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Beyond the Moral Panic: The Good Governance Option to Youth Socio-Economic Empowerment in Nigeria

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Abstract

The protracted economic crisis that plaque Nigeria since the early 1980s has impacted negatively on the well-being of youth in the country. The situation is further exacerbated by the high incidence of state failure and the crisis of governance, characterised by the massive deterioration of government institutions, pervasive poverty, corruption and the near total collapse of moral and ethical standards in the country. This has occasioned the worsening and continued deterioration of the socio-economic condition of youth thereby, creating a myriad of problems ranging from poverty, unemployment, drug and substance abuse, family disintegration, crime, violence, frustration and despair. While several attempts have been made to solve youth problems in Nigeria, the outcomes of these initiatives have been sub-optimal, as most existing policies designed to empower youth are borne out of 'moral panicky' measures, rather than being genuinely geared towards solving the problem. These policies emanate more out of fear of the negative consequences of youth responses to their poor situation, than in

fundamentally addressing the factors responsible for the situation. The good governance option thus, becomes imperative; owing to the prominence it accords structures and processes in achieving outcomes. Its propensity to generate trust and reciprocity in the exercise of authority facilitates order, stability and continuity in state-society interaction that in turn guarantees the sustainability of these outcomes in the long-run. Utilizing secondary data, the study examines the nature and causes of the deteriorating conditions of youth socio-economic situation in Nigeria. It also explores the option of good governance as a panacea, with particular emphasis on active youth participation in policy initiatives, accountability, transparency and effective service delivery.

Introduction

The protracted economic crisis that plagued Nigeria since the early 1980s, characterised by a decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate, Balance of Payment deficits, high cost of production, occasioned by the poor implementation of the various development plans and acute mismanagement of the country's abundant material resources, led to a significant increase in lending rates, prevalence of unviable State-owned enterprises, multiple taxes/levies, depreciation of the local currency, debt burden, e.t.c., that invariably, impacted negatively on the well-being of the vast majority of the population, with the youth being the worst hit. The situation is further exacerbated by the high incidence of state failure and the crisis of governance, which is manifested by the massive deterioration of government institutions, pervasive poverty, corruption and the near total collapse of moral and ethical standards in the country.

The attendant implication of the above situation was the worsening and continued deterioration of the socio-economic predicament of the youth. This gave rise to a myriad of problems ranging from poverty, unemployment, drug and substance abuse, family disintegration, crime, violence, frustration and despair. While several attempts have been made to address youth related problems in Nigeria, the outcomes of these initiatives have been sub-optimal, as most existing policies designed for this purpose were borne out of 'moral panicky' measures. Specifically, these policies emanate more out of the fear of the negative consequences of youth responses to their poor situation, than in fundamentally addressing the factor responsible for their poor socio-economic predicaments.

This study, therefore, examines the nature and causes of the deteriorating conditions of youth socio-economic situation in Nigeria, and explores the option of good governance as a panacea, with particular emphasis on active youth participation in policy initiatives, accountability, transparency and effective service delivery.

The concept of youth

The debate on who is a 'youth' has continued to generate a lot of interest and controversy that does not seem resolvable any time soon. As the concept of 'youth' has been understood and used differently by both scholars, development practitioners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Development Organizations, International Organizations, the public and Governments alike (Mkandawire, 1996). The word 'youth' has different meanings depending on the context within which it is being used. The term youth is sometimes used as a statistical artefact to refer specifically to those aged 15-24 years. This is done for ease of comparison, as it is this age grouping for which data are available (World Youth Report, 2003:3). However, this designation is often too narrow when young people and their circumstances are considered on an individual country basis. Another meaning used in discussion of policy response of Governments to the particular problem faced by young people, is based on a sociological definition of youth as a transition "from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to independence, and from being recipients of services to becoming contributors to national economic, political and cultural life" (Ibid). As such, Kenniston (1971) argues that the word youth refers to a period between adolescence and adulthood in the post-modern era. To Berger (1972), anyone who feels youthful, and exhibits such qualities as spontaneity, impulsiveness, energy and so forth is a youth. In most African countries, laws define 'adulthood' as commencing from the age of 21 years, although in recent times there has been attempt to lower this age to 18 years (Curtain, 2000). However, for most countries, 21 years still remains the age at which many of the activities and responsibilities of 'adulthood is assumed legally.

