RETHINKING INCLUSIVENESS OF NIGERIAN YOUTHS IN POLITICS AND NATION BUILDING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building is essential for sustainable development, democratic governance, and social cohesion. As agents of change, young people possess the energy, creativity, and innovation necessary to address contemporary social challenges. However, despite their potential, youth often face significant barriers to participation, such as economic disenfranchisement, inadequate civic education, cultural biases, and exclusionary political systems. This study explores the role of youth in politics and nation-building by examining past efforts to enhance their involvement and identifying strategies to overcome existing barriers. The study highlights the importance of integrating civic education into school curricula, promoting youth entrepreneurship and economic empowerment, leveraging digital technology for engagement, and reforming political party structures to ensure inclusivity. Additionally, the study recommends the establishment of mentorship programs, the implementation of youth quotas in political institutions, and the creation of platforms for youth engagement in decision-making processes. It is believed that by adopting these strategies, society can effectively empower young people to contribute to politics and nation-building, leading to more inclusive, vibrant, and resilient national development.

Keywords: Youth, political inclusiveness, nation building, opportunities, challenges

Introduction

The participation of Nigerian youth in politics and nation-building is increasingly recognized as a critical component of sustainable development and democratic consolidation. Nigeria, with a population of over 200 million, has a significant youth demographic, with more than 60% of its population under the age of 25 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This demographic advantage presents an opportunity for harnessing the energy, creativity, and innovative potential of young people to shape the future of the nation. However, despite

the numerical strength and potential of Nigerian youths, their involvement in politics and nation-building remains limited, raising concerns about inclusiveness and representation in politics.

Historically, the political landscape in Nigeria has been dominated by older generations, with youth often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes (Akande, 2021c). Corroborating the above statement, Ojo (2022b) argued that this exclusion is rooted in various socio-political and economic constraints, including the high cost of political participation, a lack of access to political networks, and entrenched cultural and societal norms that prioritize elder leadership. The "Not Too Young To Run" Act, signed into law in 2018, sought to lower the age requirement for political office and enhance youth participation. Although this legislative milestone represented a significant step toward inclusivity, its impact has been limited by structural barriers and a lack of support systems to facilitate the political engagement of young people (Olorunyomi, 2023b).

Another critical issue is the economic constraints faced by Nigerian youths. Given high unemployment rates and limited access to resources, many young people are unable to finance political campaigns or engage in political activities meaningfully (Eze, 2023b). This economic disenfranchisement is compounded by a lack of political education and awareness, which limits the ability of youths to effectively navigate the complex political landscape. Adeleke, (2023c) found that civic education is often inadequate, failing to provide young people with the knowledge and skills needed to participate actively in political and civic life because of the way and manner it is being handle in our schools.

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for youth engagement in Nigeria, providing a platform for political expression and mobilization. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 exemplified the potential of digital platforms to unite young Nigerians around a common cause, highlighting issues of police brutality and governance (Olumide, 2023b). However, while social media can amplify youth voices, it also presents challenges such as misinformation, cyberbullying, and government censorship. The digital divide further intensifies these challenges, with rural and economically disadvantaged youths having limited access to digital tools and platforms (Ibrahim, 2023a).

Conceptual Underpinnings

Youth, politics, inclusiveness, and nation-building are interrelated concepts that are central to understanding the dynamics of democratic participation and socioeconomic development in Nigeria. These concepts are foundational to political science and development studies, offering insights into how young people can be effectively engaged in shaping the future of their societies.

Youth is broadly defined as individuals transitioning from childhood to adulthood, typically between the ages of 15 and 35, in the Nigerian context (National Youth Policy, 2019). Youth represent a critical segment of the population and are characterized by energy, innovation, and potential for social contribution. In Nigeria, this demographic accounts for a significant portion of the population, positioning them as key stakeholders in the country's socio-political landscape (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The involvement of youth in various societal processes is essential for fostering a vibrant and resilient society because their perspectives and capabilities can drive significant social, economic, and political transformations (Nwagwu, 2023).

Politics refers to the processes, activities, and institutions through which power is acquired, exercised, and distributed within society. Heywood, (2022) posited that the process involves the formulation and implementation of public policies, governance, and the organization of society according to certain principles and values. In democratic systems, politics provides a platform for citizens to participate in decision-making

processes, ensuring that their voices and interests are represented. However, the political landscape in Nigeria has historically been dominated by older generations, leading to a lack of representation and inclusiveness among the younger generation (Akande, 2022a). This has implications for political institutions' legitimacy and responsiveness, and for the overall development and stability of the country.

