

# The Challenges of Youth Empowerment Programmes in Nigeria: An Appraisal of N-Power Scheme

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**Abstract:** *This study assessed the challenges of youth empowerment programmes in Nigeria using N-power as a case study. About 70% of the Nigeria population was reported to fall within the age bracket of 18-35; majority of them have the ability and capability of working in their chosen careers. Previous studies had shown that a good number of them were unable to get a job or establish themselves in businesses. The government of President Muhammadu Buhari saw the dangers of allowing these young ones to hover around the street and therefore introduced the N-power scheme. Thematic method (content analysis) was used for analysis, while secondary data were sourced from online platforms. Analysis showed that official corruption, delayed payments of allowances as well as the lack of a plan to adequately transit the beneficiaries to more meaningful ventures constitute a hindrance to achieving the objectives of the scheme. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended separation of the scheme from politics, regular payment, increased payment and that a good plan should be put in place to transit subsequent beneficiaries to meaningful ventures.*

**Keywords:** N-Power, Poverty, Youth, Unemployment, Empowerment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major reasons why developed nations invest huge financial resources in human capital development, especially among the youthful age is based on the fact that the youth have sufficient energy, creative drives, and desire to change their world. According to United Nations (2019), the global youth population in 2019 is estimated at 2 billion while sub-Saharan Africa youth population is placed at 211 million. Precisely, in Nigeria, the estimated population of the youth between the ages of 18-35 is 52.8 percent. Ordinarily, anybody within the age of 18-40 can be categorized as a young person. By implication, 70 percent of Nigeria's population are youth (Fayehum and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2020). Regrettably, the national Bureau of Statistics (2020) reported that the youth unemployment rate was around 53.40 percent in 2020 while the figure continued to shoot up as of January 2021.

Previous governments, both military and civilian, had adopted policy measures to curtail the trend. In recent years, the governments introduced a good number of youth empowerment and skill acquisition Programmes, for the unemployed who fall within the youth age bracket. Some of these Programmes are government-sponsored while others are privately sponsored. Examples of youth empowerment Programmes in Nigeria include Movement for Youth Actualization International LEAP Africa, Lagos Digital Village, International Center for Development Affairs, United Nation of Youth Network Nigeria, Foundation for Skills Development, Youth for Technology Foundation, Diamond-Crest for Youth Education Foundation, Youth Entrepreneur Support Programme (YES-P) and Graduate Internship Scheme (GIS). Other are Youth Initiative for Sustainable Agricultural in Nigeria (YISA), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P), Youth Enterprise with Innovative in Nigeria (YouWin), Youth Empowering People (YEP), Young Entrepreneurs of Nigeria (YEN), African Youth Empowerment Nigeria (AYEN), Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative (YEDI) and other capacity-building programmes, not mentioned above, are working tirelessly to reduce poverty and unemployment among youths

The cardinal objective of these programmes, as stated by the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sport, is to reduce the unemployment rate among youth, poverty reduction as well as quench youth restiveness and criminality. To give this study a better focus, the researchers will examine the N-power programme initiated by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2016. N-power as it stands today is one of the National Social Investment programmes established on the 8th of June 2016. The programme was designed to address the problems of youth unemployment and improve social development (Dauda, Yakubu, Oni, and Umar 2019). The programme, is specifically aimed at equipping the youth with relevant work skills as well as empower others who may wish to create work. The programme is designed for graduates of higher institutions and non-graduate who are within the age bracket of 18-35 years. The programme has six categories including N-Teach, N-Health, N-Creative, N-Agro, and N-Tech. However, N-

Teach and N-health are meant for graduates, who must have completed their mandatory National Youth Service Corps programmes while N-Build, N-Agro, N-creative, and N-Tech are meant for both graduate and non-graduates (Nwaobi, 2019).

The pN-power scheme was reported to have enrolled five hundred thousand Nigerians for its first and second batches (batch A and B). These two batches ended their programme on the 19th of June 2020 while batch C is being assessed for enrolment at the time of writing this paper. Despite the praises and claims of success made by the ministry in charge, it appears that Nigerian youth still wallow in poverty. This is evidently clear following the incidences that surfaced during the #ENDSARS protest in October 2020. Also, incessant attacks by bandits, insurgency by Boko Haram, agitation, kidnapping and robbery by criminal elements, and militancy are a clear indication that a good number of Nigerian youths are poor and angry with the system. This paper is, however, divided into the following subheadings: the concept of youth, Youth Empowerment, Overview of Youth Empowerment Programme since the inception of Democratic Rule In 1999, N-Power Scheme as a Youth Empowerment Tool in Nigeria, Challenges of N-power scheme, Conclusion and recommendations

## **2. Clarification of Concepts**

### **2.1 Concept of Youth:**

There is no generally accepted definition of youth among scholars. The definitions differ slightly from scholar to scholar and from country to country as well as from concerned organization to another. However, the United Nations (as cited in Unesco, 2021) defined youth as people that fall within the age range of 15 to 24 years. The organization further described youth as a fluid and changing group that needs to be handled with care and utmost attention. It is a period of transition from being dependent to a period when the individual is independent. They further maintained that the definition as stated above is bound to change due to some circumstances such as financial, socio-cultural setting, demographic, economic, etc.

Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs (2010) viewed youth as those who are aged between 13-25 years. On another hand, African Union (2006) sees youth as young people who are between the ages of 15 to 35 years. The same definition was adopted by Ghana's National Youth Policy in 2010. South Africa National Youth policy (2014) described youth as young people under the ages of 14 to 35 years. In Nigeria, a youth is one under the age of 15 to 29 years (Nigeria National Youth Policy, 2019).

### **2.2 Youth Empowerment**

Emejuru (2017) states that youth empowerment entails the activities that involve impartation of useful training, education etc. Such individuals acquire necessary skills that will help them to survive and contribute optimally to the growth and development of their society. He enumerated three critical steps of empowerment to include education (impartation of life coping skills), teaching them entrepreneurial skills (exposing to them the various type of trades, occupations, and professions) indoctrination (inculcating in them self sustaining conscience). It involves restructuring of attitude and belief patterns of the young ones intending to equip them with the ability to make changes in their lives and that of others.

The Commonwealth Plan of Action for the Youth Empowerment (PAYE) 2006-2015 see youth empowerment as the act of engaging and creating values so that young males and females can contribute to the economic, social, and cultural advancement of their families and their nations as well as their fulfillment. This definition presented two very vital dimensions: they are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, aware of the implications of their choices, make an informed decision freely, take actions based on the decisions and accept responsibility for their actions. The second dimension involved creating and supporting the enabling condition under which young people can take action independently and on their terms.

## **3. OVERVIEW OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME SINCE THE INCEPTION OF DEMOCRATIC RULE IN 1999**

Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999 after several years of military interregnum. To usher in a democratic dispensation, the general election was conducted on the 27th of February 1999, and the former military leader, Rtd General Olusegun Obasanjo, was returned and eventually sworn in on 29th May, 1999. On assumption of duty, he reiterated his earlier campaign promises to alleviate poverty, reduce official corruption, build solid democratic foundations, and reform the armed forces. The first step taken by Obasanjo's government in reducing poverty and unemployment among youths as well as empower them with the necessary skills led him to hastily introduce a scheme that paid N3, 500 per month to 200,000 Nigerians. The beneficiaries were evenly chosen from the states of the federation, including Abuja. Their major task was to sweep and mend roads in Nigeria (Iliffe, 2011). The activities of the participants, which contradicted the objective of the scheme, were greeted with stiff opposition and condemnation by well-meaning Nigerians. They were precisely accused of shoddy road maintenance, and this made the government replace the scheme with the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP).

The National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) was designed to focus on youth employment, rural infrastructures, social welfare services, and conservation (Iliffe, 2011). The National Poverty Eradication Programme was created in 2001 with the goals to train youths in vocational trades, create empowerment in the automobile industry, support internships, and provide micro-credit facilities. However, Obikeze, Ananti, and Onyekwelu (2015) argued that the programme failed to achieve its major goals even after ten years of implementation in 2010.

Late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua, on the assumption of office on 29th May 2007, was faced with high incidences of vandalism of oil pipelines, militancy, and kidnapping in the Niger Delta area of Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, and Ondo states, (Ajibola 2015). Niger Delta region is blessed with a large deposit of "Black Gold" (oil and gas) while the proceeds from these natural resources still rank number one source of revenue in Nigeria till 2021. The root cause of the crisis in the region is blamed on negligence and nonchalant attitude of the government, her agencies, and that of multinational oil companies operating in the region (Ajibola 2015). The activities of these oil companies violated the agreement they signed on environmental protection and social responsibility. This consequently led to the degradation of the environment while their youths were left to wallow in poverty. Their means of livelihood such as fishing and farming got polluted due to long years of negligence by these companies and government ("Amnesty programme and youths' empowerment in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: A critical appraisal," 2017). The resultant effect was widespread coordinated attacks on oil facilities in the region by youths; oil workers were occasionally kidnapped while some died in the process (Ajibola 2015).

