

## **YOUTH IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DEVELOPMENT: RELEVANCE, CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fifty one years after Independence and within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nigeria still battles with one of the major fall-outs of social forces of democratization and globalization which have brought into prominence, issues concerning young people. This is derived from a recognition by national governments that the youth is arguably the avant-garde of social change. Accordingly, this paper examines the place of the youths in Nigeria in the political participation and developmental process. As a dominant stakeholder in the democratic project, it is the considered opinion of the authors of this paper that the youth mirrors the fears, anxieties and expectations of the civil society. The study employed the documentary approach designed to gauge informed opinions in existing literature and official document of the Government of Nigeria. The theoretical framework adopted is Almond's Structural Functionalism, which hinges the survival of any society on the functional prerequisite of the structures composing it. The paper concludes that, for Nigeria to consolidate democracy and attain political maturity, there is need for youth-government collaboration in the political participation and sustainable development process.

**Keywords:** Youths, Giant, Poverty, Unemployed, Politics, Culture, Governance Conference

## INTRODUCTION

The Nigeria sovereign nation, more than anything else, the greatest obstacle to the nascent democracy is the pervasive insecurity of lives and property, as evidenced by the spate of youth unemployment, armed robbery attacks, political assassinations, religious conflicts and exclusion of youths from political participation coupled with the seeming helplessness of security agencies to handle criminal acts (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2011). The situation is worsened by the increasing number of unemployed Nigerians, mostly youths, some of whom are ready recruits for criminal activities (*Nigerian Tribune*, 2002). The above statement from an editorial comment by a national daily in Nigeria indeed, epitomizes the central focus of this paper, the aim of which is to analyze the nexus between democratic nurturing and to sustain the current debate on sustainable development and security which is a topical issues in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular.

As the union jack was lowered at dawn on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960 and as the green and white flag rose skywards, symbolizing Nigerian's nationhood, a number of observations were made concerning the future prospects of the newly independent nation. For example, Newsweek Magazine of New York, inspired by the vast landmass of Nigeria, as well as the country's varieties of natural resources predicated that if Nigeria's resources were prudently and judiciously managed, the country would one day become "the Giant of Continental Africa" (Newsweek, 1981). In contemporary terms, a "Giant Nation" is one that lives within its means (Percow, 1972). Such a country is farther characterized as one that have achieved industrial power, military might, political stability, political liberty, great middle class, old age security, unrivalled educational system, technology, space exploration, computer, national indispensability with the international system, stronger economy, stronger families, thriving communities, cleaner environment, humble, small government that lives within its means, and real opportunity for citizens to build better lives for sustainable development (Clinton, 1997). Nevertheless, there is a great divergence between international perceptions about Nigeria and what Nigerians think about the country. As a matter of fact, robust statistics point to the fact that all is not well with Nigeria.

The unending crises and deprivation of political participation of youths in Nigeria since 1999 is a major test on our nascent democratic experiment, as all efforts to ensure that youths are given their right place in the political dispensation has proved abortive. For some, it would appear that our brand of democracy has imbued in the people, the culture of impunity while for others, it is political differences and intolerance that has fueled some of the violence that has erupted in Nigeria of which youths are the major actors. It is the position of this paper that politicians and all major stakeholders in addition to adopting any and/or all of the modern procedures for resolving youth restiveness, and given the right positions; there should be positive steps taken by the stakeholders in ensuring that Nigeria is given the due sustainable democracy and development in order to reflect the giant of Africa (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2007). Nigeria with over 140 million people and with over fifty percent of youths cannot afford to lock out the youths if they must compete politically, technologically and scientifically with the developed world. The closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of this century could have been described as the "influx of youths in active participation in politics.

