**THE NIGERIA YOUTH AND CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

By

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**PROTOCOLS**

**INTRODUCTION**

Let me start by thanking God Almighty for making it possible for me to be physically present at this year’s award ceremony. Secondly, I want to thank Chief Tunde Ogunsola, the entire management and other eminent Directors of this foremost magazine, for inviting me to deliver ‘The Nigerian Education Times’ 6th Award of Excellence lecture on a topic which I am not only passionate about but which I hold very dear to my heart. This subject- youth had engaged me full time for four years when I was saddled with the responsibility of managing the Nigeria Youth sector as Hon. Minister of Youth Development and member of the Federal Executive Council from July 2007 up till May 2011.

Although I have been invited several times to grace the past award ceremonies, circumstances beyond my control, had always prevented my physical presence. So, when I received my brother’s letter of invitation through his e-mail to deliver this year’s lecture, I had little choice than to quickly accept, even before I checked my diary for a possible clash of appointments. On a personal note I knew I would have no excuses this time around because my brother and friend is a Chief of my native community and would have invoked his chieftaincy powers to disown me, if I failed to attend.

As mentioned earlier, I am humbled that this respected and foremost educational magazine has found me worthy to deliver this year’s lecture on the topic: The Nigerian Youth and Challenges of National Development. The assemblies of eminent personalities and distinguished Nigerian educationists gathered here this afternoon, is a manifestation of the acceptability, acknowledgement and endorsement of the Nigerian Education Times by not only the renowned and best educationists that this country is proud to have produced, but also some of the very best public administrators that have paraded our public space like colossus.

In this category, please permit me the indulgence, to mention eminent Nigerians such as our respected Baba Kekere of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UNP) fame, His Excellency, Alhaji Lateef Kayode Jakande; the youngest Director of Organisation of a major political party (UPN) that this country has ever produced in the person of my leader and mentor Chief Ebenezer Babatope OFR, and the pioneer Vice Chancellor of Open University of Nigeria Professor Olugbemiro Jegede, to mention but a few.

Also worthy of mention are past award recipients (since the magazine made its debut in June 2004) such as the Late Professor Babatunde Fafunwa, Professor Grace Alele Willians, Professor Pai Obanya, our own highly respected Chief (Dr.) C.F.I Olaniyan, Prof. Anya O. Anya, Senator (Prof.) Jubril Aminu amongst other respected Nigerians. I have been reminded that yours sincerely also humbly received Distinguished Friend of the Press Award in June 2008.

I must not fail to acknowledge the educational juggernauts (apologies to Late Dr. K.O. Mbadiwe) that constitute the advisory Board of this magazine. I am referring to no less personalities than Prof. Pai Obanya, Prof. Umo Ivowi, Chief (Dr.) CFI Olaniyan, Prof. Ayo Alani amongst other Distinguished Nigerians.

I appreciate the topic I have been given to speak on because when I occupied the seat of the Hon. Minister of Youth Development, this was essentially the crux of my portfolio. My preoccupation, emphasis and approach to governance in office, centred on how to ensure that the programmes and policies of government especially with regard to Youth Development, was to all intents and purposes practical. Therefore, let me assure this distinguished audience that in my treatment of today’s topic, I will not turn this lecture into a purely academic exercise. Instead, I will dwell largely on the practical aspects of the topic. This has become more imperative than ever before, because a third of the population of Nigeria has been described by national and international experts as ‘Youthful’ and therefore their neglect poses a serious challenge to national development.

**DEFINITIONS**

No matter how practical I want to be, I cannot do this without the foundation upon which I intend to put the blocks. I will therefore, crave your indulgence to define the operative words in this topic.

**NIGERIA YOUTH**

Who is a Nigerian Youth? The term ‘Youth’ has no luxury of definition. It varies in definition, form and approach. It is embedded in semantics, often confusing and conflicting. However, simply put, youth can be described as the time of life between childhood and adulthood. To some others, the term ‘youth’ connotes a ‘ threat to the status quo, while to others, they are the hope of the future’.

