The Role of Youths in Democracy and National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Youths are the vehicle that drives development in a nation, they are the most populous and vibrant persons within a nation and they account for the most part of the labour force. According to the 2006 census, the youth population constitutes over 70% of the Nigerian population. The quality of youths and their readiness to impact actively, contributes to the development of a nation. Any nation that therefore supports the growth of her youth will not only experience swift national development but will also enjoy the benefits of democracy. The main objective of this study is to assess the role of youth in democracy and national development in Nigeria and how it can be achieved. The work made use of qualitative research method, relied on secondary sources for data collection and is anchored on the systems theory. Youths play certain salient roles in the society which include; community development, human capital development, self-help projects and youth political development. Several factors have thus hindered the Nigerian youths from being active and productive and they include; unemployment, illiteracy, lack of authentic youth programmes and organizations and poor health facilities. A few recommendations were made to help ameliorate these problems and they are; the government should endeavour to create a favourable environment for youths such as making viable policies that will produce productive youths, provide good education, quality health facilities and also ensure political socialization amongst the youths.

Keywords

Roles of youth, National Development, Democracy, Youth development.

Introduction

It is no doubt that youths are very essential to the growth and development of a nation. They are a crucial engine that drives the existence of every society. This is because the youths constitute over sixty percent of a nation's population (Idike & Eme, 2015); they are also vibrant, energetic and productive.

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The youths are thus the future of every nation; this implies that without the youths, the collapse of a nation is imminent. The quality of youths that exist in a society, definitely defines the level of development especially in such a nation. The positive role of the youths also has a role to play on democracy in the world; democracy cannot strive if the youths are not coordinated and unproductive.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Nigerian government today is that most of the youths are unproductive. The government and policy makers have been unable to provide opportunities for the youths particularly in the areas of development and this has had a devastating effect on the youths who have become miscreants and a menace to the society, they are mostly idle and have given into fraudulent acts, they also form themselves into terrorist groups such as Boko-Haram (Onuoha, 2014), through which they unleash terror on the nation, thereby causing the problem of insecurity. It is thus safe to say that youth development in Nigeria is relatively poor and its major implication is the kind of leadership that will be produced infuture. Lack of democratic Values has also played a significant role in the underdevelopment of youths in Nigeria as it has hardly given room for national economic transformation that would be beneficial to the youths; thus has produced an un-qualitative youth force that cannot impact positively on the nation.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), reported that 85% of youths in the world live in the developing countries and it is not likely there will be a change in the near future (ILO, 2004 in Nwanegbo, Tsuwa & Jega, 2013).

There are several challenges facing youth development in Nigeria, these challenges are numerous and varied, amongst them are, unemployment, poor health status and limitation in political participation. With appropriate policies put in place, the youths can be harnessed for development. However, Nigeria lacks comprehensive and effective policies to handle issues facing the large population of youths. Many of the youths who are vibrant and productive are unemployed and unhealthy without sufficient support. Some of them are infected with terminal diseases such as HIV/AIDS while others are destitute, living on the streets or existing under very harsh conditions (Idike and Eme, 2015).

The greatest challenge in Nigeria is how to evolve a credible democratic system which has become the basis and yardstick for measuring National Development. Although Nigeria is said to be operating a democratic system of government, the past and present governments remain exclusive and excluding as the citizens are subject to the policies, rules and orders being passed by the government (Nwanegbo, 2005). It is pertinent to note that democracy and national development cannot be attained until a well-equipped and effectively mobilized youth force is instituted. All these can also not be possible if democracy in its authenticity is not practiced. This paper seeks to ascertain the challenges facing youth development and how they can be curbed in Nigeria.

