Youth Empowerment as a Panacea for Social Problems in Nigeria

Undie, Joseph Bekeh   Edinyang Sunday David (Ph.D)
Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Faculty of Education, University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria

Abstract
The inability of the government to empower the youth is so disturbing. This has precipitated a situation where social problems are multiplying rapidly in the society. The paper attempts to discuss youth empowerment in Nigeria, social problems in Nigerian society, the need for youth empowerment and the challenges encountered, in implementing youth empowerment programmes. And finally, conclusion was made by giving recommendations that if they are implemented will help to reposition and overhaul youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that the youths are the cornerstone, and vehicle of growth and development in the society. They are the leaders of tomorrow in any nation. The Nigeria population age structure according to 2011 estimate is 0-14years: 40.9%; 15-64 years: 55.9%; 65 years and above: 3.1% (CIA World Factbook, 2012). Given the population age structure, the youth fall within the age structure of 15 - 64, which constitutes 55.9%. It is this age that is the engine of productivity in Nigeria.

Nigerian youths are not adequately empowered as it should have been such that they feel short-change and vexed as this is manifested in the perpetration of myriad of deviant behaviours in the society. It seems as if the government that is having direct responsibility of setting policies and programmes that will facilitate youths empowerment (employment creation) has faltered or failed in that responsibility. This failure of those (leaders) responsible to empower allied programmes/schemes has really gone a long way to occasion unimaginable social problems rocking the peaceful state of the society. These social problems which are in many dimensions range from stealing sexual promiscuity, Insubordination, social maladjustment, political thuggery, under-utilization of national resources, vandalization of different sorts (i.e. oil pipeline). Also, these social problems are expressed in different guises - political crises, kidnapping as emergent form of business, religious bigotry/chauvinism (as in boko haram incidence).

THE NEED FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Nigerian socio-economic environment has been so poor for the youth and this has in no small magnitude variously affected the youths. The dearth of jobs (empowerment) has created a very serious and growing threat to the youth as it is an incidence that has been lingering for an age now without any remedial effort by the government and the complimentary others to arrest the trend.

Universities, polytechnics, monotechnics, colleges, of education and distance learning centres are turning out graduates in thousands into the labour market due to the quest for certificates. It is in no doubt that there is no preparation for these graduates in terms of empowerment or employment. Unemployment is growing seriously as its evidence is seen in the society as graduates roam the streets in quest for jobs; some been underemployed; while some would take to very immoral and questionable occupation that deviates from the norms of the society. Hence the need for empowerment for these to be averted.

Another issue is that of idle youths who are not having any form of empowerment for livelihood. They are always ready and requisite tools or instruments to perpetrate devilry on the society as in the case of Boko Haram insurgency and other militant activities in Nigeria. These idle youths are also used by politicians for thuggery.

Lack of empowerment of youths has caused underdevelopment with its resultant effects on the standard of living, health of the youths as further consequence of poverty. Poverty is a vicious social phenomenon. As Ekweoba, (2012) would put it "effect of poverty could be hardly ignored as it comes in vicious circle. People at times engage in unlawful, illegal, anti-social or immoral activities because of poverty, and in turn these activities bring poverty". Maduagwu, (2006:6) in Ekweoba, (2012) further explains:

> Poverty makes people compromise moral values or abandon moral values completely.
> Poverty has created frustration, loss of hope, prospects and values for life, loss of the
> meaning of life, purpose of living, something to live for and disillusionment about
> morality because criminals are living best ...

Youth empowerment should be a panacea to reverse the above discussed social problems. The opposite of this, means to invite these social problems. And this bane has adversely influenced the pattern of life in Nigeria that we are now living in perpetual fear and uncertainty, mutual distrust and suspicion, lack of faith in the leadership and progress of the country, philosophy of "anything goes" as it is seen in the unguided behaviours of the youths. To shun youth empowerment invariably means to be trapped in quagmire, slow pace of development to mention

among others. This calls for urgent intervening strides by our leaders at various levels, captains of organization and agencies, opinion leaders and policy makers, religious bodies, affluent individuals, corporate organizations to put their hands on deck to give youth empowerment a prominent attention.

HIV/AIDS has been on the increase from the last decades.

This, to some extent, is traced to poor empowerment of youths

Youths (especially females) who do not have any source of livelihood would resort to prostitution. Promiscuity facilitates the spread of HIV/AIDs, hence the need for youth empowerment.

Empowerment is necessary for the sustenance of youths to continue in the struggle for survival. A society where youths are empowered experiences rapid growth and development and there is phenomenal social peace to some extent as there would be minimal social disorder occasioned by youth restiveness, demonstrations, political and religious crises and riots, militancy and terrorism to mention among others.