In Africa like other developed countries, nations draw a line on youth as the age at which a person is given equal treatment under the law-often referred to as the age of maturity. This age is often eighteen (18) years in many countries, and once a person attains this age he/she is considered to be an adult. However, the operational and statically definition of the term youth, often vary from country to country, depending on specific socio-cultural economic, political, institutional and environmental factors.

The United Nations General Assembly, the Commonwealth and the World Bank have attempted to homogenize the categorization of youth age. For the United Nations and World Bank, youths are those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years. And, for the Commonwealth, youth is the age bracket of 15 to 29 years.

For African countries, and in line with the African youth Charter and the National Youth Policy, a Nigerian Youth is defined as ‘all males and females aged between 18-35 years who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

**CHALLENGES**

The new Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language International Edition (2004) defines challenges as ‘a calling in question (of the truth of statements, rights, authority etc) something which tests a person’s qualities.

Nigeria has a predominantly youth population with one third of her estimated One Hundred and Sixty (160) Million people being youth from the age of 18 to 35 years. That is to say approximately, 54 million of our population are youths.

The huge youth population, no doubt, poses enormous challenges to the leadership of the country. It would indeed pose a challenge to any leader given the circumstances of our situation. Some of these challenges often manifest in youth restiveness’ which is widespread across the country; unemployment; lack of patience; and a growing discontent about the state of affairs in the country generally. I shall return to some of these themes later.

**NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The earlier quoted Webster’s Dictionary also defines the word ‘develop’ as ‘to cause to grow or expand to realise (what was a potential)’. Consequently, the concept of national development could be termed to mean the growing of or expansions of the indices or factors of development. It could also be explained as the realisation of the potentials of a nation.

National development could also mean ‘the development of infrastructures, such as roads, hospitals, airports, dams, schools as well as development in the people such as in their educational and health needs. As defined by Maminder Singh, national development would be the expansion and growth of people in a defined territory or government.

Nations, on the other hand, have been classified as either developed or underdeveloped. In order not to sound offensive, underdeveloped nations have been re-classified as developing countries.

While developed nations are the countries with high per capital income; countries with market oriented economies and the attendant higher standard of living of its citizens. Examples are the United States of America and Japan to mention but a few.

In contrast, underdeveloped, less developed or to use a patronising term, developing countries more often described as the so called third world countries are nations associated generally with poor standard of living of its citizens. Majority of its citizens usually live below the poverty line and in most instances survive with less than one (1) United States Dollar a day.

The indices of development are good infrastructure such as roads, decent and affordable housing, supply of portable water, regular electricity supply, qualitative health care services, access to education and above all, employment which is a guarantor of food on the table for everybody; the youth and the old alike.

**YOUTH CHALLENGES**

During the years, especially between 1985-2005 when most of the major global policy changes in youth development gradually swept through the world, Nigeria as a nation was faced with huge political and socio-economic challenges which largely translated to stunted economic growth with its attendant consequences on national development, with the youth coming through this experience as the most affected. For instance, over 50 % of the youth, majority of whom are rural youth live below One United State Dollars ($1.00) a day, and approximately, three million persons enter the labour market every year where only a few jobs exist to accommodate them.

Similarly in every single year, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) discharges an estimated 200,000 youths into the labour market with less than 30% of this figure gaining immediate employment.

Those with semblances of employment are involved in the informal sector and in other low level activities such as street hawking and they form the pool that is susceptible to crime and other vices.

High rate of youth unemployment has a direct impact on Nigeria’s economic growth and national development. Because it is often linked to high crime rates and social instability, as young people who are forced to find alternative means of livelihood may engage in negative vices.

On a more global or continental level, the challenges facing the Nigerian youth are not different from those facing the youths in other developing countries. The problem of population in Africa has created an impact on every facet of life and it has triggered the migration of our youth from the rural areas to the urban cities in search of greener pastures.

