



Youth Unemployment in Africa and its implication on Democratization - The Nigerian Situation

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*****Introduction

Unemployment is an economic indicator that refers to the number or proportion of people in an economy who are willing and able to work, but are unable to get a job; a person in this situation is said to be unemployed. People who are not willing or able to work, for whatever reason, are "economically inactive" and do not count towards unemployment figures.

Unemployment also carries significant social costs. People who are unable to find work must frequently rely on benefits for income: if they have financial or family commitments, this can make life extremely difficult. Moreover, the sense of failure, boredom and rejection that being unemployed can generate has real social consequences. Studies have repeatedly linked unemployment to rising crime and suicide rates and the deterioration of health.

The causes of unemployment are manifold. Economists distinguish a number of types of unemployment, however: cyclical unemployment is brought about by the vagaries of the business cycle; structural unemployment is brought about by changes in the economy or the labour market, when the jobs available do not fit the workforce's skills; frictional unemployment is the phenomenon of people being "between jobs"; and seasonal unemployment is linked to certain types of seasonal jobs, such as farm work and construction.

Youth unemployment has been attributed partly to a mismatch between inadequate educational outcomes and skill demands. The educational system must provide the skills profiles required by the labour market to enhance the employability of young people. Beyond the problem of managing mismatch is the need for the education system to provide a platform for exchange of ideas and training in skill acquisition aimed at creating employment through

entrepreneurship. An entrepreneurship culture may not evolve without a corresponding shift from a wholly traditional system of education to vocational and technical education. Technical education is that aspect of education which leads to the acquisition of skills as well as basic scientific knowledge (Dike, 2009). It is a planned program of courses and learning experiences that begins with exploration of career options, supports basic academic and life skills, and enables achievement of high academic standards, leadership, preparation for industry-defined work, and advanced and continuing education” (Washington,,: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2009).

Unemployment among the youths impacts negatively on the Nigerian democratic process. Nigeria’s spiraling youth unemployment has been a significant contributor to the dramatic rise in social unrest and crime e.g. Niger Delta militancy, Boko Haram, Jos Crisis etc. Our political process has been grossly associated with violence, thuggery and general malpractice. If young people are provided with employment opportunities they can become productive assets and take their part in mainstream society offering the best of their skills and talents as well as contribute meaningfully to the consolidation of our democracy.

In this paper therefore, the basic causes of unemployment are examined as well as the several implications on the democratization process in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Solutions to the numerous causes of youth unemployment are proffered and policy options have been identified that could help in extricating the Nigerian youth from the damaging scourge of unemployment.

Conceptual Framework

Since the Nigerian State returned to democratic governance in 1999, during the era of the third wave of democratization, the nature of the democratic project has been the subject of an intense debate in various circles (Nwankwo, 2003; Saliu, 2004; Durotoye, 2006; Alumona, 2007; Nwabueze, 2007; Amucheazi & Ibeanu, 2008). Admittedly, the rising concern about the Nigerian democratic project cannot be explained outside the numerous ethno-religious, socio-economic, and political crises that have been the bane of the nation since it returned to democratic governance on May 29, 1999. This state of affairs importantly raised some serious concerns about the politics of democratization in Nigeria, where the politics of godfatherism appears to be taking over the power of the people to participate in decision making. This has thrown up great challenges for the process of democratization.

Democracy and democratization are two strongly related and mutually reinforcing concepts. This is because you cannot talk of democracy without democratization. While democracy is the state of existence or being, democratization is a process that brings democracy into being and also allows it to take the strong hold of the society.

There is no universally accepted definition of democracy. Scholars and statesmen have conceptualized it from different perspectives and emphasised different aspects of the concept (Jega & Wakili, 2005). This is as a result of the fact that the term has gone through several transformations and modifications. It is also a result of that we speak of different models of democracy today. For instance, there is the direct or participatory model, in which citizens are involved, as in ancient Athens, the liberal or representative model, which views democracy as a system of rule-embracing elected officials who represent the interests and views of citizens within the framework of rule of law, and, finally, the Marxist model, which seeks to extend equality of all citizens from the political to the social and economic spheres of life.

However, democracy, in its classical formulation, means broad based and active participation of all those defined as citizens in the conduct of their public affairs in the polis. This was possible in the relatively small ancient Greek and Roman city states. With the transformations that have affected democracy, modern formulations of democracy place greater emphasis on personal liberty, popular sovereignty, and representative government, with entrenched checks and balances to reduce or eliminate arbitrariness and abuses of power (Jega & Wakili 2005). What we can deduce from the above is that democracy allows for a broad participation of the people in choosing their leaders – who now, on their behalf, direct the affairs of the people.

