

Mobilizing and Empowering Youths for Sustainable Community and Rural Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper highlights five basic age groupings (with varying levels of cognitive development) found in every healthy human population, namely; infancy, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age; and describes Nigeria as a country with an expansive population profile. The paper discusses the conflicting characteristics of youths who are in the majority in Nigeria, and stresses the need and ways to nurture (educate) and empower them to apply their skills and intellect for sustainable community and rural development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Census, Population Structure, Empowerment, Community Development, Demography.

Introduction

Every member of the human population passes through a progressive and irreversible functional alteration of his/her biological system. This phenomenon known as aging can be considered in living systems at the level of molecule, cell, tissue, organ, intact animal or at the level of population (Kohn, 1973). The process which is initiated at birth becomes prominent and progresses from infancy, to youth and to very old, with attendant physiological decline, loss of cells, degenerative joint diseases, among other debilitating diseases that may lead to death.

Conceptually, the word youth connotes being young. Youth is a relative term, defined by a given age range, and with its meaning varying across cultures, groups, and countries. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations defined youths as young men and women between the ages of 15 and 24 years. In Nigeria, university graduates, aged 30 years and below, are recognized by the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) as eligible to serve the nation under the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme. Ironically, veteran inmate of old people's homes usually regards the latest arrivals (retirees, some of who are over 75 years) as the youths or babies of the home (Ngwoke, 1992).

Stages of Human Development

Every healthy human population has five identifiable age groupings: infancy, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and old age, with varying levels of cognitive development. Generally,

three of these groups (infancy, adolescence and very old) depend, to varying degrees, on the adult and middle aged for survival and sustenance. Piaget's learning theory distinguishes between four learning stages, each building on what was learned in the previous stage. They are sensory-motor stage (infancy), pre-operational stage (Toddlerhood and early childhood), concrete operational stage (elementary and early adolescence), and formal operational stage (adolescence and adulthood) (Nwachukwu, 1994). Youths (adolescents and young adults) constitute the majority and a formidable force in a community or country. We shall, in the context of this paper, regard youths as young males and females between 15 and 30 years.

Nigeria's population structure

The population of a country is determined through a periodic census exercise. Details of the national and state provisional totals of 1991 and 2006 censuses in Nigeria are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:
Sex Structure of Population in Nigeria

S/No	State	1991			2006			
		Males	Females	Total	Male	Female	Total	Rate of Increase
1.	Abia	1,125,999	1,212,488	2,338,487	1,434,193	1,399,806	2,833,999	17.48
2.	Adamawa	1,050,791	1,051,262	2,102,053	1,606,123	1,561,978	3,168,101	33.65
3.	Akwa Ibom	1,167,829	1,241,784	2,409,613	2,044,510	1,875,698	3,920,208	38.53
4.	Anambra	1,374,671	1,421,804	2,796,475	2,174,641	2,007,391	4,182,032	33.13
5.	Bauchi	2,192,423	2,158,584	4,351,007	2,426,215	2,250,250	4,676,465	6.96
6.	Bayelsa	Not created	Not created	Not created	902,648	600,710	1,703,358	-
7.	Benue	1,368,965	1,384,112	2,753,077	2,164,058	2,055,186	4,219,244	34.75
8.	Borno	1,296,111	1,239,892	2,536,003	2,161,157	1,990,036	4,151,193	38.91
9.	Cross River	956,136	955,161	1,911,297	1,492,465	1,396,501	2,888,966	33.84
10.	Delta	1,271,932	1,318,559	2,590,491	2,074,306	2,024,085	4,098,391	36.79
11.	Ebonyi	Not created	Not created	Not created	1,040,984	1,132,617	2,173,501	-
12.	Edo	1,085,156	1,086,849	2,172,005	1,640,461	1,577,871	3,218,332	32.51
13.	Ekiti	Not created	Not created	Not created	1,212,609	1,171,603	2,364,212	-
14.	Enugu	1,475,648	1,678,732	3,154,380	1,624,202	1,633,096	3,257,298	3.16
15.	FCT	205,299	166,375	371,674	740,489	664,712	1,405,201	73.55
16.	Gombe	Not created	Not created	Not created	1,230,722	1,123,157	2,353,879	-
17.	Imo	1,166,448	1,319,187	2,485,635	2,033,286	1,902,613	3,934,899	36.83
18.	Jigawa	1,455,780	1,419,745	2,875,525	2,216,907	2,132,742	4,348,649	33.88
19.	Kaduna	2,041,141	1,894,477	3,935,618	3,112,028	2,954,534	6,066,562	34.83
20.	Kano	2,958,736	2,851,734	5,810,470	4,844,128	4,539,554	9,383,682	38.08
21.	Katsina	1,860,658	1,892,475	3,753,133	2,978,682	2,813,896	5,792,578	35.21

