



Youth Unemployment and Social Disintegration in Nigeria: Exploring Pathways to Economic Empowerment and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, grapples with a rapidly expanding youth demographic that constitutes a substantial proportion of its population. Despite the potential benefits of this demographic dividend, the pervasive issue of youth unemployment emerges as a significant obstacle to the nation's developmental aspirations. This paper examined youth unemployment and social disintegration in Nigeria, with a focus on exploring avenues for economic empowerment and social cohesion. The study relies on secondary data sources, primarily drawn from national and international journals, pertinent textbooks, and government official gazettes. Positioned within the theoretical frameworks of Human Capital Theory and Critical Theory, this evaluative research reveals that social networks play a pivotal role in shaping employment opportunities for Nigerian youths. Those with robust social connections exhibit a higher likelihood of securing employment, while those lacking such networks encounter heightened challenges in navigating the job market. The prevalence of youth unemployment emerges as a substantial impediment to social integration, exposing disenfranchised youth to increased vulnerability to social exclusion. This, in turn, poses risks to broader social cohesion and stability. The study underscores the pressing need for targeted interventions to address economic disparities, improve educational opportunities, and diversify the economy. By fostering an environment conducive to skill development and entrepreneurship, Nigeria can harness the untapped potential of its youth demographic, paving the way for sustained economic growth and development.

Keywords: Youth Unemployment; Social Disintegration; Economic Empowerment; & Social Cohesion.

I. Introduction

Nigeria, as the most populous nation in Africa, grapples with a burgeoning youth demographic that represents a significant portion of its population. Despite this demographic dividend, the prevalence of youth unemployment has cast a shadow over the nation's developmental aspirations. Unemployment not only deprives the youth of economic opportunities but also threatens the social fabric, as disenfranchised individuals may experience heightened vulnerability to social exclusion, unrest, and disintegration (Adebayo & Adebayo, 2017; Ogwunike & Ezenekwe, 2019; World Bank, 2019).

The significance of the youth, locally and globally, cannot be overstated. Ensuring their access to employment and economic opportunities is not only justified but crucial. Conversely, the perils and unintended repercussions of youth unemployment and poverty are immeasurable. These issues have the potential to disrupt the very foundations of a nation, jeopardizing its stability and social cohesion. Moreover, youth unemployment contributes to social disruption, diminishes national economic productivity, fosters crime and disorder, and ultimately results in a negative fiscal balance due to a reduced tax base. Much like the adage "an idle man is the devil's workshop," youth unemployment poses a severe threat to national and political stability, fuels violent crime, and poses a significant danger to the overall national security of a state or region (Idowu, 2020).



In this context, Fatih (2016) argues that the youth hold a distinctive significance on a global scale. Their vigor, talent, creativity, open-mindedness, dynamism, and entrepreneurial spirit position them as pivotal engines for accomplishing developmental objectives. Therefore, integrating youths into the labour force and economies becomes imperative for realizing development goals. Serving as the foundational and predominant workforce of any economy, youths constitute a vast and diverse pool of talents. Proper utilization and maximization of their strengths can greatly contribute to the prosperity of an economy. Conversely, neglecting to harness the economic potentials of the youth poses a significant risk, akin to standing at the edge of a cliff, creating a perilous situation and fostering an environment conducive to social disorder.

Globally, the youth grapple disproportionately with issues of unemployment, underemployment, vulnerable employment, and working poverty. Even amid economic growth, numerous economies struggle to absorb sizable youth populations into the labour market, as highlighted in the UN World Youth Report of 2013. The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasized the challenging process young people undergo when entering the workforce (ILO 2017), echoing the sentiment from the UN World Youth Report (2013) that prolonged disconnection hampers their integration into the labour market. The National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria further underscores the challenges faced by young individuals, pointing out their higher likelihood of encountering difficulties in securing full-time employment, often resorting to idleness or engaging in part-time or menial jobs (NBS 2018).

