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National Youth Service Scheme as an Instrument of National Unity in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined national youth service scheme as an instrument of national unity in Nigeria. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi religious nation and sadly all these diversities have impacted adversely on her socio-political existence. The events of 1966–1970 call to question the unity and continued existence of Nigeria as an ethnically segmented nation. The Federal Military Government led by General Yakubu Gowon (rtd.) established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme as a means of achieving national integration in the face of mutual suspicion and hostility. Adopting the Exploratory research design, this study identified achievements of national youth service corps toward national unity included elimination of ignorance, regular source of labour, leadership training, national consciousness, socio economic development and rural development while the challenges include political threats, general discontent by parents and corps members, inadequate facilities/rejection of corps members and inadequate man-power. It was concluded that the NYSC has enhanced and promoted inter-ethnic marriages among the youths of this nation. The study therefore recommended that more encouragement should be given to inter-ethnic marriage between corps member during the one year programme and this will help in promoting national unity.

Keywords: National Youth Service Corps, National Unity, Ethnic Group, Religion

Background to the Study

Nigeria like many other multi-ethnic countries of Africa and Asia, is faced with the crucial problem of national unity. The insurrection of the people of southern Sudan against a government dominated by Arabized northerners, and ethnic irredentism in Ethiopia and India are other cases of mal-integration (Lefort, 1983; Keller, 1988). In Nigeria's case however there is the combination and convergence of chronic, ethnic intolerance, religious polarization and political organizational power drives, within a structure of ruthless competition. Indeed few countries have been more unstable than Nigeria; a situation which has greatly militated against any meaningful national unity. Efforts by governments to hold the different ethnic groups together, to inculcate a sense of oneness through constitutional reforms have met with little success, with the peoples' allegiance to their particular ethnic groups continuing to surpass their loyalty to the national community.

As long as parochial ethnic loyalties, built upon communal reinforcement of language, religion and other aspects of culture remain paramount, the achievement of an integrated society will remain a difficult task. The creation of states in Nigeria, for example has achieved little more than the substitution of tribalism with statism, while the abandonment of the Westminster model of government in favour of the American system has not so far withstood the strain of ethnic rivalry. The result of all these has been many years of military rule, (and indeed the virtual disappearance of democratically-oriented regimes), and uneasy peace. But as President Julius Nyerere once stated: "if the present states [of Africa] are not to disintegrate, it is essential that deliberate steps be taken to foster a feeling of nationhood. Otherwise our present multitude of small countries could break up into even smaller units - perhaps based on tribalism" (Nyerere, 1968).

To achieve this end, that is, dissipate hostile feelings, prejudice and ethnic rivalries among different ethnic groups, and inculcate the right spirit of tolerance and national identification, the Nigerian government established the National Youth Service Corps programme for all graduate youths. The scheme is a cross-cultural education programme which is expected to have a favourable impact on participants' fundamental attitudes towards other ethnic groups and the nation, thereby help bring about national integration. To do this, the scheme demands that the graduate youths are posted to serve among ethnic groups which are different from their own, for one full year. By living and working among the different ethnic groups for such a prolonged period of time, and thereby interacting with them, the government expects that such close contact will lead to better inter-ethnic relations and national identification (Onwere, 1992).

The graduate youths who are the elites in the Nigerian, and indeed African context, by virtue of their education, are particularly targeted for the scheme. This is in view of the fundamentally destabilizing nature of elite behaviour in Nigeria, as manifest in ethnic politics. The Nigerian elite have indeed been one of the crucial agencies of fragmentation in the society, as will become obvious in later sections. As Dudley (1973) commented, "the educated elite, particularly those in politics in pre and post independence Nigeria failed to respond to their foreseen role as 'conflict managers' and degenerated instead into 'conflict generators' or 'the chief proponents and purveyors of parochialism and particularistic values'". This view has been echoed by Otite (1975). The government of Nigeria therefore believes that the graduate youths, who, like their predecessors, are usually called upon for leadership roles in government, industry and education where they will be expected to initiate change as well as influence the opinion of others, are the best candidates for such re-education in their attitudes towards other ethnic groups and the nation.

