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ABSTRACT: The paper looked the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Scheme in Nigeria and the role it has played in national unity and integration. The National Youth Service Corps scheme, a post- civil war scheme initiated by General Yakubu Gowon, the then Nigerian military head of state with Decree 24 of 1973, was aimed at uniting the war torn Nigeria, as an indivisible nation; with ‘no victor, no vanquished’ principle. Given the fact that Nigeria as a nation,a creation of the British colonial master; a conglomerate of many ethnic nationals. Primordial loyalties, ethnic and religious bigotry, nepotism, corruption, acrimony and winner-take all politics prevailed among the ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation-state. The National Youth Service Corps scheme was established to among others: develop common ties among Nigerian youths and promote national unity and integration, develop a sense of cooperate existence and common destiny of the people of Nigeria, Nigerian youths to eschew religious intolerance by accommodating religious differences, that as far as possible youths are assigned to jobs in states other than their states of origin. However, the authors observed that despite the lofty dream of the NYSC scheme at integrating the Nigerian populace, the programme is bedeviled with a lot of challenges that limits the objectives of the scheme from becoming a reality. Fund misappropriation, Corruption, preferential posting, discrimination, kidnaping, killing and raping of corps members especially in the Northern Nigeria are the major challenges facing the NYSC scheme from actualizing its objectives. The authors recommends that the government should reevaluate the programme as to reflect the current realities of the time and make the scheme relevant to the contemporary Nigeria state of affairs.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE SCHEME
Prior to the emergence of the European explorers, merchants and the Christian missionaries to the geographical expression known as Nigeria today, there existed varied and numerous independent settlements, kingdoms empires, ethnic and tribal states. These tribal groups existed independently in the Northern, Western, Southern and Eastern Nigeria. There was the Kanem –Bornu Empire, Kano, Katsina Hausa of Northern Nigeria, there was the Ile and Oyo kingdom of the western Nigeria, the Benin Empire, Nok culture, the Nri civilization of Eastern Nigeria and the Bony, Opopo, Ijaw, Ikwerre, Ogoni and other dispersed settlements of the southern Nigeria. Abasi-Udofia in Udoh (2016), maintains that commerce and religion brought these varied kingdoms and empires in contact with the Arab religious merchants and European Christian missionaries 16th and early 19th century. The race for empire building brought the European colonial powers, particularly the British Colonial power to Nigeria as her colonial master, after the Berlin conference of 1885; and Nigeria was declared a British protectorate. By 1914, for administrative convenience the Northern and Southern Protectorate were amalgamated by Lord Lugard, a British Colonial Governor. This was how the various ethnic nationals, kingdoms and Empire that existed hitherto, separately and independently, were brought together as a nation with their varied cultural practices and belief system. According to James Coleman (1986), Nigeria is believed to be peopled by about 250 ethnic tribes and ethnic nationals. Under the British Colonialist government, managing the entity Nigeria though, not easy but was possible because of the singleness of purpose of the British Colonial government- the exploitation of the Nigerian natural resources.

After Independence was granted in 1960, the leadership of the country in the hands of the political elites was faced with a lot of challenges. The daunting challenge of galvanizing all the ethnic nationals into a singleness of purpose of integration and nation-building was enormous, as every ethnic leader from the political elite pursued personal and regional agenda instead of national agenda. There was no singleness of purpose in their political activities. This was due to the poly-ethnic nature of the Nigerian state, different political leaders pursued ethnic agenda instead of national agenda. Explaining the reason for that, Udoh (2010), maintains that Nigeria appears to be the most pluralistic in terms of ethnicity, states and religions. As a result, political parties and political alignment were formed along ethnic cleavages. Given the above situation, the central government has always lacked a strong single political party, a charismatic and accepted leader and a strong centralized civil service. Udoh (2010), asserts that national leadership has never been trusted in Nigeria as a result of terrible records of tribalism, corruption and religious bigotry. Political leaders were more concerned with pursuing their respective tribal interest. In such a situation, education and political policies were not geared to the development of national consciousness and unity; and this was what caused the Nigerian civil war. Amadi (2014), affirms that the post colonial Nigerian state is faced with a major problem of political leadership failure, which manifest most markedly in political instability occasioned by inter-ethnic competitiveness and rivalry. Ademoyega (1981), is also of the opinion that Nigeria’s political problems sprang from the carefree manner in which the British took over, administered, and abandoned the government and people of Nigeria. Ademoyega maintains that British administrators did not make any effort to weld the country together and unite the heterogeneous groups of people leading to political non
advancement in Nigeria after the British left at Independence in 1960. Falola and Ihonvbere (1985), also affirm that Nigerian politics is characterized by instability occasioned by its colonial inheritance which has left the country with a fragile political system and a neocolonial economy. The First Republic according to Falola and Ihonvbere quickly collapsed because of the colonial inheritance and the aggressive rivalries among the foster elites which controlled power at the centre and the three, almost autonomous regions-North, East and West. The regions all had conflicting and competing development plans and distrusted one another generally.