The term, democratization, attracted attention in political science literature in the 1990s when the democracy movement was sweeping across the world. This movement brought about changes in the governmental systems in countries in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Africa, where before the movement these countries were characterized with one-party, military and communist rule. Nwabueze (1993) conceives democratization as not just concerned with the form of government known as democracy nor being synonymous with multi-partyism, but as a process of experimentation during which certain basic conditions have to be put in place.

What all these point to is the fact that democratization is a process that takes place over a period of time and that in the process of democratization, the state and the general populace are the major actors who must show commitment to the whole process of trying to allow democracy to take a strong hold of the entire society. While countries that are transitioning are challenged to democratize, it is necessary to say that attaining democratization is not impossible, as western democracies have ably demonstrated.

Unemployment in Nigeria, particularly in the form of graduate unemployment, has become pronounced in the last two decades due primarily to upsurge in the output from tertiary education and inelastic labour absorptive capacity of the Nigerian labour market for the services of university and polytechnic graduates (Economy Watch,2010).

The after effect of this situation is that thousands of young people roam the streets in cities in Nigeria. Those who manage to complete secondary school have no opportunities for tertiary education. Having been denied the chance to reach their potential, they are disorientated and readily available for anti-social actions. Worse still, some who struggle to enroll in various educational institutions drop out due to lack of basic learning facilities. This situation is attributable to the dwindling resources of government at both federal and state levels as a result of economic meltdown (Osolor,2012).

As nations advance into the 21st century governments are shrinking as many of them are shedding the toga of “major employer” of labour. However, the rate of cutback varies from country to country but dictated by what is perceived as political and social consequences. This partly explains why the government is the major employer of labour in developing countries like Nigeria. The NEEDs document (2004) states that “Human development will definitely be grossly undermined and impaired without employment”. Awogbenle and Iwuamadi (2010) argued that addressing the problems of mass unemployment, low productivity, high inflation and poverty will depend on how speedily it is able to develop the millions of its labour force into knowledgeable and skilled people needed for the required change. Skill acquisition, a veritable vehicle to promote employment generation has become a part of the policy thrust of the Nigerian government. Beginning with the Directorate of Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DEFRI),

National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Family Support Programme (FSP), and now the National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), and even the establishment of the Peoples Bank of Nigeria are some of the intervention programmes that were intended to promote employment generation. At the local level, some states like Delta State have introduced “Micro-credit” schemes; a programme for which the State governor won the Central Bank of Nigeria award (Chiejina, 2011). Most of the past intervention programmes were implemented as ad-hoc, poorly coordinated and marred by corruption and inefficiency. Consequently, rather than reduce unemployment, the reverse seems to be the case. In 2002, the World Bank estimated about 40 million unemployed youths between 18 and 25 years. This figure is not captured by unemployment index because they are not looking for jobs as the jobs are simply not there (Vanguard, 2010). This figure is expected to be higher when lay-offs and outright closures occasioned by the global economic meltdown since 2008 are considered.

Basic Causes of Youth Unemployment

The situation of young people in the labour market is aggravated by the fact that the formal labour market is still very small in Africa as a whole. Young people are often at the end of the job queue because they lack adequate skills and experience, as well as efficient social networks

In Nigeria the growing rate of unemployment is attributable to the following factors:

- The neglect of technical and vocational education may have contributed to the high unemployment and rising poverty among the youth because many of them lack the basic job skills. In many societies, graduates of vocational and technical institutions are highly

skilled entrepreneurs, but the Nigerian society does not seem to encourage the youth to follow this route. One reason is that many policy makers perceive graduates of technical/vocational institutions as inferior to university graduates. Some employers even reflect this by their preference for regular university graduates and the pay disparity between the two categories.

- Population growth has produced an overwhelming increase in young population. Also, the general improvement in healthcare delivery has reduced infant mortality rate thereby sustaining population growth. The result is that the growth of labour (supply) is fast outstripping the available jobs (demand). It is estimated that there are between 8- 10 million new entrants into the African labor market annually.
- Rural underemployment and urban unemployment. Youth unemployment in urban areas is generally higher than in rural areas. In rural areas most employment is in small scale agriculture, which is why official unemployment levels are low. With incomes meagre due to low productivity, rural areas have more underemployment. In all cases rural exodus continues to be a problem. Many young people migrate to urban areas to find a job with higher remuneration, but jobs in urban areas are not easy to find. Urban employment generally accounts for only a small share of total unemployment.
- Education and skills mismatch. Investment in human capital in Nigeria and Africa in general is critical for supplying skilled workers. The low level of education of young people is a significant factor in the longer unemployment spells they face. In recent years the returns to secondary education have decreased. In Nigeria, secondary education as a “meal ticket” holds less attraction for young males in the Eastern part of the country

where majority of the males prefer to go into apprenticeship in commercial ventures. To many of such males, the belief is that education is “unproductive”.

