

Nigerian Rural Youths in a Culture of Undignified Survival Strategies

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ABSTRACT This paper critically examines the poverty and unemployment situation confronting the rural youth in southwest Nigeria. A conceptual model was developed to describe the situation. Also, different methodological approaches, such as structured interview schedule, unstructured interview and on-the spot observer's assessment were used to elicit information from the respondents. Descriptive statistics was used to discuss the qualitative data. It was, however, observed that the rural youth in the most Islamic communities are illiterates. Also, most of the youths generally depended on their parents for basic needs. Seven surviving strategies such as buying and selling and street hawking; involvement in daily paid casual labour; motor-park garage touting; mounting of roadblocks; armed robbery; prostitution and blood touting; which the youth employed were identified, some of which are incriminating and undignifying. The establishment of a National Youth Development Centre is strongly advocated for the enhancement of meaningful interventionist programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Youth in different Nations of the world have their common problems ranging from high poverty level, lack of opportunity, unemployment, sexually transmitted diseases/HIV, family problems, drug and substance abuse, lack of education and early marriage and child bearing.

Rural poverty has been perceived by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (1993) as a dominant feature of life in all regions of the world. The percentage of the rural population (including the youths) whose income and consumption fall below the nationally defined poverty line is estimated to be 60 percent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Majority (70 %) of the youths in this region (sub-Saharan Africa) are estimated to live in rural areas (UN, 1995). This worsening standard of living has inspired studies into poverty situation in Nigeria, which have revealed that it exists at both micro and macro levels (World Bank, 1993; Adeleke, 1995 and World Bank, 1996). Perhaps, the problems faced by these youths are more severe partly due to high level of unemployment or underemployment and poverty situations engulfing their communities.

Since gainful employment is fundamental to economic progress, it may be necessary to study the survival strategies employed by the youths

to overcome their poverty and unemployment situations. This paper, therefore, examines the youth's poverty situations and some of their contributive factors, develops a conceptual model, succinctly discusses the survival strategies identified and makes some policy recommendations.

RURAL YOUTH: CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES, NATURE AND STATE OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The concept of youth is defined from various perspectives. This varies from one country to another depending on political, economic and socio-cultural circumstances. However, three conceptual perspectives have been highlighted in different publications upon which the definition of youth can be based. FAO (1999) summarized the three perspectives of its meaning as a particular age group, that is, the period during which people graduate from school to work, from child to parent, from dependant to head of household; and as attitude, that is hopeful and apprehensive, tentative and reckless, irreverent and idealistic.

For statistical purpose, however, the United Nations defined the youth as young men and women between the ages of 15 and 24 (Seiders, 1996; Diouf, 1999). This definition, according to age category, may not, however, satisfy the universal interest due to the variations in laws, customs and constitution. Torimiro and Laogun

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(2001) implied from the Nigerian reality and defined the country's youths as young men and women between the ages of 13 and 30. This was based on the expected age of entry into primary education or vocational apprenticeship training which is usually 13 years, (the entry age into the youth world), while 30 years is the terminal age for participating in National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) - a youth programme for Nigerian graduates from either Universities or Polytechnics.

The youth, according to Umaru (1992), forms a very significant proportion of the rural population in Nigeria. Torimiro and Laogun (2001) further estimated them as 32 per cent in Southwest Nigeria based on 1991 provisional Census results.

Rural youths are generally characterized to possess innovation proneness, minimal risks conversion, faster reaction time, less fear of failure, less conservatism, greater physical strength, greater knowledge acquisition propensity, social propensity, faster rate of learning, and love for adventure and preference for boldness (Jibowo, 1989 and Torimiro, 1995). These typify the nature of youth in rural areas, which may be resourcefully applied to sustainable rural development efforts in Nigeria. No wonder, Torimiro (1999) in his challenging farewell poem to the African participants at the International Roundtable Conference on Youth, Agriculture and Development in Africa synthesized the general situation of African Youth in the second stanza thus:

*"Hail, African Youth!
For how long would she be developing?
Amidst the circumstances against her being.
No job! No food! No shelter! No clothing!
Sparingly grip by fear of future.
Arise, the elders of her continent!
Your songs shall be to hail the youth,
To guide and lead for her to see,
That your work today shall ever live."*

FAO (1999) reports that 17 percent of the youths around the world listed unemployment as one of their main concerns. Unemployment, in this case, is usually defined in development economics as the stock of those entire employable individual who are not in employment and who are either in the process of moving to a new job or who are unable to find work at the prevailing real rate. Nigeria's Federal Office of Statistics (1999) estimated the higher rate of rise in unemployment in the rural sector from 2.8 percent

in 1997 to 3.0 per cent in 1998. Obienne and Mundi (1991) characterized the poverty features in the order of magnitude among Nigerians, and wrote that unemployment and underemployment were rated number four by 90.20 percent of the population.

