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GROWING THE
NIGERIAN
ECONOMY:
EMBRACING
A YOUTH
DEVELOPMENTAL
APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian economy has witnessed persistent decline over time, as a result of fall in global oil prices. The external shock has had unintended consequences for the Nigerian economy: dwindling revenues, decrease in the economic growth, increase in youth restiveness and an increase in the levels of unemployment. Thus far, there has been no holistic government policy or initiatives targeted at addressing the challenges of the Nigerian youth.

It is recommended that piecemeal approach by the Nigerian government should be addressed. A youthful development initiative that adopts a holistic approach should be designed to resolve the problems of the Nigerian youth. In doing so, the government should focus on strengthening existing institutions, enhancing human capital development, creating a platform and environment to enable young entrepreneurs build businesses and provide critical solutions to the many existing economic problems.

JEL: A11, B00, B22, E00, E60, F62, F63, O11, O15, O40, O47, Z10

Keywords: Economic growth, government, youth development, unemployment, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

A developing country like Nigeria has enormous opportunities and challenges with the globalization and rising of knowledge economy in spite of its teeming population (Okafor, 2011; Weil, 2012). In Nigeria, youths are regarded as the most important and vibrant segment of the population (Olaniyan, *et al.*, 2012). They are regarded as tomorrow's leaders, builders, innovators, and creators. However, they need an enabling environment and the required support with regards to good health, opportunities and skills to transform the future (Obadan & Odusola, 2001; Obuh, 2005). The youth can only contribute significantly to economic growth and development when a country has more hands actively engaged in productive work than more mouths to feed (Obi, 2010; Omoju & Abraham, 2014). This simply means that the working age population should be larger than the dependent population. United Nations Fund Population Authority (UNFPA) state of the World's population report stated that Nigeria has a youthful population with 76% of Nigerians within the ages of 0 and 24 years old. Their report further stated that an estimated 148.8 million Nigerians fall under the age of 25. The controversy of who can be classified as a youth is one that continues to raise lots of issues. Scholars and academics are yet to agree on who can be classified as a youth. This lack of consensus is as a result of the disagreement of the age bracket that should be regarded as the acceptable youth age (United Nations, 2019). The lack of a universally acceptable definition of youth makes measuring the youth problem very difficult and comparison of data across countries less reliable.

The United Nations for statistical consistency across regions, defines youth, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. The United Nations (2015) has a different definition, youth is a human being between the ages of 15 and 30 years. Despite this disagreement in defining who a youth is, there is some agreement that youth is a period that is considered to be a mental, psychological, physical and social transformation into adulthood. In Nigeria, as a result of the social-economic and environmental peculiarities, the definition of a youth has been modified to reflect these anomalies. A youth in this context is regarded as a person between the ages of 15 to 40 years of age (Wokocha, 2002; United Nations, 2018).

This research was motivated by the need for Nigeria to attain meaningful economic growth and development, as well as social transformation. In other words, to achieve economic growth and development, the vital role and importance of the Nigerian youth cannot be over emphasized. This, therefore, is a call for the youths to be highly independent and equipped with the necessary tools, skills and resources to meaningfully contribute to Nigeria's economic transformation. Hence, this paper is set out to examine the following issues: (i) some of the ways that the Nigerian youth can be equipped with the needed resources to contribute meaningfully to economic growth and development; (ii) factors that are responsible for hindering youths from effective participation in the economy; and (iii) remedies and measures that can mitigate ineffective participation of youths in economic activities.

Equipping Youths with the Tools Necessary for Positive Contribution to Economic Growth

In equipping the youths with the tools necessary for positive contribution to economic growth, it is important to strengthen the quality of labour that the Nigerian youth supplies (DeJaeghere, 2017). The quality of labour supplied by the Nigerian youth is relatively poor and there are several factors that are responsible some of them are endogenous, while the others are exogenous. This research will examine both the endogenous and exogenous factors that can better equip the youth to contribute their quota to economic growth and economic development. The quality of labour this research paper is focused on is called human capital

Improving the Human Capital in the Form of Health

With the present economic meltdown coupled with the difficult times plaguing the Nigerian economy, the Nigerian youth is under enormous pressures, some from unrealistic societal expectations, some from a lack of opportunities to use their God given talent and others from a difficult environment that makes it impossible for them to make use of their talents to make meaningful contribution to economic

growth and development (Sommers, 2011; Kalau, 2020). These pressures have unintended health consequences.

