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POLICY BRIEF

The challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria is home to a significant and growing “youth” population, over a third of it below 24 years of age. The demographic potential for productivity and growth this group represents occurs alongside large-scale unemployment among young people of working age. The “unemployment crisis” has deep historical roots and exists within a wider context of poor governance, insecurity, conflict, and poverty. Policy norms and practices to address youth unemployment in Nigeria largely centre on skill development and job creation, with complementary schemes selectively targeted to specific groups of vulnerable and poor individuals. Measures are typically ad hoc, detached from a coherent programme of sustainable reform. Pre-existing structural factors and capacity constraints also shape the effectiveness of these programmes. While a productivist focus within current policy is potentially empowering in giving young Nigerians “worker” status, it also detracts from attending to deep-rooted structural problems seen to affect young people in disproportionate ways. Securing meaningful choices and lives for Nigerian youth requires reframing youth unemployment beyond labour markets alone, and embedded in ideas of equality and collective action.

Keywords: West Africa; youth; social policy; unemployment; Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, the largest and most populous economies in Africa, is experiencing a “youth bulge,” as its population of young people grows rapidly, bringing large proportions of working age populations into the labour market. Currently, 43% of the country’s population is under 14 years and 33% between 15 and 24 years, with this growth trend expected to continue until at least 2050, as the country’s population continues to grow at an annual rate of 2.3% (UNDESA, 2022). Between 2010 and 2030, about 66 million people are expected to join the ranks of Nigeria’s working-age population (Price, 2019). While some see the uniqueness and scale of Africa’s “demographic bulge” as overstated (Sumberg et al. 2021), in policy circles in Nigeria, a young workforce is viewed as a massive resource to engineer regional growth (Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning, 2021). Similar developmental thinking is evident in international organisations like the World Bank’s advocacy around developing youth capabilities through investments in health and education (World Bank, 2023b).

However, the present-day reality in Nigeria, like other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, provides a strong counterpoint, in the scale of challenges for young people to access basic services and gainful employment. Nigeria ranks low on the United Nations’ Human Development Index, with 30.9% of the

population living below the poverty line, most in the North of the country and rural areas (UNDP, 2023; World Bank 2023a, World Bank, 2023c). Incomplete access to essential education and health care services limits the productive potential of the younger generation, which is compounded by a lack of meaningful work prospects within a context of weak state capacity (World Bank, 2023b). A notable 35% of Nigerians between 15 and 34 years are unemployed, available for work and actively seeking work or working less than 20 hours a week, whereas 28% of young people in the work force are officially recognised as underemployed, working 20–39 hours a week (Federal Ministry of Youth Development (FMYS) 2022). Unemployment and the dearth of jobs is a major worry for people in Nigeria, with most youth taking up work opportunities in the informal sector; rural youth finding work mainly in agriculture, small-scale home enterprises, and construction, and older urban youth in informal retail, home enterprises, manufacturing, construction, and professional services (Price, 2019). Statistics on underemployed Nigerian youth, sit uncomfortably with the large numbers in informal employment, many of them women, and with limited access to statutory occupational security and social protection (International Labour Organization, 2023a). Youth unemployment trends suggest substantial regional differences with higher levels of unemployment in the country's Northern region and rural areas, as well as a gender gap in terms of recorded labour participation (Price, 2019). From an equity perspective, a recent World Bank report observes the evolution of “Two Nigerias” in terms of job prospects, one a sector offering high growth and income opportunities, whereas the other offers traditional low-productivity subsistence activities (World Bank, 2016a).

While unemployment affects young people disproportionately as evident in significantly higher unemployment rates, more generally, opportunities and life chances are shaped by broader structural determinants (Irving *et al.* 2018). This paper reflects on the youth unemployment experience in Nigeria, its political economy and social manifestations, and the current norms and instruments shaping policy responses. Current literature employs a macro lens examining the globalisation forces driving youth unemployment in the Global South (Fergusson and Yeates, 2021) or a development economic focus on economic sector and productivity in Sub Saharan Africa (Fox *et al.*, 2016). This paper leverages the Nigeria case study to consider the intersectionality of youth unemployment as well as the ideological underpinnings of existing policy instruments to reveal the distinctive experience of unemployment in similar contexts within the Global South, and that which defies the transportation of an employment-based welfare model as common in OECD countries (Alfers *et al.*, 2017).

