

AGGRAVATION OF YOUTHS UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA: A SCENARIO BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC

¹ADEBAYO, Anthony Abayomi, ¹AKINDOLA, Rufus Boluwaji, ²AWE, Ene, ³EGBO, Ken Amaechi

¹Department of Sociology, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

²Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

³Department of Criminology, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

Corresponding author: adebayo_nthny@yahoo.com

Abstract

Over the years, youths unemployment in Nigeria has been an issue of serious concern as it continues to increase from annually. However, with the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic that started in Wuhan, China and spread to many nations of the globe, ravaging economies and claiming lives including Nigeria, the adverse effect of the pandemic is more pronounced on youths employment. In view of the foregoing, this paper analyzed the effect of unemployment before the pandemic and during the pandemic especially as it affect the youths. The study adopted an exploratory research design and obtain secondary data for its analysis. For the purpose of this research, data from National Bureau of Statistics and other sources were accessed. It was revealed that as a result of the pandemic, employers of youth labour are either downsizing by laying workers off or outrightly closing down. NBS data revealed that unemployment in Nigeria in the second quarter of 2020 has risen to 27.1% which is a far cry from what it used to be. This is likely to further worsen the cases of crime such as kidnapping, robbery, insurgency, banditry in the country. The paper recommended that government and financial institutions should endeavour to assist businesses and employers of labour with low interest loans; youths should be trained in vocational studies and assisted with start-up capital; educational institutions should be restructured to teach new skills required for the post-pandemic era and government of Nigeria should embark on massive investment in the critical sectors such as power, agriculture, manufacturing and transport to drive massive employment generation for the youths.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, youths, unemployment, poverty, crime, Nigeria

Introduction

Human history is observing a very strange time fighting an invisible enemy; the novel COVID-19 that was initially observed in the Wuhan province of China but spread fast around the globe (Nadeem, 2020). As the new decade began, no one would have thought or expected that there would be a time when the entire world would come to a halt. COVID-19 as popularly called is currently dealing a huge blow on human relationships and threatening global finance, peace and security (Lawal, 2020). On December 31, 2019, the China Health Authority alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) to several cases of pneumonia of unknown aetiology in Wuhan City

in Hubei Province in Central China (Lu, Stratton and Tang, 2020) which eventually came to be known as COVID-19.

Corona virus has been explained by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a large family of viruses which cause illness from the cold to chronic diseases like Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). It is a disease that was not previously known in human beings till it manifested in Wuhan, China in 2019 and has now spread to all continents of the globe infecting and killing many people and with dire consequences (Lawal, 2020).

Poverty remains deep and pervasive as unemployment continues increasing in Nigeria. Nigeria has one of the largest youths labour force cohorts in the world with over 35% of the country's population falling within the age group of 15-34 (Akindare, 2020). With unemployment among this demography, the risks of depression and apathy are especially high. As such, Oyewobi (2019) states some of the factors that account for youth unemployment to include the low level of industrialization, slow economic growth, low employability and quality of the labour force and slow implementation of the national labour policy. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global pandemic has been the first known to emerge as the result of a novel coronavirus, identified as SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19. COVID-19 had an adverse effect on global economic growth, infrastructure decay is significant, corruption is endemic, and institutions of governance and accountability are grossly weakened (Akindare, 2020). Ihekweazu (2020) also argued that COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a lot of challenges to Nigeria industrial manufacturers, crude oil companies, energy companies, educational institutions, financial institutions, communication companies, technology, and entertainment companies and labour force constituents. Relatively, different countries are in different phases of COVID-19 pandemic and with different effect on its labour force (Ihekweazu, 2020). As a result of the outbreak, many households in Nigeria have reported declines in income, consistent with evidence of decreasing economic brightness and household food insecurity has significantly increased. According to Ebrahim, Ahmed, Gozzer, Schlagenhaut, Memish, (2020) COVID-19 pandemic have had serious effect on youth unemployment. According to O'Neill (2024), in 2022 the estimated youth unemployment rate in Nigeria was at almost 13.44 percent. Adegboye, Adekunle and Gayawan, (2020) acknowledge that Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the economic condition in the country, making it even harder for employers to create more jobs. As well, the private sector has relied on cutting jobs in the guise of downsizing and right sizing to reduce overheads and stay afloat (Oyekan, Adetunji, & Bafeto, 2020). Adegboye, Adekunle, and Gayawan, (2020) work also buttressed the high rate of Nigerians seeking greener pastures outside the country with most of them highly skilled and looking for jobs of the future. As the youth unemployment crisis is not new, what is new is the staggering proportional increase it has reached in the recent time.