Conceptualization of Terms
Youth: Youth refers to a particular period in an individual's life. It includes a period when a person is still fresh, young, and vibrant and every other attribute that characterizes freshness. It also implies a period of an individual life when the person is neither a child nor an adult but somewhere in between. There is actually no universally accepted definition of the term youth. However, youths are seen as persons between the ages of fifteen and twenty four years (United Nations, 2010). The African Youth Charter defines a youth as any person between the ages of 15 – 35. Countries such as South Africa, Ghana, and Tanzania define the youth population as ranging from the ages of 15 – 35. To Tyyska & Vappu (2005), scholars posit that age based definition or the actual age range that constitutes youth vary. In as much as the youth has been defined by certain ages, definitions still vary from country to country. And these ages range from 18 – 45. In other words, people cross the line of being youths to becoming elders in most societies from the age of 49 or 50. Utsua (2013), stipulates that youths share certain attributes that differentiate them from other generations. These attributes include impatience for change,

zealousness, radicalism, rebellion, curiosity, hard work, self-esteem and ambitiousness, etc. All these according to Utsua, are propelling factors for national development.

Democracy: Democracy as a word was coined from the Greek words, Demos and Kratos which implied people and power respectively. This put together, meant a government based on people and power vested in the hands of the people. As a concept, it has no generally accepted definitions. Several scholars over the years have defined democracy using various indicators. One curtain element that can be deduced from these definitions is majority rule. The concept of democracy dates to the ideas of early Greek Philosophers. The concept was envisaged and conceptualized as the rule of the lowest and commonest people or the masses (Uji, Wilfred &Kigbu, 2013). Democracy was described as the government in which the ordinary masses would control and administer the institution of governments, in this situation; power is resident in the hands of the common people, that is, the masses.

The modern democracy implies an indirect representation of the masses which is known as representative democracy. This form of government allows people to participate in government, by indirectly electing those who will represent the masses, those who will be responsible and accountable to them.
The conditions of modern democracy as stated by Nnoli(1994) include:-
a.   Political based competition between individuals and organized groups.
b.   An inclusive political participation by qualified citizens.
c.   A high level of civic and political liberties.
    These conditions can be equated to the central idea in the democratic tenets of early Greek philosophers which was geared towards a people friendly government that takes into preeminence the importance of the youths in the process of national development. The training of youths was the focus in the Greek states of Sparta and Athens. They were equipped with military skills and were also developed intellectually in order to enable them contribute to national development and transformation.

Iji, Wilfred and Kighir (2013), stipulated that the youths were the pivotal stone in the outbreak and the foundation of the new age, these revolution gave birth to two major democratic movements in world history namely Western Liberal Democracy and Social Democracy. The Western Liberal Democracy expressed the ideas of the freedom in tune with fundamental basic human rights including the right to life, the pursuit of happiness and so on. The Social Democracy expressed the ideas of social and economic justice based upon the principles of equity, equality and egalitarianism of all men. The basic rights advocated by the social democracy are the rights of all men to job, security, food and happiness.

The Nigerian experience of Democracy has been questionable right from its inception. The ambition of the Nigerian government to attain substantive democracy has been marred by corruption, which was worsened by the military regimes, executive lawlessness, general intolerance for due process and rule of law. In regards of the democratic situation in Nigeria, all citizens particularly the youths have been greatly disadvantaged, there has been a high level of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, recklessness on the side of the helpless youths and so on.

National Development: Before delving into an understanding of National development, it will be pertinent to have a very clear understanding of development as a term. In the bid to understand development, a few variables must be taken into cognizance; they are poverty, unemployment, and inequality. If these three variables are nonexistent within a society, then it can be said that society is developing. If not so, the society is not developed or is underdeveloped.

According to Nwanegbo (2005), there are some fundamental factors that are associated with development.He stated that development deals with man's effort at solving the problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality. To him man puts in efforts to solve and surmount their challenges through the mastery and utilization of nature and also lay down principles for the future generation.

Nnoli (1981), stipulates that development is a dialectical phenomenon in which the individual and the society interact with their physical, biological and inter human environments, transforming them for the betterment of humanity at large and also transferring this development to future generations in the process. This enables them to improve their capacities to make further valuable changes in their inter-human relations and their abilities to transform nature.

National development is the radical and qualitative transformation of a nation in the area of socio-economic and political development realm. There is also a progressive growth and change in the process of nation building.

