Youth Empowerment for National Development

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Abstract

The responsibilities of youth have changed significantly in recent years. It is imperative, now more than ever before, that young people be prepared for the future task of advancing national development objectives, especially in developing countries. Rather than focusing exclusively on youth and national development, which tends to place the considerable burden of advancing their country's standing and capacity on the shoulders of the young, this study examines youth development. In this context youth development refers to the role of society in empowering youth for future leadership challenges. Emphasis is placed on preparing young people for future national and regional development challenges which requires equipping young people with relevant information so as to ensure that they have an adequate scope of reference and in turn an ambitious vision for the social, economic and moral growth of society. This paper also discusses the role of various public institutions in the development of the next generation's knowledge and capacity to positively influence the values, motivations, behaviours, character and actions of their environment. It is the view of this study that this perspective, examining the role of society in terms of the development of youth, is more rewarding than traditional approaches as it places the processes by which youth acquire competencies to meet future leadership roles at the centre of its analysis.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

There are many phases in a person's lifetime which revolve around age: infancy, adolescence (which includes the teenage years), adulthood and old age. Youth encompasses that segment of the population that falls somewhere between childhood and old age. In this regard it is possible to see those between the ages of 0 and 13 as being in a period of nurturing, the stage of forming the values that will shape their behaviour through life; those 14 through 49 as being in the period of acquisition; from 50 to 59 as the period of consolidation and 60 and above as the period of reflection and accessing earlier contributions to society (Eresia-Eke, 2004). The focus of this study is on children and young adults below the age of 21. This category has been chosen because of their greater capacity to be positively influenced.

In basic economics one is taught that the working age population is those between the ages of 15 and 65. Consequently, youth are thus at the core of the working population in any society. In Nigeria they constitute 50% of the

total population and 70% of the working class. In terms of youth and national development, we can thus appreciate how youth have become the engine that drives progress. When a society is developing and the economy is buoyant, young people are among the greatest beneficiaries. As a corollary, the resources dedicated to youth education, training and advancement will wane significantly if the economy is in recession.

Nigerian youths face a number of obstacles on their path to independence and prosperity. They often must endure chronic unemployment, delayed marriage even among well educated and gainfully employed men and women in their late thirties, for various reasons including fear, and inadequate and limited educational opportunities. It is possible, when visiting any Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) Centre or post-secondary campus to detect a general decay in moral standards and school infrastructure.

Whatsoever that is wrong with Nigeria is also wrong with Nigerian youth. The irony however is that young people in Nigeria are not as alienated as it may seem. Throughout Nigerian history, Nigerian youths have been vocal and at the fore in almost all spheres of life. The majority of Nigerians voted into public office at any given time are youth and people still in their youth, including General Yakubu Gowon, Murtala and Obasanjo (during his first tenure) have ruled Nigeria. Youths have presided over state governments, become ministers, and been members of various legislative houses and local governments. Outside of politics, youths are captains of industry, intellectuals, religious leaders and traditional rulers. Thus we can surmise that the youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow, but that they possess and have long provided substantial leadership in all spheres of life.

Nonetheless, as an instrument of development and as a segment upon which society can manifest its hopes and aspirations, we have begun to doubt if Nigerian youths are equal to the task. In the light of this argument, this paper will now turn to the topic of youth development.

What is Development?

Originally, development was thought to be any positive change in income levels that would move a society or nation from a lower to a higher income level over time. Closely related to this economic understanding of development is the concept of modernization, which reflects a certain level of material change in those nations or societies under study. Current definitions, however, also consider distributive justice and socio-economic transformations when gauging the level of development. It is not enough to restrict development to the magnitude of income or possessions; development must also include how well these are distributed among the population and how society is fairing in terms of access to and opportunities in education, health services, and employment.