Starting with the Harare declaration on the plan of action for youth empowerment of 1995 through the World Youth Ministers meeting in Portugal of 1998 to the Youth Ministers meeting in Solomon Island, the relevance of youth in

contemporary development has received increased recognition in official circles (Mokwena, 2003). In Nigeria for instance, the National Youth Development Policy and its accompanying implementation strategy are palpable testimonies to the renewed interest in the youth political participation and the developmental process (National Youth Policy, 2001). Thus, more than ever before, the youth which has often been described as the 'period of possibilities' has become the subject of intense policy discourse,

Two major impetuses appeared to have converged to catapult the issue of young persons into the policy agenda of national governments as a compelling priority. The first is the global process of democratization, beginning in Southern Europe, extending to Latin America, Asia and Africa, and more recently to Eastern Europe (Almond, 2004). The second is the phenomenon of globalization and a phenomenon that has seriously challenged the capacity of nation-state to govern and which according to Heady, et al, embodied a transformation of the spatial organization of social relations and transaction (Heady, 1979). The combined effects of these global trends has confronted and dismantled authoritarian regimes in a decisive way, and at the same time rekindled the spirit of civil society in the political process (Suleiman, 2006). The youth as an important component of the civil society is in the process of self rediscovery in an era characterized by the intense movement of the social forces of democratization and globalization. As they interact with other actors in the social system, the youth express their interest and needs, they relate with relevant political institutions and political processes to articulate their views and promote shared interest (Suleiman, 2006).

In Nigeria, this process of democratization which started since 1999 to date has expanded the political participation of youths and provided ample opportunity for actors within the civil society to make their impact felt in the political and sustainable development process. In a nascent democracy like in Nigeria, grass-root apprenticeship rather than glorified 'messenger' under the tutelage of bankrupt and greedy political godfathers, offers the best training ground for the youths. The youth has been acknowledged as a formidable social force in this process, thus, youth are the most active segment of any society. Imbued with relentless energy, vigor and drive, the youth are the major catalyst for political and development process in any given society (Suleiman, 2006:98). As future leaders and key determiners of the peace and stability of society, youth are indeed the greatest asset of any nation (Adamu, 2003).

### **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

Youths according to the dictionary definition, is seen as "the state or time of being young – young men and women"(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Current English, 2001). In current times, it would appear that the majority of our youths are on the edge of reason and good conduct. Rather than exploring the opportunities for securing better lives, facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and thinking about the future of their nation, it is quite disappointing that the majority of our youths know more of how to showcase anti-social behaviour. It is shocking to realize that the constructive attitudes of youths in traditional society of Nigeria have gone with the wind (Aghahowa, 2006). Interestingly, governments at all level of governance, parents, guardians and all the stakeholders in our youth developmental process are finally waking up to the realities that the surprisingly negative attitudes of our youths can be traced to the fact that we have tens of millions of unemployed Nigerian youths, and millions others living in abject poverty, having seen the four walls of Universities.

Although there is no consensus definition of politics, its usage is very limited in time and space to certain lands of relatively liberal, pluralistic societies, which allow relatively open debate. That is, politics occurs where people disagree about distribution of means and have, at least some procedures for the resolution of such disagreement. The implication of the above analysis of politics for our discourse in this paper is that the youths in Nigeria have the rights and duties to agree and disagree openly about what goes on in the Nigerian state (World Youth Report, 2003).

The growing commitment to the involvement of the youth in global development process is a clear recognition of their potentials as change agents within the civil society. This awareness has attracted scholarly attention in an attempt to clarify and articulate a conceptual category for youth. In most literatures, scholars have often employed the criterion of age to define the youth. However, sociological studies have shown that this criterion is fluid and therefore vary from one society to another. It was observed in the National Youth Policy that:

The way in which a nation defines its youth is related to the object conditions and realities that exist on the ground especially historical and contemporary socio-economic and political issues that need to be addressed (National Youth Policy, 2001:10).

This paper utilize the age bracket of 18 – 35 to define youth, stressing that “this category represents the most active, the most volatile, and yet the most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically and in other respects (National Youth Policy, 2001)”. Angulu-Sani considered persons within the age range of 6-36 years as youth. Other scholars employed the age bracket of 15-30 to define youth. It is also helpful to add that progressive-mindedness is one of the defining characteristics of youth. Therefore, the current thinking is that people beyond the age of 36 who share the ideals of a progressive society are also considered as youthful. Whatever the age limit, youth are men and women considered to be young, energetic, vibrant and resourceful, who are often engaged in social enterprises that requires physical strength and mental capacity (Suleiman, 2006)

## **PROBLEMS**

The relevance of youth to the total political and developmental process of societal transformation cannot be over emphasized. The Department of Political Science and Social Affairs of the United Nations, while examining challenges and contributions of the youth towards the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), observed that:

Youth are making a difference as activist, as leaders in community development and political aspiration, and by their record level of volunteerism. In many parts of the world, they may be perceived as apathetic or disengaged, but this is largely inaccurate. Worldwide, youth are by-passing traditional form of political participation (e.g. voting) through their activism and volunteering (Youth and Millennium Development 2005:6).