National development, democracy and democratic stability are more or less symbiotic. A practice of democracy which allows for rule by the citizens thereby catering for the interests of these citizens automatically breeds national development. For a democracy to lead to national development and also sustain such development, it must enable a situation where every citizen can govern. Therefore the existence of a class of elites who override the people's interest must be completely wiped (Mile & Ayatse, 2013).

It is worthy to note that youths are very essential to every society. The quality of youth of a nation determines its level of development. Certain prerequisites are necessary for a qualitative youth force and they include: health and wellbeing of body and mind, good reward for labour, improvement in standard of living and good education.

The youth of nation is her democratic vanguard; the youth groups are the ones to propagate democracy and democratic activities which is not the case in Nigeria. Rather the youths are marginalized and relegated in politics. Restrictions are placed on the youths from participating in politics. According to Utsua (2013), some of these instructions are constitutional, such as legally barring most of them from vying for post in the National parliament, governorship and the presidency while others are economical such as placing a high amount on presidential and gubernatorial tickets and also expenses involved in campaign.

Theoretical Framework
This study is anchored on the systems theory. It will help guide and shed light in the comprehension of how the youths can positively contribute to national development and democracy in Nigeria.

Easton (1965), asserts that a system exists in every environment and takes input from the environment. Such inputs usually occur in form of demands or supports from the environment. In every system, a conversion process is existent. The input, which is inform of demand or support passes through the conversion process, it comes out as output to the environment and this output becomes authoritative decisions. There is also a feedback mechanism that sends the output back into the system as inputs thus completing a complex cycle of operation.

The systems theory thus asserts that everything functions in a whole (Complete System). Malfunction or disequilibrium in one part of the environment affects the whole system. Any problem that occurs in any component of the system affects the whole system, as all the components are interconnected and interdependent. The system theory is generally a relationship or more concretely "whole which comprises many parts".

In application to this work, it can be seen that the Nigerian State exists as a system comprising various parts (subsystem) which are numerous. All the parts have their peculiar roles to play to ensure the stability, sustainability and survival of the system.

The youth is a subsystem of the structural buildup of the Nigerian political system and is pivotal to the effectiveness and efficiency of the system, the importance of the roles they play in the stability and sustainability of the political system cannot be overemphasized. Given their strategic role, the youth has the greater responsibility to promote peace, security, stability and national unity. The youth is also the engine of growth and development in any society as they take advantage of their vibrancy to provide the labour force for production of goods and services. Their actions and inactions can therefore develop or destroy the fabrics a nation.

The contributions of the youth to the growth and development of the nation or the stability of the system so to say, can only be made feasible if they are given the opportunity. The government must ensure that the youth participate in democracy by allowing them to freely exercise their franchise, they must be allowed to vote and be voted for; their voices must also be heard particularly about issues that bother them and the nation as a whole. Policies and programmes which will promote the development of youths should also be formulated and implemented; they should be followed through in order to enhance efficiency, continuity and a solid youth base in the society.

One of the major problems facing national development and democracy in Nigeria is the negligence of the youths. This happens mostly because policies that concern the development of youths are usually formulated and not followed to the latter. Consequently, the quality of the youth in Nigeria is jeopardized. Nigeria is therefore fraught with unproductive youths who rather cause mayhem and destruction in the nation and this has greatly affected the stability of the nation.

Youth And Democracy
Youth inclusiveness in political activities is very important. All youths should account for participation in elections, involvement in political parties, civic engagements and other democratic activities. According to Osawaru (2021), the Democracy and Security Dialogue report stipulated that the empowerment of youth in politics creates awareness for engagements and it reduces barriers for young people's political and economic participation which are central to addressing the factors associated with violent extremism. The report further stated that the youths must be embraced as responsible citizens and be prepared to lead their societies in accordance with universal human right values.

The role of youth in peace and security of a nation can therefore never be overemphasized. For a society to make a difference in the longer term, it will be pertinent for the government to engage the youth in formal political processes so that they can have a say in formulating policies. Inclusive political participation is very crucial in building stable and peaceful societies and also developing policies that respond to the specific needs of the youths. It is very important for them to know their right and be given the necessary knowledge and capacity to participate in a meaningful way at all levels.