Defining Youth in the Context of Development

Instead of youth and development, this paper begins with a discussion of youth development because while the former taxes youth to contribute to national development, the latter speaks of what the society is doing to position and prepare youth for future leadership. Definitions of youth development typically characterize it as a process or approach in which young people become competent or develop competencies necessary to be successful and meet future challenges (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1996; Pittman & Cahill, 1991). Most definitions also identify either specific desired outcomes that young people need to achieve or critical tasks they must accomplish in order to achieve these positive outcomes (Astroth, Brown, Poor & Timm, 2002; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996; Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 1996; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The Search Institute's definition differs slightly in its focus on assets, or factors – both internal and external – that promote positive development. In each instance, these competencies, outcomes or assets encompass a wide range of developmental areas including cognitive, social, civic, cultural, spiritual, vocational, physical, emotional, mental, personal, moral and intellectual development. Based on its research of existing definitions, the following working definition of youth development was adapted for the National Collaboration for Youth: it is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically and cognitively competent. This type of positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on the problems of youth.

METHODOLOGY

Analyzing and interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data is the process of systematically organizing the materials collected, bringing meaning to them so that they tell a coherent story and writing it up so that others can read what one has learned (Ololube, 2006). In methodology literature, there is no right or most appropriate way of analyzing qualitative or quantitative data. Analysis implies and indeed requires a principled choice (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Based on this premise, this study employed qualitative techniques to allow the greatest degree of meaning to be given to the study. In qualitative analysis, the data is usually gathered using less structured research instruments and the findings are more in-depth since they tend to be derived from more open-ended questions. This approach to research is both more intensive and more flexible as it gives the researcher more freedom or latitude to probe areas that are of particular interest.

Qualitative research often relies on participant observation and in-depth interviews to enter the world of the subjects, systematically record what they see and hear, and then analyze what has been gathered and supplement it with other materials, such as school memoranda, records, school journals, photographs and other articles. Qualitative research is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell 1994, 1998).

It is important to note that in this passage Creswell emphasizes a "complex holistic picture", a reference to the narrative that takes the reader into the multiple dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all of its complexity.

The materials used in this study were largely adopted from works of known scholars in the area of youth empowerment and development, and were then adapted to the specific circumstances of Nigerian youth. In terms of the reliability of the materials used, since the methods employed by the study were qualitative no quantitative research instruments which would require reliability verification were used. The research materials and the approach used can be considered reliable to the extent that they are analytically consistent with various youth development programmes and agendas in Nigeria and other similar settings.

Empowering Youth for National Development

Over time, a number of strategies and practices have been found to shape the development of young people in positive ways. While the amount of high quality research on the outcomes of these youth programmes is limited, some valuable information about the impact of youth development and leadership programmes can still be gleaned. For example, the Search Institute, an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the well being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application, has conducted extensive research on how young people are affected by the presence or absence of the forty developmental assets they have identified as essential to youth development. They surveyed more than 350,000 school children in more than 600 US communities between 1990 and 1995 to learn about which developmental assets they encountered, the risks they took, the deficits they had to overcome, and the ways they thrived (Search Institute 1994). Their research confirmed that the presence of the developmental assets both promotes positive behaviours and protects against negative behaviours (Benson, Leffert, Scales & Blyth 1998).

A study by Scales and Leffert (1999) found that the following outcomes were associated with the participation of young people in development settings:

   a. Increased self esteem, increased popularity, increased sense of personal control, and enhanced identity development.
   b. Better development of such life skills as leadership and speaking in public, decision-making and increased dependability and job responsibility.
   c. Greater communications in the family.
   d. Fewer psycho-social problems, such as loneliness, shyness and hopelessness.
   e. Decreased involvement in risky behaviours such as drug use and decreased juvenile delinquency.
   f. Increased academic achievement and
   g. Increased safety (youth feel safe at home, in school and in the neighbourhood).

Likewise, in their review of findings from experimental evaluations, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine found that participation in community programmes for youth was associated with increases in positive outcomes such as motivation, academic performance, self esteem, problem-solving abilities, positive health decisions, and interpersonal skills, as well as decreases in negative behaviours such as alcohol and tobacco use and violence. While they could not determine from the studies precisely which programme features were responsible for effectiveness, they did find that many of the programmes demonstrating positive outcomes included a number of features identified in one of the Institute's previous studies. Through an extensive review of developmental science research, in 2002 the National

Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) identified eight programme features known to promote positive youth development. In turn, they recommend the incorporation of the following features when designing and planning programmes for youths:

    a. Physical and psychological safety;
    b. Appropriate structure;
    c. Supportive relationships;
    d. Opportunities to belong;
    e. Positive social norms;
    f. Support for efficacy and mattering;
    g. Opportunities for skill building; and
    h. Integration of family, school and community efforts.

