

Youth Unemployment in Nigeria:

Causes and Related Issues

LES PROBLÈMES DU CHÔMAGE DES JEUNES AU NIGÉRIA:

CAUSES ET QUESTIONS ASSOCIÉES

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Abstract: This article has highlighted the causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria. It has observed that many young people in Nigeria are redefining themselves by creating their own social worlds such as youth streetism and gangsterism because of unemployment occasioned by deepening socio-economic crises. The study has identified increasing population growth, high degree of geographical mobility, lack of employable skills, non involvement of youth in decision making processes and the perception of policy makers and the youth themselves about employment as the major causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria. It has thus recommended that young Nigerians should be trained to possess skills that are congruent with the real labour market demands. The youth should be involved in all the decision-making processes so as to minimize the costs of their exclusion and to ensure the successful implementation of youth policies and programmes. Credit and loan schemes should be put in place to enable young Nigerians secure loans to set up their small enterprises. Sincere policies should be formulated to enable youth pursue sustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: Youth; Unemployment; Nigeria

Résumé: Cet article a mis en lumière les causes du chômage des jeunes au Nigéria. Il a observé que de nombreux jeunes au Nigéria se redéfinissent en créant leurs propres mondes sociaux tels que le streetism et le gangstérisme à cause du chômage occasionné par l'approfondissement des crises socio-économiques. L'étude a identifié la croissance démographique, le degré élevé de mobilité géographique, le manque de qualification professionnelle, la non participation des jeunes dans les processus de décision, ainsi que la perception des décideurs politiques et les jeunes eux-mêmes sur l'emploi comme les causes principales du chômage des jeunes au Nigéria. Il a donc recommandé que les jeunes Nigériens devraient être formés à avoir des compétences professionnelles qui sont compatibles avec les exigences réelles du marché du travail. Les jeunes devraient

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être impliqués dans tous les processus de prise de décision de manière à minimiser les coûts de leur exclusion et de veiller à la mise en œuvre réussie des politiques et des programmes de jeunesse. Des programmes de crédit et de prêt devraient être mis en place afin de permettre aux jeunes Nigériens d'obtenir des prêts à créer leur petite entreprise. Des politiques sincères devraient être formulées afin de donner aux jeunes des moyens d'existence durable.

Mots-clés: jeunes; chômage; Nigéria

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment in Nigeria has become one of the most serious socio-economic problems confronting the country. The magnitude of this problem can be appreciated if accurate data on the number of jobless young people roaming the streets of Nigerian cities, towns and villages is available. Unfortunately, accurate statistics on youth unemployment are lacking. Nevertheless, estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 1999) in Sub-Saharan Africa show that unemployment affects between 15-20 percent of the work force; and out of these estimates, young people comprises 40 to 75 percent of the total number of the unemployed.

Unemployment has affected youth in Nigeria from a broad spectrum of socio-economic groups. Both the well and less well educated are affected but more especially those from low-income backgrounds and limited education. Given the lack of employment opportunities and consequently the uncertain future, young Nigerians are forced to engage in unorthodox livelihoods sources while others engage in casual work which is highly irregular. This paper therefore, attempts to highlight the causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria, government's response to the unemployment problem and the effectiveness of the response. It also surveys the future of the Nigerian youth.

CAUSES OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA

Youth unemployment in Nigeria is a consequence of several factors. One significant factor is that of population growth. Nigeria has continued to experience high rate of population growth. The increasing population growth has produced an overwhelming increase in young population thereby resulting in rapid growth of labour which is outstripping the supply of jobs.

Related to the rapid population growth is the massive rural- urban migration by the young people. According to the UN Report (1999), the high degree of geographical mobility of youth in Africa in the form of rural to urban migration has been influencing youth unemployment. In Nigeria, youth migrate to the cities more than other migrants. But unfortunately, job opportunities in Nigerian cities are very limited. Thus, the urbanization rate of the youth has continued to create unemployment.

