

# **Youth and the Future of Nigeria**

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By

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## **Introduction**

At a time when there are vociferous calls for “restructuring”, “true federalism”, “actualization of Biafra” and accompanying unconstitutional hate-inducing ultimatums; added to the already incredible challenges of bad or poor governance, as illustrated by the humongous cases of corruption and the executive-legislative imbroglio over budgetary appropriation and its implementation; it is pertinently apt to pose such questions as: “what future for Nigeria?” and what is the role of key stakeholders, such as the youth, in shaping the future? A lot of the agitations and counter agitations are being made by people who classify themselves, or a being classified as “youth”, in various groupings of dubious conceptualization. Are they, really, the youth? Who are the youth, and what should be their appropriate role for the future of our country?

This lecture hopes to contribute to a clearer understanding and conceptualization of who the youth are, what are their characteristics and the nature of the challenges they face in Nigeria, what other stakeholders in the Nigerian project need to do to address the challenges; and what roles the youth should be playing to assure the

prospects of a better future for Nigeria, notwithstanding the challenges, which bedevil them.

Additionally, this lecture is a contribution to the on-going discourses in the context of the African Union 2017 Summit's thematic focus titled: "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investment in the Youth". Africa is said to be contemporarily, characterized by a "Youth Bulge", with a large majority of its population below the age of 30, or as the United Nations (UN) specifies, between the ages of 15 – 24. This represents a huge segment or percentage of the population, which is supposed to be the most economically and politically active, but which is mostly affected by illiteracy, poverty, policy neglect and disempowerment, and therefore which has a huge potential for conflict generation and destabilization. In many different contexts globally, comparatively, this large proportion of youth relative to other segments of the population is considered to be an asset; except in Africa, and specifically in countries such as Nigeria, which is negligently converting this situation into a disturbing liability. Many theorists have averred that, a key challenge to development in Africa is converting this increasing liability back to an asset that yields dividend for stability, progress and development. I argue that it is not just in empowerment, entrepreneurship and employment that the dividend could be reaped. Crucially, in getting the youth to play greater roles in politics, policy and development processes, the dividend would yield greater rewards for societal progress and development. So, serious attention needs to be focused on youth issues, youth concerns, and especially youth's positive engagement in all aspects of the national political economy. Allowing the youth to be

disconnected, or to dissipate energy in divisive politics, or get preoccupied in criminality and self-serving pursuits, is a recipe for national disaster and spells doom for the future of any country, and especially diverse, multiethnic and multi-religious countries, such as Nigeria. The boundless energy, creativity and resourcefulness of the youth would be better channeled into productive engagements. The earlier we realize this and focus our attention on addressing the concerns and predicament of our youth, the better for the future of our country.

Indeed, it is paradoxical that globally the youth are a 'demographic majority' and yet a 'political minority'. Youth activism is an essential ingredient of politics. Historically, this has been so, with many concrete illustrations, which can be drawn from many countries. Yet, contemporarily, in most countries, especially so-called developing countries such as Nigeria, the role of the youth in politics has been relegated to merely being mobilized cannon fodder in the arsenal of reckless political gladiators. Educational policies fail to address their needs and aspirations. Economic policies undermine their potentials and dampen their spirits. And national development policies ignore their input, engagement and roles.

It is very important that we seriously interrogate 'Why this is so', especially here in Nigeria; and 'why it shouldn't be so!' And conceptualize a more appropriate role for the youth in the construction of a better future for Nigeria, given all the current challenges. In this context, I argue that this serious matter of the neglect and disempowerment of our youth is so, because essentially,

our brand of leaders seem to lack enlightened self-interest; they conflate narrow-minded short term selfish interests, with community or national interest; they are generally reckless and backward in their worldviews, and therefore seem incapable of catalyzing constructive roles for the youth. They construct an elitist narrative of being concerned with the affairs of the youth, but make no substantive effort in policies or programs to address their plight. They have failed to harness the demographic asset, which young people are, into a dividend for national development. The so-called youth bulge, in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular (it being the most populous country on the continent), is deliberately, or negligently being turned into a huge liability rather than a demographic dividend.

But, this should not be so, because this situation subverts the potential contributions to national development of the most active segment of the population, perpetuates our underdevelopment, nurtures restiveness, vandalism and instability, as well as undermines our country's competitiveness globally.

It is imperative that we take measures urgently to empower and enable our youth to play appropriate roles in our politics in particular, and in our polity and political economy in general.

In this presentation, I hope to provoke our thoughts, conscience, and souls; hopefully to add to the clarion-call for a concerted action for youth involvement and engagement and for the placement of the needs and aspirations of our youth high on the priority agenda of

national policies and programs. National Progress and development is conditional on the youth playing more appropriate roles in the political economy. Nigeria neglects its youth at its own peril. The youth are our future! We must guard, protect and nurture our future.

