ROLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN FOSTERING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN PLATEAU STATE

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ABSTRACT

Background: Government actions are crucial in influencing employment possibilities and tackling youth unemployment, which has considerable effects on economic stability and social cohesion. However, these policies do not reflect the actual needs of the youth labor market, as there is a noticeable gap between the skills imparted through these programs and the skills required by the evolving job market.

Objective: This study therefore assessed the role of government policies in fostering youth employment on the Plateau. The role of government policies in fostering youth employment in Plateau State was deemed pivotal, given the persistent challenge of unemployment within Nigeria. Plateau State grappled with high levels of youth unemployment, a situation exacerbated by the overall economic challenges and socio-political dynamics of the country.

Methods: This study employed methodological approaches such as desk review, focus group talks, and key informant interviews. To accomplish the goals of the study, both primary and secondary data were utilized. Eighty key informant interviews and eighteen focus groups were held in all.

Results: The study discovered that the government had rolled out numerous policies designed to address youth unemployment in Plateau

State, but there were several shortcomings in their design and implementation.
Key Contribution to Knowledge: This study is crucial for policymakers, as it will help them adopt a more holistic approach that integrates various aspects of youth empowerment into a cohesive strategy.
Recommendations: The study thus recommended that a central coordinating body should be established to oversee all youth employment initiatives in Plateau State.

I. Introduction

The imperative to foster youth employment has become a critical issue due to the increasing number of young individuals entering the job market. Government policies play a pivotal role in shaping employment opportunities and addressing youth unemployment, which has significant implications for economic stability and social cohesion in the region. As of recent reports, youth unemployment in Nigeria stands at approximately 42.5% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), a figure that underscores the urgency for effective policy interventions.

The economic environment in Plateau State has historically been influenced by agricultural activities, mining, and small-scale industries. However, with the global shift towards technology and service-oriented economies, there is a growing need for policies that not only address traditional sectors but also embrace new economic trends. Government policies in this context aim to stimulate job creation through various mechanisms such as vocational training programs, entrepreneurship support, and investment in infrastructure. According to the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (2022), policy frameworks that integrate skills development with labor market demands are essential for reducing unemployment rates and improving job prospects for young people.

One notable initiative by the Plateau State Government is the Plateau State Youth Employment Program (PSYEP), which focuses on providing vocational training and job placement services to young residents. This program aligns with the broader national strategy of promoting youth employment through skills development and economic empowerment. Research conducted by Akinola (2021) highlights that similar programs in other regions have led to significant improvements in employment rates among youths, illustrating the potential impact of well-structured policies in Plateau State.

In addition to training programs, the government has also prioritized entrepreneurship as a key avenue for employment creation. The Plateau State Government has enacted laws designed to cultivate a favorable environment for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through financial support, tax incentives, and business development services. Previous studies, such as those by Olaniyan and Ojo (2022), emphasize the importance of entrepreneurial policies in mitigating youth unemployment by providing alternative career paths and promoting self-employment.

Furthermore, investment in infrastructure development has been a cornerstone of government policy in Plateau State. Infrastructure projects, such as road construction and energy supply improvements, not only create direct job opportunities but also enhance the overall business environment, making the region more attractive to investors. According to the Plateau State Ministry of Works and Transport (2023), recent infrastructure developments have led to job creation in both construction and ancillary industries, demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of such policies.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in effectively implementing and monitoring employment policies. Research by Ijeoma and Eze (2023) identifies several obstacles, including inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the mismatch between skills provided and market needs. The role of government policies in overcoming these barriers and creating sustainable employment opportunities for youth

is crucial for the long-term economic growth of Plateau State.

II. Conceptual Clarifications

Concept of Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment is a critical concern with substantial ramifications for the socio-economic advancement of any nation, including Plateau State, Nigeria. The concept of youth unemployment encompasses the various factors that contribute to the inability of young individuals, typically aged between 15 and 34, to secure employment despite being willing and able to work. This issue is particularly acute in Nigeria, where the youth population forms a substantial part of the overall demographic.