Gambone, Klem and Connell (2002) identified a similar set of supports and opportunities as contributing to the healthy development of young people. Child Trends, another non-profit research organization, has compiled an online index of research that demonstrates that youth development programmes are yielding positive outcomes. The index called What Works: Research Tools to Improve Youth Development (available online at http://www.childtrends.org/youthdevelopmentintro.asp), summarizes available research and evaluations, and categorizes them according to what works, what does not work, and what are some best bets for designing, administering and funding services for young people (Child Trends, 2004). Research briefs and reports are available on a wide range of youth development outcomes from sexual health to academic achievement to social skills. For example, one study cited in the Child Trends index found that youth who participated in a youth development programme that provided training in stress management, self-esteem enhancement, problem-solving, health, assertiveness, and the use of social support networks reported better coping, stress management, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills than youth who were not in the programme (Caplan, Weissberg, Gober, Sivo, Gardy & Jacoby, 1992).

    In a 2001 study, Boyd looked at the impact of teen leadership programme in Fort Worth, Texas that engaged youth in weekly sessions on different concepts related to leadership followed by the experiential learning activities. Throughout the course of the programme, youth applied their newly acquired skills and concepts while completing service projects in the community. Boyd notes that experiential learning occurs "when a person is involved in an activity, looks back at it critically, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity" (Boyd, 2001). He found that the combination of experiential learning and service significantly increased youth participants' knowledge or leadership skills, including decision-making, goal setting, working with others, and community service.

    Lastly, Sipe, Ma, and Gambone (1998) studied the level of self-efficacy among youth in three communities who participated in three forms of youth leadership activities. These activities involved either:

  a. Formal roles, includes being a team captain or coach of a team or serving as a group club officer or leader.
  b. Informal roles, include helping to plan activities, setting rules or procedures for a group, and being in charge of equipment and supplies; or
  c. Representation such as fundraising and making a presentation on behalf of a group.

They found that the youth who participated in the highest number of leadership activities also reported the highest level of self-efficacy and the youth with no leadership activities reported the lowest level of self-efficacy.

Preparing Youth for Future Challenges

Effective youth leadership programmes that build on solid youth development principles are the key to advancing the role of young people in national development (Edelman et al., 2004). The inclusion of leadership development activities as one of the required programme elements is consistent with research (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002; Sipe, Ma, & Gambone, 1998) that posits successful youth initiatives as those that give young people opportunities to take on new roles and responsibilities through the programme and in the community. Consequently, a comprehensive youth development program should emphasize a systematic and consolidated approach geared toward long-term work force preparation and consist of ten central programme elements:

- Tutoring, study skills training and instruction leading to completion of secondary school, including drop-out prevention strategies;
- Alternative secondary school services, as appropriate;
- Employment opportunities that are directly linked to academic and occupational learning;
- Paid and unpaid work experiences, including internships and job shadowing, as appropriate;
- Occupational skills training, as appropriate;
- Leadership development opportunities, which may include community service and peer-centred activities encouraging responsibility and other positive social behaviours during non-school hours;
- Supportive services;
- Adult mentoring for the period of participation and a subsequent period, for a total of not less than twelve months;
- Comprehensive guidance and counselling which may include drug and alcohol abuse counselling and referral, as appropriate.

In a review of current definitions and research, a number of common competencies and outcomes emerged. The Forum for Youth Investment Model has categorized these common competencies and outcomes into five developmental areas. These five developmental areas are working, learning, thriving, connecting and leading (Ferber, Pittman, & Marshall, 2002).

Working: positive attitudes, skills and behaviours around vocational direction characterize the area of development known as working (Ferber, Pittman & Marshall, 2001). Young people should be actively involved in activities that will expose them to and offer the opportunity to practice not only the actual skills needed for a particular career, but also the work readiness skills needed to find and maintain employment.

Learning: Positive attitudes, skills and behaviours around basic applied academic activities characterize the area of development known as learning (Ferber, Pittman & Marshall, 2002). Often, this is as simple as giving young people the opportunity to use the skills they have acquired in school or other training programmes in a different context. Youth should be encouraged to develop not only a higher aptitude for academic achievement, but also the ability to approach learning with a strategy for achieving success.