Sociologically, 'youth' denotes an interface between 'childhood and 'adulthood'. However, in the case of many rural African societies, the status of 'adulthood' is largely determined by the capacity to sustain a 'legal' marriage. As Abdullah (1999) rightly observes, that in countries like Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Guinea, 'adulthood is defined as the capacity to sustain a marriage. As such, those who are not married, whatever

their chronological age, are still regarded as 'children'. Hence, it is not uncommon to find a 12 year old girl who, by virtue of being married, will be considered an 'adult', while an unmarried 40 year old man will still be considered a 'youth' or 'child' (Chigunta, 2002).

In an attempt to 'standardise' youth programmes, international organizations have come up with specific age categories to define a youth. For instance, the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs uses the age category 18-24 years to define a 'youth' (cited in Abe, 2007), while the Commonwealth uses the age category 15-29 years and the African Union uses the category of 15-34 years. Most African countries have either adopted the United Nations or Commonwealth definition. In Nigeria, the National Youth Development Policy, defines the youth as 'comprising all young persons of ages 18 to 30 who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria' (FGN, 2001). For analytical purposes, this paper adopts this age category as the definition of youth, as anybody who is above the age of 30 years is exempted from the compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme.

Nigerian economic crisis: implication on youth socio-economic situation

In the early years of Nigeria's political independence, the agricultural sector played a significant role in the country's economy, with agriculture accounting for at least 65% of the country's GDP. However, with the discovery oil, and the attendant oil boom of the 1970s, which saw Nigeria's revenue earnings from crude oil raising from a mere \$367 million in 1969, to \$713 million in 1970, to a phenomenal \$1337 million in 1971 (Mimiko, 1998:170), crude oil became the main-stay of the economy. By 1973, earnings from crude oil had risen to \$2878 million, jumping to an unprecedented \$8513 million in 1974 (Ibid). This increase in oil revenue occasioned a proportional increase in government's intervention in the economy, as well as the provision of social services, such that many public projects were undertaken without requisite analysis of their long-term financial viability. By the late 1970s, when the indigenisation decree was promulgated, government's involvement in the economy had become very substantial. Although the indigenisation decree was meant to enhance local participation in, and by implication the displacement of foreign interests from many sectors of the Nigerian economy (Mimiko, 1995:21), its direct consequence was that a lot of companies fell under government control.

The increase in oil revenue gave impetus to the government to increase public expenditure; government continues to spend the bulk of its annual budget on recurrent expenditure, especially on the management of a huge bureaucracy with defence being one of the key areas of capital spending (Okafor, 2003:2). However, the declining price of commodity products at the international market and the fall in oil price noticeable around the same period adversely affected the country's foreign earnings and necessitated the channelling of a disproportionate percentage of the meagre foreign exchange into sustaining its burgeoning expenditure profile. Because the oil boom could not generate enough revenue to keep pace with public expenditure, the government was forced to run a deficit budget and increase its borrowing. The government in the bid to finance its external and fiscal imbalances started incurring debts, depleting foreign reserves, and going into arrears in its external commitments (Olaiya and Awe, 2004:20). Nigeria's indebtedness impeded its access to foreign capital, and short-term trade arrears accumulated to the point that foreign banks held back on confirming letters of credit. The persistent balance of payments deficits recorded by Nigeria, came to a head when the country's foreign reserves reached a precarious level in 1982 (Jimoh, 2004:109-130). The Shagari administration in the bid to arrest the situation came up with the Economic Stabilization Act of 1982. The measures, which were no more than the intensification of import and exchange controls that had hitherto been in place (Jimoh, 2007:5), could not resolve the crisis, the military, eventually took over in December 1983.

The new military regime attempted to augment the austerity measures by imposing wage freeze on public sector employees, and drastically cutting down public expenditure on infrastructures. This however, did not abate the crisis, as capacity utilization continue to decline, leading to widespread closure of factories and plants. Domestic savings and investment fell while external debt service requirements went as high as 34% of exports of goods and services in 1985 (Olaiya and Awe, Op.Cit).