Decalo,(1967), maintains that societal and structural weakness, institutional fragility, systemic flaws and low levels of political culture are some of the factors that acts as a sort of pull the armed forces into power and legitimacy vacuum. The political institutions as instruments for mediating societal conflicts or resolving societal contradictions was very weak and ineffective as winner takes all politics and dog-eat–dog relationship prevailed during the first Republic. This institutional fragility and inability to operate society effectively portrayed a total failure by the political class. According to Falola and Ihonvbere(1985), in situation like this, the only institution capable of saving the country and resolving the contradictions because of its modernity is the army. Precisely, on the wee hours of the 15th of January 1966, the first military coup in Nigeria took place. The number of the casualties of the coup was more from the Northern and the Western Region, and was tagged an Ibo masterminded coup because of the principal actors of the coup; majors Immanuel Iheajuna and Chukwuma Kaduna Nogwu. Major Nogwu, in his broadcast stating the reason for the coup said inter-alia:

our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent; those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in office as ministers or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles: …….(Ademoyega p89)

Major Nogwu further maintained that the aim of the revolutionary council was to establish a strong united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife. But this was not to be as General Aguiyi Ironsi of an Ibo extraction, who narrowly escaped arrest by the coup plotters for his role in supporting the corrupt political system, became the military Head of state after the demise of the then Prime minister; Sir Abubaka Tafawa Balewa and other top political elite and military officers from the Northern and the Western Regions. This aggravated the Northern elements in the army to conclude that it was an ethnic master minded coup. Six months later, a counter coup was staged on the 29th of July 1966, this time around, masterminded by the Northern military officers, in the persons of Coloneks Yakubu Gowon, Theophilus Danjuma among others. Colonel Yakubu Gowon became the military head of State after General Ayugui Ironsi was assassinated.

Tension rose between the North and the South; the Ibo in the Northern cities were seriously persecuted, tortured and massacred in the most ignominious manner. This lead to a mass exodus of the Ibo back to the Eastern Region. Not comfortable with the situation of things, Colonel Ojukwu in May 1967, decided that since the Ibos were no longer safe in any part of Nigeria than in the Eastern Region, the Eastern Region would secede from the Republic of Nigeria; and to remain and be known as the Republic of Biafra. War broke out on the 6th of July 1967, between the Federal troop (dominated by soldiers from the Western and Nothern Regions.), led by col Yakubu Gowon and the new Republic of Biafra, led by Col. ChukwuEmeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. Gowon, declared that to ‘to keep Nigeria one, is a task that must be done’. Abasi-Udofia (2016), contends that this task of keeping Nigeria one was done in the most gruesome manner. The war lasted for 30months with over 2million lives lost on the Biafran side, beside other horrible dehumanizing experience and torture meted out to the Ibo and the Biafran soldiers. The war ended on the 15th of January, 1970; with Gowon declaring: ‘no victor, no vanquished’, though we know who the ‘vanquished’ and the ‘victors’ were. After the 30 months civil war, the need to unite and integrate the various ethnic groups to one indivisible nation state for peace became imperative. To accomplish this goal, Gowon was engaged in the three ‘Rs’ programme : Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and reconciliation. While the military coup that snowballed to a 30 months civil war, regional political leaders pursued regional conflicting, competing and contradictory interest. It was a war of attrition; now with the hope and faith to keep Nigeria one, national goals was put primarily as the objective of the post war reconstruction Era. According to Abasi-Udofia, National goals was adopted among others as: A united, strong and self reliant nation. A great and dynamic economy, A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens. Given the fact that Nigeria is a multiethnic, a multilingual and a multicultural set up, jammed together for the administrative convenience and benefit of her colonial master, guidelines for national goals was adopted among others as: A united, strong and self reliant nation. A great and dynamic economy, A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens. Given the fact that Nigeria is a multiethnic, a multilingual and a multicultural set up, jammed together for the administrative convenience and benefit of her colonial master, guidelines for national goals was adopted among others as: A united, strong and self reliant nation. A great and dynamic economy, A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

To allay the fears, the doubts, the apprehensions and dissensions that characterized the pre-war Nigerian body polity, and to encourage national unity and integration in the post war Nigeria; several suggestions were made. One of the suggestions was the engagement of the youth as agent of integration. This was what gave rise to the National Youth service Corps decree 24 of 1973 by General Yakubu Gowon, the then Nigerian Military Head of State.

1) DECREES ESTABLISHING THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE SCHEME.

