

# UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA AND GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO YOUTH EMPOWERMENT: 2015 - 2020

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper looked at unemployment in Nigeria vis-à-vis government's response to youth empowerment between 2015 and 2020. It relied on secondary data retrieved from online academic publications and other relevant online documents as well as the author's view for informed analysis and as a basis for evaluation. The paper observed that the prevailing security challenge in Nigeria is a resultant effect of prolong youth neglect as they take to various forms of crime and criminality. It recommends among others, that the present government should have a change of mindset towards youth empowerment programmes/initiatives as well as their administrations; if they really mean well to reduce the overall tension in the country.*

**Keywords:** Unemployment, Nigeria, youth, employment, security

## INTRODUCTION

Unemployment is one of the fundamental developmental challenges facing Nigeria presently. As noted by Akande (2014), it was high in the 1980s. However, Kayode, Arome and Anyio (2014) were in variance as available reports from various local and international bodies and the glaring evidence of joblessness in this era were clear indications that there was no time in Nigeria's chequered history where unemployment was as serious as then (2014).

Meanwhile, Kazeem Yomi, an Africa Reporter published on August 14, 2020; that the unemployment rate has more than tripled since the present administration took office in May, 2015. All these submissions point to the fact that unemployment is degenerating daily. According to the United Nations in Olurotunbi (2021), the number of people looking for jobs will keep rising as population growth continues to outpace output expansion and Nigeria is expected to be the world third most populous country by 2050, with over 300 million people.

Nigeria is endowed with significant natural and human resources, but the failure of the country's leadership to get it right over the years has continued to set the nation backward. General economic meltdown, policy somersault, failure to protect investors' investments and lack of deliberate efforts to separate business from politics bedevils Nigeria's business environment (Ekong, 2021).

Makinde and Adegami (2019) observed that one of the problems with those at the helms of affairs in African nations, including Nigeria is not being proactive enough in creating jobs forever-increasing population of their states. Utomi (2021) points out that Nigeria is a

replica of Spain of the 1840s where the elite squandered national revenues; adding that Spain would be poorer than smaller European countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands who had invested in their youths to enhance their ability to produce while Spain was sharing revenues.

More than 60% of Nigeria's working-age population is younger than 34 (Olurotunbi, 2021). Such youthful population has continuously put a severe strain on its economy and rapidly dwindling revenues. With a median age of 17.9, the youths form a huge reservoir of unutilized economic, social and technological energy. Empowering the youths is key to unlocking the nation's hidden capacity (Naijadazz, n.d). However, the large population of Nigeria appears to be a liability, rather than an asset, due to the failure of the country to control and manage population growth through meaningful policies (Abdussalam, Fudah, & Mohammad, 2013). Ozah (2018) quoted the submission of the current leadership of Nigeria at the business forum of Commonwealth Heads of Government in London thus:

*“Nigeria's youths do nothing and want everything for free. A lot of them haven't been to school and they are claiming you know, that, Nigeria has been an oil producing country therefore they should sit and do nothing and get housing, healthcare, education for free”*

The statement gives a deeper reflection of the state of the nation and if scholarly x-rayed, reveals a strong indictment on the nation on her inability to translate oil wealth into meaningful development in every facet of human endeavour since the oil boom in the 1980s. It is on this background that this paper critically looked at unemployment in Nigeria vis-à-vis the response of government to youth empowerment for the period of 2015 to 2020 and came up with recommendations that would serve as oxygen to revive Nigeria on a life-support. To achieve this, the paper was divided into five sections; including this introduction. Section two gave a conceptual clarification of key words with a view to bringing out meaning from the topic; while the third section reviewed unemployment in Nigeria and its implications for youth and national development. Section four discussed government response to youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria from year 2015 to 2020; while the fifth section concluded the paper with cogent recommendations.

### CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

It is pertinent to mention that this aspect cannot be ignored as it gives better understanding of the subject under consideration. The key words to be conceptualized are unemployment and youth empowerment.

#### **Unemployment**

Every economy is characterized by both active and inactive populations. The economically active ones are referred to as population willing and able to work, and include those actively engaged in the production of goods and services and those who are unemployed (Okoye-Nebo, Kenneth & Ugockukwu, 2014). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), an unemployed is one aged 15 or over; without a job during a given week, available to start a job within the next two weeks; actively having sought employment at some time during the last four weeks or having already found a job that starts within the next three months (insee, 2021).