Olorunyomi, (2023b) asserted that youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building refers to the active engagement and representation of young people in political processes, decision-making, and governance. It entails creating opportunities for youths to meaningfully participate in political parties, electoral processes, and policy formulation. Inclusiveness is crucial for ensuring that the needs, aspirations and perspectives of young people are reflected in national policies and programs. It also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among youths, encouraging them to contribute to the development and progress of their communities and the nation at large (Obi, 2023; Eze, 2023c). Despite the importance of youth inclusiveness, numerous challenges hinder the full participation of Nigerian youths in politics, including economic barriers, lack of political education, and societal norms that limit their roles to passive observers rather than active participants.

Ake, (2023) asserted that nation-building is the process through which a country develops a sense of identity, unity, and shared purpose among its citizens. This involves fostering social cohesion, economic development, and political stability, ultimately contributing to the creation of a prosperous and inclusive society. Nation-building requires the collective efforts of all segments of society, including the active involvement of young people. In Nigeria, where the youth population is substantial, engaging in nation-building activities is vital for addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and political corruption (Adetola, 2023). The inclusion of youth in nation-building processes ensures that their energy, creativity, and innovation are harnessed to achieve national goals and promote sustainable development.

The Role of Youth in Politics and Nation Building

Youth play a pivotal role in nation-building because they are often seen as the driving force behind social change, economic development, and political transformation. In many societies, particularly those with significant youth populations like Nigeria, young people represent vital demographics that can influence the direction of the nation. Their involvement in nation-building is not only essential for fostering development but also for ensuring that the voices of all segments of society are heard and integrated into the country's growth and progress.

Youths are often regarded as agents of change, bringing fresh ideas, energy and innovation to address social challenges. Exposure to new technologies and global trends positions them uniquely to introduce innovative solutions to issues such as poverty, unemployment, and climate change (Ojo, 2022a). By leveraging their creativity and technological savvy, young people can develop new approaches to development that can significantly improve their communities' quality of life and economic opportunities.

Active youth participation in the political process is crucial for developing democratic governance. According to Akande, (2023b), when young people engage in politics, whether by voting, campaigning, or holding public office, they help shape policies that reflect their needs and aspirations. Youth participation ensures that political systems remain dynamic and responsive to changing social needs. Furthermore, their involvement in governance helps reduce the generational gap in leadership and promotes intergenerational dialog, which is vital for sustainable democratic development.

Beyond politics, youths contribute to nation-building through their involvement in social and civic activities. Ibrahim, (2023b) opined that many young people participate in community service, volunteerism, and non-

governmental organizations (NGOs) that address various social issues, such as education, health care, and human rights. These activities help strengthen community bonds, promote social cohesion, and foster a sense of belonging and responsibility among youths (Adeleke, 2023a; Olorunyomi, 2023a; Okoye, 2023b). Civic engagement also empowers young people to become active citizens who are informed about their rights and responsibilities, which is essential for building robust civil society.

Youth are key drivers of economic growth, particularly through entrepreneurship and innovation. By establishing businesses, young entrepreneurs create job opportunities, contribute to economic diversification, and stimulate local economies (Eze, 2023a: Adeleke, 2023a). Youth-led enterprises often introduce new products and services that meet the needs of the market, thereby enhancing productivity and competitiveness. Governments and policymakers can support youth entrepreneurship by providing access to funding, training, and mentorship, which can help young people turn their ideas into viable businesses that contribute to national development.

In many societies, young people play a significant role in shaping cultural norms and values. Through various forms of artistic expression, such as music, literature, and digital media, youths have the power to influence public opinion and societal attitudes (Adeleke, 2023d). They can advocate for social justice, human rights, and other issues that resonate with their generation, helping to drive cultural change and value reorientation. This cultural influence is essential for building inclusive societies that respect diversity and promote tolerance and understanding.

Olumide, (2023a) observed that youths are crucial to peace building and conflict resolution, particularly in regions affected by violence and instability. Their involvement in peace initiatives and dialog processes can help prevent conflict, promote reconciliation, and foster a culture of peace. Engaging youths in peacebuilding efforts ensures that they are part of solutions to conflicts rather than being drawn into violence. By promoting a sense of agency and ownership, young people can contribute to long-term peace and stability in their communities.