Another factor is the lack of employable skills due to inappropriate school curricula. Analysts have argued that in Africa generally, the skills that job seekers possess do not match the needs and demands of employers (Mcgrath, 1999; Kent and Mushi, 1995). The education system in Nigeria, with its liberal bias, indeed, over supplies the labour market with graduates that do not possess the skills needed by employers. Many graduates in Nigeria lack entrepreneurial skills to facilitate self-employment.

Another factor is the perception of policy makers and the youth themselves about employment. To policy makers and the youth, employment means a job with salary and working for someone else. It is this perception that has continued to influence the institutions in Nigeria that provide skills and training. Consequently, curricula and training programmes are generally tailored towards preparing young people for formal sector jobs. But because these jobs do not exist, there is often a mismatch between the skills possessed by the job seekers and the available jobs. Recently, there has been a strong recognition among policy makers in Nigeria that the absence of artisanal and vocational skills has been responsible for youth unemployment. It is based on this recognition that the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was

established and the introduction of vocational/technical courses in many Nigerian universities, colleges of education and polytechnics. The idea behind this is to train young people to acquire vocational/technical skills. This is however a supply- driven response which has however ignored the demand for the skills being offered and the absorptive capacity of states and other institutions to make effective use of these skills.

GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Young people in every society are the greatest natural resources. They are credible and effective partners when they are inclusive. This important role of youth in development has been recognized by both the federal and state governments, especially because the youth of today are the nation of tomorrow. It is in recognition of youth as credible leaders and valuable contributors that successive administrations in Nigeria have put in place several measures aimed at empowering the youth. For example, separate ministries for youth affairs, including sports and culture, have been established. These ministries are responsible for the development of youth policies.

Generally, youth policies in Nigeria are concerned with overall policy guidance for youth development. They treat a myriad of youth initiatives such as training and credit schemes. Other youth schemes include the NYSC which was established in the 1970s. Under the NYSC scheme, it is mandatory for young people who have completed higher education to undertake a one year period of national service before they can go into the labour market. The scheme helps young people to gain necessary experience which would enhance their chances of securing gainful employment or to become self employed at the end of the service. Vocational and technical education schemes have also been introduced in many universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. Entrepreneurship training has also been included in the curricula of many higher institutions. All these are aimed at responding to the problems associated with out- of –school youth and joblessness.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RESPONSE

Although government has made several attempts aimed at addressing the problem of youth unemployment in the country, these actions seem to be grossly inadequate. As can be seen from the above, these actions are not directly aimed at addressing neither the livelihoods needs nor the real expectations of the young Nigerians. This failure can be attributed to the lack of comprehensive youth policies and institutional frameworks. Nigeria has a huge population of young people but there is no comprehensive national youth policy to address the concerns and needs of the young people. National development plans including Visions 2010, 20-20-20, and macro economic policies and other pronouncements of government do not specifically seek to address the livelihoods, social and political aspirations of young Nigerians. In fact, the only policies that exist do not seriously see youth as a valuable resource because of the politicization and the stereotypical notions about the youth. Most of the policies are based on adults' perceptions of youth concerns and needs. This assertion is made because young people in Nigeria are never involved in the formulation of national youth policy. The non involvement of young people in policy formulation has thus made the youth subjects instead of objects of policy. Besides, these policies are formulated and implemented just to avert the possibility of the young people's response to the shrinking employment opportunities.

In addition, all the youth programmes and institutions lack critical resources that can be devoted to supporting youth livelihoods. For example, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) that is supposed to train young people for skills acquisition is grossly under-resourced and just struggling to survive. So also are schemes like the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), National Open Apprenticeship Scheme (NOAS), and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). Even the vocationalisation of the education system has been problematic because of poor funding.

