defend their actions but become pawns in the hands of political "locusts" and "caterpillars" who pillage our economy and render us useless among comity of nations. Today Nigerian youths have no leader – very bad and unfortunate that expresses the reasons they are sidelined in the Nigerian project.

Issues such as corruption and greed are products of poor or bad leadership. Nigerian leaders are not transparent; they are corrupt reckless and poor managers of our economy. Because they are corrupt and greedy that explains why public functionaries are corrupt and have no respect for rule of law and accountability. Corruption stiffens the economy. The youths know this, but how many of them can really voice out. Some of them are the beneficiaries through dubious means. Insecurity in the Nigerian state are planned by the elite class and executed by the youths for a fee. Militancy, and other vices are carried out by the youths. When will they stand up to say no, that they should not be used against their nation – order and respect would return to this country?

In the last general election in Akwa Ibom for instance, Nigerian youths mainly Nigerian Youth Corps were used to rig election by extending peanuts to them by mean politicians. That was greed, when they were used, it was hoped since they are the future leaders, they would lead by example, but it turned out to be a failure, meaning the youths have lost their future.

### **The Way Forward**

The future of any country rests on the shoulders of her youths. The youths are the pivot of any society – that depends on the viability of these youths. Viability – physical, intellect, psyche, economic, social etc. For Nigerian youths to become an asset for this country, educational policies must change. We should do away with the Euro-centric type and advance to vocational, entrepreneurial, and technological education. These would prepare and reorientate the youths against depending on the white-collar jobs. This would minimise their dependence on government, politicians and in a long run reduce unemployment. Besides, Nigeria is rich by all standards – education and health care should be free at all levels. Only few too who are educated would want to carry gun or become suicide bombers or militants.

Besides, most industries in our shores have closed shop, these industries showcase the insensitivity on the part of our leaders past and present. The youths need employment – they (youths) must struggle through dialogue on the need for government to create more jobs. It is believed that frustration is responsible for drug taking, prostitution, armed robbery, desert

exploration, militancy and hostage taking except few exceptions. If truly youths are the future leaders, they need to be consulted through their leaders in major policy decision of this country. At all times, they should be taken and seen as partners in this nation's project.

Wages paid to workers in this country is very low – that perhaps explain why many are corrupt except politicians who are corrupt because it is inherent. Last week, a British envoy to Nigeria opined that about \$ 3 trillion dollars are stolen by Nigerians and kept in Western Banks. A very serious indictment on the part of Nigerian leaders. The recent revolutions in North Africa and Middle East were caused by the youths dissatisfaction with the way their countries were governed.

The youths should rise up and challenge negative practices in Nigeria in a bid to correcting them – electoral frauds, corruption, insecurity among others, in the process they truly prepare to take over as future leaders. Nigeria would be counted among the elite nations and beyond 2020 a country to be watched by others.

## CONCLUSION

So far, we had attempted to explain the problems youths are facing in the Nigerian project. These problems are caused by the ineptitude, parochial ideas of political 'locusts' called leaders. Nigeria is rich by all measurements but our resources are being frets away by mismanagement, and this has manifested itself through hunger, poverty, unemployment, insecurity, poor health, low level of education and weak institutions. We also noted that to upturn the ugly indices and place Nigeria on the path of development, free and alternative education policies be adopted, health care delivery be free at all levels; job creation institutions reactivated. The youths be proactive and revolutionary as it would be the only way to claim their future taking a cue from the recent events in North Africa and Middle East. We must explore these means otherwise the 2020 plan and beyond is a bad dream.

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