In 1971, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria under the leadership of General Yakubu Gowon, met the Israeli Government for technical aid in the area of providing for Nigeria a youth service organisation. Such a programme was to provide the Nigerian youth with appropriate training in various skills in real working condition, an organisation to inculcate in the Nigerian youth, a healthy attitude toward manual labour. This request was necessary because the ruling elite in Nigeria believed that the Israeli technical assistance would be valuable to this nation. Moreover, the Israeli Government had succeeded in solving her unemployment problems among its youth and shortages of manpower through the establishment of youth para-military organisations such as the Nahal and the Gadna. Such measures the Nigerian leaders believed would help the nation overcome her manpower shortages, curb unemployment among the youths and achieve national unity and integration. Based on the report of the Israeli technical experts, the National Youth Service Corps was established by a decree Decree No. 24 of May 14, 1973.

Therefore, the NYSC scheme was established as an instrument for national reconstruction, reconciliation and rebuilding, after the 30th month Nigerian civil war (Adedayo, 2010). The unfortunate antecedents in the nation's history necessitated the establishment of the NYSC which made it crystal clear that the scheme was established "with a view to the proper encouragement and development of common ties among the youths of Nigeria and the promotion of national unity" (NYSC, 2017). The heterogeneous character of Nigeria and the events preceding the introduction of NYSC have elicited an avalanche of arguments for and against the continued existence of the scheme (Asuka & Igwesi, 2012). With a plethora of ethnic, religious and political crises that currently pervade the nation, reservations have been expressed on the effectiveness of the NYSC in facilitating the much-needed integration as envisaged in the establishing Decree and the Act.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to investigate the national youth service scheme as an instrument of national unity in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives are as follows;

- i) To ascertain the extent to which contact with another ethnic group while in the NYSC programme affects the corps members' attitudes towards national unity.
- ii) To determine the effect of the religion of the corps members on their attitudes towards national unity.

- iii) To examine the relationship between corps members ethnic origin and their attitudes towards national unity.

Literature Review

Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps Programme

The National Youth Service Corps programme in Nigeria was established by Decree No. 24, May 22, 1973, under General Yakubu Gowon's government; charged with the task of imbuing Nigerian graduate youth with a spirit of selfless service to the nation, and to emphasize the "spirit of oneness and brotherhood of Nigerians, irrespective of cultural or social background." Section 4 of the

The basic rationale for the programme was the fact that ethnic strains and animosities have for many years plagued the Nigerian society. The history of Nigeria, particularly since independence from British colonial government in 1960, has been marked by a series of socio-political upheavals culminating in the 1967-70 civil war when the Federal Government of Nigeria went to war to prevent Eastern Nigeria, which declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967, from seceding from Nigeria. A great many writers have attributed Nigeria's socio-political upheaval and mal-integration to the artificiality of its boundaries, the country's creation being the result of the European partition of Africa. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that the British colonial government, in order to facilitate the administration of the vast territory and area of 356,669 sq. miles brought together peoples of different ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, who had little contact with each other prior to colonial rule.

All attempts by post-independent governments to promote national integration were, in the writers' view, doomed to fail in view of the antagonistic relations existing between the different ethnic groups. Furthermore, it is argued that the constant struggle for political power by the three major ethnic groups - the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, cannot provide the appropriate political and social environment conducive for the emergence of a strong national government to govern the country without the groups favouring their particular ethnic groups (Awolowo, 1947).

To ease tensions and prejudices among the ethnic groups, the Nigerian government established the NYSC whose primary aim is to help weave a spirit of oneness among the ethnic groups and to inculcate national loyalty which should supersede all other loyalties. The NYSC thus represents a massive exercise in national integration – an attempt to change the face of Nigeria through changing the attitudes of young graduates towards fellow nationals and the nation.

The objectives of the National Youth Service Corps Scheme are clearly spelt out in Decree No. 51 of 16th June 1993 as follows:

- (i) Inculcating discipline in Nigerian youths by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work, and of patriotic and loyal service to Nigeria in any situation they may find themselves.
- (ii) Raising the moral tone of the Nigerian youths by creating avenues for them to learn about higher ideals of national achievement, social and cultural improvement.
- (iii) Developing in the Nigerian youths the attitudes of mind, acquired through shared experience and suitable training. This will make them more amenable to mobilization in the national interest.
- (iv) Enabling Nigerian youths develop the spirit of self-reliance by encouraging them to develop skills for self-employment.
- (v) Contributing to the accelerated growth of the national economy.
- (vi) Developing common ties among the Nigerian youths and promote national unity and integration.

