



YOUTH EMPOWERMENT *for* **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria: Focus on the National Directorate of Employment

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1. Introduction

Empowerment is both a dangerous and powerful concept. It is dangerous because it can easily be appropriated by anybody. Indeed, it lends itself to several interpretations and has been politicized. The UN Secretary who takes off time to talk to Kurds during a visit to Iraq uses the term 'empowerment' to describe his actions. A corrupt local government head in Nigeria who throws scarce funds at problems in local communities also uses the term to describe his activities. Osama bin Laden has also argued that the 'empowerment' of the global Islamic Umma is at the heart of his terrorist project (Volu, 2002). Empowerment is also a powerful term. Currently, the term drives global development planning. It is the core buzzword in modern development-speak. The whole idea of sustainability is expressed in terms of the empowerment of multiple stakeholders at various levels to relate with socio-economic and environmental resources in ways that prove beneficial to extant and future populations. Empowerment is the new mantra of socio-economic development and some scholars (such as Rowland, 1997) even equate it with development itself. Empowerment has thus established itself as a global dream with individuals, groups, communities, and societies desperately seeking to achieve it. Empowerment is now a truly global lure, holding forth promises, potentials, and opportunities that no individual group, community, or society wants to miss.

The confusion surrounding the meaning of empowerment notwithstanding, some scholars have raised the concept to an appreciable scientific level. McWhirter (1991) notes that empowerment

refers to the process by which people or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context (b) develop skills and capacities for gaining some researchable control over their lives (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the right of others. In the view of Keller and Mbwewe (1991), empowerment is a process whereby people become able to organize themselves to (1) increase their own self-reliance (2) acquire independent right to make choices and (3) to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. Ashford's (2001) thesis is that empowerment is the surest key or avenue for reducing differences between privileged and excluded groups. Empowerment that is sustainable will enable the powerless to gain control over the circumstances of their lives. Empowerment, contends Izugbara (2004), goes beyond marginal improvements in livelihoods and greater control over resources, to involve greater self-confidence and the ability to decide on an equal basis with others. Participation is the key to empowerment and people are the focus of empowerment. Empowerment is therefore about getting excluded people to design and participate successfully in the process and events that shape their life courses. Empowerment is about livelihoods and wellbeing, and the participation of individuals and groups in the making of their conditions better.

The youth are one of the groups that have been increasingly and directly targeted, globally, by agencies implementing programmes to improve the livelihoods of marginalized and excluded groups. These efforts follow the realization that the future of many nations and societies depends, to a large extent, on its army of young people. While most societies have need for youth empowerment, it is however in the global south that this need appears most critical. In this region of the world, comprising about a hundred countries, youth are the major victims of socio-economic process. They suffer hunger, absolute poverty, lack of access to health services, HIV/AIDS, and illiteracy. They are marginalized, targeted in wars, and usually end up in prisons. Studies have shown that about 70% of drug addicts, vagrants, the mentally-deranged, and sex workers in the Third World are people whose ages are less than thirty (Izugbara, 2005b).

Nigeria presents a particularly interesting case for evaluating the dynamics of youth empowerment. Youth comprise over a quarter of the Nigerian population. Youth in Nigeria suffer serious poverty and face uncertain futures. They are often unemployed and are victims of

exclusion and oppression, comprising about 75% of those infected by HIV/AIDS. Vagrancy, drug addiction, and other anti-social behaviours are common among these people. Youth in Nigeria often possess little or no capital or institutional connections to extricate themselves from the claws of poverty. They lack access to health care services and are hungry. Many of them survive by begging.

Substantial investments have gone into supporting the empowerment of young people in Nigeria. In addition to many well-intentioned efforts to promote the education, economic participation, and political socialization of youth in Nigeria, the country has also recorded impressive strides with respect to reducing youth violence, youth vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, and enhancing the rights of youth. Further, greater discussion and awareness of youth issues have been experienced in the country.

