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**#EndSARS Protest:
Re-Thinking Nigerian Youth
and Government Policies**

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1. SETTING THE SCENE: CONTEXTUALIZATION

The youth are one of the greatest assets any nation can have. They are often the drivers and harbingers for transformative social change in well-organized societies.... Not surprisingly, the youth are legitimately regarded not only as future leaders, but also as the bulwark for a country whose growth and prosperity is inextricably connected to youth development. Therefore, it is safe to say that a country with no youth would have no future (African Heritage Institution, 2020).

If any countries in the world should take youths and youth development seriously, Nigeria should be high on the list of such countries – Nigeria has one of the largest youth populations in the world, with the youth making up almost 34% (33.65%) of the country’s huge population of more than 200 million people (Wikipedia). One fundamental way of demonstrating this seriousness is through the enactment and **serious** implementation of meaningful and effective youth policies, as well as the creation of an enabling environment for youth development. In this regard, how has Nigeria fared:

- What policies has the government put in place for youth development?
- How seriously/stringently have such policies been implemented?
- Has the government made appropriate and tangible efforts to enthrone a livable society to create an enabling environment for youth development?

1.1. SETTING THE SCENE: YOUTH POLICIES IN NIGERIA

Policy-making for youth development is not new in Nigeria; neither have youth development programmes and activities been absent. In fact, as pointed out by African Heritage Institution (2020), there have been:

efforts by successive Nigerian governments since independence to introduce National Youth Policy (NYP), which has birthed several programs and projects aimed at youth development including: N-POWER, YOU-WIN, National Youth Development Fund (NYDF), The Youth Employment in Agriculture Programme (YEAP), National Youth



Service Corps (NYSC), Growing Girls and Women in Nigeria (G-WIN) Project...to promote youth competitive spirit; national unity and integration; encourage youth participation in agribusiness and entrepreneurship; and provide grants for small and medium scale enterprises.

The most recent of these efforts is undoubtedly the 2019 National Youth Policy which will be the focus of this discussion.

2. THE 2019 NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY

This policy emerged after the long overdue review and updating of Nigeria's 2009 National Youth Policy which expired (and should have been reviewed) in 2014, as provided for in the document. The 2019 Youth Policy is truly elaborate – with its various aspects comprising numerous ***thrusts, thematic areas, and objectives***. The Honourable Minister of Youth and Sports Development is correct in his statement in the Foreword of the policy document that “the new document is all inclusive, elaborate and proactively crafted to take into account existing, new and emerging challenges in the youth sector.” Indeed, on paper, the Policy looks ‘good’. So did a number of previous government policies, initiatives and programmes for youth development which indicate that the 2019 Youth Policy is virtually a carryover of the 2009 Youth Policy. This in effect means that the Nigerian government has had opportunities to effect youth development over the years – opportunities that were, from various indications, squandered because “Sadly, these programs have largely failed to achieve their stated objectives as they are either terminated, unstable or comatose, while those that are still functional are far from fulfilling their mandated objectives... [and] the reality remains quite different” (African Heritage Institution, 2020). ***The reality and true significance of the #EndSARS Protest has finally dawned on Nigerians and the global community – #EndSARS was not just a protest against police brutality but a desperate lashing out by the Nigerian youth against a long history of government's failures to make Nigeria a livable society generally and to achieve genuine youth development in particular.***

In appraising these failures over the years, let us look at some of the ramifications of the 2019 Youth Policy in terms of its Vision and Strategic Thrusts (as a reflection of the 2009 Youth Policy and previous youth development programmes) to assess the efforts of government to make Nigeria an environment in which the youth can live and thrive.



3. THE REALITY OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: PLAYING TO THE GALLERY???

It is common knowledge that most policy documents in developing ‘Third World’ countries are usually beautiful adaptations of similar policies in developed countries – well-crafted, comprehensive, and modelled on international best practices. The problem often is the failure at the implementation of such wonderful policies and the numerous programmes they generate, as a result of a wide variety of factors including insincerity on the part of government, lack of political will, and corrupt practices – resulting in the reality being drastically different from what has been put down in policy documents. Consider the following in the context of the Vision and Strategic Thrusts of the 2019 Youth Policy (emphases added in colour):

