

## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTHS IN NATION BUILDING

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.36594.22726

### **Abstract**

*The role of children and youth in nation building cannot be overemphasized. This is so because children and youths are important to nation building and must be valued. We should no longer look down or pay lip service to the issues concerning the development of our children and their welfare. The worth we place on our children determines the kind of investment we place on them. We shall not have the great nation of our dream in this country unless we have a positive change of attitude by investing heavily in the development of children and youths. This is the most appropriate time more than ever before, for all and sundry, that is government policy formulators, academicians, entrepreneurs, philanthropists and business barons to deliberately concentrate efforts and resources on holistic moral, academic, medical and social as well as scientific technological development of every child. This is very important because more than one hundred years since the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern protectorates into a single political entity in 1914, nationhood has continued to elude the country largely due to the numerous challenges emanating from the neglect of the children and youth. Hunger, frustration, hatred and anger still grip our land in such strangulating manner that we can only perceive a cloud of hopelessness threatening to crush them and truncate their future. They have been told that they are the leaders of tomorrow and builder of a virile nation, yet there is no evidence of arrangement on ground to equip them for the leadership responsibilities. It is on this background that this work examines the conceptual clarification of children, youths and nation building. The paper also highlights the situation of children and youths in national development. Finally, the paper gave recommendation and conclusion. The work adopts diverse secondary sources (such as books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, internet sources and unpublished works) and thematic approach in its analysis. Reports obtained from these sources formed the bulk of this research's tool of assessment.*

**Keywords:** Role, Children, Youths, Nation Building, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

Nation building cannot be built solely from the top – down but requires the active participation of ordinary citizens in the shaping of a common political will. It is the citizens who must provide the necessary legitimacy to the new state. Commitment to the common good, and to a shared community are essential because effective collective decision-making often entails imposing on various participants' sacrifices for the common good (e.g. to protect the environment for future generations). If these sacrifices are not backed up by shared values and bonds, the key elements of community, they will not be treated as legitimate and hence will either have to be brought about through force, or will not be effectively achieved.

From the foregoing, therefore, it is pertinent to include all level of citizens in the process of nation building, which the children and youths are parts. The role of children and youths in the process of nation building in recent times has generated serious discussions and clear-cut policy agenda which are necessary for the development, plan and policy action of any country. According to Uhunmwangho and Oghator, the happenings appear that the majority of our youths are on the edge of reason and good conduct. Rather than exploring the opportunities for securing better lives, facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world, and thinking about the future of their nation, it is quite disappointing that the majority of our youths knows more on how to showcase anti-social behaviour<sup>1</sup>. It is shocking to realize that the constructive attitude of youths in traditional society of Nigeria has gone with the wind<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, governments at all levels of governance, parents, guardians and all the stakeholders in our youth developmental processes are finally waking up to the realities that the surprisingly negative attitudes of our youths can be traced to the fact that we have tens of millions of unemployed Nigerian youths and millions others living in abject poverty, even having seen the four walls of universities<sup>3</sup>.

From the above situation, there have been considerable efforts around the world aimed at addressing the ever-increasing needs of the children and youths population. This ranges from proper upbringing, empowerment to call for appropriate programme, services and advocacy effort to harness and enhance the children and youths' capacities and capabilities for nation building. This therefore shows the importance of children and youths' participation in nation building which is the main thrust of this paper.

The significance of children and youths' participation in nation building is of apt relevance considering their vast majority in the world's population. Udensi, Daasi, Emeh and Zukbee succinctly elucidated that, the numerical strength of the youth folks is an unlimited avenue to which the socio-economic development improved<sup>4</sup>. Hence, if the children and youths are sidelined in the articulation of any nation building programme, experts have argued that it will be impossible to reach the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets, particularly on extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1), child mortality (MDG 4), material health (MDG 5) and environmental sustainability (MDG 7).

Based on this understanding children and Youths are better able to make choices that support the pursuit of educational goals and the development of life skills necessary for national and local leadership positions. Ignoring maximum commitment and engagement of children and youths in national development today, will have dire global consequences for decades. To better understand how to move the children and youths forward towards nation building, this paper examines the rationale for expanding the youth frontier from active participation in nation building. The rest of the paper is divided into five (5) sections outlined thus: conceptual clarification (children, youth and nation building), the situation of children and youths in Nigeria, the importance of children and youths for national development, suggestive approach for youth empowerment and development in Nigeria, recommendation, conclusion and reference.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

The problem in an intellectual discourse of this nature is usually concerned with the definition of terms.