The total population of those between the ages of 15 and 34 was about 30 million in 1991, equivalent to one of every three Nigerians. It was projected that by the 2000 the total population of this category of young persons would be about 38 million

(National Youth Policy, 2001). Earlier in the year 2006, a nation-wide population and housing census was conducted to update these records. There are indications that the youth profile in the Nigerian population has recorded tremendous improvement by the released statistical figures by Nigerian Population Commission (NPC) to 53 million (NPC, 2006). Apart from the issue of numerical strength, global trend is toward emphasizing the primacy of youth in the developmental process, with deliberate efforts by national governments to create conditions that will encourage youth to utilize their energies and resourcefulness for growth and sustainable development of their nations. It was in the light of this development that the Nigerian Youth Organizations in their memorandum to the last National Political Reform Conference maintained that:

Nigerian Youth must have a voice and must be given a greater say to contribute in the way he is governed and allowed to play greater role in leadership and governance so that at all times, he is properly equipped to assume the mantle of leadership which inevitably must come someday  
(National Political Reform Conference , 2005:15)

However, the prevailing conditions in much of the developing nations, especially Nigeria, have seriously extenuated the potentials of the youth as agents of social change. These challenges range from the economic and social to the cultural. The treacherous triangle of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in which the bulk of Nigerian youths are currently trapped, has severely challenged their sensibility and has in the long run given rise to what sociologists term attitudes of fatalism, resignation and acceptance of the situation (Haralambos, 2001). The persistence of these social problems has created an environment where youth are cheaply available for manipulation by self-seeking politicians. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are interrelated conditions that generate human needs and therefore constitute a state of deprivation. As the youth continue to remain in this state, there is pent-up emotions and untapped energies. They provide cheap labour to execute the design of political gladiators and ethnic champions. In an apparent indictment of Nigerian politicians, Togbolo observed: “They take advantage of the poverty-stricken nature of the country to exploit the people, politicians are fond (sic) of using the youth restive nature as a political strategy to have their way” (Togbolo, 2006:8).

As a consequence of the foregoing, the Nigerian political landscape is replete with crass opportunism in which a handful of youth organizations are engaged in shameful romance with bankrupt politicians to destabilize the polity. The growing culture of violence among youth organizations like the Bakassi Boys, the Movement for the Actualization of a Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Egbesu Boys, the Odua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) etc are clear indications of the systematic militarization of our democratic environment. Furthermore, Omelle and Gana admitted that “the activities of these group of mostly unemployed or underemployed youth constitute a major source of recent ethno-religious strife and violence in the Nigerian Federation.(Omelle, 2005).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In developing a theoretical base for this paper, Almond’s structural functionalism provides an appropriate framework of analysis. In his search for a functional theory of the polity, Almond proceeds from the point of view that every society is a system with inter-related parts. A system is defined as an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. Organized human society fits into this connotation of system, herein referred to as the social system (Varma, 2003).

The basic assumption of the theory is that, for a social system to survive and maintain its going concern, a certain degree of order and stability is required. To achieve this order and stability, the theory maintained that every functional parts of the social system must perform its role. It is this functional pre-requisite that serves to connect the various parts and thus integrate the social system as an organic system. Thus, from a functionalist point of view:

The social system has certain basic needs which must be met if it is to survive. These needs are known as functional pre-requisites. The function of any part of the society is its contribution to the maintenance of the society (Haralambos, 2001:11)

