
Curbing Youth Restiveness in Nigeria: The Role of Civil Society Organisations

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Abstract

The problem of youth restiveness has bedevilled Nigeria for a while now. The northern region seems worst hit by this nuisance. This study therefore explores the role of Civil Society Organisations in curbing the dilemma of youth restiveness in Plateau State through youth empowerment programmes. The study adopted a qualitative design. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were carried out with seven (7) civil society organisations working with young people in Jos purposively. Findings indicated that while most of the civil society organisations sampled work with youths, they basically focus on issues of reproductive health where more funding is received from international donors compared to youth empowerment that will enable young people acquire the needed knowledge, understanding, attitudes and practical skills to become enterprising and self-reliant and further curb restiveness. The paper therefore advocates for a well designed youth empowerment programme, fully funded and efficiently implemented through collaborative efforts by civil society organisations and the government.

The concept civil society is not new and its role when discussing issues of development in general cannot be ruled out. Despite the decades of the existence of this concept, it is continually debated by scholars in sociology, political science and social theory. Reasons for this may be associated with the many claims that ‘civil society organisations’ act to achieve sustainable development in society (Pollard & Court, 2005), and possibly because many scholars have focused on the autonomous and voluntary nature of CSOs (Katusiimeh, 2006).

The concept civil society is typified by inconsistency and contradiction. For example, Larry Diamond defined civil society as “The realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond, 1994:5). In line with this inconsistency is the view of John Kean that civil society is:

a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with the governmental institutions that ‘frame’, constrict and enable their activities (Keane, 2009).

Accordingly, the Department for International Development followed suit in this contradiction by defining civil societies as “non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, faith and diaspora groups, social movements and community groups occupying a position between the household, the state and the private sector” (DFID, 2012).

Hence, to draw up a comprehensive list of the types of associations which make up civil society would be futile, as by their nature these organisations are interest-based and as such many are volatile and fluid, forming and disbanding around different issues which are important at the time (Katusiimeh, 2006). For a comprehensive definition of CS therefore there is need for the inclusion of free associations like churches, NGOs, political parties, trade unions, etc and other organisations not controlled by the state, which are self-organising.

The proliferation of these organisations in Nigeria is to a large extent in response to the ‘negligence’ on the part of the government to act as a force to reduce poverty, promote a strategic vision of economic growth, promote democracy and achieve sustainable development. No doubt, the existence of these organisations assisted considerably to open up space for the expression of dissenting opinions and what could be regarded as alternative voices. Unfortunately, this very character and attribute has come to serve as a shield for opportunistic and nuisance activities of some civil society organisations. In some respects, the nation has witnessed situations whereby monies received from international development partners have been channelled to buying luxurious cars and building high-priced houses by founders of these organisations. Though, our basic argument in this study is not what civil society is or what it is not and definitely not the fact that it is abusing the various opportunities availed to it from the negligence of the government to serve its people but instead to find out the role they have played in curbing youth restiveness to which we now turn.

Literature Review on Youth Restiveness in Nigeria

Youth restiveness in Nigeria is manifested through various ways. There has been an increase in the occurrence of acts of violence and lawlessness, including things like hostage-taking of prominent citizens and expatriate oil workers, as well as oil bunkering, arms insurgency, cultism, etc., especially in the Niger Delta region. Nevertheless, youth restiveness is not a recent phenomenon. The National Youth Development Policy (2001) defines youth as people aged 18-35. They constitute about 40 percent of the more than 140 million people of Nigeria. The total population of youth between 10 and 24 in Nigeria was 45.4 million in 2006, which is 34 percent of the total population. Elegbeleye (2005) defined youth restiveness as “a sustained protestation embarked upon to enforce desired outcome from a constituted authority by an organized body of youths. It is marked by violence and disruption of lawful activities”.

Accordingly, as pointed out by Ogbe (2008), that there is no individual that was born or destined to be a rebel and certainly not even an incompetent government will want to see her youths in a restive state. The question therefore then is what is responsible for youth restiveness in Nigeria?

The first point to this problem as observed by Ogbe (2008) is the level of unemployment in the country. This is undoubtedly true because of the level of mismanagement of political power, lack of respect for the principles of fundamental human rights and ignorance of socio-economic mandates for upliftment of the state. It is unimaginable but a reality in society of today to find out that a student who has struggled so hard to become a graduate or even a professional is still not defined in his field of utility and potentials. It is evidently as equivalent to putting a halt to education and addressing first the guarantee of a viable economic and social opportunity.

