THE ROLE OF YOUTHS IN NATION BUILDING

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INTRODUCTION

The role of youths in nation building in recent times has generated serious discussions and clear-cut policy agenda which are necessary for the development, plan and policy action of any country. Uhunmwuangho and Oghator (2013) succinctly elucidated that current happenings appear that the majority of our youths are on the edge of reason and good conduct. Rather than exploring the opportunities for securing better lives, facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and thinking about the future of their nation, it is quite disappointing that the majority of our youths know more of how to showcase anti-social behaviours. It is shocking to realize that the constructive attitudes of youths in traditional society of Nigeria have gone with the wind (Aghahowa, 2006). Interestingly, governments at all levels of governance, parents, guardians and all the stakeholders in our youth developmental processes are finally waking up to the realities that the surprisingly negative attitudes of our youths can be traced to the fact that we have tens of millions of unemployed Nigerian youths, and millions others living in abject poverty, even having seen the four walls of Universities.

From the above situation, there have been considerable efforts around the world aimed at addressing the ever-increasing needs of the youth population. This ranges from empowerment to call for appropriate programmes, services and advocacy efforts to harness and enhance the youth capacities and capabilities for nation building. This therefore shows the importance of youth participation in nation building which is the main thrust of this paper.

The significance of youth participation in nation building is of apt relevance considering their vast majority in the world's population. According to Udensi, Daasi, Emah and Zukbee (2013), the numerical strength of the youth folk is an unlimited avenue to which the socio-economic development of any nation can strive and national development improved. Hence, if the youths are sidelined in the articulation of any nation building programme, experts have argued, that it will be impossible to reach the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets, particularly on extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1), child mortality (MDG 4), maternal health (MDG 5) and environmental sustainability (MDG 7).

With this knowledge, youths are better able to make choices that support the pursuit of educational goals and the development of life skills necessary for national and local leadership positions. Ignoring maximum commitment and engagement of youth in national development today will have dire global consequences for decades. To better understand how to move the youth forward towards nation building, this paper examines the rationale for expanding the youth frontier for active participation in nation building. The rest of the paper is divided into five (5) sections outlined thus: conceptual framework (youth and nation building), the situation of youths in Nigeria, the importance of youth for national development, suggestive approach for youth empowerment and development in Nigeria, conclusion/recommendation and references.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Youth

There exist mixed feelings among researchers, countries, cultures, and development experts including governments on the actual delimitation of who a youth is. Thus, this has generated controversies on a unified definition of youth. The difficulty to bring out a clear-cut definition for youth prompted Uhunmwuangho and Oghator (2013) to posit that

> The growing commitment to the involvement of the youth in global development process is a clear recognition of their potentials as change agents within the civil society. This awareness has attracted scholarly attention in an attempt to clarify and articulate a conceptual category for youth. In most literatures, scholars have often employed the criterion of age to define youth. However, sociological studies have shown that this criterion is fluid and therefore vary from one society to another.

The foregoing raises definitional issues and implications for the meaning of youth to include biological, sociological and cultural criterion. The presiding paragraph will carry out definitional x-ray on the issues and implications in this regard.

Youths, according to the dictionary, is seen as "the state or time of being young – young men and women" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Current English, 2001). Hornby (2007) defined youth as the time of life when a person is young especially the time before a child becomes an adult. It is also used to mean the quality or state of being young. MacMillan English Dictionary (2007), adds that youth refers to the time in peoples life when they are young or looking young. Generally, the term youth refers to a time of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood.

The National Youth Policy (2010 :10) in its position on the meaning of youth posited that "the

way in which a nation defines its youth is related to the object conditions and realities that exist on ground especially historical and contemporary socio-economic and political issues that need to be addressed". For the purpose of this presentation, we will exploit the age bracket of 18 – 35 to look at the meaning of youth, with emphasis that "this category represents the most active, most volatile, and yet most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically and in other respects (National Youth Policy, 2001)". Angulu-Sani considered persons within the age range of 6-36 years as youth. Other scholars employed the age bracket of 15-30 to define youth. It is also helpful to add that progressive-mindedness is one of the defining characteristics of youth. Therefore, the current thinking is that people beyond the age of 36 who share the ideals of a progressive society are also considered as being youthful. Whatever the age limit, youths are men and women considered to be young, energetic, vibrant and resourceful, who are often engaged in social enterprises that requires physical strength and mental capacity (Suleiman, 2006).