Worthy of mention is the increase in the standard of living of the youths. Good standard of living ensures healthy state of the youths.

Furthermore, through empowerment the youths are productive. And the productivity of the youths contributes enormously to Gross National Product of the country.

Considering all these holistically, there is no doubt that youth empowerment is a panacea to social problems as we experience in Nigeria.

YOUTHS EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

Youth empowerment is 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 youth and adults (Vavrus & Fletcher, 2006).

Youth empowerment does not only mean to providing jobs alone to the youth but, also, extended to cover political, economic, intellectual and social power. This makes the youth to have that sense of belonging. Empowerment makes the youths to be better placed to function multi-facetedly to achieve the holistic goals of the society. According to Journal of Extension (1998) youth empowerment is often addressed as a gateway to intergenerational equity, civic engagement and democracy building.

Nigerian youth are change agents. Empowering them makes them to be equipped with various skills, values, attitudes, and orientation that will impact on their lives, the lives of others and the society in general.

Youth empowerment therefore is the programme that is oriented or designed to make youths to be more economically and socially responsible and self-reliant, via business and vocational skills acquisition through technical and managerial training (Kwetha, 2011). The above stated should be with Nigerian youths in order for them to live a meaningful life.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Social problems are social phenomena, situation conditions, Which are unwholesome to growth and development of the society. These conditions affect real life and are injurious to the society.

There is no society that is bereft of problems. Nigeria is one, among other societies in the world facing this. Social problems in Nigeria involve unemployment, underemployment, economic deprivation, religious and political bigotry, crime of various sorts and magnitude, poverty, poor standard of living, drug abuse, low wages and salaries, child labour, human trafficking, tribalism, corruption among others. Social problems are born out of political, economic, cultural, religious, technological developments that are vicious, and affect real life experiences.

To list social problems in Nigeria society would be an Unending exercise. Uko & Okebe (2012: 239) also have it that Nigeria is plagued by multidimensional problems, problems which are antithetical to peace, problem of socio-economic imbalance, problems of instability and inequality. As far as people are living together with varying values, attitudes, beliefs and philosophy of life, there is bound to be social problems.

Most worrisome as a social problem, now in Nigeria is the incidence of Boko Haram. This is a militant Islamist movement based in North-east Nigeria that says, Western education is sin and then seeks to establish an Islamic state. By June,2014, Boko Haram had killed more than 5000 civilians as well as 650 thousand people had fled their homes by August 2014(Wikipedia,2014). Boko Haram is a religio-politically motivated formation that has claimed thousands of lives in Nigeria. Attacks have been made by this sect in churches, markets and government's establishments. The heinous activities of the Boko Haram have tremendously impeded the economic, social, political, morale and educational development of the society. The northern part of the country is the worst hit as citizens now live in perpetual fear and suspicion.

Closely related to Boko Haram terrorism, we have incidence of militancy in the Southern part of where armed militants have taken over the oil rich Delta perpetrating all sorts of violent, disgusting and unimagined devilry on human kind and the society. The activities of these militants range from oil bunkering, vandalization of oil pipelines, smuggling of oil to neighbouring countries, kidnapping of expatriates and fellow Nigerians, calculated insurgence on civilians and security forces. These have adversely affected the Nigerian society and the international community, in one way or the other. Agbaje (2002) in Odogiyong (2009) observed also that the

activities of these groups have assumed a dysfunctional dimension and threaten the objectives of peaceful existence.

Another brewing militant formation is in Bakassi peninsula in Cross River State, a land, which has become a disputed area before and after the international court ruling on 10, October, 2002 that ceded the oil rich peninsula to Cameroon. This development has angered the original natives of the area as the ceding was fraught with kangaroo practices that negate them of their rights not only as Nigerian citizens but as earthly citizens. The recent hoisting of the flag of Bakassi as a sovereign entity (Vanguard News,2012) is born out of this unfair treatment meted out to them by the international court of justice and with the facilitation of our leaders that traded the area of Bakassi for their own selfish motive.

CHALLENGES OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

Various governments or regimes have come up with so many youth empowerment programmes that so many are defunct whereas some, to some extent are moribund. It seems as if nothing was set up at all because the purposes in which they were set up are defeated. Now what comes to mind is that, what are those very challenges that are warring against the, success of these very programmes. According to, Egoboosterbooks (2011), poor monitoring and supervision of youth programmes, lack of funding, Inadequate infrastructural facilities, lack of qualified youth personnel (leaders), poor management of youth recreational facilities, and vocational centres are responsible for the poor implementation of youth empowerment programmes.