However, it is generally observed in the rural areas that majority of the youths are not willing to work on the farm, because of the inadequate rural infra-structure and social amenities but rather prefer to work as clerk and officer in the urban and non-agricultural sectors. This presents a worrisome situation, most especially in an agrarian economy such as Nigeria's. Large percentage of these youths does not have the required skill to enable them fulfill this aspiration. In situations where skills are available, the vacancies are not always there, even.

POVERTY SITUATION AND SOME CONTRIBUTIVE FACTORS

Poverty as an expression of life situation, a state of mind and perception of self in the complex web of social relation, is a very sensitive and controversial concept that has defied a universally acceptable and objective definition or assessment. The World Bank (1996) in its report characterized poverty as overwhelmingly rural and having regional outlook. The total number of people in poverty as at 1992 was specifically put at 34.7 million with about two-third from rural Nigeria.

Decline in the world oil prices was identified as a major factor, consequent upon which, the per capita income which stood at \$1000 in 1980 fell to as low as \$340 in 1992. This has further fallen to \$260 as at 1995 (World Bank, 1994). Perhaps, the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in July, 1986 and subsequent deregulation of the economy led to an untold hardship for the citizenry. For instance, the deregulation of the naira led to an eroded purchasing power of the people. This was further aggravated by the spiraling inflation, which stood at 73 percent in 1995 (Central Bank of Nigeria, 1996).

Another contributive factor to poverty situation in rural Nigeria is the inequality in distribution of income and other productive resources. For instance, a lot of inequalities exists in the distribution of agricultural land, which has remained skewed because of the traditional land

tenure system and lack of true commitment to agricultural development which has made farming uninteresting and unattractive to the youths, who constitute the bulk of the rural population.

Chambers (1983) who had earlier caught the glimpse of the rural poor wrote that:

Poverty contributes to physical weakness (through lack of food, small bodies, malnutrition leading to low immune response to infections, and inability to reach or pay for health services); to isolation (as a result of the inability to pay large expenses or to meet contingencies); and to powerlessness (because lack of wealth goes with low status, for the poor have no choice).

It is worthy of note to affirm that the Nigerian democratic project (between 1999 to date) has not yielded any meaningful dividend for the poor masses. None of the poverty alleviation programmes put in place by the Federal Government has worked. Even the “living” wages of N7, 500¹ per month popularly awarded to workers, are not only small and unrealistic but are not regularly paid. It will also be significant to note that majority of those who are categorised as employed in the private sector earn below this figure. All these factors have their attendant effects on the entire populace of both the youth and adults alike.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The study was conducted in some selected rural communities in South-west Nigeria using various appropriate methodological approaches.

Pre-tested structured interview schedule, unstructured interview and on-the-spot observer’s assessment techniques were used to elicit information from the youths (between the ages of 13 and 30 years) considered for the study. The interview schedule was administered on each of the randomly and proportionately selected communities that have preponderance of about 80 percent ruralites in Kwara State, Osun State and Ogun State. Basically, the information gathered through the interview schedule was the youths’ personal and socio-economic characteristics. The unstructured interview and on-the-spot observer’s assessment were, on the other hand, used to gather information relating to the respondents poverty situation, unemployment and the survival strategies evolved.

Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the quantitative data while the qualitative data was directly discussed.

Also, a conceptual model was developed to explain the unemployment situation as a push factor, which makes the youths living in a poverty

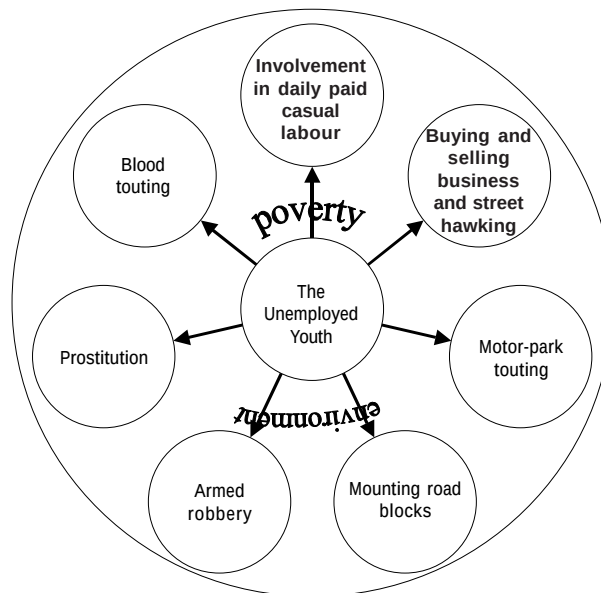


Fig. 1. Conceptual model explaining youth unemployment as a push factor to evolve a survival strategy in a poverty environment.

environment to devise and employ appropriate survival strategies to enable them overcome their wanting situations.