In a nod to deep-seated problems of corruption, the latest iteration of Nigeria's youth policy lowered the upper age limit of “youth” from the African union norm of 35 years to 29 years noting, “the need to promote the appropriate targeting of desired beneficiaries of intervention programmes for the youth rather than adults masquerading as youth” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019, p. 3). However, we take a broader view of youth to include those between 15 and 34 years, in cognisance of historical, psychological, and socio-cultural factors that are critical markers of youth status (Blum, 2007). In Nigeria, these factors include later completion of formal education and family formation, unemployment, and the economic cost of achieving adult status.

Over two decades ago, Durham (2000) observed that African youth, defined through shifting configurations of power, identities, and agency, are the prism through which the social landscape in Africa is imagined. For example, youth are central to debates and transformations in membership and belonging in family, kin groups, ethnic groups, and the state. They also constitute a major affected group for transformations in the economy as their “activities, prospects and ambitions are dislocated and redirected” (Durham 2000, p. 114). Youth are included or excluded from political processes in novel ways, and this forms the focus of wider debates about citizenship, responsibilities, and social action. The centrality of youth to socio-economic and political developments in Africa indicates a need for scholarly focus on African youth not only as a vantage point for examining political and economic transformations across the continent (as Durham emphasised), but also to inform social policy to address the complex challenges facing this large population.

Intersectionality of youth unemployment in Nigeria

Nigerian youth face multiple challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, limited educational opportunities, and health challenges. In Nigeria, as in sub-Saharan Africa generally, many young people have low access to formal education, while school enrolment has increased across many sub-Saharan African countries, literacy rates among young people aged 15 to 24 years (estimated at 78.6%) remain the lowest in the world (Statista, 2022). The low literacy level of Nigerian youth has had important implications for other indices of development, particularly health. For instance, the rate of self-medication among Nigerians from low-income backgrounds is on the rise – a large number of this demographic fall within the youth category, working in the informal sector and/or performing menial jobs that pay below the minimum wage threshold (Dele-Adedeji et al., 2021). The inability to access affordable healthcare induces a resort to opioids as temporary “treatment” for ailments that require long-term healthcare (Klantschnig and Dele-Adedeji, 2021).

Recent estimates for Nigeria indicate that only a minority of the youth demographic are employed within the formal sector (Federal Ministry of Youth Development 2022). Further, unemployment rates do not often capture the adequacy or inadequacy of available employment opportunities since they do not take employment quality into account. The low unemployment rate among Nigerian (and sub-Saharan Africa) youths partly reflects the fact that many young people have resorted to insecure, and often low-productivity jobs in the informal sector, instead of remaining unemployed and economically dependent on parents and guardians (International Labour Organization, 2022). Young women, in particular, face significant barriers to employment. Those from economically disadvantaged and/or low-income backgrounds are forced to accept precarious, unskilled and/or lowly paid jobs, such as beer promotion for alcohol producers and marketers, where they are vulnerable to sexual harassment from predominantly male patrons (Dumbili and Nelson, 2022).

Economic pressures arising from rapid population growth and accompanying social change affect young Nigerian’s transition into adulthood, measured by completion of formal education, employment, and family formation (Blum, 2007). These trends have worsened with the recent economic downturn, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in a recent qualitative study that explored the factors that influenced young people’s decision to enter retail trade in illegal drugs in Nigeria (Nelson, 2023), most participants reported that they embraced the trade as a means of income generation to meet basic needs under conditions of economic recession and livelihood precarity. The study also found that the prospect of exiting the trade was constrained by limited social support and lack of viable alternative means of livelihood in the legitimate economy.