- (vii) To remove prejudices, eliminate ignorance and confirm at first hand the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups.
- (viii) To develop a sense of corporate existence and common destiny of the people of Nigeria.
- (ix) In order to achieve the objectives in subsection (3) of the establishing decree, the service corps shall:
 - (a) Ensure the equitable distribution of members of the service corps and the effective utilization of their skills in area of national needs.
 - (b) Ensure that youths are assigned to jobs in states other than their states of origin.
 - (c) Safeguard that such group of youths assigned to work together represents our national spread.
 - (d) Provide that the Nigerian youths are exposed to the cultures and tradition the people in different parts of Nigeria.
 - (e) Encourage Nigerian youths to eschew religious intolerance by accommodating religious differences.
 - (f) Encourage corps members to seek at the end of their one year national service, career employment all over Nigeria, thus promoting the free movement of labour.
 - (g) Ensure that employers are induced partly through their experience with members of the service corps to employ more readily and on a permanent basis, qualified Nigerians, irrespective of their States of origin (Babalola, 2011).

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme established in Nigeria 39 years ago could have been a father if it were a man. The scheme no doubt has recorded many successes but like every other policy has series of challenges. Decades after the decree enabling its establishment was promulgated, a large and diverse segment of the Nigerian population as well as notable people around the world, have commended its establishment and eulogized its operation and achievements, especially its momentous role in promoting national unity, integration and rapid economic development of Nigeria (Daily Media, 2013).

Funding of The NYSC Programme.

The NYSC programme is mainly funded by the federal government which provides salaries and allowances for the administrative personnel, and the participants. Each state government gives an annual subvention to cover part of the costs of participants' accommodation and transport. The state also assumes the running costs of the orientation period, the community development programme and similar activities.

However state subventions amount to only about 17 per cent of the annual expenses of the programme. During the 1976/77 service year, the federal government spent a total of N14,458,396 (equivalent of \$ 28,916,792) to cover the costs of the 6,139 participants that year. By 1978/79 the expenditure had more than doubled to N380,60,060 (equivalent of \$76, 120,120) as a result of the increase in the number of participants. An examination of the expenditure of the service in the subsequent years for which information is available reveals that the amounts are always on the increase, because of the ever rising number of graduates that join the service yearly.

Eligibility for National Service.

At its inception, the programme was only open to Nigerian university graduates who were 30 years old or below, and whose first degrees had been obtained in any of the Nigerian universities as from the end of 1972/73 academic year. By 1974 the arbitrary nature of the age-limit, and the exclusion of Nigerian graduates from overseas had been considered, resulting in the inclusion, on voluntary basis, graduates who were 31 years and over. The amendment also allowed foreign-

educated graduates whose first degrees were awarded at the end of 1973/74 academic session and subsequent years to join the service.

In 1976, the scheme was extended to cover all those who at the end of the 1975/76 academic year obtained the Higher National Diploma (HND) or the National certificate of Education (NCE), and some professional qualifications such as ACIS; ACCA; ACA; CIB; certificates.

In January 1977, age-limit exemption was removed, and the scheme became mandatory for all Nigerian graduates of institutions of higher learning both in Nigeria and abroad.

But by August 1, 1985, the age-limit of 30 years was reimposed, mainly to reduce the number of participants and therefore the financial strain on the federal and state governments. In the same year, NCE holders were excluded from the national service.

However, any Nigerian graduate who qualified between July 1, 1977 and May 1985, during which time the initial age-limit was lifted, is not affected, and would have to serve in the programme; the same applies to NCE certificate holders who qualified between the July 1, 1976 and 1983/84 academic year, the two points marking the inclusion and exclusion of NCE holders.

Apart from medical doctors, pharmacists, and lawyers, who are granted a year prior to their joining the service in order that they could do their professional apprenticeship, no other graduates are permitted to defer their participation in order to pursue further programmes of study. Two main but related results of these changes are, first, the scheme is presently served by the products of universities and polytechnics (since those who obtain professional qualifications usually do so when they have passed the 30 year age-limit); and second, almost all participants fall between 24 to 30 year old bracket.