Materials and Method

The study adopted an exploratory research design. This research design was selected in order to ensure that data obtained are relevant to the study. The study made use of secondary data which were collected based on exhaustive consultation of journals and published data from National Bureau of Statistics' (NBS) and other sources.

Literature Review

Overview of Youths Unemployment in Nigeria

According to O'Neill (2024), the youth unemployment rate refers to the percentage of the unemployed in the age group of 15 to 24 years as compared to the total labor force. The labour force of a country is a set of people or citizens who are willing and are able to make available at any given point in time their efforts for gainful employment, while the unemployed are the individuals with no work, but are looking for work at the time of any study. Also, unemployment is a situation in which persons capable and willing to work are unable to find suitable paid employment (Udu and Agu, 2005). And for International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2012), unemployed workers are those who are currently not working but are willing and able to work for pay, currently available to work and have actively searched for work. Unemployment is a major obstacle to social progress and the reason to prevent its undesirable consequence on poverty made the battle of unemployment challenges a great effort in the development objectives of the emerging economies (Aiyedogbon and Ohwofasa, 2012). Unemployment is regarded as the root of poverty in Nigeria (Akinmulegun, 2014). In another development, Nwagwu (2014) argues that unemployment rate is quite huge despite the human and material resources that could generate employment for Nigeria, such as oil boom earnings, quick revenues to government and foreign reserve increase. The youth unemployment increase in Nigeria is further buoyed with unfavourable and defective economic policies coupled with grave and widespread corruption on the nation's economy which has crippled employment generation (Nwagwu, 2014; Adebobola, Rafiu and Igbayemi (2015).

Before the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, youths' unemployment has been on a steady increase in Nigeria. Available data revealed according to the Bureau of Social statistics that unemployment among the youths has been consistently going higher and which makes the emergence of COVID-19 a source of grave concern as it is going to worsen the already grave and precarious unemployment situation. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2023), the national unemployment rates for Nigeria between 2019 and 2022 showed that the number of unemployed persons constituted 12.59% in 2019; 14.35% in 2020; 13.65% in 2021; 13.89% in 2022. Nigeria has a youth population of 80 million, representing over 60% of the total population of the country. Also 64 million are unemployed, while 1.6 million are under-employed (Adebayo, 2013).

Furthermore, in 2012 Nigeria's population was about 167 million people and about half of the population is made up of youth classified as persons between 15 and 34 years of age (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). However, as the youth population increases, the unemployment rate also increases. The population of unemployed youths stood at about 11.1 million in 2012 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The rapid population growth in Nigeria has continued to create its allied challenges. The increasing population growth has produced an overwhelming increase in the youth population thereby resulting in an attendant increase in the size of the working age population. With the 2006 population census in Nigeria, the nation's population was estimated to be 140,431,790 and projection for the future indicates that the population could be over 180 million by the year 2020, given an annual rate of 3.2 percent (National Population Commission and ICF Macro, 2009, Adebayo, 2013). Consequently, prior to COVID-19 emergence, the growth in youth population has led rapid increase of the available persons for jobs which is far higher than the rate of jobs available.

However, the unemployment situation in Nigeria took its turn for the worse with the advent of COVID-19 pandemic. Even though youths' unemployment in Nigeria has been on a steady increase over the years, a release from the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria for the second quarter of 2020 revealed that the pandemic has started to have a disastrous impact on unemployment in Nigeria. Economic experts have also warned that the worse effect of the pandemic on employment is just starting and that the worst is yet to come. Figure 1 below represents the unemployment rate in Nigeria since 2016 and the quantum lead in the 2nd quarter of 2020 due to the pandemic.