3.1. VISION OF THE 2019 YOUTH POLICY

As clearly stated in the document, the Vision is to “Develop Nigeria youth with equal opportunities to **realise their dreams and aspirations**, irrespective of their background, **living in a safe and secure environment** that would optimize their contributions to National Development”, as well as to provide the Nigerian youth with the **“opportunities to realise their dreams and aspirations.”** Over the years, government has failed to actualize such visions. It is, therefore, not surprising that many Nigerian youths genuinely can no longer find the courage to dream and aspire. Similarly, government has failed to ensure that the youth live **“in a safe and secure environment.”**

In terms of safety and security, **Nigeria is one of the most unsafe, insecure and dangerous places to live in the entire world** – “Nigeria is ranked 3rd as the most terrorized country globally, behind Afghanistan and Iraq [and] it is being speculated that we will soon overtake them” (Obi, 2020). Insecurity is not new in Nigeria and has been getting progressively worse over the years, as generally exemplified by:

- Terrorism and wanton destruction of lives and property in the North-Eastern part of the country by Boko Haram, leading to what the United Nations (UN) in March 2017 described as the worst humanitarian crisis since the creation of the UN, as hundreds of thousands of people who survived the crisis are on the verge of starving to death. The situation has terribly deteriorated since 2017 and has become quite horrifying.



- Militancy and insurgency in the Niger Delta region of the country
- Rise of separatist groups, mainly in the Southern parts of the country, clamouring for independence/secession for their regions
- Menace of rampaging herdsmen wreaking havoc on lives and property in several parts of the country.
- All manner of ethnic and religious crises that are creating fear and distrust among Nigerians, thus fueling the clamour for the re-structuring of the country, and even a break-up of Nigeria.

Okunna (2020) summarizes the situation generally when she points out that:

...it has become common knowledge that the security situation in this country [Nigeria] is worsening by the day, and that the crime rate is rising to an all-time high. From North to South, East to West, in all six Geopolitical Zones, crime and criminality are apparently taking over the country.

Specifically, citing the current U.S. Department of State Travel Advisory which assesses Nigeria at Level 3 – **indicating that travelers should reconsider travel to Nigeria due to crime** (*Nigeria 2020 Crime & Safety Report* of the United States Consulate in Lagos), Okunna goes on to present a catalogue of criminal activities in the country which comprise a wide range of violent crimes including armed robbery, assault, burglary, carjacking, rape, kidnapping, extortion, fraud, civil unrest, maritime crime, periodic outbreaks of violence among localized street gangs, multiple armed criminal elements ranging from low level to organized syndicates, cultist or gang violence which often erupts in supremacy battles between various groups, cybercrime which is becoming more sophisticated etc.

3.2. STRATEGIC THRUSTS OF THE 2019 YOUTH POLICY

The Policy comprises five Strategic Thrusts:

- Productive Workforce and Sustainable Economic Engagement of Youth
- Health and Health-Promoting Lifestyle
- Participation, Inclusiveness and Equitable Opportunities for all Youth



- Promotive and Protective Environment for Youth Development
- Partnership-Building and Effective Collaboration

Let us look at some of these to illustrate how government has failed to make Nigeria livable for its citizens generally and for youth development in particular (emphases added in colour).

3.2.1. Strategic Thrust 1: Productive Workforce and Sustainable Economic Engagement of Youth:

“Development of youth into a productive and committed workforce through *appropriate quality education*, capacity-building and skills development, *adequate opportunities for productive employment/employment creation and successful entrepreneurship....*”

The quality of education is collapsing in Nigeria at all levels, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels whose ‘constituencies’ are the youth (aged 15-29 years, as delineated in the Youth Policy). Teaching and learning facilities in tertiary educational institutions have been abysmal because government has not shown enough concern for youth education. Over the years, this has led to agitations by various unions in tertiary institutions, as exemplified by the ongoing protracted strike action by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).