Furthermore, corruption pervades every aspect of public life in Nigeria, from “recruitment exercises to award of contract, admission processing to teaching and learning experiences as well as other bureaucratic and everyday life engagements of the people” (Falola, 2021, p. 282). Endemic corruption in Nigeria’s public sector, concentrating wealth in the hands of a few further, incentivises a recourse to alternate (and illicit) income generation activities among young people.

Nigeria’s small- and medium-scale enterprises struggle under the burden of an appalling state of infrastructure. For instance, government subsidy removal has led to a dramatic increase in the pump price of petroleum products contributing to increasing operational costs for small businesses, thereby rendering them unprofitable and unviable. Further, Nigeria’s informal economy is an ungoverned space where it is often difficult to determine the boundary between the licit and illicit. In this context, many young Nigerians have drifted from legitimate side jobs (“hustles” in local parlance) to supplement earnings to illegal activities in a desperate quest to secure their livelihoods. Declining opportunities for education and employment, linked to the structural adjustment policies of previous regimes, contributed to massive international migration of Nigerian youth, and fuelled youth involvement in activities such as illegal drugs trafficking, impersonation, and forgery for monetary gain (Apter, 1999). The poor living conditions and limited opportunities for social advancement linked to structural adjustment policies have created a context where illegal activities such as financial crimes (e.g., internet fraud) and illegal drug trade are seen as legitimate undertakings to secure one’s livelihoods (Cockayne and Williams,

2009; Felbab-Brown, 2010). Young Nigerians studying in foreign universities were reported to engage in illegal drugs smuggling as a means of income generation in the context of declining financial support from home (Obot, 2004), often serving as suppliers of foot-soldiers (“mules” or “couriers”) for the trafficking of drugs from South Asia to North America as well as inventive methods including ingesting drugs to transport them across borders (Ellis, 2009). This includes peddling illegal drugs, which serves as a means of income generation and a pathway to social and economic autonomy for young Nigerians living in conditions of poverty and limited job opportunities (Nelson, 2023). Young women, including ethnic migrants to major urban centres, turn to commercial sex work as a means of survival after failing to secure opportunities in alternative sectors (Nelson, 2020). Still others migrate internationally, mostly to developed countries in Europe and North America (“Japa”) in search of “greener pastures,” or better opportunities for securing one’s livelihoods. International migration involves not only the movement of skilled professionals (doctors, nurses) pursuing opportunities in the legal economy, but also unskilled labour who often seek opportunities in the informal and illegal economies.

The persistence of these trends casts doubt on the capacity of the Nigerian state to address the fundamental problems facing its youth citizenry as a step towards tapping their potential for economic productivity and growth. Indeed, the factors shaping youth unemployment are multiple and intersecting, defying simple solutions such as those informed by an employment-based welfare model. This situation partly explains why successive governments, driven by quick-fix approaches to resolving social problems, have not found a sustainable solution to youth unemployment.

Complex effects of youth unemployment

The impacts of global and local lockdowns induced by Covid-19, accompanying value chain disruptions, and widespread economic downturn are increasingly being felt in increased unemployment and decline in labour incomes, which has hit households living at or below the poverty line the worst (Fox and Gandhi, 2021). The African Union has estimated that the Covid-19 pandemic threatened nearly 20 million jobs in both the formal and informal sectors in Africa (African Union, 2020). The informal sector, which currently employs about 95% of the youth work force in Africa (International Labour Organization, 2019), was projected to see an 81% decline in income within the first month of the pandemic (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Failure to harness the development potentials of Nigeria’s youth population has resulted, not only in a missed opportunity for a demographic dividend, but also created a context of risk for social and political unrest. This is illustrated by youth uprisings such as the End-SARS protests of October 2020. Although alleged police brutality was the immediate trigger, the protest soon transformed into a determined and coordinated response to youth marginalisation and exclusion when the state responded with the use of firearms against unarmed young protesters converging at the now infamous Lekki tollgate in Lagos, Nigeria (Akanle and Uziewi, 2023). Mobilisation for the protest relied heavily on the use of social media platforms, which provides an alternative space for self-expression for Nigerian youth in the context of state censorship of free speech and crackdown on dissent, even under a civilian government (*ibid.*).

