

## **A Three-Prong Approach to the Transformation of Violent Out-of-School Youth in Nigeria**

**Oluremi Albert\***

### **Abstract**

*Youth violence is a regular occurrence in Nigeria. Successive administrations in the country find it difficult to put an end to the problem. With a view to making a contribution to engaging the issues, this paper identifies two types of youths that could be said to be engaged in violence in the Nigeria society: (a) the educated class that has drifted into violent activities as a result of long period of unemployment and (b) the ‘street boys’ who on the account of lack of proper education are unemployed. This paper attempts to answer a number of questions around the latter. The most critical has to do with why young people take such risks that endanger the security and wellbeing of other Nigerians. Two bodies of argument are advanced. Whereas psychological theories blame the problem on personality problems, sociological theories explain it in terms of societal precursors. This paper focuses on the sociological explanation and proposes a three-prong approach for transforming these violent “out-of-school” youth. The approaches are non-formal peace education, life skills counseling and employment opportunities.*

### **Introduction**

Since the economic crisis of the late 1970s in Nigeria and the consequent structural adjustment programme of the Federal Government in the 1980s, Nigeria has consistently found it difficult to deal with the youth crisis in the country. This problem seems to be getting worse as the youth are the vanguards of the several

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\* Dr. (Mrs) Oluremi Albert is the Coordinator of Programmes, Peace Transformation Forum, Sasa, Ibadan.

ethnic, religious, elections, rural and urban violence that Nigeria has been witnessing. A lot has been written on this issue of Nigerian youths' involvement in crisis by Otite and Albert (1999), Albert (2001), (Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye and Okhonmina 2011) and several other scholars. Issues of cultism in Nigerian institutions of higher learning shows that as the out-of-school youths create their own problems in their communities, the so called educated ones also generate problems for their schools. The main development questions arising from this pertain to how to transform these violent youths and make them responsible citizens of Nigeria.

At official level, several policies have been put in place but these pertain more to in-school youths. Two main policies can be cited here. The first is the National Youth Service Scheme which is aimed at making Nigerian youth know other parts of Nigeria and tolerate other Nigerians and the second is the policy of the Federal Government to make all Nigerian institutions of higher learning teach "Peace and Conflict Studies" to their Year 1 and 2 students. The goal of this particular policy is to make these Nigerian students acquire conflict management skills that could make them become less violent citizens (Albert 2009). The two policies have their problems. But this is not what this paper is all about. The paper is more focused on how to transform the out-of-school youths. These Nigerians consist of two categories: (i) graduates who benefited from the NYSC and peace education schemes but who have now become violent as a result of long years of unemployment and (ii) "street boys" who never benefited from the NYSC and peace education schemes but who are often vanguards of violent conflicts in their communities.

The two categories of Nigerian youth are involved in violence for various reasons. Most of those who successfully graduate from schools are unemployed for many years and this makes them to be willing tools in the hands of conflict entrepreneurs that seek to use them for ethnic, religious, election and other forms of violence. Many of the school drop-outs lack the skills to compete in the rather weak economy and tight labour market. Therefore, they

loiter around from dawn to dusk while battling with crushing unemployment and poverty. They too are often recruited by conflict entrepreneurs to engage in violence.

What are the social characteristics of the youth involved in violence in Nigeria? How are violent youths transformed in other parts of the world? What efforts are being made to transform the youths in Nigeria? Are the transformation strategies related to the cause of these young people's propensities to be involved in violence? What gaps have been noticed in the Nigerian situation and how do we fill the gaps? These are the main questions addressed by this paper.

### **Causes of Youth Violence**

Nigeria is deeply in crisis situation given the number of young people that are engaged in both criminal and political violence<sup>1</sup> across the nation. Those engaged in criminal violence include those that are implicated in armed robbery, kidnapping, hostage taking, cross border crimes (Akanle 2004) such as car smuggling, drug - trafficking, terrorism and the like. Those involved in political crisis include those implicated in religious and ethnic crises (Oтите and Albert, 1999; Albert and Olarinde 2009) all over the country. The most recent example of these cases of youth involvement in violence is the post election violence that was witnessed in some parts of Northern Nigeria in April 2011 as a result of which scores of people were killed and several hundreds were displaced.