However, in a bid to curtail the raging conflict in the region, late former President Umar Musa Yar'Adua adopted the recommendation of the technical committee on Niger Delta to grant amnesty to militants in the region. The programme had two phases: The disarmament and Demobilization phases. The program was targeted at de-escalation of the conflict in the region as well as rehabilitate, train, and reintegrates the combatants, who are mostly youth. Regrettably, ("Amnesty programme and youths' empowerment in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: A critical appraisal," 2017) observes that the programme has not impacted youth empowerment in the Niger Delta region. Ajibola (2015) further argued that though the programme had reduced the rate of attacks on oil facilities by angry youths, it has not reduced the rate of poverty and unemployment, especially among the young ones.

Also, the government of former President Goodluck Jonathan, who replaced his boss Umar Musa Yar'Adua after his death on 5th May 2010, came up with a good number of youth empowerment programmes among which were Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative (YEDI), Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWin), Graduate Internship Scheme, Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programmes (SURE-P) and other schemes aimed at empowering young Nigerians. The scholars picked Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment programme for analysis under Jonathan's era due to the level of publicity and attention the scheme enjoyed throughout the time his administration lasted.

Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programmes (SURE-P) is a youth empowerment programme established by the federal government of Nigeria under Goodluck Jonathan's administration. The scheme was funded from savings following the removal of fuel subsidies. SURE-P was officially launched in October 2012 after the announcement of the subsidy removal on Petroleum Motor Spirit (PMS). SURE-P was established to create a database of unemployed youth and provide employment for the unemployed graduates through the internship programme. It was implemented by the Federal Ministry of Finance to provide short employment opportunities for young unemployed Nigerians in the thirty-six states of the federation. The beneficiaries are offered job opportunities to sharpen their skill as well as enable them to gain some work experience (Udo, 2013). In the first phase of the programme, 50,000 young Nigerians were slated to undergo the training while an additional 100,000 were to join in the second phase of the programme (Udo, 2013). The available literature on SURE-P indicated that the programme is capable of mitigating poverty and unemployment in Nigerians if the effort had been channeled towards creating an enabling environment through the provision of basic amenities in both rural and urban areas (Okeke and Ngoradi, 2017). However, according to the World Bank (as cited in Macrotrends.net, 2021), unemployment among Nigerian youth between the ages of 15 to 24 in 2016 stood at 12.48 percent. In another report by Ripples (2016), while quoting Fitch International, asserted that Nigeria recorded her worst poverty rate in 2016; jumping from 60 percent in 2015 to 72 percent in the second quarter of 2016. This is a clear indication that the SURE-P scheme has not fairly reduced poverty and unemployment among Nigerian youth.

The current President, Muhammad Buhari, a retired general in the Nigerian military and a onetime Military Head of State from 1983 to 1985, took over office as a civilian president on 29th May 2015. He defeated the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, in a fiercely and tensely contested presidential election. His government won the election based on the conviction that his predecessor failed to satisfy the yearnings and aspirations of Nigerians. He was seen as a saviour who was sent to save Nigerians from the scourge of poverty, unemployment, corruption, disease, poor state of infrastructures, and other facilities that make life easy. His government, during the electioneering campaigns, before the 2015 general election, promised to create three million jobs every year; to create social welfare programmes where a minimum of five thousand naira (N5,000) would be paid to twenty-five million poorest Nigerians; establish youth empowerment programme that would employ 740, 000 graduates across the 36 states of the

federation and the federal capital territory; to pay a monthly allowance to discharge and unemployed Youth Corps members for twelve months and numerous promises not mentioned in this paper (Eronmosele, 2019).

To fulfill the promise he made, especially to the Nigerian youths, the government of Muhammadu Buhari introduced several schemes structured to either empower Nigerians or alleviate their suffering. These schemes include Farmer Moni, Trader Moni, Market Moni, Youth Fintech, Nigeria Young Farmers Scheme (NYFS), Buhari Young Farmers Network (BYFN), N-power, and otherwise. For the sake of this paper, the researchers will devote their time to the N-power scheme, which is the main issue under discussion in this paper.

#### **4. N-POWER SCHEME AS A YOUTH EMPOWERMENT TOOL IN NIGERIA**

N-power is a youth programme established by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari on 8th June 2016. It is a skill acquisition and development scheme primarily meant to assist unemployed youths (both graduates and non-graduates) acquire relevant job skills as well as train them to be self-reliant. The scheme is a component of the National Social Investment programme of Muhammadu Buhari's government. Unemployed Nigerian youth between the ages of 18-35 are within the age limit stipulated by the programme website (<https://npower.gov.ng>). The scheme officially resumed online registration of applicants on the 12th of June 2016. Over 350,000 Nigerians applied for batch A while 200,000 of these applicants were successfully selected to participate in the training ("N-Power", 2021). The beneficiaries are placed on monthly stipends of N30, 000, which effectively commenced on 1st December 2016. The scheme has six categories including N-Health and N-Teach which are specifically designed for graduates who must have completed the mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme. However, N-Agro, N-Build, N-Creature, and N-Tech are made available for both graduates and non-graduate. The beneficiaries were posted to their various places of primary assignment in their local government of residence irrespective of their state of origin.