The role of youth in nation-building is multifaceted and indispensable (Adeowu, 2012). Their energy, creativity, and commitment to change are vital for addressing the challenges of modern societies. Through active youth involvement in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, nations can harness their potential to drive development and build a more inclusive and sustainable future. Empowering young people through education, opportunities, and support is beneficial not only for personal growth but also for the collective advancement of society.

Some Identified Constraints on Youth Participation in Politics and Nation Building

Despite the recognized potential and importance of youth participation in politics and nation-building, several constraints hinder their full inclusion in these processes. Ibezim (2019) opined that youth participation in politics in Nigeria is bedeviled by a myriad of challenges, including a lack of understanding of the benefits that youth political participation holds. He identified unemployment, social exclusion, limited capacity, resources, and tools as constraints against youths' political inclusiveness. One of the primary constraints to youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building is economic disenfranchisement. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, youth face high unemployment and underemployment levels, leaving them economically disadvantaged. Ake, (2022) argued that this economic marginalization makes it difficult for young people to afford the costs associated with political participation, such as running for office, funding campaigns, or even joining political organizations. Without financial resources, many young people are

excluded from political life because they cannot compete with older, more financially stable individuals. This economic barrier is further exacerbated by a lack of access to credit facilities and opportunities that enable youths to build the financial stability required to engage in politics.

In addition to economic constraints, a significant lack of political education and awareness exists among youths. Many young people are not adequately informed about political processes, their rights as citizens, and the importance of their participation in governance (Ojo, 2023b ; Ake, 2022). This gap in political education is often due to inadequate civic education curricula in schools and a general lack of emphasis on political literacy. As a result, many youths do not see the relevance of engaging in politics or feel ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of the political landscape. The absence of effective mentorship programs that could guide and support young people in their political aspirations also contributes to this problem.

Cultural and societal norms present another formidable barrier to youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building. In many societies, there is a prevailing belief that leadership and political power are the domains of older, more experienced individuals. In the words of Okoye, (2023a) this cultural perception marginalizes young people, reinforcing the idea that they should delay to their elders and wait their turn before assuming leadership roles. Such norms are often deeply entrenched and can discourage young people from seeking political office or participating in governance. Moreover, traditional structures and patriarchal systems may further limit the participation of young women, thereby compounding gender-based disparities in political engagement.

Adeyemi, (2023b) notes that political structures and party systems themselves can significantly hinder youth participation. In many cases, political parties are dominated by established elites that are resistant to change and reluctant to cede space to younger individuals. These parties may have hierarchical structures that do not provide for the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes, relegating them to roles that lack real influence. The lack of internal democracy within political parties means that even where youth wings or youth-focused initiatives exist, they often have little impact on the broader party agenda or on policy formulation. This exclusion from mainstream politics leads to disillusionment and apathy among young people who feel that their voices are neither heard nor valued.

Another constraint is the pervasive corruption and patronage networks within the political system. In many contexts, political participation is not based on merit or popular support but on connections and loyalty to powerful individuals or groups. This patronage system creates barriers for youths who may not have the necessary connections or resources to navigate such networks (Nwafor, 2023). As a result, talented and capable young individuals may be sidelined in favor of those who can buy their way into power or who are part of established patronage circles. This undermines the principles of fairness and equality, further entrenching the exclusion of youths from political and governance positions.

Finally, the digital divide and limited access to technology pose challenges to youth participation, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Ibrahim, (2023c) discovered that social media and digital platforms have emerged as powerful tools for youth activism and engagement; however, not all young people have equal access to these technologies. Those in remote or economically disadvantaged areas may lack the necessary infrastructure, devices, or internet connectivity to engage in digital political activities. This digital divide limits the reach of youth-led initiatives and movements, preventing a significant portion of the youth population from participating in national discourse and decision making.

In addition, Kura (2008) argued that older people do not trust the abilities of youths in politics. In the same vein, Anasi (2020) holds the view that people are cynical toward youths in politics, thus affecting their active participation. However, some scholarly opinions put the blame of low youth participation on the youth themselves. Offiong (2018) argued that Nigerian youths' efforts at leadership is a futile exercise because they are too divided along ethnic, religious, and regional cleavages to clamor for national integration. Youths in Nigeria generally lack the financial capacity to contest elections and prefer to elect the older generation as their leaders.

