The Growing Population of Street Children and the Accompanying Social Distress in Nigeria

Adegun Joel Adekunle, Adegoroye Abiodun Smith, E.O. Osakinle and A. Falana Bernard

Department of Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract: This paper considers the social aberration of the growing population of street children (5-17years) in villages, towns and cities across Nigeria and highlights the danger that the incidence portends for the nascent democracy. It took a random sample (1645 subjects) of these street dwellers in 6 of the 16 Local Government Areas covering the 3 Senatorial districts of Ekiti state and reports the data transcriptions from the focus group discussions (FGDs) the author and the research assistants had with them and also the in-depth interviews they had with selected concerned citizens on what they expect of the society if the street dwellers would ever be integrated into the functional society. The data were discussed in relation to the need for a policy formulation and review on "the schools without failures " for these street youths as well as a coordinating point for the efforts of the various religious organizations and Non Governmental Organizations working to get them focused on acquiring specific skills for self employment to alleviate the accompanying social problems of finding relevance in the nation's strategies for youth economic empowerment.

Key words: Missing

INTRODUCTION

More notably towards the end of the last century, the traditional African communal living appears to have given in to the impersonal albeit responsible individualistic mode of life and culture of the advanced nations of the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this same culture seems to assume acceptance and approval [1,2]. However, a notable and worrisome developing pathology in the cultural advancement chain reflect in the unacceptably high number of children living in the deplorable streets of virtually all Nigerian cities, towns and villages (front page comment The Nigerian Tribune, Friday 18th June 2004; back page comment The Guardian Wed 27th Oct, 2004).

These youths, put at an estimate of 15 million are not in schools and so are either working, roaming, idling or are being used for various criminal activities. It need be highlighted here that thrice in recent years, did the Amnesty International, rate Nigeria as ranking between the first and the third in terms of the level of crime commission among the 212 nations of the world (VOA News now, 20 hours utc December 23 2004, The Point Editorial Nov/Dec 2005). The *"omo-ita"* or *"area boys"*, in the southwest Nigeria, *"almadjeri"* in the north Nigeria and the *"ndiakaagba"* in the southeast Nigeria, it need be said, roam and transacts in the streets to cater for themselves and oftentimes their families. Experiences of people who had encountered them reveal that most times, these groups of youths constitute the population of the miscreants in the society. They are usually unkempt, very wild, daring and most times violent when soliciting for most times financial assistance and they view the assistance as not forthcoming from their prospective benefactor.

Perhaps of note and of interest are these youth's responses to the prevailing social situation. They have constituted themselves into groups, meet regularly and, seems to find "profitable" patronage with local politicians who easily mobilize them for rallies and their campaign strategies. These groups' meeting points, one needs to add, had been noted and commented on at the focus group discussion the researchers held, as the ground for a number of illicit relationships, center for recruitment for accomplices in many anti social and other clandestine activities. To be "efficient" at these antisocial acts, many of them are known to be involved in substance /drug abuse. In all, they challenge Nigeria's commitment to character building of her youth and also her efforts towards making the youths develop useful manual abilities based on intellectual training.

Corresponding Author: Adegun Joel Adekunle, Department of Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

These happenings though seemingly harmless as they seem to be meeting the immediate demands of finding something to occupy the large population of the youth who are un and under employed and not in school, are unacceptable (the UNO 1989 convention on the rights of children that was signed into law in Nigeria in July 2004). They are against the rights of children/youths. The charter on the rights of children set as an accomplishment never to neglect nor abandon the youths to their fate, for self defense and finding means of survival on their own. But as it is today, the youths had not only been neglected but denied their rights by the parents, schools, peers, cultural community and the government [3,4].

According to Ekong [5] youths and children are one of the greatest assets that any nation can have. Not only because they are legitimately regarded as the future leaders and mainstay of the society; they are, potentially and actually, the greatest investment for a country's development. They serve as a good measure of the extent to which a country can reproduce as well as sustain itself. The extent of their vitality, responsible conduct, intellectual astuteness and roles in society are positively correlated with the development of their country [6-8]. By intuition, this is the opposite of what they presently constitute, that is, they are a threat to national stability and even survival as they are being left to drift and mobilized for many riots and arsons that are been reported in the dailies and tabloids of the nation of recent.

Perhaps, the reasons for the existence of these street youths, a fairly global incidence according to the World Bank Report (2003), (the highest proportion, one-in-three, in sub-Saharan West-Africa), torch on family violence, excessive discipline, poverty, early onset of sexual activity, parental death and search for adventure [9-12]. Supporting these claims, Bankole [13] presented data to show these same reasons, as accounting for a larger percentage (61.8%) of the Nigerian victims. According to Adegoke [7], Bellamy [8] and Bankole [13] a notable craving of these set of youths is their need for freedom from the oppressions that their background had inflicted on them and that had driven them to the streets.