Olaleye (2019) asserts that the correlation between youth unemployment and crime is substantial. The dangerous synergy arises when unemployed youth, armed with firearms, become susceptible tools in the hands of desperate politicians, manipulated as political thugs to perpetrate electoral violence. Furthermore, Olaleye (2019) contends that impoverished youths exhibit a heightened tendency toward juvenile delinquency and criminal activities, coupled with an increased proximity to drug and alcohol abuse. In summary, the idleness of mind resulting from youth unemployment serves as a significant incentive for criminal behaviour among the youths.

In the dynamic landscape of contemporary Nigeria, the nexus between youth unemployment and social integration has emerged as a critical focal point for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners

alike. This paper unravels the multifaceted dimensions of the pervasive challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria and its intricate relationship with the broader fabric of social integration. Against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving economic and sociocultural milieu, understanding the complexities inherent in this relationship is imperative for forging sustainable pathways to both economic empowerment and social cohesion.

Clarification of the Key Terms and Literature Review

In this subsection, it is crucial to provide clear definitions for key concepts used in the context of this paper. These essential concepts encompass youth unemployment, social disintegration, economic empowerment, and social cohesion.

To begin with, youth unemployment is a combination of two words 'youth' and 'unemployment'; from a demographic standpoint, youth is often defined by a specific age range. The United Nations (UN) (2018), for example, conceptualised youth as individuals aged 15 to 24. This perspective emphasizes the transition from adolescence to adulthood and considers the demographic characteristics associated with this life stage. Erikson, (1968) and Arnett, (2000) focus on the social roles and psychological characteristics associated with youth. They emphasize the importance of identity exploration, self-discovery, and the pursuit of independence during the youth phase. This perspective considers the societal expectations and developmental milestones unique to this life stage. According to Coleman, (2000) from a political and policy standpoint, the definition of youth often influences eligibility for certain rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Governments and international organizations may define youth based on age brackets for policy planning and implementation. This perspective considers the legal and political implications associated with youth status. In a simplistic term, youth is typically defined as the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, characterized by significant physical, emotional, and social development. This period is often associated with individuals transitioning from dependence to independence and acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for adult responsibilities.

Unemployment on the other hand, from an economic standpoint, is often viewed as a labour market imbalance, where the number of individuals



seeking employment exceeds the number of available job opportunities. Economic perspectives focus on factors such as supply and demand for labour, wage levels, and government policies affecting employment (Blanchard & Summers, 1989). From a broader perspective, Unemployment is a socio-economic phenomenon characterized by the absence of gainful employment for individuals actively seeking work. Unemployment can have economic, social, and psychological consequences, impacting individuals, families, and communities. Various factors, including economic conditions, policy decisions, and technological changes, contribute to fluctuations in unemployment rates (Giddens, 1991; Paul & Moser, 2009; Standing, 2011).

When these two concepts are compared, it becomes evident that 'youth' denotes a life stage defined by age and specific developmental attributes, while 'unemployment' pertains to an economic condition associated with job availability and individuals' involvement in gainful employment. Consequently, youth unemployment specifically addresses the experience of joblessness within the youth demographic, emphasizing the intersection of age and participation in the labour market.

Building on these conceptualizations, unemployment stands as a significant threat to social stability globally, with the current worldwide rate at 6.6%. A recent ILO (2020) report indicated that nearly one billion people, approximately 30% of the global workforce, face unemployment or underemployment in both industrialized and developing nations. The ILO warned that the escalating numbers of "working poor" could exacerbate social and economic challenges associated with the high jobless rate.

In comparison to other nations, Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, grapples with a severe unemployment crisis, currently at 33.3%, up from 27.1% in the second quarter of 2020, marking the second-highest rate globally according to Bloomberg (NBS, 2021). The NBS (2021) report highlights that over 60% of Nigeria's working-age population is less than 34 years old. The unemployment rate for individuals aged 15 to 24 years is 53.4% in the fourth quarter, while those aged 25 to 34 face a rate of 37.2%. The unemployment rate for women is 35.2%, surpassing the 31.8% rate for men. Nigeria appears to be among the nation's most severely affected by this pressing issue.