Accordingly, Anifowose (1982), stated that the major reason behind youth restiveness is relative deprivation, rising expectations of the youth on what they want the government to do for them and the frustration/aggression resulting from the inability or refusal on the part of government to grant the needs of the youth. The argument here is that aggression and violence becomes the order of the day as a result of the gap in the felt needs that are not filled overtime (Tenuche, 2009). Furthermore, since these young people lack education and means of livelihood, they become frustrated and hence the elite use this as an opportunity by manipulating and mobilising these frustrated youths to perpetuate violence in the pursuit of their selfish interests or a particular group goal. Concurring with the elite manipulation and mobilisation thesis, Tenuche (2009), alluded that:

The elite manipulation and mobilization thesis also, found support among some respondents, who argued that the local elites more often than not manipulate and mobilize ethnic and sub ethnic identity such as the clan of to achieve selfish ends. The elite, who constitute a small group and who more often than not are aspirants to and competitors for power and privileges are the primary users of sub-ethnic sentiments as a mask to defend vested class interest. The process of democratization provides a fertile ground for the unleashing of primordial sentiments. The process associated with democratization such as party system and elections provide a congenial atmosphere for the negative manipulation and mobilization of the youth and clannish identities. These identities become a tool of competition for the elites for scarce public goods such as contracts, employments, political appointments, scholarship and access to land as well as opportunities for lucrative trade and commerce.

On the other hand, a study conducted by Ofem & Ajayi (2008) identified lack of humanitarian and social welfare, lack of good governance, corrupt practices of government officials, inadequate training programmes, unemployment, inadequate recreational facilities, lack of quality education, and so on, as the reasons for incessant youth restiveness. Another point evidence advance to explain youth restiveness is the enormous economic decline, which became more obvious in the mid-eighties. For example the policies of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced to Nigerian by the Babangida regime and other policies of adjustment pursued by subsequent Nigerian Governments. These hash inhumane policies only had a short break during the Abacha regime acerbated economic decline. Egwu (2001), argued that adjustment programmes entailed rolling back the State and cutting down on public expenditure. This has drastically reduced support for essential social services for the vast majority of the people. The women and the youth have been the most vulnerable group under these developments. Under such conditions, the youth are prone to violence as a means of expressing their disaffection. Numerous cases of violence in the country in the last two decades are strongly associated with the Adjustment project (Tenuche, 2009).

In a related vein, the failure of the State over the years to pursue genuine development of the society is said to be a reason for youth restiveness. The researcher argue that efforts to achieve development must transcend the limit of economic growth to embrace such features of social justice as equality of opportunity, full employment, generally available social services, equitable distribution of income and basic political freedom. The massive corruption of State officials, the misery associated with Adjustment and the anemic state of social services with its attendant consequences has robbed the State of its God-like character thus provoking varied reactions (Egwu, 2001).

Specifically, the ability to create full employment opportunities for her citizens has eluded the Nigerian state.

Another well canvassed position is that the desperate desire to access scarce State resources has serious implications for youth involvement in violence. This situation is accentuated because of the fact that the State in post-colonial Nigeria plays a leading role in the development process; economic resources are therefore largely controlled by the State. This has the extended implication of making the state a coveted prize to be won at all cost by the various class fractions that create division in society to attain their goal (Jega, 1999). The youth are thus, used when required during intra class struggle for State control. From the above therefore, it means that differential factors combine together to cause youth restiveness in Nigeria but the main cause being idleness and unemployment.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was utilized in conducting the study which was carried out in Jos Metropolis, in Plateau State North Central Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of all civil society organizations (CSOs) who work with young people in Jos metropolis at the time of the study. A total of seven (7) civil society organizations (CSOs) participated in the study. Out of these seven civil society organizations purposively selected, twenty staff was selected to participate in the study. Key Informant Interview (KII) respondents included senior members of the civil society organization who have worked with such an organisation for a minimum of five (5) years as at the time of the study. Interviews and discussions were conducted in English languages and auto-recorded. The principal researchers was involved in data gathering, transcription and translation of data as well as in the examination and coding of key variables in relation to the issues and themes covered by the research instruments. Thereafter, results were written from translated texts, coded master sheets, and researchers' memos to ensure that reported responses were contextual. Some of the findings with contextual connotations were reported verbatim, most were summarized and others that were not so relevant to the study objective were left out. Reported findings were then compared with those of previous studies on similar issues and discussed.