The mission of this research is therefore not to further establish the fore going reasons as it affects the Nigerian victims but provide empirical answers and recommendations that can help the legislation of a policy towards assisting some of the already initiated actions by a few Christian churches and Non Governmental Organizations who are making the youths become conscious of the need to develop and maximize their intellectual capacities, make full their spirit of entrepreneurship, self reliance, mutual co-operation, understanding and respect. Added to these is the need to work on making them free from corruption and self-service and also free from gender and other forms of discriminations. According to Omotosho [14] these helping bodies and organizations are in their altruism responding to a heavenly assignment that may not meet the exact needs of those they are ministering to unless they base their programmes and efforts on the views and thoughts of the intended population. So, the question is, what exactly do the victims need and how?.

Unless this base line question and a few others related to it, for examples; are these street youths willing to leave the streets?, what are their priorities? Would they like to be employed? What sort of employments do they desire? What are the expectations of these street youths? Would they like to possess skills? What sort of skills do they desire? What would they expect the government to do to help their situation? are answered, the youths may not be correctly guided. However, if correctly guided, adequately mobilized and fully integrated into the fabrics of the society, the youths will bring to the nation, especially in her current 3-tier National/State/Local Economic Empowerment Strategies (NEEDS) program a great reservoir of energy, resourcefulness, creativity and dynamism.

MATERIALS AND MATHODS

This essentially is a survey research set to gather information from the population of street children and youths in Nigerian villages, towns and cities as to what they desired to be the help and assistance from the society. The research participants were Nigerians drawn from Ekiti state, one of the 36 in Nigeria. She has sixteen local government areas, among which, six, were randomly chosen, to cover her three Senatorial districts.

What makes street youths issue an aberration in this state among the others is the special interest in schooling that her indigenes are noted for. But in recent times, there was a frightening fall in the number of her indigenes of primary and Secondary school age that ought to register and attend but were not. This makes the notable occurrence of street youths phenomenon in the state an aberration worthy of study as to the needs of this unwanted growing population. Toward this, six Local Government areas were randomly selected from the sixteen (16) in the State. These 6 LGAs are from the three senatorial districts in the state, two Local Government areas were randomly chosen per senatorial district, namely: North Senatorial District: Oye and Ilejemeje; Central Senatorial District: Ado-Ekiti and Ijero-Ekiti; South Senatorial District: Ikere and Ilawe.

The Instruments of the Study: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth/Key Informant Interview were adopted as methods for data collection. A whole range of data was collected which encompass the wide spectrum of the information needed for the project. Content of the Focus Group Discussion and the in-depth /key informant interviews.

These methods afforded the researchers the opportunity to collect baseline and comprehensive data about the subject matter of the research. The FGDs were mainly among the street youths Some of the questions that were put up for answering by the participants included:

- Why do they prefer staying on in the street to attending schools?.
- What the difficulties they encounter while being on the street entail,
- What exactly they desired in life.
- What contributions they believed they make to the society they are living in.
- How they consider the views and reactions of the members of the functional society to them to be
- What they consider that the society can do for them to make them return to being members of the functional society.
- What their life goals and ambitions are.
- If they would like to quit living and being on the street.
- Are they oriented towards skills acquisition especially in informal employment?.
- What sorts of employment do these youths desired?.

In the in-depth/key informant interviews with leaders and responsible adults in the communities sampled, the questions asked were related to:

- What they think of the anomaly of the youths taking more to living on the street,
- Whether the youths are meaningfully engaged.
- Whether the youths in their present modes of operations constitute economic or social disadvantage to the communities.
- In what ways the youths could be meaningfully engaged.
- Whether the youths as they present are and operating could constitute a threat or otherwise to the well being, survival and continuity of their communities *and*.
- What they think the nation and the communities need or must do to nip the anomaly in the bud, among other relevant issues in the survey.

Population and Sample: One thousand six hundred and forty-five (1645) street youths and 1576 adults and concerned citizens making a total of Three thousand two hundred and twenty one (3221) are the research participants.

The total number of street youths by age and location in the focus group discussions are given in Tables 1 and 2. A breakdown of the participants in the focus group discussions reveals that about 61%(1000) were males while 39%(654) were females. More males were interviewed than the females.

The participants in the in-depth interview totaled one thousand five hundred and seventy-six as shown above. In each of the 6 Local Government areas, five in-depth/key informant interviews were conducted. This makes thirty (30) in the (6) six LGAs.

The classification of the participants in the in-depth/key informant interviews were by age and sex as shown in Table 4.

Data Analysis: Method of data analysis involves the use of simple frequencies and their percentage conversions with tabulations and content analysis.

About 59% of the participants are so willing. The other lower but significant percentage, (41%,) that would not, based their decision on the fact that they have no assurance that the troubles back at home and that drove them to the streets would ever subside.