22.	Kebbi	1,035,723	1,032,767	2,068,490	1,617,498	1,621,130	3,238,628	36.13
23.	Kogi	1,039,484	1,108,272	2,147,756	1,691,737	1,586,750	3,278,487	34.49
24.	Kwara	773,182	775,230	1,548,412	1,220,581	1,150,508	2,371,089	34.69
25.	Lagos	3,010,604	2,714,512	5,725,116	4,678,020	4,336,514	9,013,534	36.48
26.	Nasarawa	Not created	Not created	Not created	745,556	917,719	1,863,275	-
27.	Niger	1,252,466	1,169,115	2,421,581	2,032,725	1,917,524	3,950,249	38.69
28.	Ogun	1,147,746	1,185,980	2,333,726	1,847,243	1,880,855	3,728,098	37.40
29.	Ondo	1,881,884	1,903,454	3,785,338	1,761,263	1,679,761	3,441,024	-10.01
30.	Osun	1,043,126	1,115,017	2,158,143	1,740,619	1,682,916	3,423,535	36.96
31.	Oyo	1,711,428	1,741,292	3,452,720	2,809,840	2,781,749	5,591,589	38.25
32.	Plateau	1,657,209	1,655,203	3,312,412	1,593,033	1,585,679	3,178,712	-4.21
33.	Rivers	2,239,558	2,069,999	4,309,557	2,710,665	2,474,735	5,185,400	16.89
34.	Sokoto	2,208,874	2,261,302	4,470,176	1,872,069	1,824,930	3,696,999	-20.91
35.	Taraba	759,872	752,291	1,512,163	1,199,849	1,100,887	2,300,736	34.27
36.	Yobe	714,729	684,958	1,399,687	1,206,003	1,115,558	2,321,591	39.71
37.	Zamfara	Not created	Not created	Not created	1,630,344	1,629,502	3,259,846	-
	Total	44,529,608	44,462,612	88,992,220	71,709,859	68,293,683	140,003,542	36.44

Source: National population commission (2007)

The census data of 2006 shows that the population of Nigeria rose by 36% between 1991 and 2006. Kano state was the most populous state with population of 5.8 million (1991) and 9.3 million (2006), followed by Lagos State with a population of 5.7million (1991) and 9.0 million (2006). Between 1991 and 2006, there was a drop in the population of Ondo, Plateau and Sokoto states and males outnumbered females.

Population growth facilitated by high fertility rate and low mortality rate is desirable, but unrestricted population growth has disastrous consequences. Fig. 1 shows different profiles of age and sex population structure, namely, expansive, constrictive and near stationary structures. Each of them has implications for health and educational planning, environmental management, manpower availability, infrastructural provision and resource management (FRN, 1988).

Nigeria possesses a youthful structure and a healthy population since the population of her youths exceeds 50 percent (Fig 2). Demographers describe as having youthful character (expansive) or pyramidal structure, communities or countries with age range increasing from a broad base to a narrow top of the social pyramid; and abnormal (heading for extinction), communities or countries with inverted pyramidal age structure.