Only successful graduates of higher institutions (universities and polytechnics) are called-up to serve in the scheme. The prospective corps members are issued call-up letters before they leave their university campuses in their final year. The letters inform the corps members of their state of deployment, and call-up date, which represents the date for registration at the respective state capitals.

Achievements of National Youth Service Corps Toward National Unity

According to Onlinenigeria.com, the following are the achievement of national youth service corps towards national unity;

The achievements of the scheme which are both tangible and intangible, are many, and they touch all known spheres of human endeavour. The scheme has over the years allowed for the regular and effective distribution of skilled manpower, the steady breaking of social and cultural barriers as well as the building of friendly bridges across the nation (Onlinenigeria.com).

It has also promoted higher values of national unity and development, rekindled interest in neglected but vital areas of national development like agriculture, and promoted leadership qualities in our youths. In these and other ways, the scheme constantly pricks the conscience of the nation to the right course of development, thereby keeping the hope alive for a better Nigeria.

The regular invitation of members of the Corps to participate in the conduct of such sensitive national assignments as Population Census, Elections, etc. and to provide material for the Technical Aid Corps (TAC), is not only an expression of faith in the ability of the scheme, but also an appreciation of its monumental achievements since its inception in 1973. The positive multiplier effects of these achievements on society are worthy of further examination, taking, for instance, the deployment of corps members.

From its humble beginning of about 2,000 corps members in 1973, it has rapidly grown to the staggering annual figure of 85,000 corps members in 1999. This phenomenal growth, apart from ensuring that the presence of the scheme is felt in all nooks and crannies of the Federation, also allows for the even distribution of manpower in the best interest of the country (Onlinenigeria.com).

Expectedly, as Dotun Philips once observed, some states “have been subsidising the others by contributing more participants to the scheme than they have been receiving; 69 percent as against 31 percent.” Bearing in mind that this observation was made only in 1991, one is only left to imagine how ugly the situation would have been without the scheme in place. In other words, the scheme has effectively played a balancing role in the development efforts of the nation (Onlinenigeria.com).

Challenges Of National Youth Service Corps Towards National Unity

There are many challenges that have threatened the existence of the NYSC programme. It should be noted that while the earlier stated objectives of the NYSC programme are noble and targeted at youth empowerment and national development, the reality is that the effectiveness of its implementation remains an issue of massive criticism. Again, when the programme started in 1973, corps members are fed in the camp at the rate of three naira per person per day. Ironically, the same amount was used to feed corps members per day for the next ten years, making the then NYSC Director, Col. Peter Obasa to complain that it was grossly inadequate (Obasa, 1983).

Political Threats: The election of President Goodluck Jonathan into office in 2011 triggered the flame of political violence in Northern Nigeria, which led to the killing of a number of corps members. Peter Awelewa, the Bishop, Diocese of Lagos West (Anglican Communion) while reacting to the killing of corps members has stated that ‘going by this latest development, it is becoming clear that the North believes that rulers of Nigeria must forever come from among them, while other Nigerians are expected to remain as servants or second class citizens within Nigeria, which rightly belongs to all of us’ (Aladelokun, 2011). The post-presidential election violence was unfortunate and condemnable. It was a sad signal that rather than improve on their attitude over elections, politicians are still desperate, their supporters even more so. While reacting on the killings of these national servants, Wole Soyinka condemned it as a premeditated act. He stated that ‘I was really shocked by the note of satisfaction, almost sadistic reaction at the killings.

General Discontent by Parents and Corps Members: It is noteworthy that the NYSC scheme, established after the civil war to promote national integration, seems to enjoy popular supports from Nigerians for removing prejudices, eliminating ignorance and confirming at first hand the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups. However, to argue that the scheme is now seriously challenged is to put the situation rather mildly. The first major blow came during the post-election violence in April 2011 when 11 corps members were killed in Bauchi State. Prior to the election, several other corps members employed as ad hoc staff by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were also killed in Suleja, Niger State, as well as in Jos, Plateau State (*This Day* Editorial, 2012). This ugly state of affairs has led to a situation where parents, for the safety of their children do everything to see that they are not posted to volatile or crisis prone areas. This was followed by a media campaign mounted by parents and several stakeholders against posting corps members to states that were prone to serious security threats. Consequently, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Directorate in 2012 redeployed prospective corps members previously posted to “volatile states” in the North. By the directive, corps members, who were earlier posted to Bauchi, Gombe, Plateau, Kano and Kaduna States were directed to report to the NYSC headquarters in Abuja for redeployment. Though this was greeted with mixed reactions, those posted to Yobe and Borno States carried out their orientation exercise at the NYSC camps in Nasarawa and Benue States respectively.