Youths feel disempowered when they are marginalized, this usually takes place when politicians do not respond to the aspiration of young people particularly if they don't win their votes. The resultant effect is that the youth are excluded from taking part in decision making or contributing to key socio-economic political issue despite their being sensitive to demands for societal equity, justice, environmental protection and cultural diversity.

It has been strongly proven that the participation of the youth in formal, institutional political processes is relatively low in comparison with their older counterparts. This has created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction amongst the youth as they have been poorly represented and disenfranchised (UNDP, 2012).

People under the age of 35 hardly exist in formal political leadership even though eligibility for political offices starts at 25 years or higher. The situation is more challenging for young women as they are hardly considered for decision making or leadership positions (UNDP, 2012).

Several reasons have been recorded for the boycott of youth in democratic decisions in Nigeria; and they include, mistrust toward political parties, disappointment in politics and the complexity of democratic decision-making process. They have tried and have resorted to the belief that their efforts will never be recognized as the system is corrupt (Ban K-moon, 2015). Other reasons why youths avoid political participation in Nigeria include:

- The fear of being blackmailed or assassinated, election periods are usually fraught with kidnapping, killings and assassination of political opponent.
- The fear of dishonest politicians who engage in smear campaigns, propaganda and character assassination of their opponents. This factors deter eligible youths to stay away from politics in order to preserve their moral integrity, they rather view politics as a 'dirty game' meant for touts and school dropouts (Vite & Dibang – Achua, 2019).
- The fear of detention by government has caused so many youths to become apolitical and apathetic, illegal detention and violation of the rule of law has become the order of the game of politics in Nigeria and has had major effects on youth participation in politics. The enactment of hate speech bill has also silenced agitations and widened youth dissociation from political activities (Vite, Stephen & Kabee, 2020).

In order to meet the needs of young people and keep them from being disenfranchised, they must be availed the opportunity to participate actively and meaningfully in democratic practices and processes. Realizing that the youth has the right to participate and be included in democratic processes and practices is imperative for the achievement of developmental goals (World Youth Report, 2007).

Youth and National Development
The role of youth in national development is crucial as they are critical stakeholders, whose action or inaction can make or mar the nation. They have very strategic roles to play in the promotion of peace, security and national unity which are all indices of development; they provide a greater percentage of the labour force for production of goods and services and also are a reliable source of demand for the economy through their consumption activity (Odoh and Eme, 2014). The youths if properly developed could build up a new class of entrepreneurs that Nigeria needs to be stable.

According to Odoh & Eme(2014), the size of the population of the youth is currently 1.2 billion and is expected to grow in the next 20 years. Youths with the help of government must therefore channel their energy towards pursuing educational goals and development of life skills necessary for national and local leadership position. One of the ways this can be achieved is that the government must furnish them with information on reproductive health and services in order to choose the number of children and also avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infection.

The National Youths Development Policy stipulates that, youths form the basic foundation of the society, the pace of development and security of a nation are determined by their energies, character, inventiveness and orientation, their creative talents and labour power contribute immensely to the economic development and socio-political attainments of nation. A nation therefore identifies and builds her vitality and purpose from their dreams, hopes, energies, in them the future of a nation is assured (FGN, 2001:1).

There is an every need to facilitate the intellectual and moral development in the youth so as to breed productive members of the society. This process includes inculcating values and accumulated knowledge that will aid the youth to identify, pursue and actualize their goals (Osawaru, 2021). Formal education acquired through schools and informal education gained from experiences of other people is all very important for youth development, they all contribute to capacity building. Human capital development can be acquired through health, nutrition, education and training; all these enhance the youth to contribute meaningfully to the nation and also to carve a niche for themselves.

The Role of Youth in National Development
Community development
Building community based and faith based organizations.