### **Conceptualizing the youth**

Let us first understand clearly, who are the youth, because there is a lot of misconception regarding them. A notable Nigerian political party not long ago, appointed a 60-year old person as its national youth leader! Now, that is by any definition, a mature adult, indeed virtually in the departure lounge waiting for the trip to the “far beyond”! Also, a seventy plus year old president, not long ago, defined himself as a youth, because, he said, youthfulness is in the heart! In my view, that is, to say the least, excessively patronizing. Then, if you look at all these groups, currently in the forefront of all sorts of agitations, and you examine their leaders and spoke persons who brand themselves as “youth”; technically they do not belong to that category. All these, in my view trivialize such an important matter as the youth, because, unless we properly conceptualize the youth, we would *a priori* weaken our capacity to understand their real concerns and address their needs and aspirations.

The United Nations Organization (UN) defines youth as young people in transition from childhood to adulthood, who fall in the age category of 15 – 24 years. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialized agency of the UN, has expanded this definition to cover all those who fall within the age category of 15 – 34 years. The African Youth Charter defines youth as

young persons between the ages 15 and 35 years. So even if we stretch the definition, youth are primarily those in the age category of 15 – 35 years.

Young people categorized as the youth as defined above, constitute the most vibrant, active, energetic, innovative, courageous, risk-taking, problem-solving and intellectually alert grouping of people in any country in the world. They are additionally, relatively more “ambitious, enthusiastic and promising” when they define goals and pursue them. On the other hand, paradoxically, they are more vulnerable, more impressionistic and more emotionally unstable, which suggests that they have special needs and concerns worthy of serious attention, in order not to undermine their potentials. If care is not taken, and their energies are not channeled in a positive direction, and instead they are alienated, they can also be the most rambunctious, militant, murderous, anarchic, if not criminally minded group in the population.

Demographically, youth represent the majority globally. In Africa, there are presently 226 million young people out of a total population of about 1 billion, representing 20%.

A vast majority of young people lives in the developing countries, notably Africa. For example, about 85% of 15 – 25 year olds live in the so-called developing countries, and is projected to rise to 89.5% by the year 2025. Of these, the UN estimates that 200 million live in poverty, 130 million are illiterate and 10 million live with HIV/AIDs. There are more women than men in the youth category, and

adolescent and young women face the most daunting of challenges than any other grouping of individuals in the world: from poverty, to illiteracy, marginalization and disempowerment, reproductive and other health challenges, to debilitating diseases, such as STDs and HIV/AIDs.

Thus, the youth have, arguably, the most basic needs, in terms of education, employment, emotional stability, social security and healthcare. Regrettably, sufficient attention is not given to these; in some contexts, such as is the case in Nigeria, the neglect is simply reckless and crude. It can be argued that the greatest challenge of development relates to how to address the challenges and adequately provide for the basic needs of the youth, and channel their boundless energies into societal progress and development, rather than conflicts and criminality.

### **Role of the Youth: Generally, historically and globally**

History teaches us great lessons about the important and critical roles of youth in societal transformation, be it in politics, military service, religion, the economy, or in the building of empires and nations. Invariably, from all corners of the globe, change agents with tremendous impact spring up from this category of the population. This may be as a consequence of the inherent characteristics and attributes of this age group, or more importantly, as a consequence of societal socialization processes. Many societies in the past place great emphasis on character building, and the engraining of appropriate positive societal values in the indoctrination or socialization of this category of the population. Many traditional African societies for

example, have rigorous age-grade initiation rituals and practices to instill values of truthfulness, courage, solidarity, selflessness, virtuousness, etc. among the youth. Along the line, some societies, and modern African nation-states have become lax in these matters of value-orientation and socialization, or indoctrination of the youth with constructive values.

In any case, global comparative experiences are indicative of the fact that many transformative leaders 'cut their teeth' in political engagements as young men and women. These range from the ancient military and political rulers, such as Alexander the Great, one of the most influential people in history (who succeeded his father as king of Macedon at age 20; created one of the largest empires of the ancient world, from Greece to India, at age 30); to 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century greats, such as Genghis Khan (who was elected Khan of the Mongols at 24, became sole ruler of Mongol Empire at 35); to nineteenth century great political leaders, such as Napoleon Bonaparte (who became a general at 24 and built and ruled over a large empire in continental Europe at 35); to 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary types, such as Fidel Castro (27-30), Che Guevara (28-31). Others are the African greats, such as Mandela (who joined ANC at 25, became chairman of ANC Transvaal branch and organized the famous 1952 Defiance Campaign against Apartheid at 34, was subsequently jailed for 27 years, and later became elected president of South Africa in 1994); Thomas Sankara (33), Gowon (32), Murtala Mohammed (37); to early colonial and post-colonial nationalist/political activists, such as Sekou Toure (36), Mahathir Mohammed (21), Indra Ghandi (30); and other acknowledged global

change agents, such as John F. Kennedy (36), Margaret Thatcher (34) Tony Blair (30), Angela Merkel (36) Obama (36), etc.