Result and Discussion

Several issues characterise youth restiveness in Nigeria as advanced by key informant during the interview. Of immediate relevance in this study were idleness and unemployment, elite manipulation and mobilisation of young people for violence and the inability of the state overtime to fill the gap in the felt needs of young people thereby resulting to frustration and aggression.

Idleness and Unemployment

Idleness and unemployment remain a major cause for youth restiveness in Nigeria. This is evident in almost every household in urban and semi-urban centres. Furthermore, the ambition of the jobless youths in the rural areas is to migrate to urban centres in search for jobs and means of livelihood. Most times this young people enter urban centres ill-prepared and lack the skills necessary to secure a job in such urban centres. As explained by a staff of YARAC in Jos:

With the exception of electricity and infrastructure, youth's unemployment is the third biggest problem confronting Nigeria. It is the root cause of poverty, youth restiveness, gangsterism, bank robbery, kidnapping, assassination, lawlessness and all sorts of deviant behaviours. Among these bands of unemployed youths are over three million young boys and girls with NYSC discharge certificates roaming the nooks and crannies of the country searching for jobs that do not exist. Our tertiary institutions dump over 200,000 graduates into the job market every year thereby exacerbating the situation.

The youth unemployment problem seems enormous as it has maligned most families and debased Nigeria's educational system. Most parents are frustrated and traumatized at seeing their sons and daughters turn into crimes and prostitution because of unemployment. Young people are discouraged from being serious with studies because they cannot see the benefit of education from those ahead of them who remain jobless and idle. This scourge in unemployment among young people have seen many foreign embassies jammed on daily basis with young people seeking visas to travel out of the country in search of greener pastures. Furthermore, many of them travel of the country ill-prepared in terms of skills and also lack the technical knowhow to compete with others in such countries. Young people who were unable to compete favourable in such countries resort to crimes and hence most jails in Libya, USA, and Malaysia to mention a few a filled with Nigerian youths who have come in contact with the law. It is because of the idleness and unemployment associated with young people that has further given room for elite manipulation and mobilisation of young people.

Elite Manipulations and Mobilisation

The elite in Nigeria can be described as very selfish and self centred. This can be linked with the way and manner in which the country Nigeria was amalgamated without consideration of the different ethnic groups with different cultures and histories. Hence selfishness among the elite is two-fold – self-centredness and the claim for the protection of ethnic interest. The elite problem has further consolidated on the youth unemployment problem thereby making it a threat to democratic stability and its sustenance in Nigeria. The elite are fully aware that the large army of unemployed

youths are idle and frustrated and hence willing to do anything in order to survive. The elite therefore mobilise these unemployed young people in destabilising the polity. For example, many of the key informants agreed that the presence of large army of unemployed youths in Nigeria is a clear case of failure of leadership to utilise the abundant human and natural resources in the country to create jobs that will engage the youths in productive and meaningful economic activities. Because of the failure on the part of the leaders to judiciously make use of the young people, corrupt elite in most cases mobilise them to unleash havoc, as elucidated by this informant:

The unemployed youths have become political thugs and blood-thirsty hoodlums at the disposal of the elite. The point here is that when large numbers of youths are unemployed, their quest to survive may make them to become willing tools in the hands of maverick and disgruntled elite who use them for anti-social and clandestine political activities. The utilisation of the unemployed youths to perpetuate ethno-religious clashes in the present democratic dispensation is well known.

However, the utilization and manipulation of mostly unemployed and idle youths to perpetuate violence in most parts of Nigeria is a clear indication of an attempt to use this category of youths to bring democracy to a brink and destabilize the nation. It also shows that some elites are not ready to utilize legal provisions to seek redress of perceived injustice in the electoral system. The implication here is that no democracy can thrive and stabilized in the atmosphere of lawlessness, political thuggery, intimidations, killings, maiming and unabated destruction of lives and property. Furthermore, many have likened the recent Boko Haram insurgency to elite manipulation and mobilisation for selfish reasons and unemployment is a basic reason for this.