Inadequate Facilities/Rejection of Corps Members: The population explosion experienced generally in the country has rubbed off on the NYSC. With the rise in Nigeria’s population, the number of graduates per year grew so rapidly that a single state now has up to 2,000 corps members to cater for. Considering the limited resources within the NYSC and lackadaisical attitude of state governments to the scheme, the corps members are inadequately cared for and poorly accommodated. How do we explain a situation where 40 corps members are quartered in a single hostel room with food

items that can barely feed 10? The increase in corps population has contributed to the rejection of corps members by employers of labour and increased under-utilization of some in their places of primary assignment. This situation has been compounded by the worsening economic climate, which has shrunk salaried job vacancies by way of embargo on recruitment of new staff or rationalization of the existing work force. In some establishments, corps members are assigned to tasks far below their training and qualifications, and in extreme cases, owing to lack of trust by their employers, some are well utilized. The consequence is that many corps members become idle and do not acquire the experience which the service year is supposed to afford them. Consequently, the scheme is unable to achieve substantially one of its key objectives of accelerating the socio-economic development of the country.

Cases of rejection of corps members were another factor listed by ex-corps members that impede the successful achievement of the noble objectives of the NYSC programme. Some of them stated that they were rejected because the organisations lack accommodation where they can put the corps members and are also not willing to provide the needs of the corps members. Therefore, the best option to them is to reject the corps members.

Inadequate Man-power: Another major problem facing the NYSC scheme is inadequate manpower and materials to supervise and monitor members of the service corps. The responsibility of monitoring and evaluating corps members' performances is vested in the Corps Inspectorate Department at the National Directorate Headquarters and the state offices. State offices, after posting the corps participants to their places of primary assignments, are to ensure that corps members actually report at their duty posts, to their various tasks and that the tasks are executed to the satisfaction of both their employers and the NYSC authorities. But unfortunately, the rapid growth of the scheme has not been matched with the commensurate staff strength to monitor corps members and evaluate their performances in the field. Most of the state offices are grossly understaffed and the result is that this vital aspect of the operation of the scheme has suffered a serious setback. In addition, there is acute shortage of vehicles for schedule officers to carry out routine inspection of corps participants, many of whom are serving in remote rural areas.

Conclusion

The NYSC scheme has weathered several storms and has been able to stand the test of time, yet it is still very much relevant in the scheme of things. Nigeria has been enjoying the good trapping of the scheme. Through the scheme, a lot of unquantifiable achievements have been attained at the fabrics of our society. Walls of prejudices built over time have been demystified by the scheme.

There is an appreciable measure of mutual trust among Nigerians of diverse languages and cultures. Today, the NYSC has enhanced and promoted inter-ethnic marriages among the youths of this nation. Nigerians now move freely and reside permanently in states other than their own resulting in labour mobility and greater integration. Some areas of the country that hitherto lacked certain manpower in the past now enjoy such privileges as a result of NYSC posting. Nigerian youths that have passed through the scheme are now better informed than they were before participating in the National Service.

It was concluded that national youth service scheme is a useful instrument for national unity in Nigeria.

Recommendations

It was recommended that;

- i. Proper orientation should be given to corps members so that the aim of achieving national integration will be ensured categorically from the scheme.
- ii. NYSC needs to implement a comprehensive plan of ensuring continued social networks for ex-youth corps members for the purpose of sustaining national unity.

- iii. More encouragement should be given to inter-ethnic marriage between corps member during the one year programme and this will help in promoting national unity.
- iv. Religious sentiment should be discouraged between corps members by sensitizing them that there is no difference between religions since we are serving the same God, this will also help in promoting national unity among the corps members.

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