A prominent challenge and which is noteworthy of mentioning as a challenge of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria is the "monstrous" corruption. Corruption is always the cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society. Billions of nairas have been voted for the running of these youth empowerment programmes and have been diverted to private pockets. Corruption is a serious challenge to the success of these programmes. Due to corruption, laudable programmes have been stunted in both high and low places, which mean that there is no proper management and accountability (Sheidu & Abdullahi, 2012).

One of these programmes is National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) which incorporates Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), Social Welfare Services (SWS), among others was set up in 2001 during Obasanjo tenure to addressing poverty in Nigeria and other related issues (i.e. youth empowerment). This programme was set up to coordinate and oversee various institutions, ministries, parastatals like National Directorate of Employment (NDE) that are having related function to poverty eradication, empowerment, etc. NAPEP produced guidelines and plans for these institutions to actualize their objectives, which encompasses vocational training of youths to acquire basic and entrepreneurial skills, granting of micro-loans, supporting internship by giving stipends throughout the duration of the training, creating employment in the automobile industry, and helping visco virgina fistula (WF) parents (Wohlmuth, Alabi, Burger, 2008). This programme is seen as an improvement over the previous Nigerian governments poverty reduction programmes (Obadan, nd). According to a 2008 analysis, the programme has been able to train 130,000 youths and engage 216,000 persons, but most of the beneficiaries were non-poor (Wohlmuth, Alabi, Burger, 2008). This is still the corruption we are talking about. The poor youths who need empowerment would not be given the opportunity but for the relatives and the significant others of those managing the programme. The programme is fraught with kangaroo practices.

As a recent youth empowerment proqramme, President Goodluck Jonathan has launched the public works and women/ youths empowerment (PW/WYE) project in this 2012, targeted at generating about 370,000 jobs across the country (Emsamro, 2012). In this very programme, emphasis is placed paramountly on youth empowerment. Quoting the president in Esamro, (2012) "the SUR-P programme seeks to target the largest population of unskilled, unemployed and underemployed poor women and youths as well as other vulnerable groups in our society by presenting them with opportunities in the public works programmes and internships in firms for the skilled and educated." This is not the first youth empowerment programme, we have had, but there is no remarkable impact of these proqrammes.. Given the experiences gotten from the challenges that have been crippling the previous programmes, one is left in a deep doubt, if this fresh one will not be an abysmal fiasco.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Having seen what youth empowerment is in Nigeria, and the dimensions of social problems in Nigeria, and how grave these problems are subversive and pervasive to the society economically, socially, politically, religiously, morally among others; and the need for youth empowerment in Nigeria as this brings phenomenal social peace, progress and development in our society; also, the challenges associated with youth empowerment that cause successive empowerment programmes to hardly achieve their objectives, it will be apt enough to recommend that:

The government needs to provide enough funds to carry out these programmes effectively. This should be a collaborative effort of all tiers of government and also collaborating with the non-governmental organizations, affluent individuals and corporate bodies. There should be efficient ways of coordinating, assessing, supervising and monitoring of the youth empowerment programmes.

Thorough scrutiny of functionaries that manage the programmes should be given much attention to.

Since from the experience of the successive youth empowerment programmes it has been noted that corruption has been a challenge to the Success of these programmes. Funds voted for this purpose have always been diverted to private pockets. Sometimes the expected amount of the stipends to be given to the trainees in internship is not what would be given. These corrupt officers managing the empowerment programmes have always been the ones bleeding the programmes to death.

Federal character principle should be applied when selecting youths to be empowered at a time. A system of checking whether all the youths from different parts of the country, region, state or local government are affected by the selection should be put in place. This should be done because it has been noted with much dismay that such opportunities are made, by corrupt officers to revolve around their relatives and the significant others.

The vocational or skills acquisition, centres should be well equipped with modern tools, equipment and machines for the training youths to be abreast with the current technology.

The agencies (i.e National Directorate of Employment) should be overhauled to give requisite entrepreneurial and managerial training to the would-be-empowered youths.

The National Youth Service Scheme where graduates from tertiary institutions are to serve the country for a year should be strengthened, and managed efficiently, for it to become a medium where youths could be empowered by giving them reasonable amount of money that can be used as a start up capital for those who may be willing to engage in small-scale businesses.

Youth empowerment should not be restricted to providing vocational skills/training through internship only as it is common, but it should be extended to involving the youth in community decision making. Political positions should be shared with them. This makes them have the sense of belonging to the mainstream as the participate and contribute politically to better their lot.

Finally, the social welfare should not just be there nominally as a government establishment but should live up to its statutory responsibility and function. The impact of social welfare has not been felt up to expectation.

Education is another form of empowerment. It is always an instrument used to bring about change in the society. Functional literacy level which is highly needed in the society should be raised by facilitating qualitative educational attainment of youths through bursaries, scholarships and student loans.

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