



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Youth Participation and Nation-Building in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

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Nigeria's persistent challenges in nation-building are assessed with a spotlight on the role of the youths. Despite the rich ethnic tapestry of the polity, systemic issues like fragmentation and mistrust continually challenge the nation-building agenda. The research adopts a qualitative analysis via the descriptive research design and employs secondary data obtained from different literature. The political socialisation theory, which observes how young people are incorporated into a society's political culture, is the theoretical perspective adopted. The findings reveal that youth participation has been present since independence; however, there is a gap between youth engagement efforts made by the state and actual youth engagement. The study also finds that social media can be leveraged as a tool to engage the youths actively. Thus, recommendations set forth include the development of various national strategies such as youth education and dialogue to incorporate the youths into nation-building endeavours.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a significant percentage of its population as youths. It is estimated that over 90% of youths in the country live in extreme poverty and have to resort to crimes to make ends meet (Eze-Michael, 2020; Idike & Eme, 2015; Okafor, 2011; Salisu, 2008). Past governments have put different measures in place to engage the youth population across different levels; these measures have recorded varying degrees of success but have yet to fully address the needs of the youth (Odeh, 2022; Ogbeide, 2021; Ajayi, 2013; Wuam, 2012). It is a known fact that the nation's future rests on the shoulders of the youth, who are famed to be the leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, there is a need to do more to ensure that the youth population is fully and firmly incorporated into nation-building (Fanneh & Ogonna, 2021; Idike & Eme, 2015; United Nations, 2007).

The need for nation-building in Nigeria is essential due to its colonial past and culturally heterogeneous societies. Nation-building is a process done to unite different peoples to give them a shared feeling of unity (Mylonas, 2021; Ogbeide, 2021). Nigeria's nation-building project is an ongoing one. Efforts were made in the 1960s to foster national integration due to the pluralistic nature of the country's peoples (Chidozie & Orji, 2022). Unfortunately, the attempts at national cohesion were cut short by the Civil War in 1967; at the end of the war in 1970, the military Head of State of the time, Gen. Yakubu Gowon, championed a new wave of nation-building with the 3Rs of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation (Ogbeide, 2021).

To this end, several measures were implemented to build lasting unity, such as creating new states within the country, celebrating the Festival of Arts and Culture, and establishing the National Youth Service Corps. Beyond the Gowon era, various leaders in Nigerian history have tried to foster nation-building by championing sporting activities; through the creation of special programs, agencies, and ministries to incorporate ethnically or demographically marginalised groups, by providing employment opportunities, the formation of political parties by transitional military regimes and so forth (Odeh, 2022; Ajayi, 2013; Wuam, 2012).

It is pertinent to state that these nation-building efforts continue to be truncated by ethnic divide and mistrust, religious intolerance, insurgency and secessionist uprisings, insecurity, terrorism and banditry, economic meltdown, and political instability (Chidozie & Orji, 2022). Therefore, a creative solution must be proffered to Nigeria's nation-building problem. Youth participation in Nigeria's nation-building project is now more critical than ever. Young people have unique perspectives and insights, coupled with their strength and enthusiasm, making them an asset in Nigeria's nation-building endeavours. Nigeria's need of a fresh perspective and approach to its nation-building activities is imperative and the incorporation of the youths into nation-building endeavours is sacrosanct (Aje & Chidozie, 2016).

This research aims to understand youth participation in nation-building in recent years, underscoring the recent trends of youth participation and observing how the active engagement of the youth population can foster cohesion in Nigeria's polity bringing about civic engagement and political stability in the long run. This study contributes to scholarship by spotlighting Nigerian youths and displaying how they can impact the nation-building process by identifying the current trends on youth participation in nation-building, recommendations are made in line with the goal of the study in order to chart a progressive course for the future of the country.

The concept of youth participation

Youth participation refers to the structures, processes and strategies that allow for the youths to be actively engaged in the political process in society and the resultant engagement by youths in the overall process. Youth participation refers to the system of including the younger generation in the institutions and processes that affect their lives, such as establishing committees and holding meetings to lobbying decision-makers and policymakers. This aims to foster an atmosphere wherein both the older generation and the upcoming generation may collaborate respectfully and with mutual understanding. It encompasses recognising and fostering young people's qualities, interests, and abilities by giving them genuine opportunities to participate in decisions that impact them both personally and within the systems they are involved in (Checkoway, 2011; 1992). Kitanova (2020) states that there are four major dimensions of youth participation: economic participation, cultural participation, social participation, and political participation.