The youth population in Nigeria constitutes approximately 46% of the total population, with young women making up 52% of this group, compared to 48% for young men (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2021). However, the participation of these young individuals in the labor market is severely limited. Compared to 71% in 2010, only 37% of young people are fully employed and put in at least forty hours every week. Additionally, the unemployment rate for young people increased from 7% in 2010 to 35% in 2020 (Figure 1). Furthermore, youth unemployment surged from 7% in 2010 to 35% in 2020 (Figure 1).

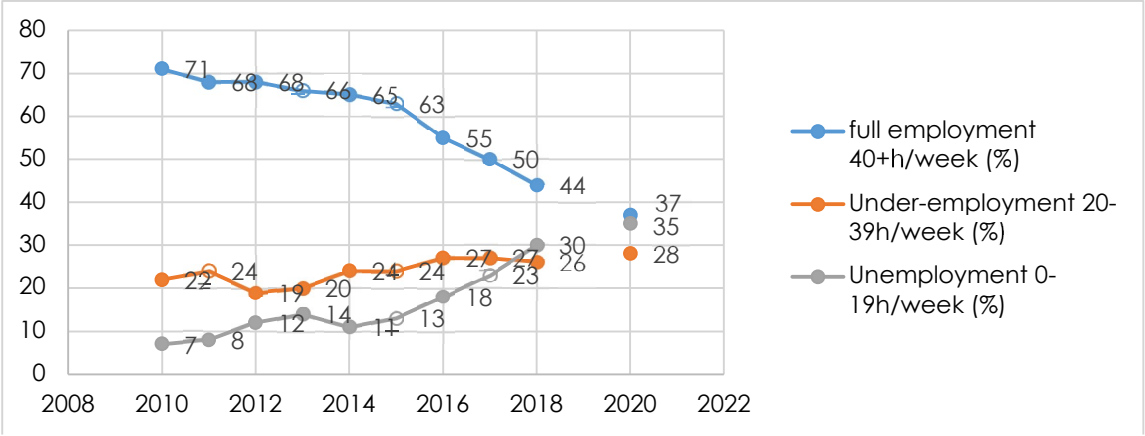


Figure 1: Youth Employment, Unemployment, and Underemployment Rates: 2010-2022 (%)
Source: Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (2021).

The labor market's inability to absorb the growing youth population is evident. Due to their lack of work experience, young people are disproportionately affected by poor economic outcomes, which frequently result in mass layoffs or slow employment development. In sharp contrast to other age groups, young people make up half of the work force, yet only 65.1% of them are employed, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (Olorunfemi, 2021).

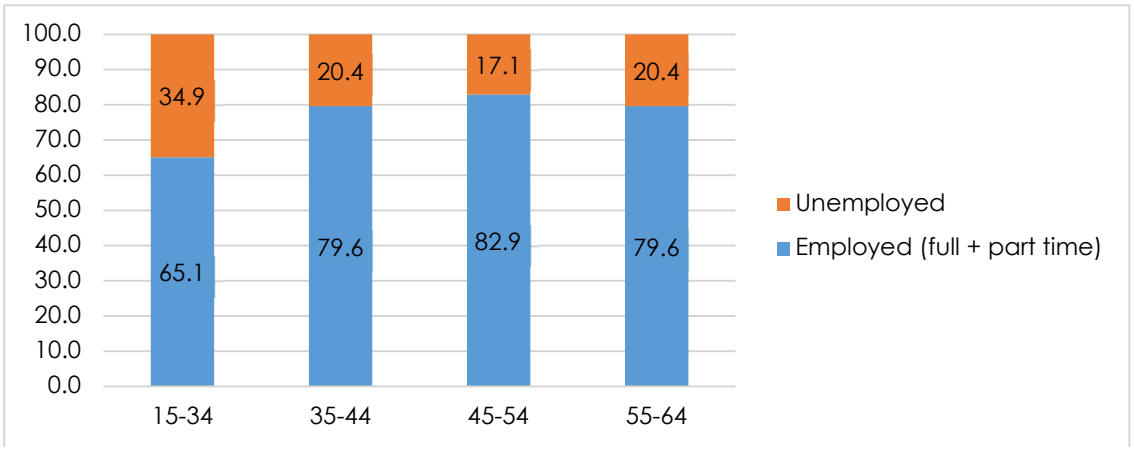


Figure 2: Proportion of Employed and Unemployed by Age Group (%)
Source: Computed by authors using data from National Bureau of Statistics (2020)

Causes of Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment is a multifaceted issue that impacts the economic and social fabric of Plateau State and Nigeria as a whole. The main causes of youth unemployment in Plateau State can be categorized into several key areas: demographic factors, educational deficiencies, economic conditions, cultural and societal influences, and policy and institutional shortcomings.