#### **Children**

Children is the plural of a child. Who then is a child? Biologically, a child is a human between the stage of birth and puberty. Some biological definitions of child include the fetus, as being unborn child. The legal definition of child generally refers to a minor, otherwise known as a person younger than the age of maturity – child may also describe a relationship with a parent or, metaphorically, an authority figure, or signify group membership in a clan, tribe, or religion, it can also signify being strongly affected by a specific time, place, or circumstance, as in “a child of nature” or “a child of the sixties”<sup>5</sup>. U.S. National Library of medicine defined a child as a person 6 to 12 years of age. An individual 2 to 5 years old is a

child, preschool<sup>6</sup>. For the purpose of this work, we will exploit the age bracket of 0 – 17 in looking at the meaning of child.

Being that as it may, it is pertinent to note that children play vital role in the building of nation and developing human resources. The government therefore should fulfill the needs of children and also making efforts to make them useful citizens of the country.

## **Youth**

Youth is the time of life when one is young, and often means the time between childhood and adulthood (maturity)<sup>7</sup>. It is also defined as “the appearance, freshness, vigor, spirit, etc., characteristic of one who is young”<sup>8</sup>. Youth is the stage of constructing the self-concept. The self-concept of youth is influenced by variables such as peers, lifestyle, gender, and culture<sup>9</sup>. It is a time of a person’s life when their choice is most likely to affect their future<sup>10</sup>.

The National Youth Policy in its position on the meaning of youth posited that “the way in which a nation defines it youth is related to the abject conditions and realities that exist on ground especially historical and contemporary socio-economic and political issues that need to be addressed<sup>11</sup>. For the purpose of this work, we will exploit the age bracket of 18 – 35 to look at the meaning of youth, with emphasis that “this category represents the most active, most volatile, and yet most vulnerable segment of the population, socio-economically and in other respects. It is also helpful to add that progressive mindedness is one of the defining characteristics of youth<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, the current thinking is that people beyond the age of 36 who share the ideals of a progressive society are also considered as being youthful. Whatever the age limit, youths are men and women considered to be energetic, vibrant and powerful, who are often engaged in social enterprises that requires physical strength and mental capacity<sup>13</sup>.

## **Nation Building**

Though widely used the term “nation building” remains imprecise and contested in much of the policy documentation, its meaning is assumed rather than defined<sup>14</sup>. There is also a tendency to use the term ‘nation building’ interchangeably with that of ‘state building’ and ‘nation building’. Despite this, it should be noted that, while closely related, ‘state building’ and ‘nation building’ are distinct processes. ‘State building’ is seen as the task of building functioning

state capable of fulfilling the essential attributes of modern statehood. 'Nation building' on the other hand, refers to more abstract process of development a shared sense of identity or community among the various groups making up the population of a particular state.

According to Nwabughuogu, nation building is a search for nationhood. It is a process of developing national consciousness among individuals and groups to cultivate a sense of love for a given nation and to accept their commitment to a nation state<sup>15</sup>. It also involves the creation of a favourable environment that will sustain the sense of love developed by the individuals and groups for the nation state. Distinguished in this way, state building focuses on the practical task of building or strengthening state institutions, while nation building is more concerned with the character of relations between citizens and their state.

### **The Situation of Children and Youths in Nigeria**

Nation building is a dynamic process involving all segments of the locality, including the often overlooked and undermined children and youths' population. Children and youths represent a vast and often untapped resources for immediate and long-term community development efforts. They also provide an invaluable resource for the progress of any society as well as its development. As youth are brought into and connected with national issues and programmes, they can participate actively and contribute to decision-making at all levels but often times they have been ignored and excluded.

The proportion of children under the age of 15 in 2010 was 44.0%, 53.2% was between the 15 and 65 years of age, while 2.7% was 65 years or older<sup>16</sup>. Apart from the issue of numerical strength, global trend is towards emphasizing the primacy of children and youths in the developmental process, with deliberate efforts by national governments to create conditions that will encourage children and youths to utilize their energies and resourcefulness for growth and sustainable development of their nations.