Currently, attention of the government has moved to market-driven economic reforms. The philosophy

of the market-driven economic reforms is that while government is concerned with the provision of basic public services including education and health, the provision of other services is to be privatized. The responsibility of government therefore is only to create the necessary enabling environment for business. The belief is that once the necessary conditions are put in place, the private sector will create jobs for young people. The adoption of the market-driven economic reforms has thus reduced the role of government in supporting youth. In fact, the current economic reforms have no explicit employment policy within which the youth can be situated. For instance, the deregulation and privatization packages have given only passive employment creation to the state. This therefore means that the various institutions that deal with labour market issues are bereft of any proper policy guidance. Indeed, under this scenario the government has abdicated responsibility for employment creation (Tendler, 2002). The implication of this is the likely duplication of efforts among market institutions.

The most disturbing issue is that in Nigeria, youth unemployment is generally never seen as an economic problem but rather as a social problem. Hence, policies in Nigeria generally subsume youth into the adult population. This is because policy makers do not see young people as having special social and economic needs that relate to their age. The consequence of the non recognition of these social and economic needs is the growing phenomenon of street youth in the country.

THE PHENOMENON OF STREE YOUTH IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, like in many other African countries, social support institutions are not properly functioning. Young people are therefore generally excluded from the mainstream society because of deepening economic and social crises. The alienation of the youth from mainstream society has thrown many young people into the streets where they are creating their own social worlds. Many young people who have found themselves in the streets have devised means of redefining themselves especially to reflect their marginal status in society (Chigunta, 2002). This redefinition can be seen in the way they dress, the language they use and the activities they engage in. These young people have become agents of their own socialization. Hence, there is the emergence of a distinct sub-culture which is discernable in every Nigerian city and town.

The language the street youth use and their patterns of dressing reflect the kind of experiences they have had in the streets. The language they speak and their patterns of dressing are very different from those of their parents or the wider society (Abdullah, 1999). Mkandawire (1996) describes this language as the language of protest that ridicules the language of the mainstream culture. In Nigeria for instance, the Area Boys and the Bakassi Boys wear weird types of hair-do and clothes, speak with coarse voice and brag a lot (Momoh, 1998). In the North, we have the *Yan banga*, the *Hisba*, and the *Yan'achaba*. Although these represent traditional/communal, religious, and political establishments respectively, and from a cursory look operate as vigilante groups, they are in reality involved in heinous crimes. For one to appreciate the language of the street youth, one has to understand the culture of the young people and their lived experiences in the streets and the perception of the mainstream society (Chigunta, 2002).

Just as life generally is hard, life on the street is particularly harder. To survive on the street with no legitimate means of earning a living, young people tend to live by their wits and acquire criminal values. They need to be ingenious. Many therefore survive on the street by stealing, pick-pocketing, prostitution and other criminal activities. Most of them are on alcohol (mostly on what is known in Nigeria as *ogogoro*-illicit gin) and marijuana. These livelihood activities of street youth are generally abhorred by the mainstream society. Street youth are thus viewed with awe, contempt and vicious passion (Momoh, 1998). Because of the lack of legitimate means of earning a living and the growing number of street youth, most urban centres in Nigeria are becoming increasingly criminalized especially with the growing number of youth gangs.

YOUTH GANGS

In Nigeria, livelihood opportunities for young people are inadequate and this has compelled many urban youth to gangsterism. Most, if not all, of these gangs have distinct sub-cultures with well developed social structures that are guarded by a clear hierarchy. According to Bennell (2000), these youth gangs and their

criminal enterprises display features of a 'career path' with an identifiable ladder of promotion, salary augmentation and status attainment where the participants can see a horizon of personal development.

However, the proliferations of youth gangs in Nigeria have continued to create problems not just to the larger society but to the youth themselves as well. For example, while the society suffers from the effect of hideous crimes such as murders, robbery, rape, kidnap, violence and other atrocities that the gangsters commit, they themselves, because of their involvement in the 'underground economies', are excluded from receiving education that is necessary for their development as good citizens and from the labour market arena. It should be noted that youth in Nigeria are associated with all forms of crime and are quick to take advantage of conflict situations to loot or vandalize items.