Youth have therefore, historically been notable change agents and drivers of societal transformation. Contemporarily, however, especially in the so-called developing democracies, the trend has been that of relegation of youth interests and roles, thereby pushing the youth more into poverty, alienation, and turning them into agents of destabilization and conflicts, especially in diverse developing countries.

### **Nigerian Youth: Nature, characteristics and predilections**

The Nigerian *National Youth Policy* (2009) defines youths as those between the ages of 18 – 35 years. (Contrary to the global trend, it excludes those 15 – 17!) Nigeria's total population in 2016 was projected to be 193,392,517 (NpopC July 2017). Youth population was estimated at 61,306,413 or 31.7% of the total population. This is one of the highest percentages of youth in any country.

In 2012, using National Population Commission's (NpopC) projections, Nigeria was said to have a population of 167 million. Half or 50% of these were said to be youth in the age category of 15 – 34 years (Akande, 2014). Nigeria is said to have the largest youth population in the world within the framework of this definition, with a figure of 33.652 million. Also, 2012 statistics suggest that 11 million youth were unemployed.

Nigerian youth face tremendous challenges, of poverty, diseases such as STDs and HIV/AIDs, unemployment and marginalization and exclusion in the political economy; arguably more so, than most countries in the world. There is a dire shortage of young persons occupying the political realm, either because of disempowerment, or alienation, or their perception that their involvement would not matter, given how elections are rigged and how policies are haphazardly conceived and implemented without input from critical stakeholders.

Additionally, there is a disjuncture between the old, the middle aged and the youth, in the sense of lack of appropriate and serious platforms for solidarity, engagement and dialogue. It hasn't always been this bad. In the First Republic, the founding fathers ensured unity of purpose, empowered the youth, mentored them, carried them along and involved them appropriately. For example, the Enahoros, the Maitama Sules, all became prominent politicians, Federal/Regional Ministers, etc., as youth. The founding fathers themselves had been involved in students and other community affairs, political struggles and leadership roles quite early in their lives. But, somewhere along the line, a rupture seems to have occurred; perhaps beginning under military rule, and especially under politics of the Second and subsequent, republics, the youth came to be generally neglected and relegated to the background.

The marginalization of youth and their disempowerment cannot be adequately addressed unless and until more and more young people, both men and women, become engaged in the political, legislative as

well as policy and governance processes. We must, therefore, reconnect with the youth, empower them, mentor them responsibly, give them responsible leadership roles and enable them become the key change agents for Nigeria's stability, unity, progress and development. Young people cannot afford to be apolitical, apathetic and indifferent to what is happening in governance and in the larger political economy. They need to get engaged and involved. Effective mechanisms and platforms need to be established to nurture and mobilize youth engagement in the wider political and policy-making processes. Credible youth leaders must necessarily help to organize and pilot such platforms of engagement.

### **Enhancing the role of youth in the Nigerian political economy**

We must work hard in all respects to empower our youth in the Nigerian political economy. The goals of youth empowerment, as identified by UNESCO, are to nurture in the youth values, ideals and notable skills as follows:

- Positive sense of self
- Self-control
- Decision making skills
- Moral system of belief
- Pro-social connective-ness

We have to work hard, with government leading the way, and other stakeholders providing critical support, to create better opportunities for our young people so that they can explore their potentials in education, in employment, in entrepreneurship, and especially in politics and governance, and in global competitiveness as well, in all facets of life. A situation in which political and governmental processes, as Sweigart observed, "seem out of reach,

out of touch and ineffective” (NDI June 28, 2017) for youth needs to be addressed and reversed.