As indicated in Table 1, the United Nations Development Plan Human Development Report (2016) reflects the life expectancy for Nigeria is lower than that of Congo and Ethiopia, while the levels of inequality and poverty for Nigerians have intensified in the last three years. Life expectancy for Germany, Singapore and the United Kingdom is above 80 years. The human development index has similar results, with Nigeria, Congo and Ethiopia have low HDI values of 0.532, 0.457 and 0.463. For Germany, Singapore and United Kingdom, the HDI value are quite high, 0.936, 0.932 and 0.922.

Table 1: Nigeria HDI and Life Expectancy

Countries	HDI Value	HDI Rank	Life Expectancy	Human Inequality Coefficient
Nigeria	0.532	157	53.9	34.6
Congo	0.457	176	60.0	30.2
Ethiopia	0.463	173	65.9	27.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.537	---	60.7	30.7
World HDI	0.504	---	60.8	30.9
Germany	0.936	5	81.2	14.1
Singapore	0.932	9	83.2	11.9
United Kingdom	0.922	14	81.7	12.9

Source: United Nation Development Plan Human Development Index (2017)

Improving the quality of health of the Nigerian youth will have immense benefits for not only the Nigerian youths, but Nigeria as a whole. Healthy people are more productive, healthier people can work harder and longer, they can also think more clearly (McArthur and Sachs, 2001). Thus, better health will raise the level of productivity and income (Acemoglu *et al.*, 2001).

To enhance the ability of the Nigerian youth to participate effectively in economic activities, it is important to ensure that the quality of healthcare and health facilities that are available to the youth are improved and strengthen (Onuekwusi & Effiong,

2002; Olaniyan, *et al.*, 2012). As it stands, there is a disparity in the quality of healthcare that is available to youths in the urban and rural areas.

With youths in the rural areas having to deal with poor accesses to healthcare facilities. As it stands, Nigerian youths in rural areas are more likely to have poor health issues as a result of lack of accessibility to healthcare facilities as a result. Bridging the gap between the healthcare facilities in the rural and urban centres would be a step in the right direction.

Another measure of enhancing the health of the Nigerian youths is for the government at federal, state and local levels to design healthcare schemes and facilities that will provide youth's access to affordable healthcare facilities. Providing affordable healthcare will improve the Nigerian youth's health and by so doing, improve his productivity and income for those who are gainfully employed.

Improving the Human Capital in the Form of Education

Education remains an important tool for improving the welfare, wellbeing and earning capacity of the youths in developing countries (Ogujiuba *et al.*, 2013; Todaro & Smith, 2015; Budget, 2019). Education enables the Nigerian youth to acquire skills that can be used to earn a livelihood, assists family and friends and also invest for future use. For this reason, any investment in education that develops a person's intellectual capacity – in other words education – has become the most important form of investments in human capital.

An increasing cause of concern in Nigeria is the quality and quantity of education available to the Nigerian youth (Omoju & Abraham, 2014). This is more so in northern Nigeria where activities of religious militants have led to the closure of several primary and secondary schools in northern Nigeria (Urdal, 2006). In the southern Nigeria, education is slightly better, but militancy and kidnaping and criminal activities have been on the increase as a result of Nigerian youths unable to find decent jobs to earn a living, and as a result turn to a life of crime (Ogujiuba *et al.*, 2013; Ekong and Ekong, 2016).

As presented in Table 2, the United Nation Development Index Human Development Indicators (2017) showed that for the average Nigerian youth, expected years of schooling is 10 years, which is slightly higher than Congo and

Ethiopia with 9.8 and 8.5 years, respectively. When compared to developed countries, the expected year of schooling is considerably lower, with Germany, Singapore and United Kingdom, on the average between 16 and 17 years as the expected years of schooling.