One of the ways youth empowerment is currently pursued on Nigeria is through job creation. Presently, diverse organizations have stated a commitment to using job creation to empower young people in Nigeria. These include governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations. But despite the powerful logic behind job-creation as a strategy of youth empowerment and the commitment of several organizations to this strategy, there is little field-based information regarding its actual impact on the goal of youth empowerment, suggesting an issue for further research. The present paper is a preliminary investigation of the effort of one Nigerian public agency to empower young people through job creation. This agency is the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). The key questions raised on this study are:

- (1) To what extent are the youth empowerment activities of the NDE sustainable?
- (2) What factors mediate the sustainability of NDE youth empowerment efforts?
- (3) What lessons can we learn about youth empowerment from the performance of the NDE programmes?

These questions demand urgent answers as Nigeria continues its quest for the sustainable empowerment of its excluded army of young people.

2. Background Issues: Nigerian youth, unemployment and the NDE

Youth have always constituted an important social group in

Nigeria. In the indigenous background, the different societies that make up contemporary Nigeria had elaborate cultural practices and institutions geared toward promoting the capabilities of the youth to contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. Among the Ngwa of southeastern Nigeria, for instance, the *ima ogwu* ceremony was a significant empowerment ritual for male youth. The *ima ogwu* rites equipped young Ngwa males with skills, strategies, and value orientations needed in the society. The Mgbede or Mgbopo institution was also an indigenous Ngwa cultural practice aimed at the female youth. Izugbara, (2005d) shows that the Mgbede/Mgbopo rites of passage aimed at helping the young Ngwa woman realize and harness her full potentials for her wellbeing, and the welfare of her family, community and the Ngwa society at large.

Similar institutions were found in the different societies that were brought together about three centuries ago, to later constitute Nigeria. The dramatic dislocation that the colonial situation visited on indigenous social systems in Nigeria grounded many traditional youth empowerment practices. Such local empowerment rites were often characterized as primitive, satanic, or unchristian by the colonial authority and then banned. Further, the new economic relations initiated by the colonial encounter made many of these practices moribund.

Colonialism initiated new constructions of youth empowerment. It introduced formal education as the single most important variable of youth empowerment in Nigeria. A major feature of youth education and empowerment in the colonial Nigeria is that it aimed at producing young people with little or no respect for indigenous culture and whose activities serve the interests of metropolitan Europe. Premised on Eurocentric ideas and perspectives, colonial education thus failed to deliver the goal of sustainable youth empowerment in Nigeria. This was worsened by the fact that it was not only geographically inaccessible to the majority of young people in Nigeria but also male-biased. Further, the fact that European Christian missionaries were the earliest forerunners of colonial education excluded many non-converts from access to it.

In the period immediately following independence, several uncoordinated and region-based attempts were made to promote the empowerment of youth in Nigeria. Apart from the establishment of universities and polytechnics, many secondary and primary schools were also established to facilitate geographical access to formal

education among young Nigerians. Following massive expansions in educational facilities and the attendant increase in school enrolment at all levels, unemployment became very noticeable in the country. As a result, initial post-independence youth development efforts in Nigeria viewed unemployment as a school leaver issue. The then eastern and western regions introduced farm settlement schemes as a means of modernizing agriculture as well as creating employment for school leavers. But these schemes were capital intensive and attracted very few participants. The schemes thus achieved very little.

Omolulu (1990) notes that subsequent attempts by these regions and the states later created out of them to provide work opportunities for young people through integrated rural development schemes, vocational training in technical and trade schools, School-to-Land Programmes, Graduate Farming Scheme, Integrated Self-employment Scheme, Graduate Self Employment Programme, Back to Land, etc.) have been adversely affected by certain factors such as difficulties in selecting and recruiting the right kind of participants, the high investment cost per participant, lack of opportunities for private sector participation, inefficient management and control, and lack of steady market for agro-products.

The highpoint of youth unemployment in Nigeria was reached in the 1980s. Following the oil glut, the country's foreign exchange earning capacity plummeted, leading to unprecedented economic recession and crises. Government's response to this situation was to cut public spending and to come down from the commanding height of the economy. This translated into hard times in Nigeria. As Adedokun (1990) writes, "the impact of government's reduced public spending was misery, hardship, poverty, and sighs heard from every quarter of the Nigerian society at school, church, hospital, industries, and farm".