### **Specific Recommendations**

Given the arguments and points raised in the preceding paragraphs, and especially the predicament of youth in Nigeria, I wish to specifically make the following recommendations, which are informed by solid research of comparative global experiences:

1. Nigeria needs to adopt a “positive youth development approach”, which recognizes youth as active participants in societal development, and not merely as passive recipients of doled out goods and services.
2. Accordingly, the National Youth Policy should be urgently reviewed, enhanced and imbued with serious programs targeted at satisfying the needs and aspirations of the youth, with their active participation.
3. Youth employment and empowerment programs and projects need to be reviewed/replaced for greater effectiveness in meeting objective goals.
4. Effort should be targeted at the systematic removal of all barriers to effective youth participation in the Nigerian political economy.
5. Government should create and, with time, institutionalize a Nigerian Youth Interactive Forum, which meets annually or biennially, through which leading public officials would meet

representatives of the youth; enable voices of the youth to find expression, to become in the center of governance and to drive change. This should become a sustainable participation forum for the youth in national affairs; to replace or incorporate cultural festivals, which presently are jamborees merely focusing on dances, singing, etc., consuming humongous amounts of public resources, with no substantive value-addition.

6. The three arms of government (Executive, Legislature and Judiciary) at all tiers need to carefully plan and introduce Internship schemes / programs for youth, especially those in tertiary institutions, during long vacation periods, which globally have been contributing to youth exposure, development of self-confidence, acquisition of gainful skills, and eventually nurturing youth agency. In addition, vacation job schemes, in the areas of public works (e.g. repairs and repainting of schools, hospitals, public building, etc.), which provide temporary employment and skills opportunities for the youth, with multiplier effects, should be introduced.
7. The Federal government should strive hard to implement all AU resolutions / decisions for youth engagement, empowerment and employment, which it is a signatory to. In particular, the Resolution of the AU Summit of heads of States, which required member states to endeavor to reduce youth unemployment by 2% per year from 2009 – 2018, should be resolutely implemented, through vigorous schemes of employment generation.

8. Nigerian communities must revive the constructive culture of socialization and indoctrination of youth with positive values and belief systems.

## **Conclusion**

As Sweigart has aptly noted, “surging youth activism and leadership has the potential to change the world” (NDI April 20, 2017); and I add, to impact upon the future more positively. This potential of youth to change Nigeria for a better future must be tapped maximally. No effort should be spared to encourage youth engagement, catalyze it, nurture and institutionalize it. Indeed, as Sweigart also averred, “young people are ... indispensable change agents for sustainable development and the source of democratic dividend”, more especially in newly democratizing countries. Our public officials need to recognize this, and become more serious in handling youth development programs.

It is worth emphasizing, at this juncture, that “youth” is not a homogeneous category. Individual young men and women are differently and intricately linked to different social and class cleavages in a country. Even though they have many common challenges, concerns and aspirations, their approach to them will necessarily vary; coping strategies, responses and modes of engagement would differ amongst the youth, influenced by affiliation to cleavages.

Forging a united, common front, to address the multifarious and complex issues, therefore, is a difficult task. However, it is not an

impossible task; it is a task that must be done. Building credible alliances, championed by credible leaders and change agents amongst the youth, is key but would require tireless sensitization, mobilization and engagement. Significantly, forging intergenerational alliances between the young, the middle and the old breeds, is the best recipe for assuring a better future for our country. In this way, the young would feel included, they would strive to add value, an amenable environment for their positive roles would be created and a smooth and seamless process of political and developmental baton-exchange would have been engendered.

The case for active engagement and participation of youth in the life of a nation and its political economy is solid, especially in new democracies, such as Nigeria, and is increasingly now being backed by evidence drawn from empirical research. For example, drawing from the findings of such research, Lagos and Rose have observed as follows:

In the new democracies of the world, the role of the youth is of special importance... older generations...include leaders of discredited undemocratic regime and many who supported or tolerated it... young persons are freer of association with excesses of the past... (“Young People in Politics...” I-IDEA).

No doubt, young people carry less excess baggage and are better placed to face the challenges of creating stability to replace the “chronic instability” of the past. But neither them alone, nor indeed, the so-called “new breed” politicians can do it alone. All hands need to be joined and placed on deck, as a by-product of credible patriotic

alliances for all-inclusive engagement in national development. Adult – youth partnerships are required and these ought to be forged systematically and with sincerity of purpose, not opportunistically. As Sweigart has observed, young people not only deserve a seat at the table and must be given one, but they also aspire for more than just a seat at the table, they aspire to learn in practice how to drive the process, a role that they clearly would be called upon to discharge sooner or later.

As for the youth, there is the absolute need for a change of their mindset, from despondency, apathy and “Exit”, to hopeful and positive, can-do attitude; indeed to engagement and activism, with purposefulness and integrity. These, I believe, are the attributes of the mindset required to move Nigeria out of its current state of chaotic befuddlement, to a greater future more assured.

Nigerian young men and women must rise to get involved; to organize, not agonize! And take their destiny and our nation’s destiny in their hands. They should not allow others to hide behind, or wear, their toga to advance particularistic, non-youth agenda. They should lead to get the agenda crafted and their concerns squarely addressed.

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