The National Youth Service Corps scheme was established on the 22nd of May, 1973 by Decree 24, by the then Nigerian military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon. The Decree was later on repealed twenty years later, on the 16th of June, 1993 by decree 51, now known as the NYSC Act CAP. N 84 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria by General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. The main Objective of the National Youth Service Corps scheme as stated in the decree 51 establishing it, states inter alia: to inculcate discipline in Nigerian youths by instilling in them a tradition of industry at work, to be loyal and patriotic in service to the nation –Nigeria in any situation they may find themselves.

OBJECTIVE OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE SCHEME

The objectives of the National Youth Service Corps Scheme are clearly spelt out in Decree No. 24 of1973 and later repealed by Decree No.51 of 16th June 1993 as follows:
1. To inculcate 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.
2. To raise the moral tone of the Nigerian youths by giving them the opportunity to learn about higher ideals of national achievement, social and cultural improvement.
3. To develop in the Nigerian youths the attitudes of mind, acquired through shared experience and suitable training which will make them more amenable to mobilization in the national interest.
4. To enable Nigerian youths acquire the spirit of self-reliance by encouraging them to develop skills for self-employment.
5. To contribute to the accelerated growth of the national economy.
6. To develop common ties among the Nigerian youths and promote national unity and integration.
7. To remove prejudices, eliminate ignorance and confirm at first hand the many similarities among Nigerians of all ethnic groups.
8. To develop a sense of corporate existence and common destiny of the people of Nigeria.
9. The equitable distribution of members of the service corps and the effective utilization of their skills in area of national needs.
10. That as far as possible, youths are assigned to jobs in States other than their States of origin.
11. That such group of youths assigned to work together is as representative of Nigeria as far as possible.
12. That the Nigerian youths are exposed to the modes of living of the people in different parts of Nigeria.
13. That the Nigerian youths are encouraged to eschew religious intolerance by accommodating religious differences.
14. That members of the service corps are encouraged to seek at the end of their one year national service, career employment all over Nigeria, thus promoting the free movement of labour.
15. 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.
16. The equitable distribution of members of the service corps and the effective utilization of their skills in area of national needs.

THE CONCEPT ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION

National integration as a concept has to do with the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a nation-state or a country. This presupposes that the individuals which make up the nation are of different culture, language, religion, castes, tribe and ethnic nationals. Integration now seeks to bring the citizens to the consciousness of oneness, promote a sense of brotherhood, love, a common identity and a common destiny. National integration also seeks to encourage citizens in a pluralistic, multilingual society like Nigeria, to harmoniously live together by accommodating persons from other tribes without prejudice, jealousy or hatred.

Ogeh and Eyong (2020), maintain that national integration is the incorporation of two or more culturally different people or ethnic groups within a geographical area into a single system of sovereign authority which gradually consolidates into a state or nation-state with defined international boundaries.

Nigeria as a nation is a conglomerate of about 250 ethnic nationals with different cultures, world view, different ideology, belief system, creed and cuisines. This is a major characteristics of many African states arbitrarily created (jammed) by the colonial imperialist governments, for their economic and administrative convenience. Asiabaka, Asiabaka and Anunobi (2013) contend that one of the major crises in post-colonial Africa states emerges from the fact that they are artificial nation-states; unlike European States that are Organic and Anthropological in nature. To create a basic oneness of the country for most African states after political independence has been attained, becomes a daunting challenge; hence the high incidence of conflict, political instability with legitimacy crises sometimes snowballing to civil wars in many post colonial African states. To keep their countries united and integrated, many African leaders have adopted different leadership styles and policies to encourage national unity and integration. This is the case with Nigeria, the National Youth Service Corps scheme as a programme, was initiated after the thirty months civil war to encourage national unity and national integration.

THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE CORPS (NYSC) SCHEME AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), was one of the post civil war educational programmes, introduced in Nigeria during the military era as an agent of national integration and nation building. The scheme was established by Decree 24 1973, by the General Yakubu Gowon’s military regime, and later repealed by Decree 54, in 1993, by General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. At the end of university programme, every Nigerian young graduate was to be posted to state other than his state of origin for a one year mandatory national service programme. Momoh in Ipaya (1992), posited that the NYSC is a program aimed at national service to mobilize and involve Nigerian youths in activities geared towards nation-building, national unity and national integration.

Taiwo (1976), further maintained that the one year national service program brings Nigerian youths together to live and work outside their states of origin, in doing this they make new friends, learn the cultures of their states of deployment and accommodate their differences. Adesina (1988), also maintains that some of the objective of the program include inter alia: to teach, train and ingraining in the Nigerian young people a custom of industry at work, enthusiastic and steadfast support of the country in any circumstance they may get among them and if possible pay the supreme price.