Demographic Factors

As the youth population grows, so does the working-age population, leading to an increase in the number of job seekers. However, the economy has not grown at a commensurate rate to provide sufficient employment opportunities for these individuals. The problem is exacerbated by high rates of rural-urban migration. Many young people move from rural areas to urban centers in search of better job prospects, but urban areas often lack the necessary infrastructure and job opportunities to accommodate them. This migration leads to urban overcrowding and increased competition for limited job openings, further driving up youth unemployment rates (UN Report, 2019).

Educational Deficiencies

The disconnect between the demands of the labor market and the educational system is another important factor causing adolescent unemployment. Many young people in Plateau State and Nigeria in general receive education that does not equip them with the skills needed by employers. The National Youth Survey 2020 revealed that a substantial number of youths are not in school, with 63% of those who have never attended school being young women (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development and National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Limited access to quality education and training opportunities further exacerbates the problem. Young people, especially women, face significant barriers to education, which hinders their social and economic mobility. In 2011, 24.8% of youth were not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and this figure increased to 28.1% by 2019 (World Bank, 2023). The larger proportion of women in the NEET category can be attributed to cultural practices such as early child marriage, which limits their ability to pursue education and employment (Enfield, 2019).

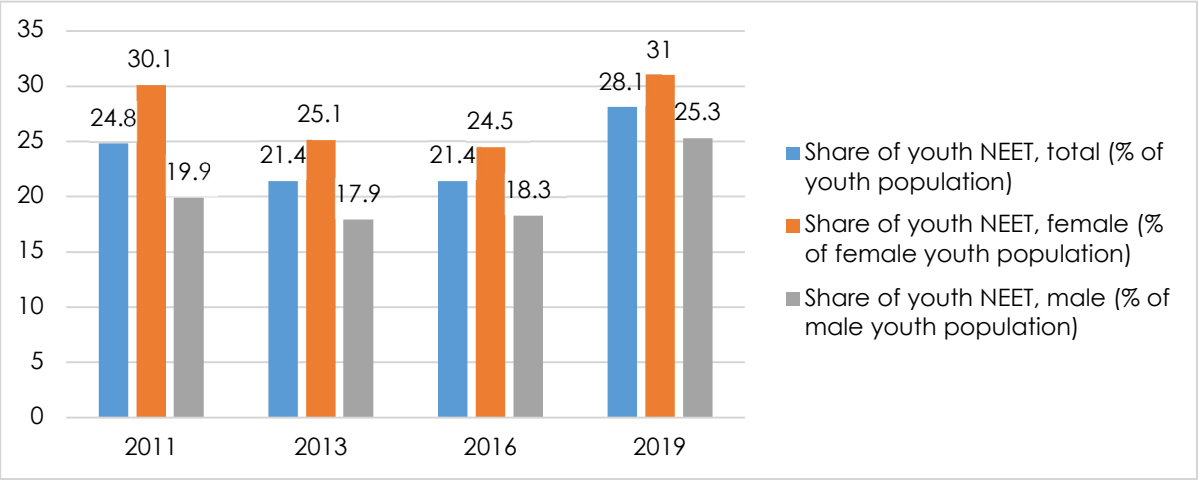


Figure 3: Share of Youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), 2011-2019
Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank (2023).

Economic Conditions

The condition of the economy plays an essential role in youth unemployment. Nigeria's economy has faced numerous challenges, including slow job growth and mass layoffs, which disproportionately affect young people. The youth unemployment rate increased from 7% in 2010 to 35% in 2020, reflecting the economy's inability to generate enough jobs to keep pace with the growing youth population (Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2021).

Cultural and Societal Influences

Cultural and societal factors also contribute to youth unemployment. Early child marriage is a significant barrier to education and employment for young women. This practice limits their ability to continue their education and enter the labor market, contributing to higher unemployment rates among young women (Enfield, 2019).