Some of them, after getting into the cities and discovering that they cannot make the necessary in roads, are introduced through friends, accomplices or through peer influence, to other things. Some become bus conductors, Okada riders, and area boys or may even end up in the hands of politicians who engage their services as touts and political thugs. For the girls, they easily take to prostitution as a way to make ends meet.

Rather than come to the city to waste away or be introduced to crime, the challenge for the youth should be how to make life in the rural areas of greener pastures for themselves. It is quite possible in this fast changing world of technology to be more creative and turn to hitherto natural resources that are being wasted into goldmines.

I will be listing some of the specific initiatives that the federal government through the ministry of youth development had introduced in recent time.

The youth attrition from our educational system indicates that of the estimated 15 million who enrol for primary education, only 1.4 million complete secondary school education. Out of this number, only about 750,000-gain admission into tertiary institutions with less than 200,000 graduating. A study in 2006 by the federal ministry of education showed that of the 33.9 million young people eligible for secondary education, only 6.4 million were in school as at the end of the academic session in 2005.

A good education will provide a youth with an increased chance of taking advantage of opportunities to be successful in life.

For instance, in the area of technology and especially with the advent of the social media, it is on record that the creator of Facebook which some of us use to communicate today, was a 19 year old Mark Zuckerberg, (at the time of its creation four years ago). He is today reputed to be the second youngest self-made billionaire in the world. He became a billionaire at the age of 23 and you know what, he created the Facebook from within the four walls of his room.

In the just concluded American presidential election, education and its funding was a major issue at the debates. Now re-elected President Barrack Obama said during the campaigns that he wanted to tax the rich the more in order to be able to put more money towards social issues including quality education, so that the American youth/ students can be more competitive, so that he/she can design and make good American products through manufacturing. He believes that through that, more jobs would be created in the US and that it would also bring back jobs that have been shipped abroad to China for economic reasons.

**YOUTH POPULATION**

In order for me to appropriately situate the symbiotic relationship between the youth and national development challenges, it is important for me to dwell a little more on the population of the Nigeria Youth.

We all recall that the National Population Commission conducted the last population and housing census in 2006. The priority tables on socio-demographic characteristics of Nigeria showed that young Nigerians aged 15-35 years constitute 35.6 per cent of the total population figures of the federation.

The breakdown shows that the youth population is fifty Million thirteen thousand, four hundred and thirty-two (50,013,432). This figure comprises of over twenty three million eight hundred thousand (23,800,000) male and over twenty-six million one hundred thousand (26,100,000) females.

This figure as at 2006 represents over one –third or 35.6% of the entire population of our one hundred and forty million. Presently the population of Nigerian youth is estimated to be over sixty Million.

This goes to underscore the fact that the growth and development of the youth must be taken seriously by any government. It was in realization of this fact that made President Olusegun Obasanjo to create a sole ministry for the youth in year 2007. The creation of this ministry has enhanced the coverage, depth and initiative in policy making and monitoring of the youth sector.

I shall proceed to explain some of the specific initiatives that government has in recent time introduced in order to make the youths useful to themselves and also make them to contribute their quota to national development.

**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN NIGERIA**

In our attempt to harness the potentials of Nigerian youth for accelerated national economic growth and sustainable development, emphasis has been on the delivery of a holistic youth empowerment programmes with specific intervention strategies to address key challenges that limit their abilities.

Since unemployment has been identified as a major challenge, the focus has been on implementing measures to facilitate the creation of business enterprise for youth. Therefore, the emphasis was on how to foster an entrepreneurship culture among young people, facilitating access to financé, encouraging innovation as key to wealth creation and poverty reduction.

Without doubt, youth employment would have a multiplier effect and have direct impact because when the youth are gainfully employed, it would reduce crime and other social vices.

Consequently, the Ministry of Youth Development under my leadership designed eight policies and programmes interventions, as major areas of focus to serve as instruments, to facilitate youth employment during my four-year tenure as Minister.