All of these cases of youth violence, whether criminal or political can be technically referred to as "risky behaviours" (Tepperman 2006:172-205) on the account of the fact that they endanger those involved as well as the society in which they live. Scholars of sustainable national development are worried about this kind of situation on the account of the fact that such risky behaviours have adverse effect on the ability of the youth to grow up into responsible adulthood and so can be considered to be a critical issue in sustainable human development. No nation can develop without a healthy youth population.

Why do young people take such risks? Two bodies of argument can be advanced in this respect. Whereas psychological theories would blame the problem on personality problems, sociological theories would explain it in terms of societal precursors. This paper focuses more on the sociological explanation.

In her publication entitled *Delinquency and Drift*, Matza argued that many of these young people merely drifted into the antisocial behaviour. To them, it is a game. She argued that it is common for any young person to have this kind of experience in his lifetime. However, the longer the youths drift from the mainstream society, the more they are drawn into risky behaviour. Those who drift away for a long time or on permanent basis do so at the expense of other life building activities - education, career, and other elements of social development. This eventually affects adult success. She also established the fact that the youths that spend the best of their time with delinquent peers cannot at the same time benefit from the virtues of their peers living in the conforming world.

In his own work, Hirschi (1969) identified four social bonds that promote conformity in the youth which when lost turns young people into agents of disorder. They are attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. The first, attachment, refers to a person's interest in connecting with the rest of his society - most especially parents, local institutions, and peers. A youth that is firmly attached to the parents is most likely to do better than those attached to peers outside the home. The second bond is that of commitment. This refers to the quality time and energy that the youth commits to doing works that could contribute to his future growth and development. Those that commit more time to acquiring skills are most likely to do better than those engaged in unrewarding social activities. The third bond, involvement, has to do with how well the person devotes himself to positive values that could have stabilizing effects on him. The last bond, belief, has to do with whether or not the person recognizes the laws of the society in which he lives and whether or not he is willing to be guided by those laws. Hirschi's position here

has been further reinforced by a few other studies (Angenent and Man 1996; Athens, 1997).

The foregoing is good for explaining the involvement of Southern Nigerian youths in violent conflicts, explaining the situation in the North would require an additional factor: the *Almajiri* system which has now become a major social question in "Muslim societies in Africa", most especially Senegal and Nigeria (Weiss 2002). Many of the Northern Nigerian youth involved in religious and ethnic violence in their communities are believed to have had upbringing challenges tied to this type of Koranic education system to which many of them were committed at the expense of western education. Many parents send their wards to these schools where they acquire Islamic education under Islamic teachers (*Mallamai*) with whom the pupils live. The latter often send their pupils to the street to beg for them and this makes these children to be constantly on the street. This has two implications. The children are not given the opportunity to acquire western education which could give them future careers. Secondly, on-the account that these children are always on the streets begging, they easily join or are encouraged to join whatever violent ethnic, religious and election-related conflicts that occur in their society.

The problems faced by young people are compounded if they are unfortunate to be living in a society with a poor youth development agenda and high unemployment rate. With delinquent subcultures and limited opportunities for success in legitimate enterprises, the youth in such a society construct their own world in which they begin to "see delinquent behavior as a 'normal' - that is, common and rational - social response to stresses and opportunities" (Tepperman 2006:174). With low self-esteem, stress and depression, young people at risk live on the fringes of the society and engage in any activity that could enable them to make money for human survival, gain status, protect gang territory, or prove manliness. This includes a display of traits of "culture of poverty: a belief in fate, danger, luck, and risk-taking...vandalism, petty theft, breaking and entering, illegal alcohol and drug use, auto

theft and dangerous driving, up through drug dealing, robbery, and gang fighting” (Tepperman 2006:176). This would probably explain the genesis of youth militancy in the Niger Delta militants as well as the “area boy” subculture in many contemporary Nigerian cities.