Fajana (2000) described unemployment as a situation where people who are willing and capable of working are unable to find suitable paid employment. It is one of the macro-

economic problems every responsible government is expected to monitor and regulate. The higher the unemployment rate in an economy, the higher would be the poverty level and associated welfare challenges. Different sources identified various types of unemployment (Fajana, 2000; Alao, 2005; & Wikipedia, 2021a). Whatever the type of unemployment it is, calls for action.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment involves a process of giving power or control over one's own life to an individual or group that has traditionally been marginalized or had control of their own life limited or surrendered (Rappaport, 1981; Sadan, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment involves a strengths based approach, viewing individuals as having competencies and the right to function autonomously, yet needing opportunities and resources in the external environment to manifest those potentials. It goes beyond simply giving an individual rights, but also provides the needed social structure and resources to live those potentials out: demonstrating one's abilities and exerting control over one's life. When support is provided, it is done from the perspective of collaboration, not professional expertise. This is in contrast to a needs-based approach, which relies on experts to provide solutions or prevent problems for the individual (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998).

Empowerment also involves circumventing traditional modes of participation and influence that restrict involvement of individuals who do not "fit the mold," to create new standards of participation through more equitable distribution and management of resources and the active involvement of individuals and groups in decision-making about issues that directly affect them. Empowering young people according to Olabiyi (2013) is the process of encouraging them to be active citizens in their community. Youth mentoring can provide young people with positive role models, support and encouragement, and is thus considered one of the most effective ways of helping them reach their fullest potential as productive members of society (Chinedu & Olabiyi, 2015).

### **Youth empowerment**

Vavrus and Fletcher (2006) defined youth empowerment as an attitudinal, 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 including youths and adults. Oluwasanjo (2013) enumerated that youth empowerment simply means all positive efforts taken deliberately towards improving the lives of young people; efforts channeled towards developing the capacities of young ones to draw out the best out of them bearing in mind that, they are truly leaders of tomorrow. Ali (2012) elucidated that youth empowerment leads to prosperity of nations; by fostering innovation, transparent social and political systems, less dependability on government by the youth communities, opportunity for voicing youth issues as well as advocate for them at local and international level effectively.

Youth empowerment constitutes a central tenet of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child which every country in the world has signed into law (Wikipedia, 2015). Hence, government youth empowerment programmes are in vogue globally to create and support enabling conditions under which young people can act in their own behalf, and on

their own terms, rather than at the direction of others (Kator & Adaigho, 2015) in a responsible manner.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The paper is anchored on the empowerment model and the systems theory. The empowerment model is designed to equip people with disabilities participating in a program, their instructors, and community organizations, such that each has the “tools” (skills, knowledge, and appropriate attitudes) required to promote successful participation (Moran, Taliaferro, & Pate, 2014). The model has three unique elements: Programming, support and training; and plays an essential role in the success of each participant, and the interaction of these elements facilitate successful participation and true empowerment (Moran, Mernin, & Gibbs, 2017).

The first element, programming, also referred to as “continuum of opportunity,” suggests that a community should consider providing a selection of options that align with current ability levels (physical, cognitive, and social) of all individuals. This continuum would allow participants to select a program that allows them to participate successfully. The second element of the model is support, and is referred to as “Helping Hands.” This element acknowledges that some level of support may be desired on the part of the participants or requested by the parent/guardian or the instructor/organization. The model considers three main factors as it relates to support: who needs the support, type of support needed, and the level of expertise required. Support can be provided directly for the participant or the instructor. The type of support needed could be direct or indirect. Direct support means a supporting individual is present during each session. Indirect support can be given in the form of observation or consultation but the supporting individual is not physically present during each session.

The third element, training, presupposes that participants may require an individual with disability-specific expertise (trained) or simply a volunteer or peer (untrained) who is instructed to stay with the participant and help keep them on task. The accompanying “helping hand” support person can assist the participant or instructor as needed during the program by breaking down complex tasks into smaller movements, providing relevant cues to keep the participant on task, modifying skills or content to meet the participant’s abilities or needs, and/ or working directly with the program instructor to ensure the participant can be successful and achieve the desired personal goal from the program.

The empowerment model is a framework mainly for people with disabilities to make them socially, economically and politically inclusive. Technically, this model suits this paper because the unemployed youths are disabled and needed to be given helping hands. It is not enough to build their capacities but the support in terms of funding is very key for them to be operational in every sphere of human endeavour.