- Disease and illness. The poor health status in Africa is a severe bottleneck to employment and economic growth. For example, at 45.2 years, life expectancy in sub-saharan Africa is among the lowest in the world (UNAIDS, 2004). Of 100 newborns fewer than 30 reach age 40 in Swaziland, fewer than 56 in Cameroon and more than 90 in Algeria (UNDP, 2004). Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest share of young people living with HIV. Young people who are HIV positive eventually become ill with HIV-related diseases, increasing their absence from work, reducing their productivity and lowering their chances of employment. When untreated, young people are ultimately unable to work. According to ILO (2004), by 2005 more than 2 million workers across the world will be unable to work due to HIV, and by 2015 that figure will be more than 4 million.
- Low literacy and numeracy rates – Africa has the worst education outcomes of any continent. Investment in Africa remains low despite significant investment opportunities. There are information failures and a lack of targeted investments in key labor intensive areas.
- Resulting from the aforementioned is poor quality of education and low transition rates. Youth unemployment in Nigeria is higher among the less educated. The practice since independence has been to tailor post-primary education largely to supply the public sector. The early education reforms towards more market-oriented economies have not been matched by the educational products (skills-mismatch), thereby indicating the lack of fractional feedback between educational institutions and the private sector. The low quality of education leads to a general lack of skills and the freed education programmes

are often limited to primary education which provide only basic skills. The high dropout rates among the school age children worsen the situation. Although, out-of-school training would be required for these young people to qualify for jobs, in many cases the resources for training and skill development are scarce (Liebrandt and Mlatsheni, 2004).

Implications on Democratization

It is imperative that in the process of democratization, there should be genuine efforts to allow the people (especially the youths) the right to participate in politics.

In Nigeria, the lack of job prospects and the likelihood of a desolate future for unemployed youths have contributed to socially deviant behaviours such as prostitution, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, drugs and so on. Schoumaker and Beauhemin (2002) have argued that one of the motivations underlying urban-rural migrations is similar to the motivation underlying international migration of young people. The rapid growth in urban population has intensified competition in the urban labour market. The death rate attributable to violence in Africa is estimated at 60.9 per 100,000 people-more than twice the global rate (WHO, 2004).

Crime and violence have been increasing in many parts of Nigeria among unemployed young people. Youth gangs which some youths view as second or substitute families, typically satisfy the economic and social needs of unemployed young people through violence. According to UN-Habitat (2004), many young people enter the criminal world at a very young age and end up becoming victims of crime themselves. They attribute the combination of youth unemployment and availability of firearms to the trend. For example, Fleshman (2001) found that homicide, involving firearms, was the leading cause of death among young men ages 15-21

and that gun shots from all causes were the leading cause of non-natural death in South Africa. Youth unemployment has a significant social cost to the Nigerian society. In addition to the indirect health cost, youth unemployment partly contributes to illicit activity which increases insecurity. The increase in criminality in a country as a consequence of youth unemployment causes losses in foreign direct investment (FDI). In Nigeria, oil giant Royal Dutch/Shell is threatening to divert from Nigeria, citing insecurity as one of the major reasons.

Health diseases and further complications could easily spring up as a result of joblessness. The unemployment overall tension can increase dramatically general health issues of individuals. Tension at home: quarrels and arguments at home front which may lead to tension and increased numbers of divorces etc. All these could lead to high blood pressure and other associated abnormalities. Mental health problems like: Low self-confidence, feeling unworthy, depression and hopelessness. With the lost income and the frustration involved in it, the recently unemployed may develop negative attitudes toward common things in life and may feel that all sense of purpose is lost. Frequent emotions could be – low self-esteem, inadequateness and feeling dejected and hopeless.

The concomitant effect of all the above issues is that the democratization process suffers because the youths who unarguably are expected to be the most formidable force to reckon with in the democratization process are being rendered feeble and their valuable contribution to the consolidation of democracy is truncated due to their handicap. This goes a long way to slow down the pace of democracy in nations of Africa and Nigeria in particular.

What follows therefore is a high manifestation of political violence and unrest displayed by the unemployed youth population who are sponsored by the political leaders and who

consider the financial reward as means of livelihood. This is largely associated with why Nigeria keeps having series of electoral crises, malpractices and deaths. Eventually, we end up being far from engendering free, fair and credible elections. Nevertheless, this culminates into loss of trust in administration and the government which may lead to another form of political instability.