Table 2: Nigeria HDI and Expected Years of Schooling

Countries	HDI Value	HDI Rank	Expected year of schooling	Mean year of schooling
Nigeria	0.532	157	10.0	6.2
Angola	0.457	176	9.8	6.8
Ethiopia	0.463	173	8.5	2.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.537	---	10.1	5.6
World HDI	0.504	---	9.4	4.7
Germany	0.936	5	17.0	14.1
Singapore	0.932	9	16.2	11.5
United Kingdom	0.922	14	17.4	12.9

Source: United Nation Development Plan Human Development Index (2017)

More so, as shown in Table 2, countries in which young people spend more time in school tend to have better educated and better skilled workforce, compared to countries where young people spend less time in schools. In countries where young people spend less time in school, the young people will end up less skilled and their productivity levels will also be poor.

Importantly, one of the measures that could enhance youth skill development is improving of existing educational infrastructure and building better educational facilities that are intended to prepare the youths for life in the 21st century (Weil, 2012; Todaro & Smith, 2015). These educational facilities should be focused on teaching skills that are relevant in today's world. They could include technological development centres aimed at teaching young people how to build computers, mobile phones and be competent in both hardware and software development.

While, there may be a few technological centres in cities like Lagos and Abuja, there is the need to ensure that more of them are built in more cities to enable young people to become technologically savvy.

Finally, there is the need to change the mind-set of the average Nigerian youth who is more focused on job seeking activities rather than job creating activities. Youths should be encouraged and schooled to become entrepreneurs and by so doing, they become job creators (Obi, 2010). The youths should become more innovative by providing economic, social and political solutions to the problems of their time.

Creating an Enabling Environment by Providing of the Necessary Infrastructure

Any sensible Nigerian youth, within reason is capable of looking after his or her health in some measure, through adequate diet, exercise and when sick finding time to seek medical attention to address his or her ailment. In the area of education, for those who have the financial resources and parental support can spend time to get an education that will enhance their income and standard of living. It is in some respect possible for a youth to influence his or her health care practices as well as his or her educational attainment.

However, when it comes to provision of infrastructural facilities considered critical in promoting an enabling environment for youths to do businesses that not only thrive, but also flourish. The youth are incapable of single-handedly providing an enabling environment where the infrastructure such as good roads, stable electricity supply and pipe borne water (Jerome and Ariyo, 2004).

Infrastructural deficits can be held responsible for the increasing transaction costs of businesses in most African countries as well as the low levels of productivity that's have plagued most African countries. Consequently, this has caused most African businesses including Nigeria to be the least competitive in the world (Ogun, 2010). In most developing countries such as Nigeria, the government is incapable of providing employment opportunities for every young person who is willing to work.

As such, it needs to create an enabling environment, for youths who intend to go into business for themselves, and as such, provide the basic infrastructure to ensure that these businesses are capable of competing with their counterparts anywhere in

the world. Doing so reduces the pressures on the youth to provide these services for themselves. And in so doing, reduces the costs of doing business and ensures that young people can be more productive.

Sadly, this is not the case, the almost exclusive concentration of infrastructural provisions in the public sector in developing countries has resulted in the failure and epileptic supply of these services. Many governments in developing countries have found it extremely difficult to keep the necessary pace with the provision of adequate infrastructure as a result of declining economic fortunes and dwindling revenues (Adenikinju, 2003; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2019).

Factors Hindering the Youths from Effective Participation in Economic Activities

In Nigeria, equipping the youths for meaningful participation in economic growth and development has been taken with levity (Wokocha, 2002). Since Nigeria became independent, there has been no meaningful development plan targeted at youth development and youth empowerment (Odoh and Innocent, 2014). There are two youth development initiatives supported by the Nigerian government and continued to date: the National Youth Service instituted in 1973 and the ministry of sports.

The ministry of sports is focused on developing talented athletes who can compete in international competitions. Its intent is to train the youths to become competitive athletes so that they can win medals. Thus far, the ability of these athletes to win medals has been seriously constrained by the poor funding for athletes who participate in international competitions.