The essence of the formation of community based organizations is to supplement government efforts in community development projects. These organizations are the closest links to the people at the grassroots level as they are formed by the members of the community themselves. Youths community based organizations enhance community development through:

- Development, promotion and implementation of development projects sustainable for the benefits of their communities.
- Mobilizing members of the community for national development.
- Strengthening community resources management.
- Improving the general skills of youth to be productive.
- Promising a sustainable human development.
- Encouraging the participation of the marginalized communities in the promotion of rural development that affects them.
- To ensure proper accountability of the community resources (Ayuba, 2012 in Idike and Eme, 2015).

Human Capital Development
The youth force provides labour inputs in production and this improves or increases total productivity the world over. The youths in Nigeria can thus be a catalyst for the development of a new class of entrepreneurs necessary for the growth of the economy. Judging based on the numerical strength or the population of youths in Nigeria; she can experience a boost of human capital. The youth force is a great source of labour.

Self-help projects in Nigeria.
Youths particularly in rural areas help accelerate development through youth participation. They are usually very engaged in self-help projects in the various local governments in Nigeria. They carry out projects such as commerce, small and Medium Term Enterprises, trade and Agriculture. These projects help accelerate rural development. There are two categories of self-help projects; Government Aided Projects (GAP) and Non-Government Aided Projects (NGAP).

Youths have realized the usefulness of self-help projects in improving the standard of living in their communities. Some of the contributions of youths in community development projects according to Idike and Eme (2015) include:

1. Clearing and draining of drainages and culverts
2. Sinking of ordinary dug out wells.
3. Educating the rural community on the use of improved seeds or farming techniques through the young farmers club.
4. Renovation of clinics, health centers/ dispensaries in rural areas.
5. Assistance to the less privileged in the society.
6. Construction of rural feeder roads
7. Other community programmes include: youth clubs enlighten follow youths and women on HIV/AIDS, women and children trafficking and child labour.

History of National Development: The Place of Youth
Before independence, nationalist movements were led by youths who displayed their energy, mind-power and ingenuity while struggling for the emancipation of the nation. Organizations such as, the National Youth Movement (NYM) founded in 1934, was a representative of youth movement in Nigeria (Ibrahim & Audu, 2020). Since then a few other organizations which include the National Youth Council (NYC) and National Youth Service Corp were established in 1962 and 1973 respectively. Government has

further made efforts towards the transformative development of the youth; they all seemed meaningful but have been futile due to the contradictions between the objectives and the realities on ground.

Uche (2019) asserts that Nigeria had adopted different types and models of development plans for sustainable development and self-actualization, however all of them have fallen short in the creation and implementation of detailed and functional youth development policy.

The National Youth Council (NYC) formed in 1962 was distorted by the political upheavals in the mid-1960s. Though groups such as the Girls guide, Boys scout and Man O'war, were established within that time, they were voluntary self-help associations that sprang up and promoted community development, skills and vocational training programs, competitive activities and cultural festival (National Youth Policy, 2001).

The National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) was introduced in 1973 in order to quell the grievances of the civil war and encourage integration, tolerance and unity. In 1977 a national policy on education was promulgated to promote vocational courses in the educational curriculum (Emeh and Eke, 2006). Sequel to this development, the Federal Government set up the Chukwuemeka committee on the 26, March 1986. The report from the committee resulted to the establishment of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) in November 1986 (Omoruyi & Osunde, 2004). The committee was charged with the responsibility of facilitating a spirit of creativity, promoting skills acquisition and self-reliance and independence (Emeh and Eke 2006).

The first National Youth Policy was formulated in 1983 leading to the establishment of the Ministry of Youths and Sports (National Youth Policy, 2001). There was a heightened global interest for youth focused policies in member states of certain international organizations; infact the year 1985 was declared 'International Youth Year' (Ibrahim & Audu, 2020). The youths were thus neglected in the 1990s, as they were hardly considered in policies and development programmes. In fact, the Ministry of Youth and Sports was abolished. This continued until 1999, when President Olusegun Obasanjo facilitated a new draft of the National Youth Policy and a strategic plan of action in 2001. The Federal Ministry of Youth was reestablished in 2007. The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was also introduced with the responsibility for coordinating and monitoring all poverty eradication schemes in Nigeria.