On the other hand, social disintegration according to Durkheim, 1897 (1951) a pioneering

sociologist, is the breakdown of social cohesion and the weakening of social bonds. He emphasized the importance of social integration in maintaining order and preventing anomie, a state of normlessness. According to him, social disintegration occurs when societal norms and values erode, leading to increased deviance and instability. Drawing from conflict theory, scholars like Dahrendorf (1959) and Coser (1951) conceptualize social disintegration as a result of social conflicts and power struggles within a society. In this view, disintegration occurs when competing groups and classes engage in constant conflicts, undermining the stability and coherence of the social structure.

Parsons, (1951) also conceptualised Social disintegration as the malfunctioning or breakdown of social institutions. He further argued that social order relies on the smooth functioning of institutions such as family, education, and government and disintegration occurs when these institutions fail to perform their functions adequately. In addition to the aforementioned understandings, Goffman, (1959) focus on the micro-level interactions and symbolic meanings in society. Social disintegration, in his view, is the breakdown of shared symbols, meanings, and communication patterns that are essential for social cohesion and cooperation. While Burt, (1992) conceptualize social disintegration in terms of disrupted social networks. To him, disintegration occurs when social ties and connections weaken or fracture, leading to isolation and reduced social capital. Giddens, (1990) further highlight how global forces can contribute to social disintegration. According to him, rapid economic, technological, and cultural changes associated with globalization can lead to disruptions in traditional social structures, values, and identities, creating a sense of dislocation and alienation.

Economic empowerment is the third concept or keyword addressed in this paper. To kick start the discourses on economic empowerment, Kabear, (2005) conceptualize economic empowerment in the context of gender equality. Economic empowerment, from this perspective, involves enhancing women's access to and control over economic resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes. It seeks to address structural barriers that limit women's economic agency. Sen, (1999) and Haq, (1995) approach economic empowerment within the framework of human development; to them, economic empowerment is seen as a means to expand people's capabilities and choices, enabling them to lead a life



they value. This perspective emphasizes the importance of education, health, and other non-economic factors in achieving true empowerment. Like Sen, (1999) and Haq, (1995); North, (1990) focus on the role of institutions in economic empowerment. His perspective highlights the importance of creating inclusive and supportive economic institutions that enable individuals to participate in economic activities, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation.

Furthermore, Schumpeter, (1934) and Yunus, (2007) viewed economic empowerment through the lens of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial empowerment involves providing individuals, especially in marginalized communities, with the skills, resources, and opportunities to start and sustain businesses, thereby contributing to economic development. While Putnam, (2000) viewed economic empowerment in the context of social networks and relationships; to him economic empowerment is conceptualized as the result of strong social ties, trust, and cooperation within communities. Social capital is seen as a valuable resource for accessing economic opportunities. Bhagwati, (2004) and Stiglitz, (2002) also added to our understanding in clarifying the concept by exploring economic empowerment within the context of globalization. Their perspective considers how global economic processes can either enhance or hinder the economic empowerment of individuals and communities. They examine issues such as trade policies, international financial institutions, and global supply chains.

Theoretical Framework

This paper reviews and applies both Human Capital Theory and Critical Theory to the phenomenon under study. Human Capital Theory emerged in the mid-20th century, pioneered by economists like Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961). The theory posits that investments in education, training, and health are akin to capital investments in physical assets. Essentially, individuals enhance their productive capacity through these investments, contributing to overall economic growth and development.

The core tenet of the theory revolves around viewing individuals as valuable assets to the economy. Education, vocational training, and healthcare are regarded as essential investments that increase a person's productivity and economic potential. The theory contends that individuals with higher levels of human capital (education, skills, and health) are likely to earn more over their

lifetime. This aspect highlights the economic returns associated with investing in human capital. Human Capital Theory posits that a nation's economic growth is closely tied to the quality and quantity of its human capital. A skilled and healthy workforce is considered crucial for sustained economic development (Heckman, 2000).

Critics argue that the theory tends to overlook existing social structures and inequalities. Not everyone has equal access to education and training opportunities, leading to a perpetuation of social disparities. Some other critics contend that the theory places too much emphasis on quantifiable elements, such as education and training, while neglecting the importance of other factors like social capital and emotional intelligence. Again, Human Capital Theory is criticized for reducing the value of education and training to purely economic outcomes, neglecting broader societal benefits and the intrinsic value of education for personal development (ILO, 2017; Olaleye, 2019; UN, 2013).