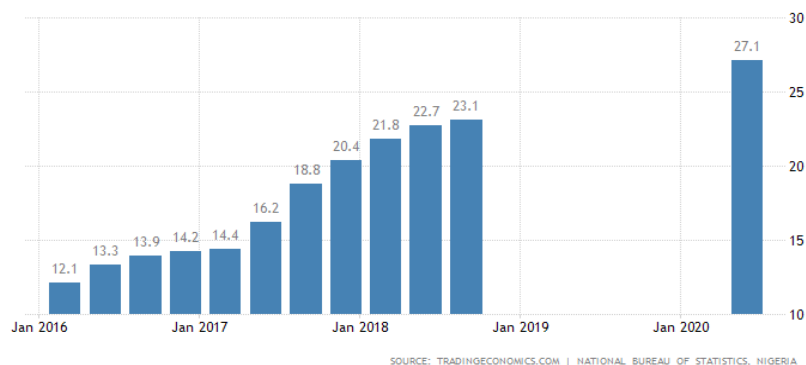


Figure 1: Unemployment rate from 2016-2020 in Nigeria

Data in the above figure reveals that unemployment in the second quarter of 2020 in Nigeria 27.1% which is a significant increase from the years preceding it. Furthermore, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, unemployment standing at 27.1% means that about 21,764,614 (21.7 million) Nigerians remain unemployed mostly youths. Worse still, underemployment rate is also at 28.6%. (Okpi, 2020) This means the total number of Nigerians

who are unemployed or underemployed as at 2020 Q2 is a combined 55.7% and the youth population is about 64% of total unemployed Nigerians (Oyekanmi, 2020) and the most recent official data on youth unemployment in Nigeria shows that 29.7% of youth were unemployed, and a further 25.7% underemployed (Okpi, 2020). Using the international measurement, Nigeria's unemployment rate stood at 17.5% while by the old metrics, it stands at 56.1%. A total of 30.57 million individuals were fully employed as at Q4 2020, i.e work 40 hours and above, while 15.9 million of Nigeria's population work between 20 and 39 hours (Oyekanmi, 2020).

The Federal Government of Nigeria through the current Minister of Labour and Productivity, Chris Ngige, while declaring open a two-day workshop on “Breaking the Resilience of High Unemployment Rate in the Country” has warned Nigerians that unemployment rate may likely reach 33.5% by December 2020 (Vanguard, 2019). Also in line with the minister, Nigeria's Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, who chairs Nigeria's Economic Sustainability Committee (ESC), also argued that since the pandemic hit, unemployment situation has gotten worse and the government was anticipating 39.4 million job losses by December 2020 due to the pandemic (Okpi, 2020). This is clearly worrisome and dangerous.

Implications of Covid-19 on Youths Unemployment in Nigeria

The disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified many of the challenges already facing youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). An estimated 20 million African jobs may be lost, according to The African Union, with a particularly strong economic impact expected in Nigeria, South Africa and Angola. The immediate impact on informal employment in SSA will be particularly acute for younger demographics (Acland, 2020). With the COVID-19 outbreak, we can expect an exponential increase in the nation's already staggering youth unemployment data (Olajide, 2020).

As already stated above, the number of young youths who are unemployed in Nigeria is a cause for serious concern as the youth unemployment and underemployment figures are worrisome, and they are worsening due to COVID-19 pandemic. Having more than half of a country's youth population unemployed or underemployed is a bad indicator (Okpi, 2020). Also, Ohia, Bakarey, and Ahmad, (2020) identify that youth population is also about 64% of total unemployed Nigerians suggesting that the most agile working-class population in the country remains unemployed. According to Onehi (2020), opportunities for jobs for these youths are hardly available as over 60 percent of the total population of the country are youths with many of them vulnerable and out of gainful employment, and with the COVID-19 outbreak, the unemployment rate is expected to increase exponentially and this is likely to escalate the already staggering unemployment data.

A high youth unemployment rate is synonymous with increased insecurity and poverty and a situation that is also seen as a ticking time bomb (Onwuka, Ugwu and Chukwuma, 2020). But the

Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the economic condition in the country making it even harder for employers to create more jobs. The private sector in Nigeria has resorted to cutting jobs in the guise of downsizing and right sizing to reduce overheads and stay afloat (Oyekanmi, 2020). According to the Economic Sustainability Committee (ESC) report, the current economic crisis risks pushing an additional 39.4 million Nigerians into unemployment by December 2020 (Olajide, 2020).