Policy and Institutional Shortcomings

Despite various government initiatives aimed at addressing youth unemployment, significant policy and institutional shortcomings persist. Programs such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) and the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) have been established to tackle unemployment, but their impact has been limited. Issues such as poor governance, ineffective targeting of resources, overlapping functions, poor coordination, and lack of sustainable measures undermine these efforts (Musari, 2019).

Effects and Consequences of Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment is a critical issue that has far-reaching effects and consequences on both the individual and societal levels. In Plateau State, the high rate of youth unemployment has led to significant socio-economic challenges, which require targeted government policies to foster employment and mitigate the adverse impacts.

Economic Consequences

One of the most direct consequences of youth unemployment is the loss of potential economic contributions. Unemployed youth represent a wasted resource, as their skills and talents remain untapped. This situation leads to a decrease in overall productivity and economic growth. The National Bureau of Statistics (2020) reported that youth unemployment in Nigeria rose from 7% in 2010 to 35% in 2020, highlighting a growing concern that needs to be addressed.

The economic burden of youth unemployment is also reflected in increased government expenditure on social welfare programs. Unemployment benefits, job creation schemes, and other support programs put a strain on public finances. This allocation of resources could have been used for other developmental projects if youth unemployment were adequately addressed. The World Bank (2023) notes that the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate for youth in Nigeria increased from 24.8% in 2011 to 28.1% in 2019, indicating a rising trend that requires immediate policy attention.

Social Consequences

The social consequences of youth unemployment are profound and multifaceted. One major effect is the increase in crime rates. Unemployed youth, facing financial difficulties and limited opportunities, may resort to criminal activities as a means of survival. The correlation between high youth unemployment and rising crime rates has been well-documented in various studies. For instance, the UN Report (2019) indicated that regions with high youth unemployment often experience increased crime and social unrest.

Youth unemployment also contributes to social instability. Frustration and disenchantment among unemployed youth can lead to protests, demonstrations, and even violent clashes. Such instability can disrupt communities and create an environment of fear and insecurity. This situation is particularly concerning in Plateau State, where there have been instances of youth-led protests demanding better employment opportunities and government action.

Impact on Education and Skill Development

Youth unemployment also affects education and skill development. When young people are unable to find jobs that match their qualifications, it discourages others from pursuing education and training. This situation creates a negative feedback loop, where the perceived lack of job opportunities leads to decreased investment in education. According to Oladele, Akeke, and Oladunjoye (2021), this trend can result in a less educated and less skilled workforce, further hindering economic development.

Political Consequences

The political consequences of youth unemployment are also significant. High unemployment rates among youth can lead to disillusionment with political systems and institutions. Young people who feel neglected and unsupported by their government are less likely to participate in political processes, such as voting or engaging in community activities. This disengagement can weaken democratic institutions and lead to lower levels of civic participation.

Impact on Social Mobility and Inequality

Youth unemployment also hampers social mobility and exacerbates inequality. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to unemployment, which limits their opportunities for upward mobility. This lack of mobility expands the cycle of impoverishment and inequality, as unemployed youth are unable to improve their socio-economic status. The Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (2021) reported that young women face additional barriers to employment, further widening the gender gap in employment opportunities.

Health Consequences

The health consequences of youth unemployment are also significant. Unemployed youth are at a higher risk of experiencing health problems, both physical and mental. The stress and anxiety associated with unemployment can lead to conditions such as depression, substance abuse, and other mental health issues. Additionally, the lack of financial resources can limit access to healthcare, exacerbating health problems and reducing overall well-being.

Policy Implications

The effects and consequences of youth unemployment in Plateau State underscore the need for targeted and effective government policies. A multifaceted strategy that incorporates job development initiatives, school reforms, and entrepreneurship support is needed to address youth unemployment. Policies should focus on aligning education and training programs with market needs, promoting vocational and technical education, and providing support for young entrepreneurs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for understanding the role of government policies in fostering youth employment in Plateau State can be anchored on two prominent theories: the Empowerment Model and Systems Theory. These theories provide a comprehensive lens through which the interplay between government policies, youth employment programs, and their effectiveness can be examined.