The second batch (batch B) online enrolment began on the 13th of June 2017. At the end of the online registration, it was announced that a total of 2,543,079 Nigerians applied to the scheme ("N-Power", 2021). Assessment of the applicants was done online while 300,000 of them were selected based on their performance in the assessment exercise. The batch B beneficiaries officially resumed work like their batch A counterparts on the 1st of August 2020. Both batches were, however, officially disengaged on the 30th of June 2020 for batch A and on the 31st of July for batch A. As of the time of writing this report, another batch (batch C) is on standby for deployment.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to state clearly that the N-power scheme has the potentials to equip the youths with job-relevant skills as well as allow them to create the job, especially those under N-Agro, N-Build, N-Creative, and N-Tech. Vanguard (2020) reported a statement credited to the Honourable Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, Sadiya Umar Farouq, whose ministry is in charge of the programme, argued that N-power has improved the living condition of the mass unemployed youth. She substantiated her point by stating that 109,823 of the beneficiaries were, as of August 2020, gone on to establish personal businesses in their villages and towns. As at the time of compiling this paper, the researchers were unable to access data from the Ministry to backup their claims. However, a report released by the National Bureau of Statistics (as cited in Onyekanmi, 2020) indicated that about 116,871,185 Nigerians were within the working age of 15-64 years in the second quarter of 2020. The number of people within the labour force was estimated at 80,291,894 while those in the age bracket of 25-34 were 23,328,460. Also, the unemployment rate among the youth within the bracket of (15-34 years) was 34.9 percent in 2020; meanwhile, in 2018 it was 28.6 percent. So statistically, there is an increase in the unemployment rate among Nigerian youth from 2018 to 2020.

Also, in a study carried out by Akujuru and Enyioko (2019) on the impact of the N-power programme on poverty alleviation in Nigeria; A study of River State. The study showed that the N-power scheme generated empowerment opportunities for the youth in the state. However, the major question the study failed to examine are: "What would be the fate of these youths after the expiration of their training? How many are comfortably self-employed? As it stands now, a large number of the beneficiaries are back on the street because the money given to them were not enough for setting up a meaningful business considering the economic situation of the country.

#### **5. CHALLENGES OF THE N-POWER SCHEME**

1. N-power scheme is a home-grown youth empowerment programme; it is not devoid of what scholars called "the Nigerian factor". One cannot rule out the "Nigerian factor" in the programme: nepotism, "who-knows-Who", favoritism and corruption at the federal, state, and local government levels.
2. Payment of stipends is often not paid on time, thereby forcing some of the volunteers to abscond or dodge work.
3. The ₦30, 000 stipends is very meagre and below the economic realities for a graduate to establish himself or buy tools.

4. The number of volunteers so far is insignificant compared with the number of unemployed youths in Nigeria.
5. An adequate plan was not made to transit these young beneficiaries into more meaningful ventures after training.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the n-power scheme and how it has impacted the lives of Nigerian youths. The programme is, no doubt, specifically designed to help teeming unemployed Nigerian youth come out of poverty and unemployment. The study, however, has shown that the programme has not reduced unemployment and poverty among young ones. Even after the expiration of the programme in June and July 2020, a good number of the volunteers are back in the labour market while some are still considering what to do with their lives. The programme failed to empower the trainees not because the government had no good intentions but because the people in charge lack political will and sincerity of purpose to drive the scheme to a point where so many young Nigerians can participate and have some businesses or profession to fall back on thereafter.

The new ministry, the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development that took over the management of the programme in 2019 from the office of the Vice President, had not exhibited serious commitment to fix or assist the exited volunteers settle down into gainful ventures.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend thus:

- i. The scheme should be separated from political influence to ensure credibility and fairness. Politicians are known to have often mortgaged their quotas for financial gains.
- ii. Payment of stipends should be made available to the beneficiaries on time to enable them cater for their transportation and other personal needs.
- iii. Due to the economic crisis that has ravaged the world, the researchers, therefore, recommend an increase in their stipends to enable them to meet up with their daily needs and financial pressure posed by the scheme.
- iv. The authorities at the helm of the affairs of the scheme should increase the number of selected beneficiaries since statistics have shown that the unemployment rate in Nigeria is on the increase.
- v. Subsequent beneficiaries (Batch C) should be made to pass through phases that would usher them into meaningful ventures.

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