Table 1: Analysis of the age and distribution by location of the street youths

	Rural		Urban		
Ages	N	%	N	%	Total
5-8	96	5.8	126	7.6	222
9-11	106	6.4	200	12.1	306
12-17	416	25.2	701	42.3	1117

Table 2: Analysis of gender distribution

Sex	N	%
Male	1000	60.45
Female	654	39.55

Table 3:

Participants	Male	Female	Total
Opinion leaders	200	160	360
Traditional leaders	180	120	300
Market women	160	140	300
Religious leaders	180	100	280
School principal/headmaster	240	80	320

Table 4:

Sex	30-40	41-50	Above 51
Male	200	160	360
Female	180	120	300

Table 5: The priorities of the street youths *(excerpts from the Focus Group Discussions)*

S/N	%	
	Male	Female
1. Meet physiological needs	73	87
2. Perform and participate in social roles and expectations	88	57
3. Improve their performances at their trade	71	66
4. Travel far and wide for experiences related to the practice of their desired trade	94	63
5. Possess a recognizable certificate after attending training	98	47
6. Be respected and granted opportunities to serve in public (political) offices	97	47

Table 6: Willingness to quit being on the street

Yes (59%), N (976)		No (41%), *N* (678)	
Male	Female	Male	Female
652	324	467	211

Table 7: Expectations of the street youths and children *(excerpts from FGDs)*

S/N		Male	Female
1.	To be known for particular contribution to the society	921	511
2.	To be prosperous and influential	900	528
3.	Social respect	953	542
4.	To be able to produce goods and services	403	211
5.	Government patronage	916	633
6.	To be able to develop appropriate technique for handling things in the environment	407	113
7.	Access to funds	964	528
8.	To be able to perform specialized activities for people	706	523
9.	Meeting specific needs of the people	833	537

Table 8: Analysis of streets' youth and children orientation toward skills acquisition and informal employment

Very much	Not much	Never
12%	51%	37%

Table 9: Ready source of employment for the youths

S/N		Male	Female
1.	Hair dressing (mainly female)		601
2.	Barbing "males"	617	
3.	Okada, transportation with motor cycle (mainly males)	600	
4.	Commercial Bus transportation (Driving and being the passengers' Conductor, mainly males)	743	
5.	Wares selling and Petty trading (female than male)	703	546
6.	House servants/maids	418	201
7.	Baby sitting	117	377

Table 10: Priority needs of the street youths and children

S/N		Male	Female
1.	Preparing for life establishment on an employment	64	52
2.	Meeting physiological needs	100	82
3.	Planning for the future(marriage and family life)	71	100
4.	Making investments	60	63

Table 11: Some suggestions made for reduction of the number of street youths by the participants in the *Focus Group Discussions*

S/N	Support Required	Male	Female	Total	%
1.	Provision of soft Loans	503	324	827	50
2.	Provision of Equipments	197	101	298	18
3.	Provision of Infrastructure	197	101	298	18
4.	Having Apprentices	10	7	17	1
5.	Provision of Government Employment	102	96	198	12
6.	Provision of Government Industries	10	7	17	1
7.	Subsidy (Regular stipend for Up-keep	10	7	17	1

More over, they find a large measure of freedom to do whatever pleases them. Included in this is their association that determines what they charge the people who come to hire them for works and services at building sites. The females were sure that men would come to solicit for them as partners in their sexual pleasures and these serve as source of ready employment that does not require the use of dissipation of physical energy.

Analysis of what kind of employment the street youths desired: Findings showed that there are some seven informal employment that these youths and children appear oriented to:

In the in-depth interviews, 50% of the participants demanded for soft loans from government or any other agencies to help the youths start businesses as these participants believe that these street youths appear to have lost interest in schooling and had been involved in "businesses" involving monetary transactions and hence would best be helped if given loans to continue these businesses if such businesses are found helpful and legitimate, 18% submit that if the government can provides basic infrastructures such as water, constant electricity, good roads, security and housing this will give rooms for both local and foreign investors who can then come in build industries and then gainfully employ them. 18% of the participants want the government to provide them equipment, these are the set of people who had acquired skills but no materials to function. 12% of the participants demand for government employment demanding for government patronage (that is becoming the government political canvassers).

Most of the participants in the FGDs believe that if the government can provide the basic needs highlighted above, the problem of street youths would be half resolved as if given loans, they may not have opportunities to invest it as there are no viable industries like the ones that the majority of Nigerians are migrating abroad to serve.

DISCUSSION

First and above all, the communities from where the FGD participants were drawn expressed profound appreciation for the opportunity they had to express their views and to be listened to on an issue of such importance to the well being of their immediate society. They, however, also expressed a wish for the research to go beyond good intentions and to result in practical change for them.