Galstyan (2018) posits that youth political participation requires an enabling environment and restrictions on expression; assembly and association limit the freedom of youth to engage in political dialog or criticize politicians/candidates, as well as the increase in election-related violence has hindered the engagement of young people in electoral processes. 0ther challenges include political apathy by the youth, immaturity to be considered for inclusion in decision making, propensity of youth for violence, extremism, and other social vices such as thuggery, drug peddling, cybercrimes, and internet fraud, orchestration of divide and rule tactics among youth by older politicians, and display of youthful exuberance in previous political offices held by them.

The constraints on youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building are deeply rooted in economic, social, cultural, and political factors. Overcoming these barriers requires concerted efforts from governments, civil society, and communities to create an enabling environment for youth participation (Ojo, 2023a ; Ibrahim, 2023c). This includes investing in education and economic opportunities for young people, promoting political literacy, challenging cultural norms that limit youth engagement and reforming political structures to ensure they are more inclusive and representative. If these constraints are tackled, societies can harness the potential of their youth population to build a more inclusive, dynamic, and prosperous future.

The Way Forward

Involving youths in politics and nation-building is critical for fostering inclusive development, sustaining democratic values, and ensuring societies' long-term stability. To effectively engage young people in these processes, a range of strategies can be employed that address the barriers they face and empower them to take active roles in shaping their communities and nations. These strategies must be multifaceted, encompassing educational, economic, technological, and institutional approaches to create an enabling environment for youth participation.

One of the primary strategies for engaging youths in politics and nation-building is the enhancement of civic education. Providing young people with a solid understanding of their rights, responsibilities, and the workings of political and governance systems is essential. Ojo, (2023a) found that civic education programs should be integrated into school curricula from the primary to the tertiary levels, ensuring that students are well-informed about democratic principles, governance structures, and civic engagement. These programs can be complemented by extracurricular activities such as debates, mock elections, and student governance bodies, which provide practical leadership and decision-making experiences. By fostering political literacy and a sense of civic duty, civic education helps young people to participate actively in their communities and national affairs.

Promoting youth entrepreneurship and economic empowerment is another critical strategy. Economic independence provides youth with the resources and confidence to engage in politics and nation-building activities. Governments and development organizations can support youth entrepreneurship through initiatives that provide access to credit, training, mentorship, and market opportunities (Eze, 2024b). Establishing youth

innovation hubs and business incubators can also foster the development of youth-led enterprises, which contribute to economic growth and job creation.

Ibezim (2019) observed that the first step in empowering youth should start from employment creation and integrate them into entrepreneurial activities whereby they would think about how they will impact the inclusive political momentum of their country. Youth empowerment is a process in which economically active people are encouraged to take charge of their lives and actions to help them gain access to resources and transform their consciousness through their values, beliefs, and attitudes, which aim to improve their quality of life (Tagwai, 2020). As Jega (2012) noted, there is a need to reconnect with the youth, empower them, mentor them responsibly, give them responsible leadership roles, and enable them to become key change agents for Nigeria's stability, progress, and development. Empowering youth and allowing them the opportunity to participate in the community have shown to benefit their development greatly. Job creation and empowerment of youth will make financial resources available for the pursuit of their political dreams.

Leveraging digital technology and social media platforms is a powerful strategy for engaging youths in politics and nation building. With the widespread use of smartphones and the internet among young people, digital platforms have become accessible and effective tools for political participation, activism, and advocacy (Adeleke, 2023b). Social media campaigns, online petitions, and virtual town hall meetings allow youths to express their opinions, mobilize support, and influence policy decisions. Governments and political organizations can harness these platforms to reach out to young people, solicit their input, and engage them in dialog on national issues. Additionally, training programs that enhance digital literacy and online activism skills can empower youths to effectively engage in civic engagement and social change.

Reforming political party structures to make them more inclusive of youths is essential for increasing youth participation in politics. Political parties should create platforms for youth representation, such as youth wings or advisory councils, that have a meaningful impact on party policies and decision-making (Adeyemi, 2023a). These structures should provide opportunities for young members to take on leadership roles, run for office, and influence party agendas. Internal party democracy should be strengthened to ensure that youth voices are heard and that merit, rather than patronage or seniority, determines leadership positions. By actively involving young people in party structures, political parties can benefit from the fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that youth bring to the table.

Establishing youth quotas in political institutions is another effective strategy for enhancing youth inclusiveness. Quotas can be implemented at various levels of government, including local councils, state legislatures, and national parliaments, to ensure that a certain percentage of seats are reserved for young candidates (Ibrahim, 2023d). This approach has been successfully used in some countries to increase the representation of women and other marginalized groups in politics. Implementing youth quotas can provide young people with the opportunity to directly participate in governance, influence policymaking, and represent the interests of their peers. Quotas can be complemented by capacity-building programs that equip young politicians with the skills and knowledge they need to perform effectively in their roles.