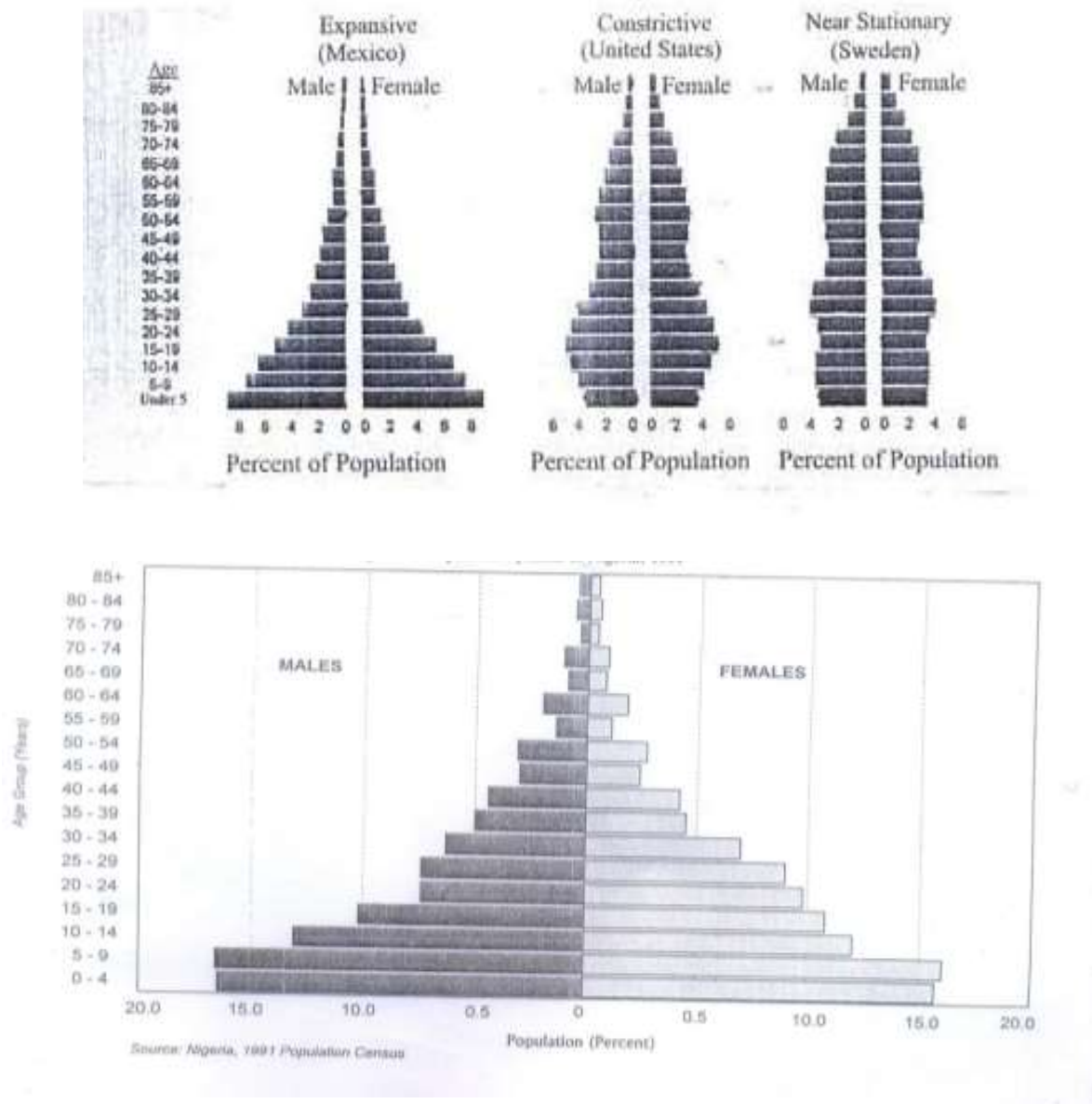


Figure 2: Age and Sex population pyramid of Nigeria, 1991

The numerical and percentage distribution of Nigeria's population by age and sex (age/sex pyramid) aptly shows this expansive structure with more youths than adults. (Fig 2). This structure has the disadvantage of a high dependency ratio and equally implies the investment of a greater part of a society's income in social welfare programmes, as well as creation of employment opportunities and is typical of developing countries (Ekong, 2010).

Conflicting Features of Youths

Youths have conflicting personality, motivational and developmental characteristics. The period witnesses rapid physiological changes that usher in puberty and adolescence. It is a period of character building and a time of handover of human patrimony or matrimony (Ngwoke, 1992). It is the age of hope, of promise, of enthusiasm, of plans and of ideals (Okogie, 1992). Other tantalizing qualities of this stage of life include belief in a better world, condition of being fresh and vigorous, being daring, inquisitive, enterprising, and full of energy.

It is also a period when a number of anti-social and disruptive behaviours manifest. These include reckless spending, drugs and alcohol addiction, sexual immorality, extremism, cultism, restiveness and other forms of juvenile delinquency. Adedoyin (2005) summarized characteristics of youths as including innovation proneness, minimal risk aversion, faster reaction time, less fear of failure, less conservatism and greater physical strength. Others are greater knowledge acquisition propensity, social propensity, and faster rate of learning and faster relation building.

The Holy scriptures is replete with both noble and obnoxious activities of youths. Jesus Christ made the most significant contributions to the advancement of mankind in his youth. At the age of 12, he was found in the temple of Jerusalem where he quizzed and stunned the philosophers and scientists. (Luke 2⁴¹⁻⁴⁶). Again, he was able to chase a bunch of exploiters, swindlers and other people of doubtful character who were exploiting the people away from the temple (John 2¹³⁻¹⁶). Conversely, Lot's daughters, who were youths, made their father drunk and forced him to impregnate them (Genesis 19³⁰⁻³⁸). Again, the sons of Eli who were described as scoundrels, and who treated people's offering with disrespect (1Samuel 2¹²⁻¹⁷), were also youths (Goodnews Bible, 2007).