Funding has equally been abysmal for the Education Sector, thus making it impossible to achieve quality education, capacity-building and skills development for youths. This can be seen from the percentages of Federal Government Budgets allocated to the Education Sector over the years (Olufemi, 2020):

2011 = 9.3%;

2012 = 9.86%

2013 = 9.01%

2014 = 10.5%

2015 = 10.7%

2016 = 7.9%

2017 = 7.4%

2018 = 7.04%

2019 = 7.05%

2020 = 6.7%

2021 = 5.6%

In terms of providing ***adequate opportunities for productive employment/employment creation and successful entrepreneurship*** for the Nigerian youth, government has also failed. The level of unemployment and under-employment in Nigeria is staggering. This is particularly true of the youth, many of whom are well educated and skilled. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2020) show that:



- Overall unemployment rate in the country is as high as 27.1%.
- The number of youths who are eligible to work is 40 million, out of which only 14.7 million are fully employed.

This is a very worrisome situation. Even more worrisome is the fact that government, having failed in employment creation for Nigerian youths, has equally failed to create the enabling environment for the youth to create employment for themselves by engaging in successful entrepreneurship, particularly through Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) which are acknowledged globally as the engine of economic growth and development, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria. One great advantage of MSMEs lies in their capacity to empower young entrepreneurs and boost desperately-needed employment in the face of the staggering level of youth unemployment in the country today. In this respect, Peter Obi's (2017) advice to the Federal Government, in its search for solutions to the country's economic problems, has become even more relevant. According to him, government should:

focus its energies on creating enabling environment for the growth of micro, small and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs) in its efforts to turn around the Nigerian economy and create jobs for the teeming army of unemployed youths. ...such businesses hold the future to Nigeria's economic recovery and growth. Government must therefore do everything possible to encourage them.

Creating this enabling environment for the growth of MSMEs depends largely on effecting **real** change in the Power Sector in terms of electricity generation and distribution. Sadly, this sector has continued to lag behind, making Okunna's (2016) argument still very relevant:

The country must get it right in the power sector. How can small and medium enterprises thrive [when] businesses...still experience incessant power outages, load shedding, power rationing and fluctuation, as well as other maladies that have continued to afflict the power sector?

The current situation of a terribly high level of youth unemployment is very worrisome because a "high youth unemployment rate is synonymous with increased insecurity and poverty, a situation that is also seen as a ticking time bomb" (nairametrics.com). This scenario is not just worrisome; it is terrifying in the face of the current level of poverty in Nigeria:



According to a recent study on global poverty, the World Poverty Clock shows that Nigeria today is a nation with the largest number of poor people in the world [the ‘poverty capital’ of the world], about 90 million people, with the poverty rate growing at the rate of 6 persons per minute. We have more people living in extreme poverty than the two biggest nations: China and India combined (Obi, 2020).

3.2.2. Strategic Thrust 2: Health and Health-Promoting Lifestyle

“Fostering the health development of youth *through appropriate health systems....*”

Government has definitely failed to make the Nigerian health system appropriate to foster the health development of the youth, as well as of all Nigerians. With the country’s deplorable health facilities, Nigeria’s health indices are among the worst in the world, as demonstrated by the astonishingly high rates of infant and maternal mortality. For instance:

- As shown in UNICEF’s 2020 child mortality rate estimate, “Nigeria has overtaken India as the world capital for under-5 mortality” (Obi, 2020).
- Nigeria’s maternal mortality rate is “1 in 13....One Nigerian woman dies every 13 minutes – that is 109 women dying each day – from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth” (Wekesah & Izugbara, 2017).

With the country’s abysmally poor physician density, these and similar depressing health indices are not surprising at all. According to World Health Organization (WHO), Nigeria’s physician density (doctor-patient ratio) is 4 per 10,000 population (0.4 per 1,000). Facilities in government health establishments at all levels are deplorable, and medical ‘tourism’ to various countries with state-of-the-art health facilities has become the order of the day for those who can afford it – most of whom definitely are not youths. So has brain drain of Doctors and other health professionals – most of them young people seeking ‘greener pastures’ to make their mark in their professions and enjoy a better quality of life.



3.2.3. Strategic Thrust 3: Participation, Inclusiveness and Equitable Opportunities for all Youth

This is supposed to be achieved by being able to “*Address barriers to meaningful youth engagement in civil and political affairs...*”.

As is the case with the Vision and other Strategic Thrusts, the government has failed to live up to expectations, and the level of meaningful youth participation in political affairs has remained pathetically low. Writing about the very low level of youth participation in politics and decision-making, Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2019) says that although the signing into law of the **Not Too Young To Run Bill** in 2019 had reduced the age for running for elective offices (for instance, from 40 to 35 years for the Presidency; from 30 to 25 years for House of Representatives etc), and as many as 67% of registered voters for the 2019 General Elections were youths:

- Less than 1% of youths were voted into office in the elections.
- There is no youth in the National Assembly.
- No youth was appointed into President Buhari’s Cabinet.