The End-SARS protest may be seen as the latest in a long series of social conflicts in which the army of disenfranchised Nigerian youth have served as key actors. Ethno-religious conflicts since the return to democracy in 1999 highlight the inequalities that have emerged in the wake of democratic and market reforms. Young people bear the brunt of these inequalities, a condition that, as Collier and Hoefler (2004) explained, renders them vulnerable to mobilisation for violence. A good portion of the membership of Boko Haram, the terrorist group responsible for the violence that has exposed Nigerian society to mounting fear and insecurity, are economically marginalised youths from Northern Nigeria, including poor migrants and struggling middle-class Muslims with limited education and prospects (Meagher, 2013).

Similarly, before the ascent of the Boko Haram in the country’s North-East, the Niger-Delta in the South witnessed insurgency and the rise of ethnic militias that sought control over oil revenues (Tantua

and Kamruzzaman, 2016). Years of peaceful protests by aggrieved youths were met by payoffs to local elites and repression, which instigated a resort to violent strategies, including a coordinated declaration of war on the oil industry by militia groups under the auspice of the Ijaw Youth Council. Although the government responded by increasing the region's share of oil revenue to 13%, persistent poverty, unemployment, and state repression has been accompanied by violence, including kidnappings, attacks on oil installations, and illegal oil bunkering. An amnesty programme implemented in 2009, involving a monthly stipend to ex-militants, skills trainings, and social reintegration, followed the surrender of weapons by members of militia groups and relative peace. However, the amnesty has selectively focused expenditure on 30,000 ex-militants while ignoring the development and employment needs of the remaining inhabitants of the region, including some 10 million youth. As illustrated in sectarian conflicts in the North-East and activities of Niger Delta militias, the conflicts in Nigeria are embedded in deep-seated problems of poverty and unemployment among youth. These problems are shaped by a "toxic combination of extravagant corruption, the depredation of years of savage market reforms, and integration into a global economic system that has left much of the population as surplus labour" (Meagher, 2013, p. 169).

In the face of a faltering jobs market, high levels of poverty and lack of social safety nets has pushed a growing population of unemployed youth into Nigeria's vast informal economy, where about two-thirds of the urban workforce earn a precarious living through a range of income generating activities, including automobile repairs, retail trade in consumables, and commercial transportation that features a growing swarm of motorcycle taxis (known in many parts of Nigeria as "Keke"). In the past decade or so, the popular music sector has emerged as a viable industry providing opportunities for social and economic mobility for Nigerian youths. Afro-beats, Nigeria's popular music genre, is emerging as the country's leading export beside crude oil. The industry, which is considered one of the largest in the world, is rumoured to generate two billion dollars annually mostly through digital streaming and downloads. It employs a growing number of young Nigerians as artists, producers, and managers, and provides a livelihood for many more, including families. Stories of artists who rose from rags to riches abound, serving to position the industry as pathway to fast wealth. These are paralleled by tales of exploitation of naïve and desperate young up-and-coming artists by managers and record labels. Such stories illustrate how political economic conditions operate to constrain agency and choice, creating a context where young musical talents are vulnerable to exploitation through inequitable contracts. It also shows how intersecting political and economic factors operate to shape access to opportunities for young people, establishing a context where already wealthy record label owners profit at the expense of poor and disenfranchised young people. Yet the turn to the informal economy is also a testament to the agency of young Nigerians in forging a means of survival amidst widespread precarity. The exercise of agency is shaped by social location as earning a living from Nigeria's informal economy is a "hustle," a reference to extra work and alternative occupations to supplement incomes (Bailey, 2023).