We can treat or analyze the youth from this theoretical perspective as an important segment of the social system with specific functions to perform. These functions are not only meant to ensure the continuity of the social system but also to achieve what the functionalists refer to as some degree of fit and compatibility (Afonja, 1994). The political system is a specific system within the social system to which we can relate the functional pre-requisite of the youth. Almond argued that in any political system, there are four input functions which “are performed by the non-governmental sub-systems, by the society and the general environment (Varma, 2003). These are political socialization and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation and political communication. Contemporary articulation of the role expectation of the youth fit into these functional categories and should be treated as informed responses to the social forces of democratization. Given their energy, character and orientation, the youth constitute the object and subject of political socialization. Organized youth movement which has received a boost in the wake of democratization process has also provided a platform for interest aggregation and articulation. Political communication provides the information flow that determines the character and orientation of a political system. The relevance of the youth in this process cannot be over emphasized, especially in an emergent democracy like Nigeria (Suleiman, 2006). In their interface with the establishment, the youth largely represent the ‘feed back loop’, to borrow the words of Easton, through which critical views of government action or inaction flow from the society into the political system.

However, Nigeria with over 140 million people and with over fifty percent of youths cannot afford to lock out the youths if they must compete politically, technologically and scientifically in order to align itself with the sustainable development in African in particular and the developed world in general. The closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of this century could have been described as the “influx of youths in active participation in politics (Uhunmwuangho and Epelle, 2007)

## **ROLE EXPECTATIONS**

While discussing the role of youths in contemporary political participation and development, there are certain underpinning assumptions (Suleiman, 2006). Firstly, we are assuming a political system that is endowed with a significant proportion of its youthful population who are highly informed and consensitized. Secondly, we are also assuming an organized youth with clearly defined objectives and a variety of legitimate methods to make input in the political process. Thirdly, we are assuming a political system with sufficient public space that allows for unfettered citizens participation and robust engagement in the governance process. Meanwhile, the degree of these variables in the Nigerian political system is at best

measured and sometimes highly debatable, it has been observed generally that over twelve years of democratic experiment has created opportunity for actors in the civil society, or what social entrepreneurial scholars now call 'citizens sector' to take on their role in the political participation process (Bornstein, 2005).

In a recent research on government – civil society partnership in Nigeria, it was observed that: "Civil society groups are reaching out and trying to work with various government agencies and parastatals in efforts to build their capacity for service delivery and be accountable to citizen" (Chukwuma, 2005:15).

Given this opportunity, the Nigerian youth is currently faced with the task of redefining its role in the democratization process. The mission statement of the National Youth Policy is treated here as a point of departure in articulating the role expectation of Nigerian youth in the political participation process. The document state as follows:

The present administration, having given due consideration to the significance of the youth in socio-political, economic and sustainable development, has found it most desirable, necessary and urgent to initiate this National Youth Development Policy so that there will be a purposeful, focused, well-articulated and well-directed effort aimed at tapping the energy and resourcefulness of the youth and harnessing them for vitality, growth and development of the country well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century National Youth Political Reform Conference, 2005:17).

In the light of the foregoing, the crucial issue of creating an enabling environment for the youth to bring their productive capacity and resourcefulness to bear on the political and developmental process should be accorded priority attention. Given the right climate therefore, the following are considered as the role-expectation of Nigerian youth in the political and developmental process (Suleiman, 2006). First, the youth should parade itself as agents of political socialization. By political socialization, we mean the way in which political values are formed and the political culture is defused in the society. This socialization process ultimately determines how individuals form their political attitudes, and thus, collectively, how citizens form their political culture (Almond, 1963). In Nigeria today, the level of political culture is not sufficient enough to support our democracy. No thanks to more than two decades of military dictatorship during which the civil society was considerably militarized and civic engagement perverted (Osha, 2000).

In Nigeria, experience has shown that the youth often provides the manpower requirements for general elections. Rather than succumb to the unwholesome man oeuvres of selfish and bankrupt politicians to pervert the process of elections, by way of hugger and rigging, the youth should exhibit good conscience and insist on due process and fair play. We have in Nigeria also, an array of youth organizations with diverse and varied interest. They can begin to explore the political space to influence the decision-making process. Recent studies have proved that:

Unless young people are consulted and involved in the design of developmental strategies they are not necessarily going to be youth-relevant or accurately (sic) factor in the contribution of youth to national political and sustainable developmental process. Participation of young people

in decision-making concerns more than integrating young peoples' issue into existing policy paradigm (Amanda, 2003:6).