Thriving: attitudes, skills, and behaviours geared towards maintaining optimal physical and emotional wellbeing, characterize this area of development (Ferber, Pittman & Marshall, 2002). Not only must a young person have intellectual and social competencies so as to achieve success in adulthood, but he or she must also have the wherewithal to maintain his or her physical and emotional health. While this includes having the knowledge and capacity to identify environments and situations that could potentially compromise one's physical health, the core of this area of development is the ability to identify and access those situations and resourced that can enhance one's physical and emotional wellbeing, as determined by each youth's particular circumstances and range of abilities. Of the five areas of development, thriving may require the most individualized attention for youth to achieve successful outcomes. Since each youth brings experiences to the programme, his or her reactions to situational factors will vary. In addition, each youth will have different physical and emotional abilities, as well as ways in which they access supports and services to meet their specific needs.

Connecting: refers to the development of positive social behaviours, skills, and attitudes (Ferber, Pittman & Marshall, 2002). Relationships with elders, peers, supervisors, family, and other community members commonly influence the ability and inclination to connect with others. The level to which a young person has developed in this area will also dictate how he or she continues to build relationships later in life. Maintaining these relationships in a way that will positively benefit the young person is also a goal of this area of development. Outcomes for this area depend on the party with whom the youth is connecting. This area of development is arguably more subjective than the other four and a youth's outcome level can be based on the number and character of relationships with peers and adults, the skills used to start and maintain these relationships, and the degree to which the youth feels acceptance and belonging toward the individual or group. For instance, if a youth feels that he or she has an extremely supportive relationship with an adult mentor, but still has very few positive peer relationships, he or she needs to be directed to programming that builds interpersonal skills with peers. Connecting is an important area of development for youth leadership and so youth leadership programmes should address and seek to build interpersonal skills.

Leading: this final area of development centres on positive skills, attitudes, and behaviours around civic involvement and personal goal setting (Ferber, Pittman & Marshall, 2002). Youth who are civically engaged in a positive manner, willing to participate in public activities, and able to navigate the civic arena are more likely to accept their civic responsibilities as adults. In this case, the term "civic" can refer to an entire city, a neighbourhood, a community or anything else that implies public environs.

A youth who develops the inner strength and vision to set and meet goals will benefit not only himself or herself but also his or her workplace as well as society as a whole. It is important to note that a young person is capable of showing leadership even without a "fellowship". Showing responsibility for oneself and demonstrating the ability to make personal change is often as critical as leading a group. Businesses, community-based organizations, healthcare institutions, schools, government foundations and individuals are all responsible for providing youth development opportunities and supports if youth development is to become a viable support system for youth rather than just a fragmented collection of targeted programmes.

Although programme activities may vary with each programme and organizational focus, the areas of development and outcomes should remain constant. In other words, within each of the five areas of development listed above, there are specific outcomes that should be achieved. Youth leadership programmes typically concentrate on outcomes in the leading and connecting areas of development.

In attempting to analyze the cost of youth development, we have chosen to focus on the time period for which a vacuum exists in terms of support for youth: the hours of a typical youth's day, week and year when families and schools, in particular, are often unable to address youth needs. There is a link between how young people spend their unstructured time and youth engagement in risky behaviours. Newman et al (nd) have demonstrated that giving youth supports and opportunities like those discussed above in turn encourages youth to make positive decisions about how to fill this vacant time.

We thus begin by dividing the hours in the year of a typical youth into segments that include: sleeping, productive (school, studying and jobs), maintenance (household chores, work and errands, personal care and eating), discretionary (reading, visiting, church, television, playing, hobbies, art and activities, and sports and outdoor activities) and miscellaneous. According to these calculations, outside of time spent in school and with family, there are approximately 1,920 hours not accounted for each year; hours in which youth are looking for something to do. These hours are the focus of this study. How much would it cost to provide 1,920 hours of youth development opportunities and support to 52 million school-age youth (youth ages 6 to 17 years old) in Nigeria? While we do not have a definitive answer, we do hope to provide some of the basic parameters that must be addressed in planning such an endeavour.

Sustainability

Youth development is an investment that must be made by each sector, both public and private, of the wider community. In determining each sector's level of responsibility, we must give precedence to mechanisms that account for interrelated roles as well as for programme sustainability, which requires long-term secure and adequate funding. It is imperative to secure adequate funds for youth development for at least 15 to 20 years before society can expect to see widespread positive results.