By 1985, the distortions in the economy were severe and varied. The exchange rate was still grossly under-valued. Budget deficits were still prevalent and import controls were made more stringent. The Babangida administration in 1986, adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which includes among others, trade liberalization, currency devaluation, wage freeze, review of government expenditure (reduction in the subsidization of essential services), commercialization and privatization and

interest rate liberalization. These measures did not however, have much significant impact on the economy, as many sectors of the economy recorded low performances. For instance, while the manufacturing sector accounted for 9.5% of the GDP in the years 1981 to 1986, the figure nosedived to 6.1% in the period 1987 to 1992 (The Guardian, 1993:20-21). Similarly, it was observed that between the period 1987 and 1993, 700 manufacturing companies out of the 1500 that belong to the Manufacturing Association of Nigeria (MAN) closed down as a result of the distortion occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme (Mimiko, Op.Cit: 31-33). Also, investment as a percentage of GDP that was 12.0% between 1981 and 1986 fell to 6.0% in the SAP years of 1987-1991. Capacity utilization as at June 1992 was 34.51% as against 42.4% in 1989 (Ibid).

In relation to the reduction of government budget deficit, rather than reduce, fiscal deficit was observed to have increased progressively. In 1988, fiscal deficit which stood at N12.2 billion had increased to N23.5 billion in 1990 to N35.3 billion in 1991, by 1993, it had reached an all time high of N101 billion. Official rate of inflation jumped from 7.4% in 1990 to 44.6% in 1992 to 100% in 1993 (Tell, 1993:13). The country's debt situation also worsens under SAP. Nigeria's external debt jumped from \$18.9 billion or 23.4% of GDP in 1985 to \$28.9 billion or 113.2% of GDP in 1992. External debt ratio that was 147% in 1985 was 232% in 1993 (The Guardian, Op.Cit). The entire debt profile rose by some 1,440% between 1986 and 1992. The internal environment did not fare better, as domestic debt jumped from N27, 952 billion in 1985 to N175.20 billion in 1993.

These crises continued even after the SAP years, and they were further exacerbated by the incidences of state failure and the crisis of governance. The collapse of the Nigerian State occasioned the deterioration and near total collapse of public utilities in the country. Commenting generally on the state of public services in Nigeria, Olowu (1996) observed that:

The country's public utilities, as a social sector, have virtually collapsed. It will be charitable to describe the education system as epileptic. It is difficult to say whether the public schools are open or closed...state hospitals first degenerated from places that provide medical care to consulting clinics. Now, places to die-alternatives, that is to homes.

Water, next to air as the most elementary human need, became scarce, while the nation's roads, highways, bridges, seaports and airports, all degenerated to a terrible state, due to neglect and lack of maintenance. Power supply became erratic, while the communication sector did not fare better, as the quality of services rendered by NITEL and NIPOST, became a subject of continuous lamentation by the generality of the people. Added these problems, is the crisis of governance that engendered wide-spread corruption and the break-down of moral and ethical values in the country.

By the end of the 1990s, when the country eventually return to "democratic governance", corruption had become so pervasive and endemic that the country was rated as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Government business and public life became riddled with inefficiency, dishonesty, mediocrity, incompetence, indifference and waste. The attendant social problems created by these crises were myriad, with severe negative consequences on the socio-economic conditions of the vast majority of the population, and youth in particular. For instance, while the poverty rate of the overall population in the country increased from 17.7 million in 1980, to 34.7 million in 1985, 67.1 million in 1996, and well over 70 million in 2004 (Omotoso, 2004; Oyeranti and Olayiwola, 2005), the poverty rate among the youth was put at 26,630 thousand out of the estimated 28,821 thousand in 2003, representing over 90 percent of the estimated youth population in the country (Youth Response, 2003:9).

In the case of unemployment, studies by the UNDP and ILO using composite rate of unemployment and underemployment indicate that "approximately 21.9 percent of Nigeria's labour force had unemployment problems in 1998" (Okafor, 2003:2), with youth unemployment rate estimated to be four times higher than the country's national average (Egulu, 2004). According to the 2008 unemployment statistics, it is estimated that as many as 21 million Nigerian youth are jobless (Makinde, 2008). The attendant effects of deepening poverty and widespread unemployment has considerably contributed to the breakdown of traditional value system and social institutions (Mlama, 1999), coupled with rapid urbanization that engendered rural-urban migration that greatly undermined the traditional kinship structures (Bonnell, 2000) has weakened the ability of parents to cater for their children, thereby, forcing these children to look for alternatives in order to survive, with most of them engaging in menial activities, begging, scavenging, prostitution and crime.

