

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Youth, state and society

Many Nigerians have such a strong attachment to their self-image as youths; they are reluctant to ever let it go. There are many 'youth' organizations comprising members over forty years of age. It would seem they reject the adage that youth is wasted on youth. When they are patently too old to be classified by even the most elastic definition of "youth", they move into the "senior boys" and "senior girls" categories. However, the U.N. definition of youth is between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five.

This is the period of tutelage or apprenticeship for mature adulthood. It is a valuable period for it is a time of great vigor but also dependency on parents, institutional authorities and employers. Youths have physical and intellectual power but lack economic and political power. This disjunction may cause a profound frustration which is easily exploitable.

The last decade has witnessed youth-led political, religious and economic violence in Nigeria directed against multinational companies, different religions and ethnic communities, traditional rulers and rival political groups. The objectives are the reallocation of resources, land, oil, timber, political and religious power for the benefits of the youths and their communities.

The persistent underdevelopment of Nigeria has spun a vast army of unemployed and under-employed young men and women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five. One way to break the vicious circle of poverty and marginalization is to make some of these young people stakeholders in the economy and society.

This is the solution which other countries, faced with the same problem, have experimented with and, on a micro-level, found successful.

Youth unemployment is not peculiar to Nigeria, Africa or even the third world. There are over 300 million unemployed young people in the world today. Traditional sources of unemployment are reducing the number of people employed due to the changes created by technology and globalization and exacerbated by the current down climate.

In the U.K for instance, His Royal Highness (HRH), the Prince of Wales set up the Prince's Trust in the early 1980s designed to help disadvantaged young people to start their own business. The concept is to mobilize local business communities, who, working in partnership with local and national organizations, would provide access to finance through business mentoring and the provision of seed money. The trust was so successful it generated unprecedented global interest which led to the formation of the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders' Forum in 1990. The two organizations recently set up a joint venture--Youth business international (YBI). The YBI helps business people and partner organizations around the world to start up youth business initiatives based on the Prince's Trust model. It has succeeded in Ghana, the Gambia and South Africa in 2000. The Youth Business Initiatives was set up in Nigeria by its

founder, Mrs. Alero Okotie-Eboh Jadesimi.

On the 8th of May 2001, YBI Nigeria held its "outing ceremony" with a fund-raising dinner in Abuja. Then its rationale and programmes were presented to the Nigerian public by the chairperson of the board of trustees, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, by a repre-

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sentative of the Prince's trust and youth business international in the U.K and by the patron of YBI Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo.

The position of the patron is personal to President Obasanjo as the president explained in his address; it was his contact with HRH, the Prince of Wales last year which alerted him to the work of Youth Business International. He immediately recognized its potential for Nigeria and was pleased to learn it already existed in Nigeria. The president acknowledged that "youth unemployment is one of the most pressing problems that our country has to tackle, ...but it is a problem which needs a dual approach from government and community... we need the support of the private sector.... A sustainable flow of funding from the Nigerian business community."

The president recognized that one solution to youth unemployment, as many economists and policymakers believe, is that small businesses are now the main generators of new jobs, either as employers or as individual entrepreneurs. The future of our nation depends on our young people being able to fund and create employment opportunities for themselves and hopefully others"

The personal understanding between President Obasanjo and H.R.H, the Prince of Wales was demonstrated by the handing over to the president of a personal letter from the Prince by the U.K representative of the Prince's Trusts at the dinner. A message to the dinner guests from HRH was also read: " I have been delighted to hear of the excellent progress that has been made by Chief Anyaoku and his team in adapting the ideas of my Prince's trust for helping disadvantaged young people to achieve self-employment. It is a tremendous challenge and will require all the support and wisdom that the Nigerian business community can give.

I am sure that, under the leadership of President Obasanjo and Chief Anyaoku, the Youth Business Initiatives in Nigeria will not only be a great success but a real source of inspiration and employment for young people all over the country.

I know that Youth Business International is ready to help in whatever way you think useful, and I am confident that, with your help and support, the new initiative will flourish and grow from strength to strength."

The results to date of the work of the Prince's Trust and YBI international are impressive. Over 50,000 young people have been helped by the YBI programmes already up and running in over 15 countries around the world. Survival of the new business is high. 60% of those helped are still trading in their third year. The young people became more employable, more confident and learnt how to create and sustain the business. YBI programmes mobilize the local business community to provide this support. The two main innovations are the provision of volunteer business mentors to help the young person through the first three years of trading and the creation of a local business support network that helps those young entrepreneurs with a visible idea, to ensure it gets realized.

YBI Nigeria, as explained at the dinner, plans to start with a pilot project of thirty young people in Lagos. From that experience, YBI will be able to create a robust schedule to roll the program out across the rest of the country from 2002. Atiku Abubakar was present at the dinner and some state governors were represented.

I was present at the dinner as well and I was struck by the unanimity of sentiments expressed by the governors: Zamfara, Borno, Ekiti and Akwa Ibom, among others. All donated generously and invited YBI to partner with existing projects in their states and to set up new ones. All showed deep concern for the plight of their unemployed youth. At a time of deep division between geographical and political units within Nigeria, it is salutary to be reminded of how many problems are shared by the states of the federation.

I was also impressed by the sincerity of the president's address and by the fact that he was there. That morning, the president had flown to Zaire and Rwanda on what must have been a harrowing and strenuous attempt at conflict mediation. Yet he came from the airport to the dinner, eloquent testimony to his commitment to solving the crises within Nigeria of disadvantaged and unemployed youth.