Nation Building

The task of nation building has been argued to be historically contingent due to the fact that the process is inextricably tied to the formation, growth and demise of nations as well as factors that influence the process (Oghi & Ajayi, 2011). The attempt at integrating the diverse elements in a country in order to promote a sense of belonging among people is also part of nation building process (Wallenstein, 1961). Nation building therefore, involves not only the implementation of political and economic policies that will improve the lives of the citizenry, but also a recognition of values and other aspects of the state that would act as a national catalyst to bind the people (Elaigwu, 1983). Culture, which is the totality of a people's way of life, is crucial to nation building because its non recognition could promote fissiparous tendencies among the citizenry. According to Wikipedia (2013), Nation-building refers to the process of constructing or

structuring a national identity using the power of the state.

However, Irele (1999) defined nation building as "the process whereby people transfer their commitment and loyalty from smaller tribes, villages, or petty principality to the larger central political system". Nation building can also be defined as a process of bringing diverse groups together to develop their common land.

This process as Eme and Onyishi (2014) noted aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation-building can involve the use of propaganda or major infrastructure development to foster social harmony and economic growth. It is also the development of behaviours, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate history and culture, concretize and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of a nation. For the purpose of this presentation, nation-building is viewed as purposeful interventions in the affairs of a nation-state for the purpose of changing the state's method of governance. It includes deliberate efforts to promote institutions which will provide for a people's enhanced economic well-being and social equity.

THE SITUATION OF YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

Nation building is a dynamic process involving all segments of the locality, including the often-overlooked and undermined youth population. Youths represent a vast and often untapped resource for immediate and long-term community development efforts. They also provide an invaluable resource for the progress of any society as well as its development. As youth are brought into and connected with national issues and programmes (they have often times been ignored/excluded), they can participate actively and contribute to decision-making at multiple levels. As youths are engaged in more sustained positive relationships with adults,

other youths, and national development programmes, apart from realizing that they are valued citizens of their nations, such collaborations and participation may lead to skill enhancement, empowerments and confidence-building traits, which will help prepare them for active interest and involvement in nation building (even in future).

The total population of those between the ages of 15 and 34 was about 30 million in 1991, equivalent to one of every three Nigerians. It was projected that by the year 2000, the total population of this category of young persons would be about 38 million (National Youth Policy, 2001). In 2006, a nation-wide population and housing census was conducted to update the records. It indicated that the youth profile in the Nigerian population has tremendously improved to 53 million (NPC, 2006). Apart from the issue of numerical strength, global trend is towards emphasizing the primacy of youth in the developmental process, with deliberate efforts by national governments to create conditions that will encourage youth to utilize their energies and resourcefulness for growth and sustainable development of their nations. It was in the light of this development that the Nigerian Youth Organizations in their memorandum to the last National Political Reform Conference maintained that:

> Nigerian Youth must have a voice and must be given a greater say to contribute in the way he is governed and allowed to play greater role in leadership and governance so that at all times, he is properly equipped to assume the mantle of leadership which inevitably must come someday (National Political Reform Conference, 2005:15).

However, the prevailing conditions in much of the developing nations, especially Nigeria, have seriously extenuated the potentials of the youth as agents of social change. These challenges range from the

economic and social to the cultural. The treacherous triangle of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in which the bulk of Nigerian youths are currently trapped, has severely challenged their sensibility and has in the long run given rise to what sociologists term attitudes of fatalism, resignation and acceptance of the situation (Haralambos, 2001). The persistence of these social problems has created an environment where youth are cheaply available for manipulation by self-seeking politicians. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are interrelated conditions that generate human needs and therefore constitute a state of deprivation.