The concept of nation-building

Nation-building refers to the creation of a joint national identity by unifying a country's population and creating a national unity where people feel bound together by a sense of community and cohesion. Nation-building is the challenge of winning the loyalty and commitment of the subjects of a political system, and it is the process of uniting a country's population by creating a national unity where citizens are bound by a sense of oneness and kinship, and where trust and understanding is cultivated. It is the construction of a shared national identity, as against ethno-tribal or regional identity, and has been put forth as a potential remedy for challenges associated with ethnic fractionalisation (Mylonas, 2021; Ogbeide, 2021; Idike & Eme, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This research investigates the phenomenon of youth participation in Nigeria's nation-building project, with a specific focus on prevalent trends of youth participation in recent years. To achieve this goal, the study adopts the secondary research method which entails the review of existing

literature. The research design follows a descriptive and exploratory approach to identify and analyse data relevant to the study.

The study reviews a variety of academic sources, including journals, conference proceedings, websites, and books. Data for this research is primarily sourced from secondary outlets such as peer-reviewed academic papers and online resources, with academic databases like JSTOR, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Google Scholar serving as key platforms for primary data collection. The data was analysed through a thematic review method, incorporating document and content analysis to derive meaningful insights from the available information.

Political socialization theory

Political socialization refers to the purposeful efforts to instill political knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours by instructional agents tasked with this duty (Kotze, 1986). It encompasses the learning process in which people accept various political attitudes, values, and actions from their surroundings (Hong & Lin, 2017). The theory of political socialization was propounded by Hyman (Kudmac, 2015; Dennis, 1968; Easton, 1968) and is premised on the facts that all political behaviour is “learned” and that all learning has a direction because of either the intentional transmission of knowledge or the unconscious development of psycho-cultural inclinations (Ray, 1968). There are numerous agents of political socialization, such as the family, peer groups, schools, religious institutions, mass media, and the Internet (Hong & Lin, 2017; German, 2014; Kotze, 1986). These agents influence children's political behaviours and dispositions as they evolve into adulthood; it can thus be concluded that parochial political culture is learned, just as political participation and civic engagement are learned (Hong & Lin, 2017). The political socialization theory adequately captures how young people are inculcated into the political culture of their society.

Background to nation-building in Nigeria

Diverse attempts at nation-building were observed during and after the decolonisation era of the African continent, manifested in different forms across the various colonies, and the results show corresponding disparities. Nation-building points to the strategies employed by the governing elites of a state within their polity in an attempt to manage social order within the municipality in ways that promote a particular national narrative over any other (Osimen, et al., 2024). These strategies can range from assimilationist initiatives to exclusionary policies. When successful, nation-building results in societies where individuals exhibit greater loyalty and patriotic sentiments to the nation than their regional or ethnic origins (Mylonas, 2021). The modern states of 21st-century Africa conform to the basic principles of a state, such as a defined territory, permanent population, effective government, independence and so on. Their historical ties can only be traced back to the era of colonialism in the early 20th century. In a bid to imitate the European model, states within Africa are inherently porous as the shared cultures and values vary from one cardinal pole to another within a particular state. For instance, Nigeria can boast over 250 ethnic nationalities within the country (Davis & Kalu-Nwiyu, 2001; Chidozie, et al., 2024).

The Nigerian state was forged as an artificial contraption, a mash-up of diverse ethnic nationalities fused into a state, collectively lacking the inherent and fundamental attributes of a nation (Osimen, Fulani, Chidozie & Dada, 2024) The government was not autonomous, the boundaries were arbitrary, and the inhabitants were regarded as subjects instead of citizens. The colonial state was devoid of national foundations. Hence, at the attainment of independence, the state was stripped completely of the pre-colonial style and became a replica of the colonial state. An autonomous government headed by the inhabitants, who were now citizens, but the territorial structure maintained the same arbitrariness, which lacked a national character since the state was primarily an agglomeration of multiple nations within a state. Hence, citizens strived not for a common national interest but for the interests of their individual nations (Wuam, 2012; Fonchingong, 2005; Davis & Kalu-Nwiyu, 2001).

The fragmented and competitive nature of the different regions between the 1940s up till independence in 1960 led to the creation of a country with “fragile unity”. This fragile unity was eventually shattered by the Civil War in 1967. The post-war efforts made from 1970 by Gen. Yakubu

Gowon were the landmark moment of active national integration in Nigerian history, with efforts made towards rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation. Also, the adoption of the federal system of government and the existence of diverse heterogeneous groups in the country continue to challenge national unity (Ogbeide, 2021).