Furthermore, the disintegration witnessed in public schools in terms of quality, infrastructure and the morale of both teachers and students has equally contributed to the worsening socio-economic conditions of the youth. Educational curriculum at the secondary and tertiary levels in the country emphasises more on theoretical knowledge acquisition at the expense of practical and vocational skills. As a result of the inability of the educational system to equip young people with skills beyond basic literacy and numeracy skills, most school leavers were ill-prepared for the practical realities they face in a largely stagnated formal sector environment as job seekers. The attendant implication of this is that, most young people now perceive formal education as being 'useless', especially, when they see their friends, brothers, sisters and cousins who complete school before them staying for long periods at home without gainful or productive employment. This situation has occasioned an increase in the rate of school drop-outs by young people, especially the male children.

Several initiatives by the government to arrest the deplorable socio-economic conditions of the youth- The National Directorate of Employment (NDE), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Community Banks (CB), Family Support Programme (FSP), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), have produced limited outcomes. These attempts have largely been guided by a vision that neither addresses the livelihoods needs nor meets the real expectations of young people (Momoh, 1998; Nweke, 2005; Yinusa, 2005). Rather, the policies were highly politicised and based on stereotypical notions of disaffected youth (Schnurr, 1998). Specifically, most of these initiatives were prompted by a 'moral panic', "mainly because of fears arising from the way young people respond to shrinking income and opportunities which are interpreted in pathological terms by the authorities" (Chigunta Op.Cit:15).

The general perception have been to see the youth as an immature, impatient, inexperience and greedy set of people, who should not be trusted or saddled with positions of responsibility. As such many of the initiatives designed to solve youth problem sees the youth as 'subjects' rather than the 'objects' of such initiatives, which has necessitated their marginal involvement and near total exclusion in policy agenda. This lack of adequate participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of these initiatives has led to the

duplication of programmes, whose scopes are most often unwieldy, thereby leading to difficulties in coordination, institutional rivalry and conflicts amongst the various agencies involved. Similarly, inadequate funding to sustain most of these programmes long enough to allow the benefits manifest, has ultimately led to their failure.

The good governance option

The sub-optimal outcomes of government's responses to youth poor socio-economic situation, encapsulated in the wanton and unbridled exercise of power and authority; gross mismanagement of national resources and dismal state of infrastructures and social services, makes the good governance option very imperative. Governance can be understood in terms of three major components. First it denotes the nature or form of political authority existent in a country, that is, whether autocratic or democratic; presidential or parliamentary. Second, the means through which authority is exercised in the management of both human and material resources. Third, the ability of the government to discharge its functions in an efficient and equitable manner that ensures and guarantees the entrenchment of certain democratic ideals such as accountability, transparency, corruption-free, integrity, responsiveness and high performance standard among others, through effective citizens engagement.

Governance therefore, involves interactions among structures, processes and traditions that determine how power is exercised, how decisions are taken, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their way (Plumptre and Graham, 1999, p.3). It allows us to discuss the role of government in coping with public issues and the contribution that other players may make. It facilitates reflections on strategies that may be adopted by a society in instances of government's incapacity. It opens our minds to the possibility that groups in society rather than government may have a stronger role in addressing problems, which allows for "adaptation and continuous improvement of market-oriented systems in a specific socio-economic context" (Bratton and Hyden, 1992). This includes advocating and demanding accountability and transparency from those in authority, and facilitating opportunities for improved service delivery, through effective participation.

Participation involves a search for new, more direct ways through which citizens may influence government and hold them accountable (Gaventa and Valderrama, 1999: 2). It represents a move from one of users and choosers of

services provided by others to one in which people become actors and agents in broader processes of governance. As such:

Once user groups engage in dialogue with producers of public services they enter the territory of public service decision-making. It is at that point that the issues of identity and governance come together in the tension around the disputed identities of “consumer” or “citizen” (Barnes, 1999, p.82).

This means that citizens themselves play a role in the process of policy-making, by proposing policy-options (Gramberger, 2001, p.16). Active youth participation in the policy process facilitates a viable working partnership with adults in a mutual and respectable manner. It affords opportunities for recognising and nurturing the strengths, abilities and interests of young people in evolving decisions that affects them both at the individual and collective levels. Since governance involves, “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development” (World Bank, 1992, p.3), effective participation of young people moves the process beyond reactive and prescriptive measures to the level of meaningful stakeholders in the design and implementation of policy decisions capable of transforming their socio-economic situation. As Osamani (2001: 6) rightly comments, “participation makes it possible to utilize local people’s knowledge about local conditions in solving local problems more efficiently”, Similarly, Fischer, (2000) also argues that “citizens have special knowledge that is indispensable for the development of practice-oriented, effective, and meaningful solutions to problems”. In this sense, participation and genuine partnership involving young people, build trust and enhances the potential for sustainable policy through broad-based ownership, especially of youth empowerment programmes.