From the foregoing, Nigeria may be facing its worst unemployment crisis since independence as helpless employers retrench millions of workers due to the pervasive impact of COVID-19 on their margins. Weeks of lockdown have hiked logistics costs for employers, forcing reductions in output, revenue and profits (Onehi, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on the economy is especially harsh on the youths in Nigeria as they form the overwhelming majority of the population. The pandemic has put the approximately 40 million small businesses (SMEs) where many young people find employment in a precarious situation with many of them struggling for survival. In Nigeria, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are responsible for most of Nigeria's employment, are the hardest hit by the pandemic. They account for 96% of businesses and 84% of jobs (compared to 53% in the US, 60% in South Africa, and 65% in Europe) and for the last five years, they have contributed almost half of Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) (Adesoji, 2020). SMEs that are already battling with limited access to capital, know-how and markets are being tormented by the pandemic situation leading to job losses and sometimes outright business closures.

The snowballing effects of COVID-19 pandemic presently bedeviling the economy is making Nigerians to lose their jobs as individuals as companies face trouble times. In a maiden report of COVID-19 impact monitoring survey released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020), it was reported that the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on employment and income of Nigerians have been widespread. Out of the 1,950 households surveyed on a nationally representative sample, 42% of the respondents who were working before the outbreak were no longer working the week preceding the interview for reasons related to COVID-19. Also, a high rate of households reported income loss since mid-March 2020, as 79% of households reported that their total income decreased. Basically, while income from all sources were affected, the rate was highest for income from non-farm family business (85%) compared to household farming, livestock or fishing (73%) and wage employment (58%). According to the report, 14% of respondents were working in the commerce sector before the outbreak but have since stopped working due to COVID-19. This is equivalent to 60% of all those working in the sector prior to the pandemic. In all sectors, respondents that stopped working reported that COVID-19 related economic impacts were the primary cause of their lay-offs (Adesoji, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to pose varying degrees of challenges worldwide in the concomitant high prevalence rate of crimes and criminality, including mass murders, insurgency,

militancy, armed robbery, kidnappings and drug abuse, among others. The harsh economic condition and the impacts of unemployment which include a surge in the prevalence rate of crimes and criminality are unavoidable (Onehi, 2020). For instance, in the Lake Chad region of Nigeria, the impact of the pandemic will most likely be worse for apparent reasons. First, the region has known Boko Haram violence for over 10 years. As a result, very many people are currently displaced in the region. Moreover, nearly 10.7 million people require crucial humanitarian assistance. The environmental challenges in the region are also worrisome. Much worse, the violent conflict and its attendant losses to livelihoods further complicate these internal challenges. An estimated 246 million population surrounds the Lake Chad Basin. Also, about 30 million people are currently living within the area. The Lake Chad Basin countries (Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad) has a youthful population with its median age barely at 17.6 years according to the United Nations Population Fund's report in 2017. The deficiency of human capital development, lack of employment opportunities would make the youthful population who still depend on government for basic services exposed to recruitment by extremists for violence. Furthermore, with COVID-19 pandemic, many Non-Governmental Organisations providing humanitarian support have pulled out on health safety, priority and funding issues. Therefore, if the youths in the region do not get adequate support in the face of existing humanitarian crisis and the pandemic, they are likely to turn to the violent extremists for support in return for allegiance or membership and thereby worsening banditry and insurgency in the region (Nextier, 2020). It is in this light that the COVID-19 pandemic poses mixed outcomes for the increasing number of young people in the Lake Chad area and by extension the entire country and its resources.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious disruptions in every sphere of life in Nigeria. Particular attention has been devoted to the impact of the pandemic on the already precarious unemployment situation of the youths in Nigeria. The situation has gone from bad to worse due to the pandemic and experts have warned that the worst is yet to come. More youths are now jobless while even those employed are being laid off. This portends serious danger for the nation and unless serious actions are taken to timely mitigate the effects of the pandemic, youths are likely to suffer grievously from the long-lasting effects of the pandemic, and portends a dangerous time-bomb for the nation.

Recommendations

Government should encourage financial institutions to support businesses with low interest loans in order to recapitalize and stay afloat to secure jobs in their outfits.

Even before the pandemic, business outfits have always complained about excessive taxation by the government. At this time, government should embark on giving employers of labour tax holiday till a sufficient recovery time from the pandemic.

There should be aggressive advocacy and support for the youths to engage in entrepreneurship and vocational training so as to become employers of labour themselves. Such trained youths should be supported with start-up capital to enable them establish small scale businesses or the vocations.

The Nigerian government should embark on massive investment in critical areas of the economy such as power, transport, housing, technology and agriculture so as to drive massive employment generation.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, government should empower educational institutions to impart into the students the required skills for today's jobs. This is to be done with the mind of seeing opportunities in the challenges posed by the pandemic.

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