Mentorship and leadership development programs are also crucial for nurturing the next generation of leaders. Experienced leaders, politicians, and professionals can serve as mentors to young people by providing guidance, support, and inspiration (Okoye, 2023a : Nwafor, 2023a). Mentorship programs can be established within educational institutions, community organizations, and political parties to connect youths with mentors who can help them navigate the complexities of politics and governance. Leadership development workshops, seminars,

and training courses can also be organized to build the leadership capacity of young people, equipping them with the skills needed to lead effectively and ethically.

Finally, creating platforms for youth engagement in decision-making processes is vital for ensuring that their voices are heard. Governments can establish youth councils, advisory boards, and forums at the local, state, and national levels to involve young people in policy discussions and development planning (Nwafor, 2023b). These platforms should be designed to provide meaningful participation where youths can contribute ideas, provide feedback, and collaborate with policymakers. Engaging youths in decision-making not only empowers them but also enriches the quality of policies and programs by incorporating diverse perspectives and innovative solutions.

Conclusion

The story of Nigeria can change for better if the youths are positioned to play an active role in leadership roles and decision making. Inclusive political participation is not only critical to political and democratic rights but also germane to building stable, peaceful societies and developing policies that favor younger generations and prosperous Nigeria. The youth should join forces together by eschewing issues (ethnic, religion, regional) that divide them and clamoring for inclusiveness to pilot Nigeria into a new dawn. To actualize this, governments at all levels should, as a matter of priority, attach importance to youth development and formation across all sectors.

In addition, platforms for youth engagement are established through youth advisory boards at the local level, shadow councils at sub-national level and youth parliament at the national level and domestication of UN processes. Youth need to go back to the drawing table to re-strategize and inculcate the habit of integrity in their private and public lives. Integrity and good character will enable the youth to focus on the positive intention of taking Nigeria out of the wilderness. It is not an understatement to assert that the older generation has failed. Youth should be allowed to assume the leadership role at all levels. Youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building is not only desirable but essential for fostering sustainable development, democratic governance, and social cohesion.

Young people bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and the energy needed to address the complex challenges facing today's society. Despite various efforts and initiatives to enhance youth participation, significant barriers remain, including economic disenfranchisement, limited political education, cultural norms, and exclusionary political structures. To harness the full potential of youth, it is crucial to implement comprehensive strategies that address these barriers and empower young people to take active roles in shaping the future of their nations.

Recommendations

Recommendations to enhance youth inclusiveness in politics and nation-building include a multi-pronged approach that involves all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, educational institutions, and the private sector. First, there should be a concerted effort to enhance civic education at all levels of the education system to ensure that young people are well informed about their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of political participation. This can be achieved through the integration of civic education into school curricula and the promotion of extracurricular activities that provide practical leadership experiences.

Promoting youth entrepreneurship and economic empowerment is critical for providing the financial stability needed for political engagement. Governments and development partners should invest in programs that support youth-led businesses, provide access to credit and training, and create job opportunities. Economic

empowerment not only enables youths to participate in politics but also contributes to national development. Leveraging digital technology and social media to reach and engage young people. Training programs that enhance digital literacy and online activism skills should be implemented to empower youths to effectively use technology for civic engagement. Governments and political organizations should also use digital platforms to engage youth, solicit their input, and facilitate dialog on national issues.

Furthermore, political parties should be reformed to be more inclusive of youth by establishing youth wings, advisory councils, and mechanisms for meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Implementing youth quotas in political institutions can also ensure that young people have representation and a voice in governance. Mentorship and leadership development programs should be established to connect young people with experienced leaders who can provide guidance and support. These programs can help to build the leadership capacity of youth, preparing them for political and nation-building roles.

Lastly, creating platforms for youth engagement in decision-making processes, such as youth councils and advisory boards, is vital for ensuring that youth voices are heard. These platforms should be designed to provide meaningful participation where youths can contribute ideas, provide feedback, and collaborate with policymakers. By implementing these recommendations, societies can create an enabling environment for youth participation, empowering young people to contribute to politics and nation-building. This will not only strengthen democratic governance but also ensure the development of inclusive, vibrant, and resilient nations for the future

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