YOUTH AND CONFLICT

In Nigeria, and indeed the whole of Africa, many young people have played significant roles in conflict situations (Zack-Williams, 2001; Curtain, 2000). In fact, young people in Nigeria are usually the principal actors in every conflict situation. The involvement of young people in conflict can be explained better in terms of their social exclusion and marginalization arising from both the collapse of social institutions and the failure of the economic system to generate sufficient means of livelihood opportunities for the young people. Several reasons can be adduced for the involvement of youth in conflict in Nigeria. First, most of the young people are not gainfully employed and many are therefore not married. These young people therefore have low opportunity cost and consequently no stake in the shared future of the country. They do not have any children or personal property to protect.

Secondly, many young Nigerians have become involved in ethnic militia and other forms of militancy because these promise much deeper means of empowerment than life on the streets. Besides, involvement in militant groups provides quick returns without any serious capital investment. Most of the street youth-now turned combatants- can hardly read or write as most of them are from disadvantaged or marginalized ethnic groups. They are what Abdullah (1999) calls the lumpens. They therefore depend on the gun to bring them money and respect. These young combatants use drugs that erode their self control, enhance their free-wheeling behaviour and encourage acts of bravery.

The third factor is the general decay of state institutions, the collapse of the family, formal education, and the absence of job opportunities and social services. One can not but agree with Zack-Williams (2000) that, the collapse of state institutions and the demise of traditional family coping structures have left a gaping social void which, whereas once filled via the protection offered by the social organization of 'street life', the various military forces are now filling in. In fact, life on the street has given many young Nigerians qualities that make them brave fighters. The growing number of street youth and militant groups in Nigeria can be seen in the widespread violence, destruction of public infrastructure, kidnap, attack on oil companies and the laying waste of villages.

WHERE IS THE FUTURE OF NIGERIAN YOUTH?

This question has become pertinent because of the ongoing social, economic and political happenings in the country. Socially, Nigeria is experiencing a myriad of interconnecting and interpenetrating problems. For example, while infant mortality has been rising, life expectancy has continued to decline. There is high rate of population growth. Many communities can hardly access clean drinking water nor have access to public health care. This situation is exacerbated by the high prevalence of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, childhood killer diseases and HIV/AIDS. Basic education for all Nigerians has remained a distant hope. At the moment, there is a marked difference between the educational levels of boys and girls. To be employed in the formal sector in Nigeria today is a privilege. In this context, the future of young Nigerians remains very uncertain.

On the economic front, Nigeria is in deep economic crises. Inflation has continued to remain on the high side. Many industries have closed down. The only ones surviving have drastically cut down the sizes of their labour force. There is general retrenchment of workers in the public and private sectors of the economy due to the dwindling economy. In this scenario, the possibility or hope of generating sufficient

means of livelihood opportunities for future generations of young Nigerians is very bleak.

In terms of politics, democracy in Nigeria has been entrenched. Since 1999, there have been successful transitions from one civilian government to another. And since then there have been concerted efforts aimed at building the future of the country on the principles of rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of movement and of association. Young Nigerians are interestingly taking advantage of the present political dispensation to improve their social and economic hardships. Many young Nigerians have mobilized themselves into social movements. Most of these social movements are involved with mainstream party politics. It is however important to note that the activities and actions of these young people have in some instances enhanced, but in most cases undermined popular struggles for democracy.

But the question is how has the partisan political mobilization of the youth been able to address the needs of youth? This question has become compelling because in Nigeria, there is so much coercion on the part of the major political gladiators to maintain the status quo. It is in pursuit for the maintenance and acceptance of the legitimacy of the status quo that youths are hired as political thugs and to participate in political protests. In the absence of any visible means of livelihood, the involvement of youth in partisan political mobilization serves only as a survival or coping strategy.