Fig. 1: The empowerment model

Source: Moran, T., Taliaferro, A., & Pate, J. R. (2014). Confronting physical activity programming barriers for people with disabilities: The Empowerment model. *Quest*, 66(4), 396-408.

The system theory on the other hand explains interdependence between and among components working together to achieve a common goal. The theory is utilized in the study based on the conviction that the youths, government and other stakeholders are components that make up the system. These components have varying inputs required for system development. The inputs of government are infrastructure, funds and sound policies; the inputs of the youth are strength, attitude, activity and agility while the other stakeholders are monitoring and evaluation, training and capacity development. The interdependent nature of these components cannot be overemphasized as it is critical for system growth and development. If any is not functioning properly, the entire system may fail. Government as a subsystem needs to play its role effectively in the form of appropriate policy response and creating enabling environment; and the youths are to be seen active with evidence of improved production capacity and other stakeholders have responsibility of continuous feedback to inform critical decisions for the betterment of the system.

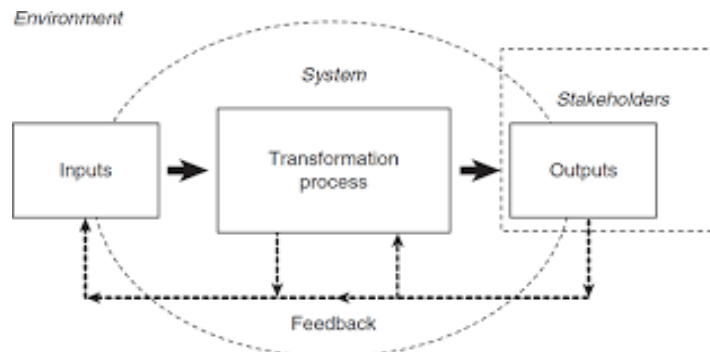


Fig. 2: System theory

Source: Luhman, J. T., & Cunliffe, A. L. (2013). Key concepts in organization theory. SAGE Publishing.

**UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Nigeria has one of the largest youth cohorts in the world with over 35% of the country’s population falling within the age group of 15 to 34 (Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), 2020). Unemployment is becoming a vicious disease in Nigeria. It has been estimated that millions of Nigerians are jobless and this justify that youth unemployment has been abysmal issue in Nigeria (Bulus, Gubak & Gubam, 2020). Youth unemployment is not a recent



phenomenon (Ugal, Nwagbara & Uyang, 2011; Bulus *et al*, 2020). What is new, however; is the emerging nature of its consequences which raise greater concern.

With unemployment highest among this demography (15-34 years), the risks of social vices, depression and apathy are especially high (PWC, 2020). Animashaun (2015) buttressed that, “not only are young people the most likely to be affected when unemployment rates are high, there is also danger that the psychosocial effects of unemployment on young people may be more damaging both to the youth and the society at large.” Terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery and the spate of bombings in Nigeria of recent has brought to greater attention, the challenges of unemployment in the country. The consequences of long years of youth neglect in Nigeria have reflected in various regional insurgencies including militancy in the Niger Delta, Boko Haram in the North, and New Biafra agitation in the South East (Jegede, Irewole & Dada, 2019). Gribble (2010) clearly noted that ignoring the youth population and the major problems faced by this group of individuals in a nation such as Nigeria will have due global consequences for decades.

Makinde and Adegami (2019) avowed that it was to this extent that the current Minister of Labour and Employment, Senator Chris Ngige described the situation as “alarming.” In the lecture delivered while declaring open, a two-day workshop with the theme “Breaking the Resilience of High Unemployment Rate in the Country on May 2, 2019, in Abuja; Senator Ngige declared that:

*“It is a worrisome status, as the global poverty capital (World Bank, 2018); concomitant high prevalence rate of crimes and criminality, including mass murders, insurgency, militancy, armed robbery, kidnapping and drug abuse, among others.”*

As if this situation is not scary enough, it is projected that unemployment rate in the country will reach 33.5 percent by 2020, with consequences that are better imagined if the trends is not urgently reverted. Thus, the official declaration by the current Minister of Labour and Employment concerning the unemployment rate in Nigeria bore eloquent testimony to the fact that all is not well with the Nigerian youths, and so the future of the country in terms of development is shaky (Makinde & Adegami, 2019). Unfortunately, the declaration of the Minister of Labour and Employment manifested as the projected rate was in consonant with the actual (33.28%) rate in the Q<sub>4</sub> 2020 as reported in Varella (2021) and the grievous consequences (EndSARS protest by the youths and COVID-19 palliative saga) that moment brought in the history of Nigeria.