Participation as discussed above represents a key element of governance, by building on the insight that citizens can make an active and original contribution to policy-making. It taps into the broader resources of society in order to meet the many governance challenges facing societies today. It envisions the role of government not as a micro-manager, but as an enabler and provider of frameworks. Within these frameworks, market and civil society, individual citizens and groups may organize their activities and relations. Here, the relationship between government and citizens in policy-

making can become a partnership that builds trusts and enhances the potential for sustainable policy through broad-based ownership.

Furthermore, effective participation engenders an environment conducive for positive and transformational change in perception and attitude of the youths towards the structure and process of governance. Such perceptual and attitudinal change makes the process of reorientation, re-socialization and mobilization of young people easy in the all-important task of nation-building and national development, thus, empowering them to demand accountability and transparency from those in position of authority.

Conventionally, accountability refers to being answerable for one's actions or behaviour. According to Robertson (1993, p.3), it concerns the process by which those who exercise power, whether as governments, as elected representatives or as appointed officials, must be able to show that they have exercised their powers and discharge their duties properly. Essentially, therefore, the idea of accountability is "rooted in the widely shared belief that humans are prone to error, and as such subjects of political authority should therefore be protected from the hazardous behaviour of their governors" (Fontana, 1997, p.1). This requires that public officers and institutions are under obligation to submit their activities to scrutiny by the members of the public, and by the organs and institutions to carry out such scrutiny (Akinseye, 2001). The need to hold government accountable for decisions and actions taken, act upon criticisms or requirement made of them, and accept (some) responsibilities of failure, incompetence, or deceit' (Mclean, 1996, p.1), reduces inefficiency in resource management, and facilitates opportunities for the productive channelling of the energy and creativity of young people. Achieving this requires:

- a. Greater responsibility to elected superiors
- b. Greater responsibilities to community groups; and
- c. Greater commitment to value and higher standard of morality (Adakai, 1998:113).

Transparency on the other hand, requires that governments consult broadly to ascertain citizen interests, publicize plans and decisions, share information widely and in good time, and consistently act in an open manner (Centre for Democracy and Governance, 2000: 1). It is about the provision of information, which has to be objective, complete, relevant, easy to find, and

easy to understand (Caddy, 2001:2), in relation to the conduct of public affairs and public transactions, through the exercise of the right to know (Sorabjee, 2001: 1-2). Transparency emphasizes government's tolerance of youth active engagement in public debate, scrutiny and public questioning of political, economic and social policy choices, affecting them in particular, and society in general.

Lastly, a viable governance environment guarantees effective service delivery. As De Groot (2003), notes, service delivery involves service improvement... that ensures that when citizens contact their local authority their request is resolved to full satisfaction on first contact. Service delivery is aimed at enhancing civic life, deepening democratic involvement and contributing to more effective neighborhood renewal and sustainable communities. A citizen-centered approach to service delivery requires government to seek continuously to improve organizational performance in delivery of programmes and services, by identifying the appropriate organizational arrangement to promote optimal performance.

Conclusion

The attempt in this study, have been to reveal the negative impact of Nigeria's protracted economic crisis on the socio-economic well-being of the youth. It drew attention to the persistent economic decline that became noticeable since the 1980s, as well as the crisis of governance that culminated in state failure, poverty, unemployment, corruption, deprivation, and its impact on young people in the country. The outcomes created myriad of problems for young people, which appeared insurmountable, despite government policy initiatives. The observable trend in most youth policy initiatives revealed that they were designed with the youth as objects, rather than subjects of these initiatives, which leaves them little or no room to get actively involve.

The paper therefore, advocates the need for good governance as a panacea these problems. It submitted that the entrenchment of accountability and transparency in government, possess the capacity to generate trust and reciprocity necessary to forge a viable partnership between the citizens and their elected officials. A partnership that is required for translating governmental policies into sustainable actions or outcomes. It also, suggested the need for active youth participation in the formulation and implementation of initiatives that affects them directly, as well as the need to forge viable

partnership and collaboration with other stakeholders in the delivery of services.

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