A second National Youth Policy was drawn in 2009 which was very similar to that of 2001, though it was better structured and well phrased than the former (Ibrahim and Audu). Following this development, President Goodluck Jonathan's administration setup the Youth Enterprise With Innovation in Nigeria (YOUWIN) in 2011. It was a contest that rewards the most promising business ideas with funding to encourage enterpreneuship and business development among Nigerian youths. President Muhamadu Buhari Administration also introduced a programme called N-Power in 2015, this was to empower and create job opportunities for Nigerian youths.

A third National Youth Development Policy was formulated in 2019 called "Enhancing Youth Development and participation in the context of Sustainable Development". It was actually more daring and futuristic than the others but its five years projections was shrouded with optimism as it sought to create an average of 3.7 million jobs per year with the priority on the youth employment (NYDP 2019), it also sought to encourage the youths to delve into agriculture by lending to them (NYDP, 2019).

All of these programmes and policies were properly drafted but failed due to common reasons:-

- Inconsistencies in planning initiatives and implementation
- Lack of enabling environment for entrepreneur activities to thrive
- Lack of active participation of youths in decision making
- Lack of viable youth empowerment policies in agriculture.

Factors Affecting Youth in National Development
1. **Unemployment**: 70% of the youths in Nigeria are not gainfully employed and this situation has led to continuous increase in poverty as the population increases daily. Unemployment in most cases has been attributed to lack of education. To UNDP (2001), the number of youth that areuneducated and unemployed either as graduates or dropouts is alarming. Lack of employment which has brought about an alarming rate of poverty poses a serious threat to the survival of youths and their ability to carry out their responsibilities and roles in sustaining democracy in Nigeria. This situation has rather led youths to engage in unscrupulous and fraudulent activities which have rather dampened the hope of development in the country.
2. **Illiteracy**: A number of Nigerian Youths have not been fortunate enough to acquire formal education. Education equips youths with not just the ability to read and write but with imperatives such as values, norms and skills. It is a factor that enables the youth of a nation to contribute immensely to national development. The UNDP Human Development Report (1996 & 2004) observed that aside the chunk of Nigerians that are illiterates; a large number of youths are dropping out of school every day. There is also a high increase of unproductive graduates due to the educational system in Nigeria. This has been a major impediment for the youths in sustaining a genuine democratic process. The youths rather participate in the supposed democracy by accepting roles of thugs.They are brainwashed and exploited by politicians to carry out these roles to booster their political ambitions.
3. **Lack of authentic youth Programmes and organizations**: Even as this is one of the surest methods by which youth can pursue development policies and support the bid for substantive and sustainable democracy in Nigeria, youths have found it difficult to coordinate themselves within the groups they have formed. Most of the organization formed by youths are spearheaded by elders and controlled by politicians who find the organizations.
4. **Poor Health Facilities**: Inadequacy of health facilities such as hospitals, drugs and even personnel who would sensitize the youths concerning health issues, have also contributed greatly to youth underdevelopment. Youthsfrom the ages 0f 15-30, face a myriad of health issues, they are more susceptible to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.They also engage in drug use/abuse. The female youths face issues such as female genital mutilation and early pregnancies. Consequently, there is an increase in school dropout, risk to life through unsafe abortion, early death and an increase in helpless youth.

Recommendations
1. Government should create enabling environment favourable for the youths to achieve vision for national development by investing in knowledge and skills acquisition for youth and national development.
2. Education offered to the youths should not only concern the acquisition of mere knowledge of facts but should encompass values, norms and skills which will help understand, harness and nurture potentials in the youths.
3. Political socialization should be taken seriously using the agents of socialization, a process of educating instilling in the young ones the right political behavior attitudes, manners, values. It must also begin at the family level than at school and worship places.
4. The mass media, both print and electronic should devote a good amount of space and airtime to issues associated with political enlightenment and education.
5. Political leaders must channel their resources into harnessing and utilizing the energy and passion of the youth by educating and engaging them meaningfully rather than living them as political thugs, assassins and agents for election rigging.
6. Government should execute favorable youth policies and also follow up in proper implementation of these policies.

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