**REVIEW OF NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY**

The National Youth Policy outlines the guidelines and clearly specifies objectives to be achieved in youth development efforts, stating clearly key strategic areas of thrust, such as youth empowerment programmes, youth socialization/ education/ training, youth sports and recreation, youth employment, youth health, and the role of youth organizations. The policy also provides for appropriate enabling legislative, institutional, budgetary\funding, monitoring and evaluation framework for its effective implementation. The policy serves as a guiding document for youth development programmes, planning and implementation.

The policy, which was reviewed early in 2009 covers new areas of youth needs and aspirations and also integrated an implementation strategy and action plan. The document was approved for implementation by the Federal Executive Council and made specific provisions to address the problems of Street youth, jobless youth, female youth, youth in drug amongst other challenges facing Nigeria youth.

**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CENTRES**

As stated earlier, Youth Development Centres were established to provide functional, non-formal education to both school and out of school youth. Conceived originally in early 1980’s the centres offer applicable and employable skills to both categories of youth in the prevailing trades and vocations.

During my tenure, six centres were originally conceived to be built- one in each of the six geo-political zones of the country but eventually, this was increased to fifteen to take care of the interests of the National Assembly members who perceived the centres as a means of empowering the youth in their various constituencies and therefore ultimately made provisions in the national budget for their creation as constituency projects. As at the last count, we now have twenty-two youth development centres located in various parts of the country.

An ideal youth centre was conceived and designed to have a functional and fully equipped conferencing facilities, hostels/ Chalets, classrooms, sports/ recreational facilities, a standard foot ball field and vocational and skill building facilities. A fully functional and operational youth centre was designed to accommodate 1,500 trainees every 3 months which sums up to 6000 trained youth in every year.

The centres were expected to make Nigerian artisans globally competent and their products and skills competitive. This is being done in collaboration with the National Board for Technical Education, which will award graduates of the centres appropriate certification in each vocational skill.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, you will agree with me that this agenda would significantly increase the number of young people equipped with the skills and knowledge to enhance their capacity to support themselves and national development.

**NIGERIAN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT ACTION PLAN**

This was the first national youth employment policy in Nigeria formulated as a consequence on the United Nations Global Youth Employment Initiative (YEN) which Nigeria Volunteered since 2006 to become one of the lead countries. The initiative called for countries volunteering to be lead countries to formulate and implement National Youth Employment Action Plan.

The plan was developed by a team of experts in 2008 in close collaboration with the International Labour Organization and was approved for implementation by the Federal Executive Council.

In order to fast track the implementation of the NIYEAP, other major activities that followed as a major fall out were:

* Job creation Templates: This is a sectoral outline of job creation potentials and opportunities in various sectors of the country’s economy
* Launch of National Youth Employment Action Committee. This committee has representatives of key ministries, agencies and private sectors as members.
* National Youth Employment Summit. The summit, which held in 2010, accepted the urgency of the unemployment challenges and adopted resolutions to fast track employment generation in line with the goal of the employment Action Plan.

**NIGERIAN YOUTH PARLIAMENT**

The Nigeria Youth Parliament was established in year 2008 as a major innovation in youth leadership training, the birth of which marked a landmark decision that was widely acclaimed. It is designed to systematically train our young ones in democratic and leadership processes and procedures. All nations have their leadership elite corps from where future leaders emerged. For example, for countries in the Northern Hemisphere, namely Europe and North America, youth political engagement accounts for their successful and matured succession in political leadership. We all remember former American President; Mr. Bill Clinton was a college student when he met the former American President, J.F. Kennedy in the 60’s. The former President of Russia, Dimitry Medvedev had his political education as an assistant in President Vladimir Putin’s local council office. The Republican Vice Presidential candidate in the just concluded American election; Paul Ryan was a legislative aide to several American Congressmen such as Sam Brownback and former Speechwriter to Jack Kemp who became his mentor.