Hence, historic neglect of public goods has hence engendered a complex form of youth engagement in the labour market in Nigeria. Correspondingly, weak political governance and misguided economic policies have created a scenario of endemic and enduring underemployment. The vast population of young people faces insecurity and exploitation as it offers a reserve of cheap, surplus, and dispensable labour (Meagher, 2013), which perversely has wider effects within the labour market, suppressing wages not just among younger populations but more widely (Egunjobi, 2014).

Policy responses to youth unemployment

Nigeria has had an active youth policy in place, periodically reviewed, and strongly focused on skill enhancement and stimulating youth participation in economic activity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). This, along with the subsequent Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan, led by the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (FMYSD), and supported by the Economic Community of West African States, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation and the ILO,

provides an overarching framework for policy intervention in the area (Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan, 2021). Within a context of limited opportunity, sizeable proportions of youth that are unemployed or underemployed, as well as those not involved in education or training, are a key target group for current federal measures for tackling unemployment (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019, p. 14).

The federal response has largely centred on labour market measures focused on job creation and human capital development, which sits sporadically introduced cash transfer schemes such as the 2007 In Care of the People, targeted towards the poorest of the poor (Holmes *et al.*, 2011). An inventory of major government run youth employment programmes shows that 95 % of these involve a skills training component, and entrepreneurship promotion is a feature of 88% of these (Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan, 2021). Human resource development and employment creation are prominent themes in a range of recent policy pronouncements, including the federal government's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan, the National Youth Policy (2019), the National Employment Policy (2017), and the Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan 2021–2024 (NIYEAP 2021). The NIYEAP's predecessor, the plan for 2009–2011, also aimed to harness youth “energy and capacity,” impelled by the aim to “minimise the risks to national security and development posed by rising youth unemployment and underemployment” (*ibid.*: 7). While work based employment programmes remain in place (NDE 2023), the centrepiece of current government strategy is the promotion of entrepreneurial and self-employment opportunities. The currently suspended N-Power programme, initiated as part of the National Social Investment Programme by former President Muhammadu Buhari, and The Nigerian Youth Investment Fund 2020–2023, managed by the FMYSO, offered credit and soft loans to support Nigerian youth led enterprises. Human resource development was a critical feature of a host of past federal government-initiated programmes – the You-WIN programme encouraged the establishment or expansion of business enterprises through an open competition, the Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) included initiatives to establish vocational training centres for skills training in Information and Communications Technology, agricultural techniques, and creative industries, as well as a Graduate Internship Scheme. The more recent Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme entitled small businesses with a net capital worth or requiring under 20,000 Nairas (US\$ 25.36 based on 2023 rates) with a stipend for expanding their businesses.

Alongside, often with the support of external organisations such as the World Bank, a host of programmes have sought to improve youth capacity and participation in agricultural work, such as the 2013 Youth Commercial Agriculture Development Program (YCAD), Youth Employment in Agriculture Program, Youth Initiatives for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Fadama Graduate Unemployed Youths and Women Support Program, and the Osun Rural Enterprise and Agriculture Programme (Ayinde *et al.*, 2016). Programmes often encountered problems such as complex registration and paperwork requirements for private employers (Akande, 2014), fragmented and uncoordinated governance, targeting errors (Ikeanyibe and Nzekwe, 2019), limited coverage and monetary value of payments (Ayinde *et al.*, 2016), which along with their time bound nature, limited their ability for sustainable and meaningful impact on development goals.

Within the Nigerian federal administration, state governments and local government authorities are key players in implementing a range of recent federal government initiatives for social assistance and social protection, albeit with diverging capacities across regions. Within the funding landscape, private philanthropies and bilateral donors such the German Development agency GIZ and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs fund projects on youth unemployment (Price, 2019). Alongside, international organisations including the World Bank and International Labour Organisation are key players, facilitating dialogue on youth employment strategies, providing technical support to federal and state governments and implicitly, shaping the direction of policy (International Labour Organization, 2021, 2023b). In recent years, the World Bank in particular, has been a key proponent for initiating social protection measures in Nigeria and has supported the federal administration in implementing the National Social Safety Nets Project which encompassed targeted cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households (World Bank, 2016b). A recently concluded World Bank led, Youth Employment and Social Support Operation Project for Nigeria similarly supported cash transfers selectively targeted to the poor,

vulnerable and internally displaced people in the North East States, a skills training package, as well as a public workfare program to provide labour-intensive jobs to unskilled youths from poor households; with a significant amount of resources devoted to the workfare program.

