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**YOUTHS IN NATIONAL LEADERSHIP: THE WAY FORWARD**

**JOSEPHINE E. ELEKWA, PhD.**

**Department of Educational Foundations  
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education  
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt**

**And**

**ANELE, JUSTICE IRECHUKWU**

**Department of Educational Foundations  
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education  
Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt**

**Abstract**

*This paper discusses the role of the youths in national leadership; the way forward. The paper was premised on the fact that youths' inclusion in national leadership is imperative as no nation can prosper without its youths making contributions in government. It also aims at adding to the ongoing discourse on youth participation to issues of national concern and to supplement existing information available about the values and aspirations of young people towards participation in national leadership. This paper concludes by making recommendations that every national leadership plan must involve the youths at all levels of planning and implementation. It also made recommendations on the need to institutionalize youths participation in national leadership.*

*Keywords: Youths, National Leadership.*

**Introduction**

The role of youths in National Leadership cannot be down played in any society. Young people play a very crucial role in the prospect of leadership in the country: "Youth" is generally perceived as the younger generation of any society within the time frame of childhood and adulthood (Macmillian Dictionary 1981). There are variations in societies of the range that constitutes the age brackets, reason being that an individual's actual maturity may not correspond to their chronological age.

On the same Flank, the United Nations opined that youths are persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNESCO, [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)). "The youths are recognized not only as future leaders but also as actors and foundations of our society, with a direct stake in the development process of our great nation ..." (Aishat Ismail, New Nigerian, 2001). It is worthy of note here to say that, the greatest assets any nation can be proud of are the youths. They are the vital resources worth of investment by any country as well as the valued possession for national leadership. The emerging global and regional consensus on youth development clearly

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underscores the need to ensure the inclusion of youth perspectives in the development process along with the effective participation of youth in national leadership.

The youth are both demographically significant, and an essential and dynamic part of the world's human resources. They make tremendous contributions to society at all levels as actors, players, partners and strategic catalyst for leadership process at the national level.

There is hardly any function, be it social, cultural or economic, where youths have not played part: from leaders of crusades to national presidents, from prolific writers to media pundits. Yet the acknowledgement of their contributions to human and societal development has not been fully appreciated.

### **Definitions of Youth**

Defining 'Youth', however is not a simple task since there is no international agreement on what the term implies or a clear-cut indicator such as age intervals to define it. Thus, the definition of who is a youth in a society will depend on a number of factors; i.e cultural and political. They are a special group within the age bracket of 18 years and 35 years that make diverse socio-economic contributions. Tsegaye (2006).

Mudaly (1999), goes further, dismissing the idea that youths are a homogenous group and arguing that the concept is flawed because it infers there are more similarities than differences. Yet, some have argued that youths are deviants, criminals or simply ill-informed. One of them portrays them as irresponsible and subject to caprice.

Youth is therefore more accurately defined as a relational stage, where young people develop into unique individuals (Wyn and White, 1997), Kenway, (1993) argued that "youth" is a slippery concept" ... when does it start and finish? ... some would say that there is a fluidity that transcends demarcation." Kenway [1993], further argues that there are instances in any adult life where behaviour or attitudes could be construed as 'childish' and in the same way, young people can display remarkably adult actions or perceptions.

The Pan-African Youth Charter (2006) defines youth or young people as "every human being between the ages of 15 and 30 years." The Charter, however, makes this qualification: "Considering the transitional nature of youth that is influenced by social, economic, political, cultural and others factors, this definition does not exclude youth or young people below and above the specified age – range who may be engaged in this transition."

The United Nations General Assembly first defined youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24 in 1985 for the International Youth Year (UNIDESIA, 2004). In 1995, when the General Assembly adopted the World programme of Action for youth to the 2000 and beyond, it again defined youth as people aged 15 – 24 years old, but acknowledged that the age range included in the term varies among different countries and societies (UNIDESIA 2004). In Nigeria for the purpose of executing the National Youth Policy, the youth is defined as comprising all young persons between the age of 18 and 35 who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (NYP, 2001, 2008).

Sigudhla (2004), opined that the concept of youth in a 21<sup>st</sup> century context has led some authors to believe that many of the routes into adulthood that were previously open to young people are no longer available because of social and economic changes. This leads to the period of their dependency being extended. The age of transition from youth to adulthood will thus

increase as young people's capacity to achieve adult status by carrying out certain tasks or reaching goals decreases.

Many countries see youth as ending at the age when a person is given equal treatment under the law – often referred to as the 'Voting age'. In many countries this happens when the young person is 18 years old. After this age, the young person is considered adult. In spite of the disparity in these views, it is generally agreed that youth is the period that marks the physical, psychological and social transition into adulthood. Based on this characterization many government policies consider youth to include people 13 to 25 years old (Wyn and White, 1997).