Youths' unemployment, without doubt, has degenerated to “multi-social problems” such that bunkering, kidnapping or hostages taking, internet fraud, drug peddling, armed robbery, militancy and insurgency and prostituting are now thriving among the youths as alternatives to being idle. In order words, crimes have now become booming economic activities in Nigeria even more profitable than civil service job (Makinde & Adegami, 2019). Youth unemployment has consequences that extend beyond the economy, there are situations where some youths with no job prospects and little hope of getting any have fuelled raging tide of conflict (Ugal *et al*, 2011). It is worthy of note that recruitment into the “political army” requires no academic qualification except the possession of destructive mindset. If employment is not forthcoming youths easily take solace in this dangerous option as a means of inclusion and to enjoy rights and privileges.

Though the security services are under intense pressure to addressing the security challenges, the problems can be overwhelming due to the high level of unemployment (Adesina, 2013). Lack of committed, competent, and visionary leadership has contributed in no small way to the persistence and increase rate of unemployment in Nigeria. The associated effect of lack of good governance is unemployment and poverty (Makinde & Adegami, 2019). The alarming rate of youth unemployment has prompted the adoption of various measures and strategies such as the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Industrial Trust Fund (ITF), Directorate of Foods, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), etc. by successive military and civilian regimes (Ugal *et al*, 2011). According to National Bureau of Statistics (2012), the hallmark of poverty and crimes in Nigeria is the level of unemployment among its active age citizens. If Nigeria can tackle the high rate of unemployment in the country by creation of productive employment, the battle against poverty and crime would have been won.

### **GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: 2015-2020**

Any plan to develop the Nigerian economy must consider youth development very seriously. There are more reasons to the centrality of youths in development process than just their population. The multiplier effect of investment in youths is greater than the effect of comparable investment in the aged in a society (Okonkwo, Onyeze, & Ociaka, 2019). To stress the importance of youth, the current Speaker of House of Representative, Femi Gbajabiamila was quoted in Nwabughio (2021) as follows in a youth event organized by All Progressive Party in Abuja on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2021:

*“For the APC and the progressive movement to survive in Nigeria, we must commit ourselves to a deliberate and effective system of leadership recruitment to identify and prepare people, young people especially to occupy the important offices of party and government. We need to bring them to become effective champions of progressivism in the country and in government.”*

The statement acknowledged the fact that the youths do not have better engagement not only in socio-economic environment, but also in the political sphere. The statement did not undermine the strength of the youths in the scheme of things. However, when their energies are misdirected to perpetrating crimes and criminalities; growth and development would be adversely affected in the country. Successive governments have invested substantially in employment generation and economic empowerment programmes. Often these programmes are explicitly framed as interventions that will reduce levels of violence, through providing young people with a larger stake in society (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), 2014).

The Federal Government of Nigeria in 2015 under the direction of the National Social Investment Office created a social welfare initiative called National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) of Nigeria. The programme was set up to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources to vulnerable populations, including children, youth and women (Wikipedia, 2021b). Under the current leadership, the office has created four programmes to address poverty and help increase economic development. They are detailed as follows.

- a. The N-Power (Nigeria) programme is designed to target Nigerians between the ages of 18 and 35 to acquire and develop life-long skills and are provided with a monthly stipend of 30,000 naira while learning the skills.
- b. The Conditional Cash Transfer programme directly supports the most vulnerable by providing no strings attached cash to those in the lowest income group, helping reduce poverty, improve nutrition and self-sustainability, and supporting development through increase consumption. A monthly stipend of 5000 naira is given to households in poverty-stricken communities along with an additional 5000 naira for families designated as priorities or extreme cases. Aside cash transfers, beneficiaries are supported, mentored and coached by trained Community Facilitators who visit them weekly to help them take ownership of their lives.
- c. The Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) is a micro-lending investment programme targeting entrepreneurs with a focus on young people and women. This programme provides no-cost loans to its beneficiaries helping reduce the start-up costs of business ventures in Nigeria.
- d. The Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSP): It attempts to increase school enrollment by providing meals to school children particularly those in poor and food-insecure regions. The intention is a cycle of productivity, sustaining and connecting local farmers to nationwide and global markets while providing the next generation with the sustenance necessary for education and growth.