Alongside, there are schemes linking young job seekers and employers, offering a chance for on-the-job learning, albeit with no commitment towards secure employment. The Nigeria Jubilee Fellows Programme (NJFP) 2021, for instance, is a federal government initiative co-funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, offers 12-month paid work experience in private and public sector institutions, aiming to “improving the fellows’ employability and competitiveness in the job market,” as well as to “(e)mpower and engage youth to be able to contribute to the expansion of the private sector (NJFP, 2023).

A delineation of policy responses also needs consideration of youth populations and their responses to the unemployment scenario in Nigeria. Policy discourse on Nigerian youth is framed through a “deficiency” or scarcity (in skills, resources), lens suggesting shortcomings in young people’s political and economic acumen and ability (Akame, 2021). However, young actors in Nigeria are showing a remarkable ability to exercise their agency, whether this be in conveying young Nigerian’s shared sense of frustration with political authorities such as in the 2020 youth-led protests against heavy-handed policing (Yvonne., 2020) or forging networks focused around health, governance, and the environment, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (NGYouthSDGs, 2023; Youth Network for Community and Sustainable Development, 2023). Access to information technology, faster communication, and mobility are changing ideas and aspirations among young people, providing a means to circumvent traditional spaces and find new platforms for expression and representation offered by social media, for instance. However, often there are crucial gender, regional, and socio-economic differences among youth, which makes such tools limited in their reach. Further, a naïve confidence in technology or development risks ignoring the role of politics and political agents in policymaking (Nyabola, 2018). Despite celebrated examples of youth enterprise, crucially though, large numbers in Nigeria take recourse to self-employment opportunities because of the lack of suitable work opportunities, and often in occupations such as street trading and low productivity agri-businesses with limited prospects for social and economic mobility.

Discussion and conclusion

Government pronouncements show genuine recognition of the scale of youth unemployment, and a willingness to engage with international covenants and partners to devise alleviating measures. Policy-makers in Nigeria show an awareness of involving youth in policymaking processes as evident in the youth policy document as well as a stated intention to address vulnerabilities facing specific groups of marginalised individuals through targeted social assistance. Ideas about developing human capital through investment in education, upskilling, and work opportunities signal the developmental focus and productivist leanings of current measures, which corresponds to broader conceptions of the Nigerian “social policy model” as one where welfare and rights framing is secondary to economic growth policy objectives (Shadare, 2022). Policies for activating youth participation in the labour market through workfare programmes like the 2012 SURE-P programme or encouraging youth enterprise through monetary assistance, as well as cash transfer programmes within the 2016 National Social Investment Programmes are laudable in their universalistic framing and community-based targeting to reach poor, vulnerable, and low-skilled individuals. However, the implementation of these programmes has been imperilled by complex and resource-intensive technological and administrative demands as well as difficulties identifying recipients in a fair and transparent manner (Akinleye et al., 2019; Ikeanyibe and Nzekwe, 2019). While well-intentioned, selective, and targeted approaches appear less mindful of existing power differentials and social contexts where community-based affiliation risked identifying those most in need (Anyanwu et al., 2016). Moreover, as standalone and short-term measures, often dependent on donor support, policies risk duplication of infrastructure and more fundamentally an

institutional and governance vacuum when programmes have run their course, with the potential to exacerbate low levels of public trust in state authorities in Nigeria (Ikeanyibe and Nzekwe, 2019; Shadare, 2022). To an extent, newly instituted coordination bodies, including a new ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development in August 2019 may enable a degree of consistency and institutional sustainability.