Empowerment Model

The Empowerment Model, as conceptualized by Moran, Taliaferro, and Pate (2014) and further developed by Moran, Mernin, and Gibbs (2017), is fundamental to understanding how government policies can be designed to enhance youth employment. The model is predicated on the idea of providing individuals with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to enable them to control their own lives and actively participate in economic activities.

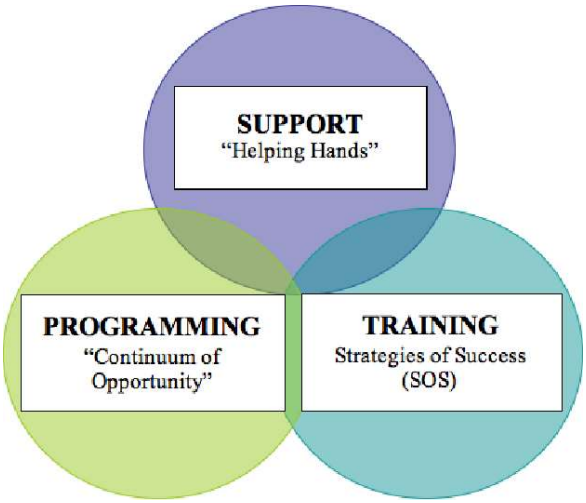


Fig. 4: The empowerment model (Moran et al., 2014)

The Empowerment Model encompasses three critical elements: programming, support, and training. Each of these elements plays a pivotal role in facilitating youth employment, particularly when integrated into government policies.

1. **Programming**

Programming, or the "continuum of opportunity," involves creating a range of options that align with the varying abilities and interests of individuals. In the context of Plateau State, this means developing a diverse array of employment and skill development programs tailored to the needs of the youth. For instance, government policies could include vocational training programs, internships, and entrepreneurial workshops that cater to different skill levels and interests.

2. Support

Support, termed "Helping Hands" in the model, acknowledges the need for various levels of assistance for successful participation. This includes both direct supports, such as mentorship and guidance, and indirect support, such as providing resources and infrastructure. In Plateau State, effective government policies should incorporate mechanisms for providing continuous support to youth, including mentorship programs, career counseling, and financial assistance.

3. Training

Training is essential for equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge. In the context of youth employment, government policies should emphasize the provision of high-quality training programs that are relevant to the current job market. This includes not only technical and vocational training but also soft skills development.

Integrating Theories into Government Policies

The integration of the Empowerment Model into government policies can significantly enhance the effectiveness of youth employment programs in Plateau State. By adopting a strengths-based approach and ensuring that all system components work in harmony, government policies can better address the needs of unemployed youth and foster meaningful employment opportunities.

For example, the implementation of the Youth Empowerment and Social Support

Operations (YESSO) program, which combines skill development with cash transfers, reflects an understanding of the interdependence of system components. Evaluations of YESSO by Azad and Fashogbon (2018) show that participants were able to save and invest in income-generating activities, highlighting the positive impact of integrating support, training, and financial assistance.

III. Methodology

Key informant interviews, focus groups, and desk reviews were some of our methodological techniques. We reviewed government policies by conducting desk research. In order to better understand the political economy of youth employment and to obtain firsthand knowledge on the job status of young people and youth employment programs in Plateau State, focus groups and key informant interviews were also conducted.

To accomplish our goals, we used both primary and secondary data. Government records, media reports, polls, and literature were the sources of the secondary data. Information on government policy goals, target audiences, beneficiary selection, number of beneficiaries per state, implementation costs, and funding were all gathered as part of the data collection process. While focus groups were held with the recipients of government programs, key informant interviews were done with implementing agencies, key informants, policy influencers, representatives of beneficiary groups, and other pertinent stakeholders. Institutional participants, including implementing and coordinating ministries, departments, agencies, and other stakeholders pertinent to youth employment initiatives at the national and subnational levels, were chosen using a purposive sampling technique.

We chose young people to participate in the focus group talks using a multistage selection process. Selecting one local government, more precisely, the biggest local government in each of the three geopolitical zones in Plateau State was the first step in the process. Both urban and rural regions were the focus of data collecting. As a result, one rural and one urban region were chosen at random for the second stage. Selecting young people for focus group talks was the third step, which made sure that underrepresented groups including women, those with impairments, and internally displaced individuals were included. Jos South on the Northern Plateau, Mangu in the Central Plateau, and Langtang North in the Southern Plateau were the three local government areas that were chosen.