Nurturing the Youth

Youth character is influenced by both genetic inheritance and learning. Genetically-inherited feature are fixed and are difficult to change, while learnt behavioural patterns can be modified with desirable results. The popular saying "as a tree is inclined, so shall it fall" aptly underscores the need to appropriately handle the conflicting personality, motivational and developmental factors associated with youth, and the transition from youth to adulthood. The scriptures (Prov. 22:6) admonishes us to "train up a child the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it".

The youth can be likened to a flood. "When there is no control system for a flood, a terrible disaster to all and sundry is usually the uninvited consequence. Several authors have described failure to show interest in youth development as a grave and dangerous omission (Ejiogu, 2001; Onochie, 2008).

Educating and Empowering Youths

A two-pronged approach to harnessing the physical and intellectual abilities of youths is to organize educational programmes that will empower them to achieve self-fulfillment, and to create an enabling environment for their participation in rural and community development. Fishers (1993) defined empowerment as $f(A \times R \times IA)$ where,

A = Authority

R = Resources

I = Information

A = Accountability

He further explained that authority, training, information we important for decision making and when provided, individuals could then be held accountable for their decisions.

Nigeria's 6-3-3-4 educational systems made provision for a six-year primary education, three years of junior secondary school (JSS), three years of senior secondary school (SSS), and four years of University Undergraduate Studies. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) had three components, namely, (i) literacy or non-formal education, for out-of school children, youths and adults, (ii) formal basic education (Primary and junior secondary education), and (iii) nomadic education for school age children of pastoral nomads and migrant fishermen (FMYD, 2008). Youths can impact on the community development effort of their communities (FRN, 2004).

Youth Participation in Community Development

Community is a term used to describe human population within a specific locality or district who share common interests, basic infrastructural facilities and natural resources. The United Nations defined Community Development as a process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of government authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress. (NYSC, undated); and mass participation is encouraged (Abasiokong, 1980).

Community development entails members of the community pooling their resources together, to provide functional physical and social infrastructures. These include educational and health facilities; potable water and electricity; information and communication facilities, road and transportation facilities. As well as storage, processing and marketing facilities. It also involves managing and controlling their living environment with the aim of improving the living standards of the people.

Underlying community development efforts are the following basic principles: (NYSC, undated)

- i. People need change and are capable of organizing themselves to bring social and physical benefits to their community.
- ii. Self or collective effort is at times necessary, desirable and effective for achieving progress.
- iii. Local initiative can be mobilized in the interest of the community.
- iv. External assistance may provide additional motivation or incentive if properly channeled.
- v. Community development connotes voluntarism, selfless service and participation.

Community participation is necessary because community projects affect the lives of members of the community more than anyone else. Apart from the fact that it assures interest and commitment, it is crucial for the initial success and sustainability of the programmes. Every member of the community (youths, adults) has a role to play in community development. However, on account of their large population (Table 1), the youths are a major force to be reckoned with in community development matters. Youth participation at individual and organizational levels can take positive, negative, passive forms.

a. **Positive contribution:** This takes the form of youths

- i. Applying as trained youths (Engineers, Doctors, Teachers) etc their skills to community development projects.

- ii. Engaging as unskilled youths, in manual labour such as carrying water, clearing or leveling sites etc during project implementation.
- iii. Offering consultancy services and technical advice where necessary.
- iv. Donating cash (local or foreign currency) or contributing non-cash materials such as wood, gravel, sand, equipment etc.
- v. Attending community development meetings and participating in decision making; making suggestions and voting; coordinating group activities.
- vi. Devoting hours, months and years to community development activities, and
- vii. Participating in surveillance, and being security conscious in order to protect the community and preserve community project.

b. Passive Contribution

This means indifference, non-active compliance or lack of opposition regarding projects sited in one's community.

c. Negative Contribution

Youths can also play negative roles that affect community project adversely. Youths' nuisance value could be expressed through the following ways:

- i. Embezzling community development funds entrusted to one's care.
- ii. Conniving or aligning with undesirable external elements to sabotage projects sited in or proposed for one's community.
- iii. Vandalizing community project.
- iv. Supporting community projects that promote one's selfish interest.
- v. Gossiping or giving negative publicity to community projects in order to discredit community leaders or sponsors of project in one's community.

Conclusion

Youths should be instrumental to formation of a youth forum (with credible administrative structure) in the community where development activities and other issues of community interests will be discussed. They should be given recognition by the community leadership and relevant organs of government in order to give the group legal status. In addition to assisting in identifying community needs and anxieties and in addressing such issues they should be alive to their social responsibilities as youths. e.g. Surveillance and vigilante services, clean-up activities and representing the community in football and other competitions. Therein lies the key to sustainable community and rural development in Nigeria.

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