However, it was not until 1986 that an elaborate and fundamental strategy for combating unemployment was established in Nigeria. General Babangida, the then President of the country, sought for a permanent solution to widespread unemployment through what Kwanashie (1987: 95) describes as a production structure that will facilitate the country's ability to mobilize resources and manage the domestic economy effectively. This production structure was expected to be achieved by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).

As part of this strategy, the federal government set up a committee The Chukwurah Committee to examine the country's unemployment situation and make policy recommendation. The

committee's report showed that 500,000 persons lost their jobs in the public and in organized private sectors between 1975 and 1985 under the guises of rationalization, restructuring, reorganization, downsizing, etc. Further, the committee submitted that enrolment in schools was growing and that 75% of the country's workforce was unemployed and needed to be more productively engaged (NDE, 1989; Nwaguba & Mbata, 2002). Following the completion of the committee's task, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) was established on January 30, 1987.

The mandate of the NDE includes (i) to design and implement programmes to combat mass unemployment (ii) to articulate policies aimed at developing work programmes with labour intensive potentials (iii) to obtain and maintain labour force in the country with a view to acting as a clearing house to link job seekers with vacancies in collaboration with other government agencies (iv) to implement any other policies as may be laid down from time to time by the board established under sections of the enabling decree. The NDE has five major programmes: the vocational skills and development programme, the small scale enterprise programme, the rural employment promotion programme, the special public works programme, and the special employment programme.

Table I: Summary of the Distribution of NDE Programme Beneficiaries (1987-1996)

S/No.	Programme/ Scheme	Year Launched	No. Of Beneficiaries
A.	Vocational Skills Development Prgm		
1.	National Open Appren- ticeship Scheme	1987	555,575
2.	Waste-on Wealth Scheme	1987	8,047
3.	School-on Wheels Scheme	1990	9,672
4.	Resettlement Scheme	1991	6,024
		Total	589,318
B.	Small-scale Enterprise Prgm		
1.	Entrepreneurship Develop- ment Programme	1987	574,000
2.	Graduate Job Creation Scheme	1987	2,508
3.	Mature Peoples Scheme	1987	138

Table 1: Summary of the Distribution of NDE Programme Beneficiaries (1987 - 1996) contd.

4.	Motor-cycle Transportation Scheme	1994 Total	450 577,096
C. Rural Employment Promotion Programme			
1.	Graduate Farmers' Scheme	1987	11,335
2.	School Leavers Farmers' Scheme	1989	13,220
3.	Crop Production Scheme	1994	3,700
4.	Dry Processing Scheme	1996	611
5.	Dry Season Irrigation Farming Scheme	1995	930
		Total	29,796
D. Special Public Works Prgm			
1.	Special Public Works Scheme (Graduate School Leavers)	1987	149,081
2.	National Sanitation Employment Scheme	1994	478
		Total	149,559
E. Special Programme			
1.	One Million Jobs Creation Programme	1992	547,374
2.	Labour-based Infrastructure Works Programme (UNDP/ILO/NDE)	1992	capacity building by United Nations for effective job creation in Nigeria
3.	Urban Informal Sector Support Programme (UNDP/NDE)	1992	
4.	SME-EDP Component (NIR/B) UNDP/NDE	1993	
5.	Rural Off-Farm Employment	1993	& Income
6.	Generation Programme (NIRA/A, UNDP/NDE)	1993	
7.	Mass Agricultural Programme	1993	8,000
8.	Job Placement and Vocational Guidance	1993	1,2000

Guidance

Source: *NDE Statistics of Employment Generating, 1987-1996*.
(see also Nwanguba & Mbata, 2002)

All in all, the efforts of the NDE in the generation of employment and in the provision of marketable skills to Nigerian youth are commendable. Ojo (1994) argues that by December 1990, the cumulative number of jobs created by the Directorate stood at an impressive 776,803. Important as the contribution of the NDE to the Nigerian society appears, little critical and independent assessment of

these contributions has been undertaken. This has obscured our understanding of the ways in which the NDE has performed in respect of the goal of youth empowerment. Most of the available reports are from the NDE itself and they tend to be tailored to suit the interests of the Directorate and thus framed to the aspirations of its ranking officials. Our paper attempts to broaden understanding of the role of NDE in youth empowerment in Nigeria beyond official statistics and anecdotal evidence. In the main we ask: To what extent has the NDE realized the goal of sustainable youth empowerment in Nigeria?