The Nigeria Youth Parliament has three youth Senators per state; sits in the House of Representatives Chambers during the annual break; elects its principal officers, deliberate on national issues, and pass resolutions especially on matters affecting the youth. Their resolutions are forwarded to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with a copy to both the Speaker of the House of Representative and the Federal Ministry of Youth Development.

The goal is to ensure that nation wide and at all levels of governments, there will be a corps of trained youth, exposed, equipped and groomed to play leadership role in the future development of the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am happy to report to you that the parliament has been achieving its objective as a breeding ground for youth leadership training because, the first Speaker of the Parliament, Hon. Luke Onofiok is presently the Chairman of Finance and Budget Committee of Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly.

**YOUTH MAINSTREAMING**

The National Youth Mainstreaming Policy was designed to put youth concerns at the centre of programmes and policy implementation across ministries, departments and agencies of government. Youth mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications (for youth) of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels.

It is a strategy for making youth concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies in all political, economic and social spheres so that youth benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated- ECOSOC Agreed Conclusions 1997/24.

Youth mainstreaming is particularly important because it will ensure that young people are beneficiaries of a certain percentage of the budget, programmes and initiatives of various sectors of government and other stakeholders in national development.

**National Youth Council of Nigeria**

National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) is the Umbrella body of all youth organizations in Nigeria. The council has chapters in all the 36 State of the federation and the 774 local government areas. The council engages in youth development activities with the active support of government at all levels. It is instructive to State that during our tenure, Nigeria through the Council occupied the presidency of pan African Youth Union. We provided financial and diplomatic support for Nigeria’s candidate, which gave victory to our youth representative at the Congo Brazzaville election in 2009.

The last time that Nigeria occupied such a key and strategic position in the pan African Youth body was in 1960 when our late President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was the General Secretary.

**NATIONAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INDEX**

The inability of governments all over the world to measure in scientific terms the improvement and impact of government programmes has been identified by the United Nations as a major gap in youth development. As a consequence, the U N urged member nations to create a national youth development index through which the status of youth can be verified and the impact of government policy ascertained. The first nation to implement this initiative was Brazil, followed by India and Malaysia. It is of historical significance that Nigeria was the fourth country in the world and the first on the African continent to create a national youth development index when we signed an agreement with a local consultant in 2008.

The Deputy Secretary General of the Commonwealth of Nations while addressing the African Regional Senior Government officials meeting in Abuja in June 2010 commended the Nigeria government for taking this bold move, stressing that it is an affirmation of the government commitment to addressing the challenges of youth in national development headlong.

**REFORM OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE CORPS (NYSC)**

I will not bore this audience with the historical facts that necessitated the birth of the NYSC by the General Yakubu Gowon administration in 1973 that was shortly after the civil war. However, please permit me to dwell on the comatose state that we met the programme in 2007 with the raging national debate about whether the scheme should be scrapped or not due majorly to the myriads of operational challenges confronting the scheme. Some of the challenges we met included-

* Backlog of service call up
* Irregular payment of corps members monthly allowances
* Decrepit state of orientation camps across the country
* Political and social pressure for increment in corps members’ allowances.
* Phenomenal increase in the number of qualified graduates from 2,345 at inception in 1973 to about 170,000 in 2011.

However, we took the bull by the horn, leading to the following notable attainments up to May 2011.

* We commenced the model of a staggered orientation system, which ensured that in a year, two or three batches of corps members were called up for national service. This system not only answered and resolved the challenges of over-crowding at orientation camps but also ensure the immediate mobilization of eligible graduates as they are graduating from their various institutions.
* Similarly, the backlogs of those who had been waiting for upward of a year or two were cleared within a couple of years. It is gratifying to note that as at date, there are no more waiting period for our eligible graduates.
* Alongside the challenges of late call up was the irregular payment of the monthly allowances of corps members. The situation was such that they were owed between two to six months’ allowances leading to disillusionment within the scheme.
* A high powered committee of the then Vice President, His Excellency Dr. Goodluck Jonathan recommended an increased federal allocation to the scheme which not only resolved the challenges of payment of the backlog of arrears, but also took care of the increment in monthly corpers allowances from ~~N~~7,000.00 to ~~N~~9,000.00 the payment of which we effected in 2007.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, our recommendation of yet another increase in the monthly allowance of corps members in line with the increase in the national minimum wage from ~~N~~9,000 to ~~N~~19,000 was approved by Mr. President in July 2011 barely over a month after we left office.