The research findings across the sampled LGAs indicate that the problem of street youths is related to declining youth employment opportunities even when they have finished schooling. The issue is so strongly felt that it is almost a swan song among the people, that is, in their words, 'there are no jobs for us to do', 'we can't find work to do', 'we are just rottening away', 'what can we do about it?', " the government and it's police need to know that the increasing stealing and robberies are due to the devil finding work for the many idle hands", 'should there be a war or any social crisis, there would be too much atrocities'. In other words, the people are aware of it, its dangers and threats to the society's well-being but equally feel helpless about it.

Howbeit, there is a strong wish by most participants for the government to be notably involved more than the Churches and these other NGOs. Questioning participants as to why this should be so, it was revealed that people believe that for sustenance and support of a program that would and must be all embracing as one to take care of street youths, an unwavering and sure support is required, this they likened to the assurance that people have in government employment that later serve them at retirement and even in old age and this directly relate to the issue of pension and gratuity.

Implications and Recommendations: In all the six sampled LGAs, there exists a deep sense of concern for the unemployment status of especially the youth and these youths poor attitudes and indifference to their lack of

meaningful skills. Also of worry to virtually all the participants in the research is the trend among the youths to opt for transient jobs that require little training, demanding more or less no specific skills or certification or licensure, examples are 'Okada riding (commercial motorcycle transportation) and conductors for mini bus drivers, popularly called *'Akoto'*. It is worrisome to the research participants because these two chosen sources of employment had increased the daily experiences of traffic accidents and that had maimed and even killed many of the victims.

The nature of the socio-political and economic environment, which had prevailed in the state, imposed serious constraints in terms of meeting the needs and aspirations of the youth. Contemporarily, they suffered different kinds of socio-economic deprivation and afflictions. Thus, government's efforts, when made, have generally tended to be little, too late. The institutional framework for and plan implementation mechanism of public policy have been very weak, inefficient and ineffective, such that they hardly ever facilitated the actualization of desired policy goals. Hence the perspective of the nations' youth engagement policy need focus and bring into play factors such as:

- Involvement and use of skills training centers (the state has about 5 of them) that would not only train but also certify the recipients' capabilities,
- Focusing the skills training centers to meeting the local needs and relevance of the people,
- Developing/ adopting skills training strategies periodical for the people in identified or new areas of need in the society (for example chicken/wool production in Ekiti state).
- Working out an arrangement between the centers and the practitioners on the field as means of fine tuning the syllabus of training.

The governments in Ekiti state and the nation as a whole need recognize that the youth constitute the most vital resources for national and state development and hence need to prepare a consensus blue print for Youth Engagement Policy.

The governments in Ekiti state and at Abuja need recognize that the ability and capacity of the youth to derive benefit from and contribute the development depend essentially on the political will of Government, the legitimacy and credibility of its engagement policy as well as the appropriateness and adequacy of the institutional arrangement it puts in place to administer the policy programmes.

Thus, this policy needs to recognize the inadequacies and failure of previous policies and therefore make efforts at consultations for example with studies like the one at hand that attempts to fundamentally address the needs for youth engagement.

The policy need to outline the guiding values and clearly specify the objectives to be achieved for example, the right and obligation of the youth, the obligation of the government and parents and the expected social and physical changes in the society. These would have to be a set of clear, firm and formal statements of objective, target, programmes and plans of action towards Youth employment, well-being, growth and development.

Finally, unlike in previous attempts, this policy need provide for appropriate enabling legislative, institutional, budgetary/funding and monitoring and evaluation framework for its effective implementation. For example on the institutional provision, there need to be "The schools without failure" that would focus the curriculum on enterprise education, that is, (financial) reward oriented activities, into the school curriculum, especially at the Primary and JSS levels. Providing the people with sustainable means of livelihood through well managed forestry concessions and sustainable agriculture, develop a network of effectively managed parks, protected areas and ecological corridors so that skills could be displayed, encouraging investment of foreign government create activities that would be involving artisans, the seeming interest of the street youths, involve reputable banks and insurance companies in their investments, so that the youths can have a larger measure of confidence in the future. Setting up a Micro credit scheme to encourage youth and the apprentices establish and stay on vocational skills.

There also has to be a change of attitudes towards rural areas as many of the street youths migrated from such places. Hence there is the need to make the rural areas attractive through the provision of comparative amenities with that in the "urban" areas, diversion of attention to environmental sanitation and laying emphasis on food production and preservation. On these premises, the policy would outline the guiding values and hence clearly specify the objective to be achieved. The right and obligation of the youth, as well as the obligation of the government and parents would be enumerated toward the success of youth engagement.

In conclusion, these efforts, aids and resources intended to make life and living peaceful and prosperous for these youths in Nigerian streets need to encourage their out of school education , skills acquisition and economic freedom backed up with appropriate enabling legislative, institutional, budgetary/funding and monitoring and evaluation framework.

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