Methods and materials.

The data for this study were elicited from both primary and secondary sources. Published and unpublished information retrieved from national and international bibliographic archives as well as the internet formed the bulk of the secondary data employed in this research. Primary data were generated through personal observations and in-depth individual interviews with some beneficiaries of the NDE scheme and officials of the Directorate in Akwa Ibom State.

Three critical and interlocking clusters of themes provide the grid upon which our analysis rests. First, we explore the objective contributions of the NDE; second, we mark the inadequacies which characterise NDE scheme, and third we explore the possibilities which present for re-orienting the moribund scheme. Throughout the analysis, we will draw extensively upon our recent ethnographic research carried out among officials and former and current beneficiaries of the NDE in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

3. The Contributions of the NDE to Youth Empowerment: Findings

There is evidence that the establishment of the NDE brought a dramatic reduction in the rate of unemployment in Nigeria. Nwanguba & Mbata (2002) argue that when the NDE programme became operational in 1988, the unemployment composite rate began to experience a marked decline in both urban and rural Nigeria

Table 2: Rates of Unemployment by Year, Locality and Percentage Change.

Year	(%) Composite	(%) Change	(%) Rural	(%) Change	(%) Urban	(%) Change
1985	6.1	-	5.2	-	9.8	-
1986	5.3	-13.1	4.5	-13.5	9.1	-7.1
1987	7.0	32.1	6.1	35.6	9.8	7.7
1988	5.3	-24.3	4.8	-21.3	7.8	-20.4
1989	4.4	-17.0	3.5	-27.1	8.7	11.5
1990	3.5	-20.1	3.0	-14.3	5.9	-32.2
1991	3.1	-11.4	2.7	-10.0	4.9	-16.9
1992	3.4	9.7	3.2	18.5	4.6	-6.1
1993	2.7	-20.6	2.5	-21.9	3.8	-17.4
1994	2.1	-22.2	2.0	-20.0	2.5	-34.2
1995	1.8	-14.3	1.6	-20.0	3.9	56.0
1996	3.8	111.1	3.4	112.5	5.9	51.3
1997	3.7	-2.6	8.5	150.0	4.5	-23.7

Source: Federal Ministry of Budget and Planning "Economic and Statistical Review 1989-95" CBN Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 1996. CBN Study on Poverty Assessment and Alleviation, 1999

(see also Nwanguba & Mbata, 2002)

The NDE helped not only in providing job opportunities for young Nigerians, but also in creating an enabling environment for promoting entrepreneurial ability among the unemployed. Official sources put the number of job opportunities created by the NDE between 1987 and 2000 at about 2 million. Majority of the beneficiaries of these opportunities were persons aged between 17 and 35. These persons reportedly benefited from 72% of the job opportunities created and delivered by the NDE between 1987 and 2000.

The types of jobs which the NDE trained people for include painting, iron work, vulcanizing, wood work and tailoring. Others include poultry, driving, hair making, soap making, automobile repairing, electrical work, and carpentry. Available records show that most of the beneficiaries of these schemes were male youths. Apart from merely helping to train and retrain people, the NDE also helped beneficiaries by providing start-off capital and tools. The total sum expended in recruiting, training, and setting up beneficiaries by the

NDE between 1988-2000 is put at 22 million Naira (Irabor, 2002). Apart from starting their own businesses, many of those trained by the NDE were also employed by private construction, mining, and extractive industries. So, the NDE did not just help to train youths for self-employment but also facilitated their employment by industries and companies.

Beneficiaries of NDE programmes: Current conditions.