Ajodo-Adebanjoko identifies poor internal democracy among older political parties, an absence of a strategic political agenda, and money politics as some of the barriers to youth inclusion/representation in politics in Nigeria. Showing how money politics constitutes a barrier to meaningful youth participation in political affairs, she concludes that “while they are Not Too Young To Run, in practice the youth find themselves Too-Poor-To-Run....” To buttress this point, she refers to the 2019 General Elections when nomination forms for various offices were as high



as N45 million for Presidential aspirants, N22.5 million for Governorship aspirants, N7 million for Senate, and N3.8 million for House of Representatives. A relevant question here is, having reduced the age for running for elective office, should the government's strategic political agenda not also result in a reduction of the high cost of nomination forms for various elective offices?

3.2.4. Strategic Thrust 4: Promotive and Protective Environment for Youth Development

For effective youth development, the Nigerian youth should be living in an environment that guarantees them "*freedom from abuse, violence, intimidation...*".

As is the case with the other Strategic Thrusts of Nigeria's youth development policies and programmes, the government has failed to safeguard its youth from abuse, violence and intimidation. This failure is best summarized with the question: If there was "*freedom from abuse, violence [and] intimidation*" for the Nigerian youth and if they were "*living in a safe and secure environment*", would the #EndSARS Protest have happened? As stated earlier, #EndSARS began basically as a protest against police abuse, violence, intimidation and brutality. Similarly, as extensively discussed in Section 2.1.1. above, safety and security have progressively worsened in recent times, to the point where Nigeria is now one of the most unsafe, insecure and dangerous places to live in globally; it is therefore not surprising that the country has become the most stressful country to live in – ranked 148 out of 150 (Obi, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD – RETHINKING NIGERIAN YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES

From virtually every indication, government has failed abysmally over the years in recent times to enthrone a livable society as a conducive environment for effectively implementing its well-crafted youth policies and programmes, thus wreaking havoc on youth development. For how long should this terrible scenario continue? Something definitely needs to be done by the government, by the youth themselves, by non-governmental bodies made up of well-meaning Nigerians, and by the international community (if need be) – and the time to do this 'something' about this situation is NOW. Doing something should include:



- **Honest Action by Government**

Government at all levels in Nigeria must take the right action to move beyond platitudes, window-dressing, and playing to the gallery, and commence genuine re-thinking of youth development by *getting Nigeria working again* and ensuring the effective implementation of youth-oriented programmes and policies (particularly the current National Youth Policy) within the ‘*new Nigeria*’. From several indications, the 2019 Youth Policy is comparatively comprehensive; if the implementation framework, objectives, and numerous policy benchmarks of its Strategic Thrusts are honestly pursued within a conducive environment of a livable Nigeria, their realization will provide lasting solutions to youth challenges and growing restiveness.

- **The Youth Themselves: To Be or Not to Be**

For the youth themselves, the needed re-thinking is virtually a matter of ‘life and death’. With their #EndSARS Protest, Nigerian youths have commenced the process of taking back their life and playing a more active role in making it worth living. Peaceful protests by different groups, particularly youths, are gaining ground all over the world as powerful tools for eliciting necessary action from governments and other stakeholders; the Nigerian youth have demonstrated their capacity for effectively utilizing this tool – and there should be no going back, *provided this is done responsibly, non-violently and with patriotism and maturity*. It is very much hoped that government would keep abreast with modern democratic principles by allowing the youth to utilize this tool.

- **Support by NGOs, CSOs, CBOs, FBOs: All Hands on Deck**

Youth development should not be left to governments and family alone. The many other stakeholders have various roles to play to ensure that government lives up to expectations in its responsibilities to the youth, and to support the youth to realize their potentials – Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) etc.

- **With the World Watching: The ‘Deterring Gaze’ of the International Community**

Most governments in the developing world have a penchant to ‘bow and tremble’ when world powers are watching their activities. Consequently, Nigerian youths and their supporters/collaborators should ensure that government action and inaction, in relation to youth development, are globally ‘visible’.

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