Active participation in governance at all levels including local government level is another process. Through which the youth can make their impact in the political and developmental process. The learning process that is so fundamental to political maturity must start from the grass-root. Grass-root politics will afford the youth the opportunity to identify with the masses, appreciate their problems and master the terrain. In a nascent democracy like in Nigeria, grass-root apprenticeship rather than glorified 'messenger' under the tutelage of bankrupt and greedy political godfathers, offers the best training ground for the youths (Suleiman, 2006).

Finally, given their vulnerability, the youth has the greater responsibility to promote peace, security, stability and national unity. Through their political education and public enlightenment campaign, through their policy advocacy, and their active involvement in the electoral process, they can build bridges of understanding across ethnic groups, across political affiliations and religious divide. Democracy and good governance can only be nurtured and sustained in an environment of peace, security and stability. Where these are lacking, it is not only democracy and good governance that suffer, but also social progress and the future of the youth is seriously compromised (Suleiman, 2006). The current 36 States in Nigeria can be seen in the political map below:



Figure 1: The Federal Republic of Nigeria Map Political Map of Nigeria

Source: Wikipedia caught 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2012



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the Nigeria sovereign nation, more than anything else, the greatest obstacle to the nascent democracy is the pervasive insecurity of lives and property, as evidenced by the spate of youth unemployment, armed robbery attacks, political assassinations, religious conflicts and exclusion of youths from political participation coupled with the seeming helplessness of security agencies to handle criminal acts (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2011). The situation is worsened by the increasing number of unemployed Nigerians, mostly youths some of whom are ready recruits for criminal activities (*Nigerian Tribune*, 2002). The above statement from an editorial comment by a national daily in Nigeria indeed, epitomizes the central focus of this paper, the aim of which is to analyze the nexus between democratic nurturing and to sustain the current debate on sustainable development and security which is a topical issues in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular.

The foregoing have capture the place of youth and their role in contemporary Nigerian polity. The paper further concludes that the role of youth in political participation and development cannot be over emphasized as they should be involved in the processes that shape their future, sustain political and developmental process in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. The movement toward participatory democracy the world over has necessitated the urgent need for greater involvement of the civil society in the governance process. Since the youth constitute a significant proportion of the population, their contribution in this process is vital to democratic consolidation.

However, Nigeria with over 140 million people and with over fifty percent of youths cannot afford to lock out the youths if they must compete politically, technologically and scientifically in order to align itself with the sustainable development in African in particular and the developed world in general. The closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of this century could have been described as the “influx of youths in active participation in politics (Uhunmwangho and Epelle, 2007)

Prospect for this participatory democracy has received a boost by the gradual opening up of the democratic space. An indication of this opening was the active participation of the younger elements of the civil society in the transition to civil rule that culminated into the general elections of 1999. Similar experience was replicated in 2003. Some of the Governors who won election were in their late 30s. The National and State Houses of Assembly also parade some members of the youthful population. At the local government level, youth, most of whom were school teachers and young graduates also became Councillors and Chairmen of their Local Councils (Angulu, 1999). The youth were adequately represented in the last National Political Reform Conference. These openings and public engagement should be considered as the most valuable dividends of democracy which in the final analysis will translate to good governance and democratic consolidation. It must be pointed out here that most youth are well represented in the governance of Edo State as most of them are in every sector of governance, from Commissioners to Chairmen of Board etc.

However, there are considerable obstacles and challenges facing Nigerian youths. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, drug abuse and the scourge of human trafficking, armed robbery and kidnapping et-cetera are steady impediments that must be tackled if the youths are to be adequately empowered to take on their role in the political and sustainable development process. For the Nigerian youths to be politically and developmentally relevant, it is imperative that they must:

- Demonstrate adequate participation in politics;
- Promote political issues;
- Engage in political campaign;
- Hold public and political offices;
- Given financial and material assistance to political parties with sound manifestos; and
- Protest political inefficiency, or inefficiency in governance through appropriate petitions, usually diverted to the law-making organs at all levels of governance.

It is hoped that if policy pronouncement is matched with action, the youth will form the fulcrum of a transparent, purposeful and service-oriented leadership with sustainable development in the 21st century.

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