In Nigeria, many of the conflicts that have arisen are mostly interstate conflicts in the form of ethno-religious uprisings, civil war, secessionist movements, terrorism, insurgency, banditry and so on. Some significant instances include the ethnic militia groups in the Niger Delta, the ethno-religious crisis in Plateau state, sectional conflicts (Biafran agitation, Oduduwa people's congress), and the recent phenomenon of terrorism in the country as promoted by the terrorist organisation known as Boko Haram and the herdsmen-farmers clash in some Northern states (Chidozie & Orji, 2022; Davis & Kalu-Nwiwu, 2001). These unrestrained attacks on individuals and institutions in the state point to the fact that there is a lack of peace and cohesion in the country. These inter-regional and inter-tribal conflicts are borne out of the need of these peoples to defend their "rights" and protect themselves from other ethnic groups who may try to dominate or subjugate them. Hence, the need for nation-building in Nigeria is pertinent (Osimen, et al., 2024).

Nations are rooted in cultural and historical identities shared by communities that were created long before the idea of the modern state was conceived. The state is an instrument of supremacy exercised through a legitimate government, and a nation is a cultural society. The Nigerian cultural community is subdivided into various ethnic groups with uniquely distinct, languages, cultures, traditions of origins, and peoples. Nigeria is a fusion of various nations into a state, and since independence in 1960, the Nigerian nation-building project has been a work in progress (Grotenhuis, 2016).

For Nigeria's nation-building project to work, we can borrow from the history of the German unification. From German history, we can deduce that the state does not become national through the mere desire of the people or the governing elite, but through the same means that language, customs, and faith are national and become national through the quiet workings of the national spirit. This national spirit is needed to bolster nation-building efforts and the involvement of young people with their unique ideas, perspectives and exuberance will go a long way in the creation of a nation spirit (Berdahl, 1972).

Current trends of youth engagement in Nigeria

Over sixty years have passed since independence, and Nigeria still struggles with the challenge of nation-building. The tumultuous relationship shared by the different states across the six geopolitical zones is evidence that significant work needs to be done to overhaul the existing system and bring about nation-building efforts in the true sense of it. According to Yakubu (2019, 2018), the solution to this is active citizen participation, which can be done through the integrative process of nation-building, which will foster unity and a sense of similarity among the different tribes represented in Nigeria. While there are many challenges set to be overcome such as the internal nature of the state (it possesses ethnically fragmented groups), the lack of a common geopolitical interest as each ethnic group seeks to look out for its own interests and not the interest of Nigeria, and the failure of the political elite to develop the country's economy, as is observed in the different cases of corruption, embezzlement and looting of public funds (Igbini, 2020; Ojiagu, Nzewi & Arachie, 2020).

For any country to thrive politically or economically, the country must actively engage its youth population. If this is not done, national development will be stifled. Youths have been involved in Nigeria's nation-building efforts even before independence; various youth movements contributed to the nationalist struggle which led to self-determination. However, appraising the state of economic decline, the surge of unemployment and population explosion of the youths in the country, all these efforts have not done enough to develop the youths or increase their level of participation in nation-building. Many Nigerian youths are engaged in various dastardly acts, and the non-inclusion of the youths further intensifies their restiveness and the inability of the state to engage the youths constructively and strategically, alongside policy inconsistencies, further postpones the attainment of fully formed nation-building (Odeh, 2022).

Several policies have been instituted over the years to address this teeming issue that is unemployment, notable among which include the institution of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), the creation of the Ministry of Youths and Sports, the development of the National Youth Policy, and other youth-focused specialised programs such as the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP) the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program (SURE-P), the Youth Enterprise With Innovation in Nigeria (YOUWIN), and N-POWER. These measures all attracted a level of buzz at the time of implementation, they have not been able to change the percentage of unemployed youths in the country significantly. Although there is no accurate data from the National Bureau of Statistics to back this claim, foreign observers have estimated the level of Nigerian youth unemployment from 40-50%. This has led to an increase in rural-urban migration, especially of young people in their search for greener pastures (Odeh, 2022; Ibrahim & Audu, 2020; Anthony & Ikechukwu, 2019).

Unfortunately, these urban areas are overpopulated, and many youths are still either unemployed or underemployed. A new consequence of this is manifested in poor business output and performance, vandalism and theft, economic stagnation, low foreign exchange and brain drain (Adeosun et al., 2022; Odeh, 2022). Nigeria continues to face the issue of underdevelopment due to numerous factors, one of which is the increase of unemployed youths among her populace. Unemployment and poverty work hand in hand in further exacerbating societal vices such as an increase in criminality, insecurity, corruption, and bad leadership. The persistent increase in unemployment among the country's young population fosters negative feelings of anger, shame, frustration, and desperation, which leads young people to commit heinous crimes to make ends meet. The idle youth population have become delinquents, and this has led to a surge in criminal activities such as cybercrime, fraud, kidnapping, murder, banditry, etc. (Adeosun et al., 2022; Eze-Michael, 2020).