### **Youth and the Concept of National Leadership**

Checkoway (1992) defines youth in National leadership "as the process of involving young people at the national level in the decisions that affect their lives. These includes numerous and diverse activities, from forming committees and holding meetings, to lobbying decision – makers and policy – makers. I.e the active participation of the youths in the process of effecting positive changes in the society, with regards to how the society is run. Youths taking positions of authorities like in the areas of representing their constituencies at the national levels, ministerial appointments, heads of government parastatals etc.

In an era of democratic dispensation, the most active and vibrant group are the youths whose onus of the responsibility lies on them to push for a better society, through constant pressure for change of draconian legislations. Some decisions of government that do not have a human face are brought to the attention of those at the corridors of power to effect a change.

Youth in national leadership can thus be regarded as the process of guiding and designing micro and macro – society by and with young persons. It is a democratic process in which young persons challenges society to bring about positive changes for sustainable development (World Youth Report, 2007).

There is the promotion of Youth Resilience. Resiliency–based approaches involve community–wide, intersectoral collaboration. This approach sees youth as more than the focus of a given problem; they are part of the solution. Youth participation promotes resiliency by building on young people's strengths, including energy, enthusiasm and creativity. The opportunities for meaningful youth involvement in national leadership in problem solving, goal setting and planning are major factors in helping youth withstand the negative impacts of neglect, poverty and other problems.

The drive by the youths pressing for a better society cum better conditions for their existence is necessitated by the desire to mount the positions of leadership as to put things in right perspectives. Oputa (2018). Some youths today are members of the federal House of representatives making laws for the development of the Nigeria society. Youth participation has a positive impact on Adults. Zeldin et al (2000). Concludes that young people can have powerful and positive effects on adults and organizations, but that the right conditions need to be in place for positive change to occur. According to their findings, for young people to achieve ownership of decision making processes, they require support as well as challenges, voice, opportunity for action based on a cause, skill building adult, structure, affirmation, and a project that is relevant to them.

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As Francis Bacon observed (cited in Kester, 2002), that youths bring fresh energy to the issues they address, which can revitalize overworked, cynical government consult too long. They provide contributions that are extremely beneficial in forcing organizations, states and the nation in general to look beyond the comfort where decisions are taken according to tested approaches. This boosts creativity and can lead to new solutions to policy problems.

Checkoway, (1992) opined that youths in national leadership improves academic achievement by increasing young people's substantive knowledge and practical skills as a result of solving real problems. It also strengthens their sense of social responsibility and long – term civic values. Rather than simply accepting their situation, youths are more likely to think critically and to actively challenge their circumstances what this portends is that, unless youths are given the opportunity to work both at the state and national levels in partnership with the adults to meaningfully determine the course of their lives, their personal development will be restricted. They will not mature and contribute to societal development.

### **The Way Forward**

Youths' interests are frequently neglected and overlooked in contemporary national leadership issues. They are in favour of those of more powerful interest groups. It is not necessarily the case that the welfare of youth is deliberately disregarded, but because their voices are not heard and the impact of public policy on their lives is discussed in decision – making forms. Thus, there should be (a) comprehensive efforts by government to listen to youths and engage the youths in the process of strengthening participatory democracy. Youths involvement can lead to better decisions and outcomes. Participation promotes the well-being and development of young people, strengthens their commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy, and provides them a form of protection, (b) their should be an unhindered access to Qualitative Educational opportunities, reducing youth illiteracy and improving the coverage and quality of education and training are potentially powerful instruments for reducing levels of income distribution inequality, schooling and training increase one's productivity and as such increase young people's chances of obtaining higher wages and increasing the social contributions they make. Similarly, achieving a higher individual's more flexible and able to adapt to new job opportunities. It endows the individual with the ability to manage resources more efficiently, to conceive new ideas and new frontiers of production and contribution to overall national development. (c) A comprehensive agenda should be developed and strengthening opportunities for youths to learn their rights and responsibilities. This will help in from mental and environmental involvements, removing obstacles that will hinder their full involvement in national leadership. On the other flank, taking away barriers that will affect full contribution of youths to society and respecting, inter alia, freedom of association, encouraging and promoting youth associations through financial, educational and technical support and promotion of their activities.

There should be improvement in access to information in order to enable young people to make better use of their opportunities to participate in decision – making.

### **Conclusion**

The value of youths in national leadership needs to be full recognized at all levels ranging from the local community which is the nursery ground for future leadership

involvement to the national and international arena. However, recognition is not the same as action, and progress in the area of practical implementation has been slow. Many initiatives may be limited to particular issues; their involvement in decision – making is rarely sought, young people remain marginal to most democratic processes. Minimal participation is meaningless, as it does not empower youths to influence outcomes and achieve real change in national leadership.

The demographic picture of youth makes it patently evident that engaging youths fully in national leadership is not a matter of choice, but rather an imperative for national development.

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