DISCUSSION

a) Personal and Socio-economic Characteristics

Majority (72.58%) of the youths were in the age group of 13 and 24 years, while about 27.42 percent was between the age group of 25 and 30. The study revealed that 55.56 percent were young men and 44.44 percent were young women. This shows that male youths are more than the female youths in the rural areas. Also, majority (80.83%) of the respondents in Kwara State were Muslims. It was, however, observed that it was a different situation in Osun and Ogun States where majority (59.13%) were Christians.

Also, level of education of the youth follows the same trend. That is, youths from Kwara State were highly (28.33%) illiterate as compared to those in Ogun State with only 5.56 percent being illiterate. This implies that youths in Islamic areas are less educated as compared to their contemporary in areas with high Christian population. Over 80.0 percent of the population attributed their inability to acquire formal education to lack of sponsorship.

Majority (61.67%) were from polygamous homes with about 60 percent having household size between 7 and 10 members. These are common features of a poverty stricken household in Nigeria. Also, majority (65.83%) of the youths are still living with their parents and 53.16 percent indicated that they always depended on their parents for feeding, 16.45 percent for clothing and other social responsibilities. About 41.67 percent of the respondents were married, while 58.33 percent were single.

Further discussion through unstructured interview revealed that majority of those married were self-employed (in farming and petty-trading) with a monthly earning of below N7, 500. Majority (97.50%) of the youths indicated that they had their family farmland available for use but only 61.67 percent indicated their involvement in cultivating between 1.00-2.00 acres seasonally.

b) Rural Youth and Undignified Survival Strategies

Survival strategy refers to the approach

employed by the unemployed youths as a means of last resort to earn their living amidst poverty situation. Such strategy is perceived as undignified because it is propelled by an unimaginable situation propelled by poverty. This has to do with desperation and with no regard for personal integrity. It is in fact not their intended job.

These survival strategies are discussed as follows:

i) *'Buying and Selling' / and Street Hawking:* These are survival strategies employed by both young men and women. They were observed to go to the neighboring cities or towns to purchase domestic goods that may be useful to the rural dwellers. Youth of this category are mostly educated up to at least school certificate level. Also, many of the youth buy farm produce and hawk through the streets. Proceeds from such business are often used to cater for their needs, while some deliver such to their parents who primarily own the enterprise. Those who engage in farming activities often bring their farm produce to market for sale. The illiterates amongst them were observed to engage in selling of fruits, leafy vegetables, peppers, iced fish and other groceries.

ii) *Involvement in Daily Paid Casual Labour:* Many unemployed youths are often found gathered together in different locations at the various community centres almost on a daily basis, awaiting anybody who may want to engage them in a casual work for the day. Such works include: bus conducting, construction site labour, fetching of water, general cleaning, cutting of grasses, and digging of wells. Over 20.0 percent of youths in this category are non-indigenes of the communities under study, but rather from the satellite neighboring villages or completely from different tribes. For instance, youths from the Northern part of the country, mostly the Hausa are more involved in digging of wells/soak away, fetching of water and cutting of grasses. The Yoruba boys are mostly involved in bus conducting.

Also, among those who engage in motorcycle riding (popularly known as *okada*), over 80.0 percent are Yoruba boys, while about 20.0 percent are non-Yoruba. Female folks are exclusively involved in general house cleaning, washing of dresses, scrubbing of floor and fetching of water. Generally, youths in this category are stack illiterates. Only very few (5.0%) obtained the first School leaving certificate.

It was also observed that, in some locations,

other youths, especially boys, who have nothing to do, constitute themselves into play group and derive solace in their fellowship. At times, the most aggressive and desperate among the boys shower encomiums on any notable personality driving past them, who often understandably responds by giving out some money to them, over which they often fight.

iii) *Motor-park Touting*: Most of the motor-park in the areas are characterised by the presence of touts, which are mostly the youths. These youths have perpetually resulted to spending their days in the park to extort money from the professional motor drivers. A times, they lord it over the drivers through the act of hooliganism and extort money from the unwilling drivers. It was also observed that these youths engage in cigarette and hemp smoking and drinking of alcohols. They are often locally referred to as “garage boys”. Majority of these same set of boys constitute themselves into social miscreants popularly known as “area boys”. They have neither regards for law nor for fellow human beings. Mostly, they act under the influence of Indian hemp or alcoholic drinks. Majority of young men in this category were observed to be either illiterates or drop-outs from primary or secondary schools. It is obviously expressed in their appearances that they are at the extreme state of frustration and hopelessness. They are highly involved in local crises even at the expense of their lives. Many of them take advantage of any crisis situation to vex their anger against the public. This buttresses Rotimi’s (1997) submission that “... misdemeanour develops in reaction to a lingering stress caused by deprivations within a community”. Atimes these youths are employed by unscrupulous politicians as agents of destruction and vandalisation during electoral campaigns and real elections. Also, in some crisis regions like Modakeke/Ile-ife in Western Nigeria and so on, these categories of youths are more prominent as fighters and protestants basically because of the financial benefits they derived.