Building on the After-School Momentum

Increased public attention to and investment in quality after-school opportunities for school-age youth are encouraging signs that the public is recognizing the value of youth development. There must be support and funds for after-school programmes at all levels - federal, state, local and philanthropic. A positive momentum in this regard will provide the necessary vehicle for increasing the public understanding of and commitment to youth development on a national scale. Beyond these traditional "after-school" hours, youth also need development supports and opportunities that encompass evenings, weekends, summers, and other school vacations.

Federal, State and Local Governments

Given the ultimate capacity of government funding to address the developmental needs of youth, the roles of each level of government must be critically examined. While the fixed nature of dedicated funding can act as a safety measure for ensuring a minimum level of funding, this can also eventually become a barrier to increased or new funding. Dedicated taxes are a start; a bridge to getting protected and secure funding for youth development. Government can also require communities to provide new types of information about how resources are allocated to serve young people in a community. The creation of the Youth Affairs Ministry and programmes like The Adolescent Programme (TAP), and the various skill acquisition programmes of the Rivers State Government are example of government programmes that are indeed restoring the fortunes and potential of youth.

Business and Philanthropic Sectors

Recent economic prosperity highlights a greater potential capacity for the business and philanthropic sectors to contribute to investments in youth development. Encouraging them to do so will entail clarifying their level of responsibility to youth and devising effective mechanisms for investments. Analogous to the federal/state match, government at all levels can provide incentives to the business and philanthropic communities to provide funding and support for youth development programmes. The government can offer financial incentives, similar to tax abatement and tax credits given for commercial development, to these communities when they provide youth development supports and opportunities.

Youth with Disabilities

Although research shows that youth who participate in youth development and youth leadership experiences are more likely to do well in school, be involved in their community and positively transition through adolescence to adulthood, youth with disabilities are often isolated from mainstream youth development programmes. To ensure equal access to the benefits of youth-focused provisions, a number of organizations devoted to promoting opportunities for persons with disabilities have become active in the arena of comprehensive youth development and work force development. Areas of need specific to youth with disabilities include exposure to mentors and models with and without disabilities, and fostering an understanding of disability history, culture, and public policy issues as well as notions of rights and responsibilities.

Self-advocacy and self-determination skill building have been found to be important components of leadership development for youth with disabilities (Agran, 1997; Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996; Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker & Deshier, 1994; Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998). These skills are particularly important for young people with disabilities so as to enable them to advocate on their own behalf for adult services and basic civil and legal right and protections (Sand & Wehmeyer, 1996; Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes, 1998), and work force and educational accommodations. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that students with disabilities who have self-determination skills are more likely to be successful in making the transition to adulthood, including securing employment and community independence, and have increased positive educational outcomes compared to students with disabilities who lack these skills.

New Types of Information

There is a saying in the human services field that "you collect information about what you fund and fund what you know". The most readily accessible information on youth consistently pertains to what is wrong with them or what they have done wrong. It is relatively easy to find out how many teenagers are parents, how many do drugs, how many dropped out of school and how many have committed a crime. On the other hand, how does one determine how many youths are abstaining from sex or practicing safe sex, how many have positive and caring relationships, how many are engaged in community services and how many are leaders in their community? How would you find out how many youth development-orientated after-school and out-of-school programmes are in a community, city, country or state or what percentage of tax or charity donations go toward the positive development of young people? We must seek new types of information that enable us to support ongoing healthy development of all youth and do not restrict us to fixing specific problem behaviours.

CONCLUSION

There is much promise in the emergence of common definitions and programme components across the fields of youth development, workforce development, and development programmes for youth with disabilities. An ever-growing body of research has validated the effectiveness of quality youth development and youth leadership programmes. In order to meet present challenges, stakeholders at all levels of workforce development, youth development, and disability development must be involved. The policies suggested in this paper would cross sectors of government and fields of service delivery including employment and training, health and human services, housing and community development, secondary and post secondary education, and juvenile justice, and would not only provide services to youth but would also value youth as a resource for programme development. Such a comprehensive youth policy would put in place coherent and long-term strategies that would contribute to positive youth development in such a way that no one agency could on its own.

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