Notable among the recent programmes is the Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme (P-YES) which was launched on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2020 by the current leadership to create at least 774,000 empowerment opportunities through direct youth empowerment. The details of the jobs showed that 1000 youths per local government across the six geo-political zones were selected in the efforts of the Federal Government to eradicate unemployment among the teeming youths.

Burchard, LeGrand and Piachaud (2002) posited that investment in human capital stimulates national growth and development. Furthermore, youth empowerment is indeed a key strategy to take the challenges created by rapidly changing social, economic, technological and demographic environments in Nigeria. Empowering young people as a promoter, has a greater effect and more long lasting impacts on communities and national development (Fajana, 2000; Garduño, Sawyer & Sawyer, 2013).

Notwithstanding, the number of schemes and the resources that have been poured into them, both youth unemployment and the level of insecurity continue to grow in Nigeria which give raise to questions as to the overall quality and impact of the programmes (NSRP, 2014). The Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWIN) was rebranded in the present administration as YouWIN Connect but could not address the challenges in the defunct YouWIN as the participants of YouWIN Connect lamented their ordeals; having passed through rigorous selection process where fifty thousand were selected from the pool of applicants to attend online training. After the completion of the training, five thousands were announced winners at national, regional and state levels for excellent performance.

The question is 'winners of what? Certificate of participation or fund for start-up or to boost existing businesses. This is in concomitant to NISER (2014) where it was posited that youth



empowerment programmes have concentrated more on training than other activities that actually provide openings for immediate employment in white-collar jobs or jobs in small and medium scale industries. While the view of Akande (2014) that the strategy has not yielded the desired results because the training is often not accompanied by soft loans was buttressed by the lamentation of the participants. N-Power and other programmes under NSIP are not left out as they are marred by poor supervision of process and weak monitoring and evaluation.

It is pertinent to mention that despite the Presidential directive for the implementation of the P-YES, it is yet to be carried out; and this called for an investigation by the House of Representatives during one of her sittings. A similar scenario once happened during political campaign for the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria where the current leadership vowed to empower the unemployed youths with monthly stipend of 5000 naira. However, the promise never saw the light of the day.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Good governance comes into full action when a leader understands his assignment and carries it out in line religiously. Positive Government Response to Youth Empowerment in Nigeria is germane for the peaceful existence of the citizenry. From the various interventions, it is evident that public policies directed at addressing youth unemployment have faced different challenges including but not limited to finance, absence of efficient administration and proper implementation, as well as inconsistent designs in policies. Consequently, this paper recommends as follows:

- 1) There should be critical impact-audit of current interventions to determine their effectiveness and relevance in the context of current realities;
- 2) Government at various levels should as a matter of urgency, have a change of mindset in programme governance by sticking to one clear roadmap to steer response, rather than proliferating initiatives;
- 3) The recommendation of Ajayi (2021) for the decolonization Nigeria's educational curriculum in a way that do not erode international standard should be adopted. It is very important that curricula are reviewed with local perspective in mind to help train students to become fit to occupy local labour space.
- 4) A workable monitoring and evaluation system should be put in place in youth empowerment programme, making result-oriented measurement and monitoring of impact a requirement for programme continuity.
- 5) Government should view empowerment programmes beyond a means of supporting members of political parties, if they are to make meaningful impacts.
- 6) Agriculture used to be a major employer of labour before the oil boom. Government should therefore, revive the sector by making it attractive to young Nigerians.
- 7) Teeming unemployed youths are absorbed in large number in the production sector. Government should endeavour to create enabling environment through the provision of basic infrastructure that permits production of goods and services as the economy cannot thrive when it is import-dependent.
- 8) Government should adopt a "multi-stakeholder approach" in the administration of empowerment programmes to ensure transparency and eschew corruption while training and mobilizing capital for participants.

- 9) Government should refocus efforts on supporting organized businesses by creating enabling environment to increase production capacity, which would invariably enable them to create jobs.
- 10) There should be robust re-orientation of youth on their views that “education is scam” and institutions should build capacity in order to prepare the youths for the future.
- 11) When the righteous governed, the people are happy. It is believed that this should spur government at all levels to be more proactive, transparent and focused on meeting the expectations of citizens. Hence, the government should have a rethink on the implication of a sad populace.
- 12) Government should ensure intervention programmes do not fuel grievances by making sure they are inclusive, fair, transparent and accountable. Typical example is the petition by participants in the YouWIN Connect programme.

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