As earlier noted, we interviewed some persons who benefited as youth from NDE programmes in Akwa Ibom State. These people were trained mainly in technical work such as welding, blacksmithing, automobile and electrical work. As at the period of the present research, only 12 of the forty-two were still doing the work which they were trained. The rest had taken up other jobs. They had abandoned the professions for which NDE trained them. Nine out of the twelve who had continued in the jobs for which NDE trained them said they were not doing very well. Only three of them reported doing well. The rest said they were not making enough gains in their businesses and that they were merely managing to stay on in their respective businesses. Beneficiaries mentioned poor sales, and patronage and competition from others as responsible for the poor performance of their businesses. Some of them also noted that they were not doing well because their training was not adequate. They reported that they were crash-trained by NDE and found it hard to compete with other people in the business. One of the welders we interviewed noted that the NDE training merely exposed him to the basic skills in welding, which did not match the higher skills of those trained by private welders. He reported that he had to pay and go for more training under a private trainer to be able to undertake jobs and have high patronage. Beneficiaries who did not continue with the profession for which the NDE trained them said they had to find something else to do when they could not break even. They reported that the capital which they received at the end of their training by the NDE was hardly enough to keep their businesses afloat. In our survey, the average number of years which this category of beneficiaries worked before abandoning the profession was three years.

Constraints facing the NDE.

Currently, the NDE exists merely as a name. There is virtually little to show that only decades ago, Nigerian leaders placed all hopes of liberating the country from the quagmire of youth unemployment and

poverty on the agency. The current condition of the NDE is like most other Nigerian agencies; it is near moribund. A visit to any NDE office shows the crisis which the agency faces. For instance, the agency office in Uyo may well pass for a defunct mechanic workshop. Rusty machines, broken tools, costly but dead equipment, and odds litter the premises of the agency. A sense of waste and poor organization fills anyone who enters the premises of the agency. Our research shows that the key problems facing the agency include poor funding and coordination, little attention to the interests of potential beneficiaries and lack of a re-training component. Long-standing officials of the agency that we interviewed told us that the exit of the originator of the NDE, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, from power, marked the beginning of the decline of the agency. Officials noted that the Directorate is increasingly finding it difficult to support its activities owing to fund shortages. Salaries and wages of trainers are no longer paid as at when due. Some of the professional handiwork trainers and educators have been laid off in the agency's bid to downsize and cut costs. Further, most of the electrical equipment and tools used by the Directorate to train beneficiaries are in varying states of disrepair and dilapidation. Currently, also, funding to the agency only comes in trickles.

Again, the Directorate does not have a policy for re-training, making it unable to help beneficiaries acquire newer skills in their respective professions. As such the beneficiaries often find it hard to compete with professionals trained by private individuals and organizations who were exposed to higher and better professional scope.

Other identifiable problems facing the agency include lack of specificity in handling the needs of beneficiaries, politicization of the directorate's activities and poor conceptualization of the meaning of empowerment.

4. Looking Ahead: Possibilities for making progress

The NDE is an agency with immense potentials. It was established to empower young Nigerians by creating jobs for them. The NDE has performed creditably well in this task creating over 2 million jobs in its few decades of existence. But the question of sustainability still haunts its activities. Despite the great positive impacts it has registered, many of its efforts are not sustainable. Most of the young people trained by the Directorate have left the professions for which they were trained. Some of them consider the training they received too

primary for the competitive world of business. Many thus failed to break even in their businesses. Such people are then thrown back into the unemployment whirlpool, compounding the employment crisis in the country. Much of the Directorate's current inability to deliver sustainable goals is related to poor organizational and financial outlay, politicization, and lack of a clear-cut idea of the meaning of sustainable youth empowerment.

To reposition the NDE, there is need to improve its financial base, change its philosophy of empowerment, integrate its activities with those of other agencies, expand its focus to adopt inputs from the private sector and develop option for on-field monitoring. There is also the need to develop a strategic pool of information regarding what has worked and failed to be fed back into the Directorate to enable it reposition its agenda.

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