Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Nigeria: Key Research Findings

Dauda Garuba, 'Funmi Olonisakin, Eka Ikpe and Wale Ismail

The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG) at King's College London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries, in order to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in the region's youth.

Specifically, we were interested in knowing how decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance and globalization have impacted on the young people of West Africa. Our initial conviction that youth are at the heart both of the region's challenges and of its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the subsequent interest in young people displayed by major international organizations like ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations (UN). Also, the wide involvement of youth in the outbreaks of sub-national violence in post-military Nigeria, especially ethno-political and religious clashes, underscores the need to focus attention on this country's youth.

What we found in Nigeria

■ Several government-led initiatives appear to show commitment to addressing youth needs, but the majority are largely unresponsive to the actual needs and aspirations of youth. Where these initiatives meet youth needs and aspirations at all they are often inadequate and deeply politicised. Politicians regularly exploit these initiatives to distribute patronage and cement their power base, rather than seeking to genuinely address the plight of young people.

■ Most young people are not willingly inclined to use violence to seek to change their circumstances. Where violence does occur, it is often aimed at creating or defending socio-economic and political privileges.

■ Young people's choices of activities for coping with vulnerability and exclusion are determined and shaped by factors such as the social networks they are exposed to; the opportunities and constraints in their environments; the level and type of education they have accessed; and their interests, talents and abilities.

■ A majority of youth actively use non-violent (if sometimes illegal) means like media, music, petty commerce, sports, manual labour, artisanship, Internet fraud, visa racketeering and document forgery to cope with socio-economic deprivation.

■ Where youth have been involved in violence and crime, it has been due to local dynamics that include the capacity, scope and social space for invention and creativity; the connections between informal structures and state/formal institutions and actors; and the type of assistance offered by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The nature and needs of youth in Nigeria

■ The national definition of youth (those aged 18–35 years) is more inclusive and robust than the international (UN) definition.

■ The challenges of youth in Nigeria are poor governance, disrupted education and socio-economic deprivation.

■ The key needs of youth in Nigeria are access to quality educational, employment and socio-economic opportunities, as well as participation in the formal processes of decision-making (beyond voting during elections and joining the youth wings of political parties).

Government youth programmes (and their limitations)

■ The Nigerian government appears to be committed to youth development through several programmes;

however, their implementation has been poor, with minimal impact on youth.

- Eighty per cent of the programmes under the 2001 National Youth Policy have not been implemented.

- Because government programmes are driven less by the actual needs of young people and more by considerations such as political patronage, a majority of these initiatives do not engage the current realities of youth needs and aspirations.

- The government has not involved non-governmental and informal structures and youth organizations as stakeholders in the delivery of youth services.

What happens to vulnerable youth?

- Notwithstanding the levels of vulnerability and exclusion of youth in Nigeria, most young people are disinclined to use violence to change their circumstances, although some use violence to create or defend socio-economic and political privileges, and insert themselves into structures controlled by political elites.

- A minority use violence (as members of ethno-religious militias, political thugs, etc.) to access and influence public office holders and policies.

What sustains youth?

- Social network made up of communities, NGOs and religious groups have emerged as critical sources of support to marginalized youth in Nigeria, providing alternative forms of inclusion and means of exercising influence on the state and formal institutions.

- Youth have created new commercial opportunities through a broad range of informal economic activities, including both the legitimate (such as telephone calls and card recharging businesses) and the illegitimate (prostitution, car smuggling, Internet fraud, visa racketeering and document forgery).

- Sports (especially soccer) and show-biz activities have witnessed astronomical growth among Nigerian youth. Music, theatre arts, comedy and event management have become sources of income.

What should be done?

The Nigerian government should:

- urgently review and enhance the implementation of the National Youth Policy;

- urgently tap into the resources and expertise of non-state actors, especially religious groups, NGOs and youth groups that are actively involved in the delivery of youth-related services at different levels across Nigeria;

- give a greater role to and partner the private sector in youth empowerment beyond the current limited high-visibility programmes that are restricted in the numbers of beneficiaries and targeted at educated young people;

- remove arbitrary rules that limit the participation and representation of youth in formal politics and decision-making processes, most importantly age-based criteria for political aspiration;

- revamp the formal education and vocational skills programmes to reduce the high number of drop-outs and improve these programmes' currently poor training and learning standards; and

- remove the financial constraints that prevent young people from gaining formal educational and/or vocational skills training.

DFID and other international development agencies should:

- use in-country definitions of youth in programme designs and project implementation;

- support civil society groups (NGOs, youth groups and religious bodies) in the areas of capacity-building and programming to improve the efficiency of their projects;

- create dedicated funding streams targeting specific aspects of youth empowerment, including vocational skills training, self-advocacy and conflict prevention;

- partner government at the national, state and local levels on strategies for integrating youth into governance processes; and

- support government to develop and train a professional cadre of youth workers with expertise on youth matters, like counselling, career guidance and communication.