As the youth continue to remain in this state, there is pent-up emotions and untapped energies. They provide cheap labour to execute the design of political gladiators and ethnic champions. In an apparent indictment of Nigerian politicians, Togbolo observed: "They take advantage of the poverty-stricken nature of the country to exploit the people; politicians are fond of using the youth restive nature as a political strategy to have their way" (Togbolo, 2006).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVING YOUTHS IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to (Gribble, 2010) more than half of the world's population is under the age of 25 (between ages 15 and 24) are in greatest need of empowerment, those who are younger will quickly come of age and share these same needs. This segment of the population (15 to 24) is expected to continue growing faster than other segments for at least 20 more years (Gribble, 2010). With the swelling wave of young people, access, empowerment and their engagement in nation building becomes critical if they are to contribute effectively.

Uhunmwuangho and Oghator (2013) suggested two (2) major motivations which have brought the converge of youth (young persons) into the policy agenda of national governments, thus,

fascinate and prioritized youth inclusion to the building process of any nation. According to them, the first is the global process of democratization, beginning in Southern Europe, extending to Latin America, Asia and Africa, and more recently to Eastern Europe (Almond, 2004). The second is the phenomenon of globalization that has seriously challenged the capacity of nation-state to govern and which according to Heady, et al, embodied a transformation of the spatial organization of social relations and transaction (Heady, 1979). The combined effects of these global trends has confronted and dismantled authoritarian regimes in a decisive way, and at the same time rekindled the spirit of civil society in the political process (Suleiman, 2006). The youth as an important component of the civil society is in the process of self rediscovery in an era characterized by the intense movement of the social forces of democratization and globalization. As they interact with other actors in the social system, the youth express their interest and needs, they relate with relevant political institutions and political processes to articulate their views and promote shared interest (Suleiman, 2006).

The role of education in positioning and providing youth with access to effective engagement in national development which is a way of incorporating them in the decision making process of the nation's governance, nation building activities where they are welcomed, with accurate and comprehensive information which will empower them to make healthy decisions.

SUGGESTIVE APPROACH FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND INVOLVEMENT IN NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA

There is no how the untapped capacities in youth can be tapped and utilized with an all-inclusive, participatory and synergy approach; thus, a suggestive dimension for involving the youth in nation building. Youth participation according to

Cornwall (2010), refers to the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and/or decision-making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequence is extended to others i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. Rajani (1999) notes that, it is only through participation that youth develop skills, build competencies, form aspirations, gain confidence and attain valuable resources. This shows that youth participation therefore is a product and strategy of sustainable human development.

Youth comprise nearly 30 per cent of the world's population, these large numbers of young people are an opportunity; an investment to their country. Youth participation in nation building programmes/activities therefore is to:

i.   Strengthens young people's abilities to meet their own subsistence needs;

ii. Prevents and reduces vulnerabilities to economic, political and socially unstable environments;

iii. Promotes ownership and sustainability of change interventions;

iv. Helps gain entry into target communities and build up trust and social capital.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria with over 140 million people and with over fifty percent of youths cannot afford to lock out the youths if they must compete politically, technologically and scientifically in order to align itself with the sustainable development in Africa in particular and the developed world in general. Nigeria can build a strong and viable nation if and only if there is an existence of common values, beliefs, attitudes, effective leadership and a will to live together as a nation. Such transformations must allow every group (especially the youth population) to participate in the economic, political and the social spheres of the nation.

The following recommendations are discernibly based on the foregoing:

a.   Youth should be given the opportunity to develop their capacities through balanced education and exposure.

b.   Skills acquisition and entrepreneurship will help reduce idleness among youths and keep them from being involved in crime and other activities that are counterproductive in nation building.

c.   Youths should be made relevant and involved in leadership at different levels of government.

d.   We must moderate our demands on our youths and as well condition their behaviour in line with our cultural values.

The youth of today must not fail this nation.

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