We conducted eighteen focus groups and eighty key informant interviews in all. The majority of policymakers, influencers, and other pertinent stakeholders lived in Jos South, where forty key informant interviews were conducted. The remaining key informant interviews took place in Langtang North (20) and Mangu (20). There were at least ten participants in each focus group. Based on the population size and the strategic significance of the local government in the political and economic landscape of the Plateau, focus group discussions were distributed across the several local government districts. As a result, Jos South hosted ten focus group discussions, Mangu hosted four, and Langtang North hosted four. Women made up 44% of the 206 participants in the focus group sessions, while people with impairments made up 4%. Participants' educational backgrounds were as follows: 73% had a tertiary education, 24% had a secondary education, and 3% had only completed primary school. Furthermore, 55% of individuals were unemployed, compared to 45% who were employed.

IV. Role of Government Policies in Fostering Youth Employment in Plateau State

Given Nigeria's ongoing unemployment problem, government policies play a critical role in encouraging youth employment in Plateau State. The high rates of youth unemployment in Plateau State are made worse by the nation's general economic difficulties and sociopolitical instability. Numerous government initiatives have been put into place to solve this problem, all of which seek to boost economic expansion and generate employment possibilities.

The Plateau State administration has implemented a number of policies and initiatives to address the urgent problem of youth unemployment, with the goal of enhancing the lives of its young people and generating job possibilities. Although these programs are designed to meet the unique needs of Plateau State, they are in line with more general national policies.

To address the urgent problem of youth unemployment, the Plateau State government has adopted several policies and programs aimed at creating employment opportunities and improving the livelihoods of its young population. These initiatives align with broader national policies but are tailored to address the specific needs of Plateau State.

1. **Plateau State Youth Employment Scheme (PSYES)**

The Plateau State Youth Employment Scheme (PSYES) was established as a flagship initiative to address the high rate of youth unemployment in the state. Launched in 2018, the scheme aims to create job opportunities through various channels, including vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and public works projects. The PSYES focuses on equipping young individuals with practical skills and resources to enhance their employability and entrepreneurial potential.

The program has achieved some success in providing training and resources to thousands of youths. For instance, in its first year, PSYES trained over 5,000 youths in various vocational skills, including carpentry, tailoring, and plumbing. Despite these achievements, challenges like insufficient funding and poor program monitoring have limited its impact (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), 2014).

2. Entrepreneurship and Microfinance Programs

Entrepreneurship has been promoted as a viable pathway to employment through various microfinance programs and support schemes. The Plateau State government, in collaboration with national agencies, has implemented microfinance initiatives to provide low-interest loans and grants to young entrepreneurs. These programs aim to reduce the barriers to starting and sustaining small businesses.

The Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), a national initiative, has been adapted to benefit youths in Plateau State. This program offers no-cost loans to young entrepreneurs, supporting them in starting or expanding their businesses. However, the effectiveness of these programs has been hampered by issues such as bureaucratic delays and limited access to capital, as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics (2012).

3. Skill Acquisition Centers

The establishment of skill acquisition centers across Plateau State is another critical component of the government's strategy to tackle youth unemployment. These centers provide training in various trades and skills, aiming to prepare youths for both self-employment and wage employment. The centers offer programs in areas such as Information Technology, agriculture, and craftsmanship.

Despite the potential benefits, these centers have faced challenges related to infrastructure, resource allocation, and program quality. Reports indicate that while many youths have benefitted from the training programs, the lack of follow-up support and market linkages has limited the long-term success of these initiatives (Bulus, Gubak&Gubam, 2020).

4. Educational Reforms and Skill Development

Recognizing the need to align education with employment opportunities, the Plateau State government has undertaken educational reforms aimed at improving the quality and relevance of education. These reforms include curricula updates to incorporate practical skills and vocational training, as well as partnerships with industries to provide hands-on experience.

Educational institutions in Plateau State have been encouraged to collaborate with local businesses and industries to offer internships and apprenticeships. This approach aims to bridge the gap between academic training and job market requirements. However, the implementation of these reforms has been inconsistent, and there is often a disconnect between the skills taught and those demanded by employers (Ugal, Nwagbara & Uyang, 2011).

5. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have been instrumental in fostering youth employment through collaborative efforts between the government and the private sector. These partnerships aim to leverage private sector expertise, investment, and innovation to create

job opportunities and enhance the effectiveness of youth employment programs.

In Plateau State, PPPs have facilitated projects such as industrial parks and technology hubs, providing platforms for young entrepreneurs and job seekers. Despite these efforts, challenges such as limited private sector engagement and insufficient infrastructure have affected the success of these partnerships.

Analysis of Policy Effectiveness

While these policies and initiatives have been designed to address the issue of youth unemployment in Plateau State, their effectiveness has been mixed. Key challenges include inadequate funding, poor implementation, and limited monitoring and evaluation. For example, the N-Power program, part of the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), has faced criticism for poor supervision and weak monitoring, which has affected its impact on youth employment (Fajana, 2000; Garduño, Sawyer & Sawyer, 2013).

The Presidential Youth Empowerment Scheme (PYES), launched in 2020, aimed to create 774,000 job opportunities, but its implementation has faced delays and criticisms regarding its effectiveness (Burchard, LeGrand & Piachaud, 2002). Additionally, previous programs such as YouWIN Connect have been criticized for focusing more on training rather than providing tangible financial support and job placement opportunities (NSRP, 2014; Akande, 2014).

V. Conclusion

The government has rolled out numerous policies designed to address youth unemployment in Plateau State, mirroring broader national efforts. Initiatives such as the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), which includes the Home Grown School Feeding Programme (HGSF), Conditional Cash Transfer, N-Power, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), are examples of these programs. These programs all seek to address various facets of young unemployment, ranging from direct financial assistance to entrepreneurship and skill development.

Despite these comprehensive efforts, the impact of these policies has been mixed. A critical evaluation reveals several shortcomings in their design and implementation. The policies have often faced challenges such as inadequate funding, poor governance, and limited political inclusivity, which undermine their potential impact. To address these challenges, it is crucial for policymakers to adopt a more holistic approach that integrates various aspects of youth empowerment into a cohesive strategy.

Recommendations

To effectively tackle youth unemployment and foster sustainable employment opportunities in Plateau State, the following recommendations are proposed. These recommendations are designed to enhance the impact of government policies and address existing challenges based on a review of current interventions and their outcomes.

1. **Align Youth Employment Programs with Long-Term Development Plans**: Government policies aimed at fostering youth employment should be aligned with broader, long-term national and state development plans. This alignment ensures that youth employment initiatives contribute to the overall economic and social objectives of the state. Investment in youth has a multiplier effect that surpasses investments in other demographic groups.
2. **Establish a Central Coordinating Body for Youth Employment Programs**: The fragmentation of youth employment programs across various agencies has led to inefficiencies and overlaps. To streamline and enhance the effectiveness of these programs, it is recommended to establish a central coordinating body responsible for overseeing all youth employment initiatives in Plateau State.
3. **Enhance Monitoring and Evaluation Systems**: Effective monitoring and

evaluation (M&E) systems are crucial for assessing the impact of youth employment programs and ensuring accountability. It is recommended that the government develop robust M&E frameworks to track the performance of employment initiatives.

4. **Increase Funding and Resource Allocation**: Adequate funding is essential for the successful implementation of youth employment programs. The government should allocate sufficient resources to programs that demonstrate potential for high impact relative to cost.
5. **Involve Youth Groups and Civil Society Organizations**: Youth groups and civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in the design and implementation of youth employment programs. Their involvement can ensure that the programs are more responsive to the needs of young people and that they are implemented in an inclusive manner.
6. **Promote Inclusive and Equitable Program Design**: It is crucial that youth employment programs prioritize vulnerable and marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and internally displaced persons (IDPs).
7. **Revise and Strengthen Existing Programs**: Existing youth employment programs such as N-Power, Conditional Cash Transfer, and Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) should be reviewed and strengthened based on past performance and feedback.
8. **Foster Public-Private Partnerships**: Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a significant role in expanding employment opportunities for youth. By collaborating with private sector companies, the government can leverage additional resources, expertise, and job opportunities.

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