Other notable achievements recorded were:

* Increase in the building of ultra modern orientation camps in many states of the federation.
* Inclusion of entrepreneurship and skill acquisition training in the enabling act of the scheme.
* Additional responsibility for corps members to respond to national emergencies. Note the credibility they have given to our electoral system since INEC started utilising their services as ad-hoc staff for electoral processes.
* Agro- Entrepreneurship training which is a deliberate strategy to solve the unemployment challenge and tap into the potentiality of the agro-processing sector for wealth creation and poverty alleviation in collaboration with the office of the MDG in the presidency. Selected corps members are trained in agric processing and are advanced a soft loan of ~~N~~ 250,000.00 to start their own agro- business at the end of the service year. Remember what I said earlier about making the rural areas of greener pastures.
* Computerization of mobilization – Corps members are now accessing their postings online as opposed to the old manual system.
* Completion and commissioning of Directorate Headquarters. This is an accomplishment that touched the hearts of many stakeholders within the scheme. The completion and commissioning of the Directorate Headquarters of the scheme which started 25 years earlier was appropriately named ‘Yakubu Gowon House’. This modern edifice, which was approved to be so named by the late President, His Excellency Umar Yar'dua was in recognition of the foresight of the founder of the scheme in 1973.

**CITIZENSHIP AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING CENTER (C&LTC)**

Aside the NYSC, the Citizenship and Leadership Training Centre (C&LTC) is another federal parastatal under the ministry of youth development that was established to train our youth in citizenship and leadership education for national development. Unknown to many, the centre has trained thousands of students and youth leaders over the years. With training centers located in the six geo- political zones, the C&LTC regularly trains school prefects in secondary schools, officers of student – Government union in tertiary institutions and key leaders of the youth bodies.

As a mark of its significant position in citizen education for national development, the center is involved in the training of former Niger Delta militants. In early 2011, about 300 repentant militants who benefitted from the government’s amnesty programme passed out of the center’s Jos training center.

**YOUTH RESPONSIBILITIES**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen before I conclude this paper, it is important to make the point and note that the youth themselveshave the responsibility to key into the renewed national attention for their re-engagement in the process of national development.

The challenge of youth mobilization for national development is a cross cutting issue that should involve the family, the school, various levels of government and as well as the civil society. This is the whole emphasis of the new National Youth Policy already approved by the Federal Executive Council.

In the new policy, specific provisions were made for the rights and responsibilities of youth, governments and the civil society at large. It is not enough to provide for youth participation and engagement, but their responsibilities are explicitly stated. Our youth must be patriotic, disciplined, hardworking, honest and law abiding and must be ready to contribute their quota to national development.

**CONCLUSION**

The Nigerian youth faces many challenges in their bid to contribute to national development. Those challenges, as started in this paper are not unique to the Nigerian youth alone. They vary from one country to the other.

A common affliction of the youth in the developing countries is poverty. Poverty eradication is an ethical social, political and economic imperative of mankind generally. To meet the challenges of today’s youth, government at all levels would have to address the root causes of poverty and provide basic needs for all and ensure that the poor and the youth have access to production resources including credit and training

In our little way, when we had the chance to make the difference, we did. Some of the initiatives we conceptualized and executed in the ministry of youth development during my stewardship have been enumerated in this paper. It is desirable that our youth stop being cynical about government programmes and initiatives. Our youth must seize all legitimate avenues and opportunities provided by the government and their environment to contribute their quota to national development.

I thank you all for your attention.

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