Most of the other programmes designed for the Nigerian youth have largely been focused on addressing social and recreational agendas. The various national development plans from 1962-2014 acknowledged the efforts of government to address the unemployment issue and acknowledged that it continued to be a serious concern. To be fair to the Nigerian government, there have been some effort and initiatives targeted at addressing some of the employment related issues that affect the youth.

Although they have been far from comprehensive, they can consider a step in the right direction. The poverty alleviation programme and SURE-P which was targeted at growing entrepreneurs through promoting Small and Medium Scale Enterprise. However, despite some national effort to address the problems of the youth, the problems affecting young people appear to have increased and may even be getting worse. This poor outcome of several government youth initiative is simply as a result of the lack of comprehensive policy that provides a blueprint for Nigerian youth (Oviawe, 2010).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) one of the serious issues facing youths today is the high level of youth unemployment. It is estimated that more than 35% of the youths in Nigeria remain unemployed. Many of these young persons are actively seeking for work and cannot find work. The current economic climate is not exactly helping matters, with the Nigerian economy growing at less than 2% a year, the fall in oil prices and global economic recession has had severe economic consequences for youths in Nigeria. The global economic recession set in motion a series of external shocks that have continued to worsen the plight of the Nigerian youth. The inability of the private sector to provide the necessary jobs for youths, has put a lot of pressure on the public sector and government to provide job opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths.

New graduates in developing countries such as Nigeria are faced with the dilemma of employers asking for years of experience as prerequisites of employment. Consequently, most of these graduates go on to spend years in unemployed limbo, therefore creating an experience gap and a loss of opportunity to acquire further skillsets in work environment for better opportunities. With a few exceptions, this unemployed numbers resort to all forms of criminal activities to meet their daily obligations. The few who engage in entrepreneurial exercises often come out drained by unfavourable policies and an unfriendly market system.

Another serious issue facing the youth in Nigeria is the issue of inequality. Around the world, about 500 million young people today are living on less than \$2 dollars a day. Last year, being 2016, was the first year since the global economic crisis in which youth employment had grown, thus stressing that inequality emanated from lack of access to opportunities. There are also crippling challenges such as insecurity, lack

of access to credit facilities, poor education, and an unstable political climate, usually all combining to forestall any effort at self-sufficiency or growth by youths. These challenges have a direct correlation to youths becoming violent, restive and fraudulent, among other things. This in turn directly impacts negatively on the economy as a restive, criminal-minded youth population is a threat to a viable, stable and sustainable economy.

CONCLUSION

The role of youth on in harnessing economic growth and economic development cannot be over emphasised. The wheel of economic development of developing countries lies on the hands of how productive, innovative and creative the youthful populations are. The youth in developing countries are regarded as the engine of economic growth and development; because, they provide the manpower for enabling production of goods and service to take place.

At the moment, it is important to create an enabling environment that allows for the Nigerian youth to be productive in the workplace. This can be done through providing skill development centres, opportunities for young persons to gain a decent education and \exploiting the entrepreneurship ability of the Nigerian youth. As it is impossible for the public sector and private sector to provide gainful employment for all Nigerian youths. As such, it is important to teach youths entrepreneurship skills that will enable them be employers of labour and not seekers of employment.

A sustained economic policy measure targeted at addressing poverty and inequality in developing countries is through intentional youth empowerment and development schemes can be very useful in ensuring young people earning a decent living, are capable of assisting immediately family members.

While the role of government is important in creating an enabling environment to resolve youth development issues, the government is not capable of resolving all the problem the youths have. As such, it is important that youths develop the spirit of entrepreneurship from an early age, since it will prepare them in becoming job-creators rather than job-seekers. Doing so will go a long way in encouraging the youth to embrace their innovativeness in networking, production, distribution,

recycling, regeneration among other entrepreneurial roles. In addition, there is the need to establish systemic linkages to ensure that education is linked to training and real life scenarios to survive, as well as compete in a global economy.

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