iv) *Mounting of Road Blocks*: On several occasions, it was observed that in many pothole-ridden highways, many young men mount road blocks for collecting money under the disguise of road mending. Atimes, they hold vehicle drivers into ransom by not allowing them to pass until they part with some money.

v) *Armed Robbery*: In recent times the rate at which armed robbery incidents are reported in

Nigeria’s daily newspapers are becoming alarming. It was, however, observed that teenagers, undergraduate or graduate categories are more involved (City Update, 2003). Whenever they are caught by anti-crime agents, they often confess that they are lured into armed robbery as a result of frustration because of their unemployment situation. Majority of them claimed to have ‘god father’ as sponsors who usually empowered them with ammunitions and charms in which they put their confidence. They also act under the influence of dangerous drugs such as Indian hemp, Chinese capsules, heroine, cocaine, alcohol, etc. They are always merciless at the point of operation and life has no meaning to them.

vi) *Prostitution*: This survival strategy is exclusively employed by young women, who claimed to have been stretched beyond the limit of enduring the hardship meted on them by poverty and unemployment situations. They either constitute themselves into a group or rent an apartment for transacting their dangerous business. They sexually offer themselves to men who patronise them in return for money. Some were also observed doing the business without joining any group. Some would stand by the road side leading to the main towns or cities enticing men/ male car owners to patronize or sexually engage them in the night. Their charges are negotiable depending on the services rendered to the men, ranging from companionship to a party or bed mates for a particular period. Many of them claimed that they were introduced to the business by their friends as a result of frustration. Some are, however, proud of the business because they rated it better than stealing, it fetches them sufficient money for their livelihood. Majority of the prostitutes are educated ranging from primary school certificate holders to University degree holders. Also, they are mostly non-indigenes. For instance, most of the professional prostitutes operating in Southwest were observed to come either from the Northern or Eastern parts of Nigeria.

vii) *Blood Touting*: It was also observed in some hospital environments that young boys constitute themselves into blood sellers under the disguise of blood donors. For instance in Ile-Ife, such touts collect money from hospital patients desperately in need of blood for their survival. Such fees include mobilisation fee for transporting the potential blood donors to the blood bank, and the actual fee for the blood per

pint depending on the blood group. It was, however, revealed that for one pint of blood in group 'O' positive or 'A' positive category, a fee of ₦2,500 is charged, while a pint of group 'O' negative cost between ₦7,000:00 and ₦10,000:00. It was also observed that they occasionally attempt to donate against medical advice!

These seven survival strategies as highlighted above are arranged in the order of popularity among the youth in the area of study.

CONCLUSION

Nigerian youths are really feeling the crunch of the poverty and unemployment situations. These have been the main reasons for engaging in all kinds of undignified means of livelihood and even sometimes in criminal acts under the guise of survival. There is, therefore, an urgent need for intervention.

Government needs to work more in creating conducive socio-economic environments for the youths to enable them pursue their aspirations. Also, youth orientation, development and empowerment policies need be made to take care of the welfare of all categories of youths.

To achieve this, the following recommendations are made:

- Government should develop a national Centre for youth development that will research into youth problems, develop policies on youth matters, establish entrepreneurial activities for all categories of youth and monitor the youth activities in Nigeria. Such Centre, though centrally controlled, must be grassroots based.

- Enlightenment campaign must be launched by the various tiers of governments, that is, the Federal, States, and Local Governments, focusing on the youths to make them see the implications of the dangerous trend in such undignified ventures, in which they are engaged. However, achievement in this regard depends on the extent to which the governments are ready to provide them (the youth) with better alternatives. Parents and relevant Non- governmental organisations (NGOs) can also be strategically involved.

- A well comprehensive youth development curriculum must be developed and integrated into various schools, vocational Centres, religious organizations, and youth based programmes to prepare them (the youths) for future challenges.

- Finally social amenities, rural infrastructure

and basic farm needs required by the rural youth (Adedoyin et al., 1998) must be adequately provided in the rural areas as a way to make the youth stay in the rural areas and engage in farming activities, which is the most prevailing and abundant dignifying job in the rural sector.

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