Furthermore, the scheme is aimed at enabling Nigerian youths acquire the spirit of self-reliance and dignity in labour. The scheme is also aimed at developing common ties among Nigerian youths, eliminating prejudice and ignorance hence, Corps members are encouraged to marry fellow corps members who are not from their states with special grant from the state/federal government to promote national unity and national integration. Corps members who excel during their service year also receive national award from the federal government. All these are aimed at unity in diversity and integrating the divers ethic groups and cultures to accommodate one another.

It is also on record that corps members posted to some remote schools in some part of Nigeria where the regular teachers would not want to be posted, have helped in the education of such communities thereby, encouraging national development, national unity, integration and nation-building. The orientation given to corps members during their deployment has also made young Nigerians to be broad minded and has instilled the lasting idea of oneness which lingers even after the service year. Even after their service year, many corps members still have some attachment to the state of their deployment. Many young Nigerians who received
automatic employment in their state of service are still living and working there till today with their families like any other citizen of that state. This has also encouraged national unity and integration in Nigeria.

CHALLENGES OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE SCHEME AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

The National Youth Service Corps scheme has survived many decades, but incidentally, it seems the programme is no more what it was at its inception. Despite the effort at encouraging national unity and integration through the National Youth Service corps scheme, there are many challenges militating against the actualization of the Service Corps Scheme objective of national integration. Right from deployment of corps members to their states of national assignment to posting for primary assignment, prospective corps members have in most cases influenced their posting to their preferred states of choice. Onifade and Imhonop (2013), affirm that nepotism, fund misappropriation, diversion of fund and corruption are some of the major challenges to the National Youth Service scheme actualizing it set objective. The problem of indigene, non indigene and state of origin has hindered many corps members from getting jobs and settling in their states of deployment after their service year. Due to frustration of discrimination most ex-corps members are forced back to their states of origin instead of settling and integrating in their states of deployment, thus making nonsense of the objective of the programme.

Recently, the increasing wave of religious fanaticism- Boko-Haram, political violence, kidnapping, Unknown-Gun-Men, Fulani herdsmen, Bandits and inter/intra community clashes have seriously endangered the lives of many corps members during their service year. As a result some part of the country are considered to be high risk zone and very unhealthy for the posting of corps members. Consequently, prospective corps members lobby their way to be posted within their zone or state of origin. Some corps members connive with the officials of the NYSC officials to be permanently absent from their areas of primary assignment, while their monthly allowance is partially remitted to the officers concerned.

Recently, the government is proposing selective posting due to poor funding. All these challenges have raised a lot of questions about the relevance and the usefulness of the National Youth Service Corps scheme regarding national unity and integration in Nigeria. While many Nigerians have suggested that the program be scrapped, especially after the gruesome murder of corps members who were involved in conducting elections in the Northern states. Despite all the recent life threatening challenges that are rampant here and there, the fact remains that the National Youth Service Corps scheme is a program in the right direction towards national integration.

THE WAY FORWARD

Given the fact that the National Youth service scheme was a major post civil- war Nigerian programme, aimed at encouraging national integration, national unity and nation-building, the programme was relevant to the Nigerian situation at the time of its inception. And given the historical specificities that informed the establishment of the scheme, the venture was greeted and welcomed with great enthusiasm as many Nigerian communities, individuals companies and institutions treated the Corps members posted to their areas with much respect and reverence. However, with the recent happenings in Nigeria the National Youth service scheme has become a shadow of its self. The need to re-evaluate the objective of the scheme has become imperative. Abasi-Udofia (2016), collaborates that the National Youth Service Corps scheme was designed to meet a peculiar need of the time at its inception in the early seventies, now that there are new challenges confronting the programme, it has become imperative that the Federal government should redesign the programme to respond to the contemporary challenges facing the scheme and the nation at large.

Given the fact that many Corps members fall back to the labour market after the service year, the government should provide a trust fund in form of grants, and soft loans that can be easily accessed by the corps members who wish to start up business of their own after the service year. It has been observed that corps members are given some skill acquisition training at the orientation camp, to encourage self employment after the service year. However, the finance to translate much of the skills acquired during the orientation training to reality has been a major challenge to corps members at the end of their service year. It is pertinent to note that at the time the National Youth Service Corps scheme kick started in Nigeria the seventies, it was greeted and welcomed with joy and excitement by all and sundry, and the programme was able to meet the need for which it was created at that material time. Now that there are lot of contending issues confronting the programme, it has become necessary that the Federal government of Nigeria should have a thorough review of the programme, taking cognizance of the contemporary issues that have impinged on the National Youth Service Corps scheme achieving the main objectives of its establishment. Though the challenges to the Nigerian nation of the seventies when the National Youth Service Corps scheme was established are still here with us, the contemporary challenges are multiplied and are more challenging and threatening to the very existence and survival of the fragile Nigerian unity. These contemporary challenges should be taken cognizance of and have the NYSC scheme redesigned to meet the needs of the time and make it relevant and very interesting to all parties involved if the programmed must be continued.

REFERENCES