In spite of the promises of democracy, Nigeria has continued to experience a great number of conflict situations. Every state in Nigeria, since 1999 and even before then, has experienced one form of conflict or the other that have resulted into the death of innocent people, destruction of property, the creation of refugee situations and the retardation of development in general. In these conflicts, young people have played key roles. The growing involvement of young people in conflict portends a serious threat to the future of young Nigerians and Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper has examined youth unemployment in the context of declining economic situation in Nigeria and the consequent growing deprivation and marginalization of young people. The paper has identified rapid population growth, massive rural-to-urban migration by the youth, the lack of relevant skills by job seekers, and the perception of employment by policy makers and the youth as the major causes of youth unemployment. The paper has noted that the problem is being exacerbated by the current economic reforms. The paper has observed that though government has made efforts to tackle youth unemployment, the actions have been very limited as the actions are not directly aimed at addressing the livelihood needs or real expectations of young Nigerians. The paper has attributed this failure to the lack of comprehensive youth policies and institutional frameworks, and the non involvement of youth in policy formulation. The paper has thus contended that a combination of these factors, among others, has made the future of many young Nigerians very uncertain. And this uncertain future occasioned by the deepening socio-economic crises and the consequent alienation of the youth from mainstream society has thrown many young Nigerians into the streets where they are creating their own social worlds. The paper therefore recommends that:

Serious attention should be paid to human capital development. This suggests that the educational system- including vocational and technical- be transformed to enable youth acquire relevant and quality skills that can contribute to the mastery of their lives and therefore contribute to socio-economic development of the country. Young Nigerians should be trained to possess skills that are congruent with the real labour market demands. This means that investment in training institutions must be increased while the training institutions, as a matter of policy, are made to have functional link with the labour market. It should be borne in mind that training does not in itself lead to the creation of jobs. But that, effective training makes it possible for the young people, through the skills acquired, to take advantage of opportunities in the labour market. The skills can enable them start their own businesses and market their services and products. Hence, basic entrepreneurial courses should be universally taught in secondary schools and universities.

Youths should be involved at all stages of decision-making process. The active participation of youth in economic, social and political processes will help to minimize the risks and costs of exclusion and then enhance the likelihood of youth policies and programmes being implemented successfully.

Youth citizenship should be promoted. At the moment, citizenship in Nigeria is defined in exclusionary

terms which ignore young people. The exclusionary definition of citizenship has alienated young people thereby forcing them into the streets. There is therefore the need to put in place sincere measures that would address the specific social, political, and economic needs and aspirations of young Nigerians.

In Nigeria, many young people would rather be self-employed than salaried. Unfortunately, this has not been possible because youths are denied access to credit. They are seen as a high-risk group for credit. There is therefore a need to put in place a scheme that would enable youth to secure loans to set up their small enterprises. Youth on their part should organize themselves into cooperatives. The formation of the cooperatives will increase their chances of securing loans, and of loan repayment.

Globally, modern information and communication technologies are offering significant opportunities for job creation. The Nigerian government should therefore explore how the ICT industries can provide new jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for young Nigerians.

In many parts of the world, apprenticeships are becoming significant training areas for youth, with the added possibility of a job offer upon completion. The federal government should therefore re-evaluate its National Open Apprenticeship Scheme (NOAS) and possibly expand it to the rural areas. To encourage enrollment, trainees should be provided with stipends. Public enterprises on the other hand should be encouraged to take on apprentices.

On the whole, a comprehensive research should be conducted so as to put in place policies that would ensure a balance between the demand for jobs and the available jobs (demand-supply). Especially, the policies should aim at providing opportunities for youth to pursue sustainable livelihoods. The social, economic, political and educational crises that have made the Nigerian economy unstable and unpredictable and therefore incapable of producing additional jobs for new entrants to the labour market must be urgently and sincerely addressed

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