Frustration and Aggression

The ease in the elite manipulation and mobilisation viewpoint is further consolidated by the frustration and aggression viewpoint. Violent crimes among unemployed and idle youth is the mean through which young people express their discontent with the way and manner the elite and leaders have failed in providing the infrastructure needed for them to thrive and therefore the need to access power and social relevance through all means necessary. For example a key informant from INTER-GENDE stated: the phenomenon of unemployment has been worsened by the negative impact of the adjustment programmes. There is also a polarization between the elders and the youth in Nigeria, with the latter blaming the woes of the land on the former and insisting on having a greater say in leadership arrangement of the society. Furthermore, there is a growing discontent among the youths on the role of elders in the society, who the youths blame for the lack of basic infrastructural facilities and employment opportunities.

This frustration has thus led to aggression and restiveness among young people. This continued frustration and aggression has imbued in young people the ability to display raw courage and inflict punishment on the masses in order to create access to positions of authority and even employment for themselves as fierce youth gangs often get engaged to provide security for top government officials, secure contracts and scholarships in a few cases to pursue higher education. In return they are guaranteed uninterrupted access to acquisition of arms and ammunition, in addition to protection from arrest and detention by security operatives.

Curbing Youth Restiveness through Empowerment

Key informants generally stated that the youth problem is pervasive and further posited that they would also not thrive in their provision of basic goods, services and capacity building if nothing was done to the problem of youth restiveness and hence many turned to their vision and mission in order to help reduce the menace of restiveness among the youths. For example, a key informant with Youth, Adolescent, Reflection and Action (YARAC), Jos, stated that:

Empowering young adults and adolescents to look before they leap through information sharing, training and interactive activities so that they are informed about their reproductive and civic rights and responsibilities, and are able to change and make responsive decision regarding their future.

All the respondents have worked with young people in different capacity. The informants with this CSO were quick to point to the fact that their organisations have carried out different capacity building workshops aimed at organising and promoting self-employment and entrepreneurial skills for young people e.g. computer training. Key informants also stated that their organisations have also trained and promoted young people interest in agriculture for sustainable living e.g. animal husbandry, fish farming, poultry farming and general crop production and programmes targeting young people.

Other CSOs have done work with young people in areas of governance and development aimed to promote young people's participation in policy-making and leadership building. For example, a key informant with Good Governance and Youth Empowerment stated that since the formation of the organisation, its specific contribution has been to stimulate an assets-based approach to youth development by:

- i. Recognising young people as an asset to their societies;
- ii. Building on young people's capacities and agency to overcome poverty and;
- iii. Engaging young people in decision-making, as partners in democracy and development.

All informants recognised the fact that empowering young people is very important and young people can only be said to be empowered when they (youths) acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of those choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions. For example an interviewee in another CSO stated: empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. These enabling conditions fall into four broad categories: i) an economic and social base; ii) political will, adequate resource allocation and supportive legal and administrative frameworks; iii) a stable environment of equality, peace and democracy; and iv) access to knowledge, information and skills, and a positive value system.

It was discovered that the increased public concern over the right to participate in policies and processes that affect people's lives and the growing demand for improved public accountability and responsiveness to citizen inputs at the local, national and global levels has made the work of CSOs more prominent. Their visibility has also been enhanced as CSOs become increasingly widely connected and organised into national and global networks, supported by expanded access to information. But despite this prominent role of CSOs it was found that they focus more on health and reproductive issues compared to youth empowerment. This is associated with the huge grant received from donor partners which in most cases are health related.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Nigerian economy is such that little or no effort is made by government to encourage investment that can help to create employment opportunities for the youths and other job-seekers by establishing corporations, enterprises and companies or even revitalize the existing ones. Since this is the case, there is the problem of unemployment in Nigeria as a whole, and the resultant effect has been youth restiveness. We found that though CSOs are doing their best in areas of youth empowerment particularly through capacity building workshops which in most times end without such CSOs giving the young people the needed financial assistance to start something. CSOs have tended to tilt their activities towards health which gives them more funding than youth empowerment. Hence, in order to curb the problem of youth restiveness, there is the need for the youths and job-seekers to be assisted to acquire the necessary entrepreneurship skills. In essence, for the youths to be useful to themselves, they should be well-equipped with the entrepreneurship skills and if possible be given some start-up grant (capital) no matter how small to at least start something.

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