Critical theory is the second theory adopted, reviewed and applied to the phenomenon of youth unemployment and social disintegration in Nigeria. Emerging from the Frankfurt School in the early-to-mid 20th century, Critical Theory is a philosophical framework that seeks to challenge and deconstruct societal structures, questioning power dynamics, norms, and inequalities. Rooted in the work of theorists like Horkheimer (1982) and Adorno (1944/2019), Critical Theory extends beyond academia to address practical social issues.

The primary focus of the theory is a critical examination of societal structures, cultural norms, and power relations. It unveils hidden assumptions and challenge oppressive elements within these structures. The theory is concerned with emancipating individuals from social constraints. It empowers marginalized groups like the unemployed youths in Nigeria and foster social justice by addressing systemic inequalities. Employing a dialectical approach, Critical Theory encourages an examination of contradictions within societal systems, promoting a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena (Freire, 1970; Fraser, 1985; Saskia, 2001).

Critics have though argue that critical theory often identifies issues and critiques existing structures but falls short in providing concrete solutions or alternative frameworks. According to its critics, the subjective nature of critical analysis raises concerns about potential bias, and the interpretations of the theory may vary, limiting the universality of this perspective. Some other critics



suggest that Critical Theory tends to overly emphasize power dynamics, potentially overshadowing other significant factors contributing to societal issues (Saskia, 2001; McNay, 2014).

Despite their various criticisms, the human capital theory and critical theory are still relevant to the phenomenon under discourse. Applying the human capital Theory and critical theory to the phenomenon under discourse; first, the human capital theory provides a valuable framework for addressing youth unemployment and promoting social integration in Nigeria. By investing in education, skills, and health of the youth, the nation can unlock pathways to economic empowerment and build a more cohesive and prosperous society. Policymakers must navigate the theory's limitations, ensuring that interventions are comprehensive and inclusive, fostering both economic growth and societal well-being. Second, critical theory also provides a valuable framework for understanding and addressing youth unemployment and social integration issues in Nigeria. By critically examining societal structures and power dynamics, it offers insights that can inform policy changes and interventions, ultimately contributing to pathways for economic empowerment and social cohesion. The application of critical theory prompts a deeper reflection on the root causes of issues, encouraging transformative changes for a more just and inclusive society.

Review of Empirical Studies

Youth unemployment and social disintegration are pressing challenges in Nigeria, with significant implications for the country's economic and social development. This review analyzed existing empirical studies on these intertwined issues, identifying key findings, gaps in knowledge, and potential pathways towards economic empowerment and social cohesion.

Studies consistently report high youth unemployment rates in Nigeria, exceeding 33% in recent years. Factors contributing to this problem include rapid population growth, inadequate educational systems, lack of relevant job skills, limited access to finance, and an unfavourable business environment. Youth unemployment has detrimental consequences for social integration, fostering feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and alienation. This can lead to increased social vices, reduced civic engagement, and weakened social cohesion (NBS, 2013; NBS, 2018).

Awogbenle&Iwuamadi (2010) documented that individuals aged between 15 and 35 years accounted for approximately 80 million in

Nigeria, constituting 60% of the country's population. They further stressed that out of this demographic, 34 million were unemployed, while 1.6 million were underemployed. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2013) report, individuals within the same age range comprised about 62% of the nation's population, with 39% of them classified as unemployed and underemployed. More recently, as reported by NBS (2016), the unemployment rate for the 15-35 years age bracket was 44.52% in the third quarter of 2016. A careful examination of these figures reveals a significant and rapid increase in the trend compared to the data observed in 2012 and 2016.

Unemployment has been associated with conflict, manifesting in issues of social insecurity, crime, and violence. In his study addressing insurgency in Nigeria, Muzan (2014) asserted that an unemployed individual is often idle, and this idleness can lead to engagement in antisocial behaviour as a way to occupy time and energy. Even if the person is educated and possesses employable skills, a lack of productive employment can result in frustration, aggression, and ultimately, conflict. Kakwagh&Ikwuba (2010) study highlighted how the global trend of unemployed youths played significant roles in instigating conflict situations. In the Nigerian context, they noted that unemployed youths were frequently the primary actors in various conflict scenarios. They argued that the involvement of youth in such situations stemmed from their social exclusion and marginalization, preventing them from making positive contributions to society.