However, in terms of a broad vision for tackling youth unemployment and associated vulnerabilities in Nigeria, the federal response focuses on developing the productive potential of individuals, with a limited role for protective and redistributive functioning within existing programmes. The underlying narrative of driving a focus on youth centric, skill building is based on a set of ideas about young people disinclined to farm work, lacking capacity, but with an inherent creative drive (Fox *et al.*, 2020). Current policy responses—harnessing youth entrepreneurship is also strongly reflective of a neoliberal assertion of youth identity and responsibility. Normative ideas about youth creativity and initiative engender rational interventions focusing on skills acquisition and/or financing support for microenterprises, which instil a reductive understanding of young lives (Irving *et al.* 2018). This is underpinned by a general policy framing wherein social investment trumps a rights-based articulation and execution of federally run social programming (Shadare, 2022). Arguably, this stems from neo-liberal thinking within policy circles in Nigeria associating poverty with a lack of economic growth and therefore giving pre-eminence to private sector participation and development of entrepreneurship as the cornerstone of public policies (Aiyede *et al.*, 2015).

Perceptions of youth in policy are all too often framed across binaries of vulnerability and promise, isolating “youth” as a monolith, detached from community and individualities of age, gender, religion, ability, and social class (Anyidoho *et al.*, 2012). Fortune *et al.* (2015) point out the meandering reality of young West Africans’ journey into adulthood as well as the role of social constructs like gender in shaping varying classifications of “youth”. Government programmes modelled on international and donor norms fall short in reflecting the lived experiences of young West Africans who seek paid and unpaid work as part of fulfilling expected social roles (Howard, 2017). Besides, generalised assertions about young people’s penchant for engaging in violent or illicit activities (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019), a broad-brush approach to describing youth into a single category risk devising programmes and policies that are partial in scope. Broadly viewed, a homogenous construction of youth in Africa is also contested, which has led to narrowly formulated, blanket policy measures such as employment generation programmes as a pathway out of violence (Ismail and Olonisakin, 2021). For example, in common with other countries in the Global South, young men in rural Nigeria were generally more amenable to a career in agriculture subject to its professionalisation, unlike young women who instead placed higher value on formal education as a pathway to economic and social empowerment (Elias *et al.*, 2018). In contrast to the general positioning of youth schemes in Nigeria that implicitly seek to address individual capacity shortcomings, the real-world picture reveals the overweening role of structural limitations, access to resources and gendered norms, particularly affecting young women’s prospects for fulfilling work (*ibid.*). Mueller and Thurlow (2019) broadly concur on the substantive role of farming and agriculture in job creation for young people, given the uniqueness of the demographic transition in many part of Africa where urbanisation is accompanied by growing numbers of young people who remain to work in rural areas.

Prioritising labour market measures in policy responses, such as through job creation or youth training schemes, with lesser attention on protecting against social risks such as sickness, disability, or job losses, signals the framing of the youth unemployment problem in Nigeria as one positioned in individual action rather than a shared responsibility for managing social risks (Hamilton, 2017). Besides being limited in their reach and effectiveness, disparate, ad hoc schemes with a singular vision to foster creativity or offer subsidies may detract from addressing more fundamental and persisting structural problems to do with governance, access to adequate services, including health care, housing, and education, which are the building blocks for developing effective policy responses (Sumberg *et al.*, 2021). Insecurity in conflict-afflicted states, gender norms, rapid urbanisation and resulting spatial inequalities contribute to divergence in young Nigerian’s experience of the labour market or exclusion

from it. Wider economic and structural reforms are needed to streamline young people's transitions into education and employment in Nigeria. Clearly, this will require a larger project to better coordinate economic and social policy instruments to ensure that the redistributive goals to tackle deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities in Nigeria are addressed alongside the wider social cohesion or "nation-building" project (Adesina, 2011). Casting the problem of unemployment and the responses to it in narrow terms of vulnerability or enterprise, detracts from constructing a programme of transformative action, anchored in principles of equality and solidarity (ibid.). Herein, exists an opportunity for Nigeria to realise its goals of youth empowerment, through progressive, comprehensive action, firmly grounded in ethical principles and shared responsibility.

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