Beyond restiveness and government policies, it must be observed that social media has now become an instrumental tool for youth participation in Nigeria. Young people use their social media accounts to express themselves and share information while engaging in peer-to-peer interactions. Social media has increased the number of informed and engaged young people due to its influence on youth behaviour (Erubami et al., 2021; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2018; Dagona et al., 2013). The rise of social media as a tool for youth participation has led to a clamour by the youths, both offline and online, by using various digital channels and social media platforms to express support or air their grievances (Mohamad et al., 2018; Dagona et al., 2013).

Yakubu (2018) observes that activities that take place online also translate to offline gatherings in line with political participation, such as the Bring Back Our Girls forum, the peaceful protest to the national assembly at Abuja, collective interactions like this among the nation's citizenry fosters a sense of oneness and belonging which is at the heart of nation-building (Braitham, Gberegbe, Chidozie & Osimen, 2025). The young population have taken to social media on numerous occasions to protest; some notable protests in the past few years include the #LazyNigerianYouth hashtag, which trended on Twitter and other social media in 2018. The hashtag was sparked by a statement made by the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, at the 28th meeting of the Heads of Government of the Commonwealth of Nations in Westminster, UK, in 2018, implying that Nigerian youths are lazy (Oladoyin et al., 2024; Ezeh & Mbose, 2020).

The #NotTooYoungToRun movement, which led to the enactment of the Not Too Young to Run Act in 2018, led to the reduction of age limits for young individuals to participate in elections and hold political positions (Braitham et al., 2024). This legislative change lowered the age requirements for the office of the President from 40 to 35 years, the House of Representatives from 30 to 25 years, and the State House of Assembly from 30 to 25 years. The impact of this policy has been instrumental in enhancing youth involvement in politics and the electoral process (Uwalaka, 2020). The #EndSARS protest of 2020 saw youths across different parts of the country clamour for an end to police brutality and the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Their demands were acknowledged, and the task force was disbanded in October 2020 (Dambo et al., 2022; Abari, 2021; Ajibulu & Asemah, 2021).

Finally, during the electioneering season 2023, Nigerian youths were actively engaged both online and offline, campaigning for their preferred candidates. The #GetYourPVC movement was used to sensitise youths to obtain their Permanent Voters Card (PVC), enabling them to exercise their franchise. Many businesses championed this cause by introducing various marketing strategies around this hashtag, such as offering discounts on a purchase when customers displayed their PVCs or subsidising logistic costs for product delivery. #NigeriaDecides2023 was the hashtag used to call out the 2023 general elections as Nigerians got to decide their political fate. The #GetYourPVC campaign and 2023 general elections enabled erstwhile politically apathetic youths to engage in the civic process. This manifested in young people engaging in online and offline political discussions, registering for and collecting their PVC and finally voting during the 2023 general elections (Obisesan, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it is evident that Nigeria urgently requires a new approach to nation-building strategies, with a particular emphasis on actively engaging the youth population. The adverse trends of political instability, economic decline, and brain drain have weakened vital institutions meant to enable and empower the youth. Consequently, a high level of youth restiveness exists, exacerbated by government policies that inadequately address their needs. Social media has emerged as a platform for the youth to voice their concerns, advocating for positive change and improved governance.

This study recommends that the government sponsor diverse educational initiatives for youths, encompassing formal education and vocational training. This comprehensive approach aims to engage youths based on their unique strengths and capacities actively, ultimately reducing the prevalence of idle youth on the streets. Recognising education as a potent means of empowerment, this initiative seeks to equip the youth for a more promising future. To further empower the educated population, entrepreneurial development schemes should be implemented nationwide, occurring biannually for a specific quota of youths in each of the 36 states. This strategic move aims to transition the educated demographic from job seekers to employers of labour, fostering economic growth. Moreover, the government should leverage social media to amplify the voices of the youth. This involves considering their specific demands, facilitating platforms for dialogue and forums, and providing digital opportunities to empower young people. By incorporating these recommendations, Nigeria can work towards a more inclusive and vibrant future driven by the active participation and empowerment of its youth.

It is instrumental to note that this work is not exhaustive and is limited in that it focuses only on youth participation in Nigeria's nation-building, looking at it from the political dimension. Other studies could observe the participation of other groups such as women and or children; they may also focus on youth participation in other countries, and nation-building can be assessed from different dimensions such as the economy, social and cultural dimensions, to mention a few.

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