Emeka&Olaowei, (2015) contended that unemployment brings about misery and hopelessness among those without work. In their efforts to escape this state, individuals often resort to promoting social unrest by engaging in criminal activities, which can lead to conflicts between individuals and, in some cases, between communities. Agba, Akwara, &Idu(2013) observed in their study that a majority of individuals apprehended by law enforcement agencies as criminals are either unemployed or underemployed. They noted that a significant proportion of these individuals fall within the age range of 15-44 years, with both males and females participating in gangs that terrorize communities, sparking conflicts among community members. Furthermore, Agba, Akwara, &Idu,(2013) emphasized the alarming aspect of the situation, pointing out that some of those involved in criminal activities leading to conflicts are educated. The fact that educated individuals contribute to the crime wave is a deeply



disheartening situation for the country. Their lack of productive employment and exclusion from social security programmes only serve to intensify their anger and frustration toward the country's development.

Iyoboyi & Pedro, (2014) conducted a meta-analysis examining the relationship between economic growth and conflict in Nigeria. Their study scrutinized data on economic growth, including factors such as poverty-based indicators, government expenditure, inflation, unemployment, GDP, and other documents pertinent to the country's economic development. Data on conflict were sourced from a conflict research institute, specifically the Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research (INSCR). Their study assessed whether unemployment could be identified as a significant predictor of conflict. Through the application of multiple regressions, findings from their study reveal that unemployment indeed functioned as a statistically significant predictor of conflict. The researcher concluded that the presence of unemployment correlated with the prevalence of conflict. This finding suggested that the rate of unemployment could potentially be used to predict the level of conflict within a given society. The relevance of Iyoboyi and Pedro's (2014) study lies in its exploration of the role of unemployment as a significant predictor of conflict.

Conclusion/Recommendations

This paper examined the critical issue of youth unemployment in Nigeria, highlighting its prevalence and its detrimental consequences for social cohesion. The review of empirical studies revealed several contributing factors, including rapid population growth, inadequate educational systems, lack of relevant job skills, limited access to finance, and an unfavorable business environment. These factors create a vicious cycle of unemployment, frustration, and social disintegration among Nigerian youth. On the bases of these major findings, the paper proposed the following recommendations:

i. There is a serious need to organize a kind of gamified skills development and entrepreneurship training because obviously, our traditional educational systems is largely not equipping our youths with the specific skills demanded by the current job market. The training should develop interactive, gamified online platforms (mobile apps or web interfaces) that offer engaging skills training in high-demand areas (e.g., coding, data processing and analysis, digital marketing, and renewable energy). Integrate these

platforms with entrepreneurship training that teaches business planning, financial literacy, and pitching skills.

ii. A Peer-to-Peer Mentorship and Crowdfunding Platform should also be put in place. Limited access to finance and mentorship have hindered a lot of young entrepreneurs from starting businesses. Creating a secure online platform where experienced entrepreneurs can mentor aspiring youth can help fill this gap. The online platform should integrate a crowd funding feature allowing young entrepreneurs to pitch their business ideas and secure funding from a network of potential investors. Leverage social media integration to increase platform visibility and attract potential mentors and investors. Crowd funding can strengthen community support for youth-led ventures.

iii. Youth-Led Community Development Projects with Skills-Based Incentives should be set up. This is because there is a lack of relevant job opportunities and a disconnection between youth skills and community needs. Federal Government should Partner with local governments and NGOs to design this youth-led community development projects that will address local needs (e.g., sanitation, infrastructure, education, etc.). These projects would provide temporary employment opportunities while developing relevant skills through on-the-job training. Incentivize participation by offering training certificates or micro-credentials relevant to the acquired skills. These projects will definitely promote a sense of purpose and community ownership among youth, fostering social cohesion and civic engagement.

iv. Strengthening social cohesion requires policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity, reduce inequality, and foster a sense of community among youth. Social policies should aim to provide equal access to education, healthcare, and social services, while community development initiatives should focus on engaging young people in meaningful activities that build social capital and community resilience.

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