However, the prevailing conditions in much of the developing nations, especially Nigeria, have seriously extenuated the potentials of the children and youths as agent of social change. These challenges range from the economic and social to the cultural. The treacherous triangle of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in which the bulk of Nigeria youths are currently trapped, has severely challenged their sensibility and has in the long run given rise to what sociologists term attitudes of fatalism, resignation and acceptance of the situation<sup>17</sup>. The persistence

of these social problems has created an environment where youth are cheaply available for manipulation by self-seeking politicians. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are interrelated conditions that generate human needs and therefore constitute a state of deprivation.

As the children and youth continue to remain in this state, there is pent-up emotions and untapped energies. They provide cheap labour to execute the design of political gladiators and ethnic champions.

### **The Important of Involving Children and Youths in National Development**

As said earlier, all citizens are to be involved in building or developing a nation. Thus, the involvement of children and youths in national development is a must. In fact, children and youths play one of the most important roles in nation building. They are a crucial segment of a nation's development. Without children, the world is not complete, it will snowball into an unexpected end and more so, the children of today are future leaders of tomorrow. We are to help these children embrace national patriotism by mentoring them to become good citizens for nation building. Children also have a part to play in making Nigeria great, they should not consider themselves as too young to contribute their quota to nation building.

The youth as an important component of the civil society is in the process of self-discovery in the era characterized by the intense movement of the social forces of democratization and globalization. As they interact with other actors in the social system, the youth express their interest and needs, they relate with relevant political institution and political processes to articulate their views and promote shared interest<sup>18</sup>. The roll of education in positioning and providing youth with access to effective engagement in national development which is a way of incorporating them in the decision making process of the nation's governance, nation building activities where they are welcomed, with accurate and comprehensive information which will empower them to make healthy decision

### **Suggestive Approach for Youth Empowerment and Involvement in Nation Building in Nigeria**

There is no how the untapped capacities in youth can be tapped and utilized with an -inclusive participatory and synergy approach, thus a suggestive dimension for involving the youth in nation building. Children and youths participation refer to the involvement of children and youth in responsible, challenging action that

meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and decision-making affecting others in an activity whose impact or consequences is extended to others that is, outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. Rajani notes that, it is only through participation that youth develop skills, build competencies, form aspiration, gain confidence and attain valuable resources. This shows that youth participation therefore is a product and strategy of sustainable human development

Children and youths constitute the larger part of the nation's population, these large numbers of young people are an opportunity, an investment to their country. Children and youths' participation in nation building programmes / activities therefore is to:

- a. Strengthen young people's abilities to meet their own subsistence needs;
- b. Prevent and reduce vulnerabilities to economic, political and socially unstable environments;
- c. Promotes ownership and sustainability of change interventions;
- d. Help gain entry into target communities and build up trust and social capital.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Nigeria having children and youth as the larger number of her population, cannot afford to lock out this young people if they must compete politically, technologically and scientifically in order to align itself with the sustainable development in Africa in particular and the developed world in general. Nigeria can build a strong and viable nation if and only if there is an existence of common values, beliefs, attitudes, effective leadership and a will to live together as a nation. Such transformation must allow every group (especially the children and youths' population) to participate in the economic, political and the social spheres of the nation.

The following recommendations are discernibly based on the following:

- a. Children and youths should be given the opportunity to develop their capacities through balanced education and exposure.
- b. Skills acquisition and entrepreneurship will help reduce idleness among youth and keep them from being involved in crime and other activities that are counterproductive in nation building.

- c. Children and youths should be made relevant and involved in leadership at different level of government.
- d. We must moderate our demands on our children and youths and as well condition their behavior in line with our cultural values.
- e. The children and youth should be encouraged to involve in grass-root participation in government, like the governor Ifeanyi Okowa of Delta state who started following the powers that be in Delta state, until he finally got to the most exalted position in the state.
- f. Children and youth should form a common front in order to encourage young people's participation in nation building.
- g. It is obvious that no one will give them power on the platter of gold they need to desire it and work for it through discipline and hard work.

## Endnotes

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