Possible Solutions

Advancement in technology provides a sure way for Nigeria to exploit and transform its numerous natural resources into goods and services and create jobs in the process. Achieving technological advancement may not come cheap and would require a drastic policy shift to develop curricula that blend theory with the practical aspects of learning. As Vanguard (2004) noted only 1% of the resources for secondary education is channeled towards technical/vocational education. In order to promote entrepreneurship and job creation as well as reduce unemployment among youths the following strategies are instrumental-

- Curriculum development. Any attempt to address the issue of entrepreneurship and youth unemployment must begin with curriculum review. There is the need to move from the present incremental or cumulative concepts to instrumental or problem solving curricula. These are the kernel of vocational/technical education. This requires a curriculum that focuses on technical and scientific subjects that is student-centered. Entrepreneurial skills and workshops on how to find business ideas should be integrated in school curriculum to encourage young people to start their own business.
- Improve access to education. Improving access to education is critical to unemployment reduction. This is because less-educated people have access to fewer jobs. As UNDP (2004) has noted basic education is a prerequisite for training young people. Youth unemployment is partly

the result of a mismatch between inadequate educational outcomes and skills demand. The education system must provide the skills profiles required by the labour market to enhance employability of young people.

- Public-private partnerships are essential for overcoming supply constraints in education and provide feedback from the private sector to the education system, which mitigates the problem of mismatch. Public-private partnerships can also improve the quality of education by using private sector core competencies to robustly link education with job skills..

- State governments should develop its own innovative strategies to promote entrepreneurial activities in its area. Although many policy makers and top government officials realize the potential of new enterprises in promoting employment growth, a centralized administration of entrepreneurial activities have tended to impede their effectiveness.

- Give newcomers equal opportunity with the old. Some leaders erroneously believe in the dictum of “old reliable” or “tested hands” much to the discomfiture of beginners. It is believed that motivated new entrepreneurs may want to be challenged to show success if given a chance. Past performance may not always be a good predictor for tomorrow.

- Government should recognize and reward innovation. Records by the American Executive Office (1983) show that new business with less than ten employees have a little less than a 75 percent chance of serving the first year, and only about one chance in three (33%) of lasting four or more years. Therefore, given the likelihood of challenges, government should offer incentives such as “tax holiday”, and adequate protection from foreign competitors, as well as patent rights to spur more desire for innovation.

- Nations driven by leaders with global mindset have the abilities to understand relevance of engaging the youth population in productive endeavor as well as comprehend sustainable

development issues of their local environments and then compare and contrast such with what is obtainable in other regions of the world. They have the ability for knowledge and innovation transfer. In this era of technology, it is important for nations to get into partnership that can better their situations. A nation's vision and values must show global consistency. However, its workplace practices, which translate policy guidelines into day-to-day procedures, should be locally determined. A need for global consistency would favour policies that accentuate formalization, standardization and global dictates, whereas a need for local responsiveness would favor flexibility, customization and delegation (Ndum and Onukwugha, 2012).

Above all, effort should be geared towards the enhancement of the literacy and numeracy level. More to this is the essence of quality assurance. When this is done, potential graduates would be embedded with the skills that would facilitate employability and thereby turn the youths into a strong force that could engender change and bring transformation in our democratization process.

Conclusion

Unemployment in Nigeria, particularly in the form of graduate unemployment, has become pronounced in the last two decades due primarily to upsurge in the output from tertiary education and inelastic labour absorptive capacity of the Nigerian labour market for the services of university and polytechnic graduates. This paper has attributed the high youth unemployment in Nigeria to the disconnect between effective technical/vocational education and the development of entrepreneurship culture. It argues that skill acquisition should be complemented by skills management which vocational/technical education can provide. An effective public-

private interface can robustly enrich the curricula and reduce the present unemployment due to mismatch between labour market demands and acquired skills.

Recommendations

This paper makes the following recommendations capable of enhancing the employability level of the youths in Nigeria and Africa.

- That while economic growth must be made employment intensive, all the economic players such as the government, the private sector, workers, private individuals as well as non-governmental organisations must pursue policies and programmes that would attain this objective. Among the immediate, short and long-term measures to be taken are promotion of informal micro and small-scale sector enterprises; promotion of entrepreneurship culture through entrepreneurship development programme; accelerating the growth rate of the agricultural sector, linking education and training with labour market requirements; promotion of enterprise culture which will induce self-reliance, risk-taking, and a national environment which rewards effort and initiative; self-employment and curriculum re-engineering.
- Resource constraints should not deter the Nigerian policy makers from refocusing public expenditure towards young people. Increased funding to raise the educational and health status as well as generating more jobs for young people should be seen as a way of prioritizing allocation within the social sector.
- There should be a drastic shift in policy from the present incremental curriculum to scientific and technical subjects that promote student-centered learning.

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