One other critical issue that must be considered in the explanation of why Nigerian youth engage in violence is the fact that many of these young violent people are sponsored by Nigerian community leaders and politicians who involve them in ethnic, religious and electoral violence. What has been found to be unique in all these is that it is the very social characteristics of the youths that make people come to them for the dirty jobs they are employed to do. They are jobless and therefore willing to do the bid of whosoever wants to use them to do any work. A transformation process must take all these into consideration.

### **Transformation Strategies**

The lesson from the foregoing is that several factors account for the kind of youth violence now witnessed in Nigeria. All these factors have to be adequately taken into consideration by those seeking to transform these violent youths. Local peculiarities and conditions must be taken into critical consideration; it is therefore difficult to apply a “one-solution-fits-all” strategy to dealing with the situation. In one of most cited works focusing on chief executives of corporate organizations, Sloan (2006) warned that those trying to transform critical situations must think strategically about the difficult problems they have to solve. She particularly observed that “strategists must be willing to seek out facts that might disconfirm a generally held belief and be willing to explore other possibilities” (Sloan 2006:79). Conflict interveners must engage the youth crisis in Nigeria similarly. They need to think through the solutions they package for transforming the youth they associate with the violent crisis in the country. It is in this respect that this paper is coming out with a three-prong transformation strategy for managing violent youths in Nigeria.

A transformation project involves four critical elements: issue, actor, legal and structural transformation. Issue transformation refers to the need to change the issues that underlie a conflict situation or a conduct that is not healthy for a society. Actor transformation refers to having to positively change the attitude and behaviour of those behind these activities. Legal transformation has to do with changing the rule or laws in the society so that issues and actors can be properly changed while structural transformation has to do with changing the unhealthy structure of the society that supports the disorderly attitude and behaviour noticed in the society.

Any project that is aimed at transforming violent youths must take these four transformation strategies into consideration. This is taken into consideration in this paper where a three-prong approach is proposed for transforming the youths involved in ethnic, religious and election violence in Nigeria from their bad to good state.

### **A three-Prong Approach**

The Nigerian state and civil society organizations perceive militant or violent youths differently. To the government (most especially security agencies), these young people who engage in risky behaviours are nothing but criminals. Therefore some of these young people are killed, arrested and detained during ethnic, religious and electoral violence in the Nigerian society. The expectation of this legal transformation strategy is that what happens to those youths would serve as a lesson to their peers who might want to engage in such activities that threaten law and order in the society. On the other hand, civil society organizations doing peace work see these violent youth as a people deserving social support to become more responsible members of their society. As a result, they provide them peace education. These two strategies have to be reconciled and expanded in order to arrive at an intervention method that is more result-oriented.

It is true that many of these violent youths are criminals if their activities are weighed against the law. Those who kill, maim

and force other Nigerians to flee their communities cannot be said to be decent citizens. But that is not the entire story. When the conditions under which these young people developed are taken into deeper consideration, it would be realized that they were indeed produced by their society. They constitute part of the group that was left behind by the development processes in their society. Therefore, what many of them, most especially those involved in ethnic, religious and election-based violence, need is more of rehabilitation than punishment. In the alternative, rehabilitation could go with punishment as “impunity” could encourage more youth to follow the same path of unleashing physical violence on the society. The rest of this paper is devoted to how they could be rehabilitated. Three related strategies are proposed: peace education, life skills counselling, and provision of employment opportunities.

### **Peace education**

There are several definitions of “peace education”. Space would not allow me in this paper to review them. What has simply been done is to adopt what seems to be the most encompassing of the definitions and most related to the subject matter of this paper. This is the one provided by UNICEF. Here the concept is defined as “the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level” (Fountain 1999:1).

This type of education is meant for both in-school and out- of-school youths but the focus of the two are different. Whereas the training provided for in-school youth is formal and looks much like the normal learning systems, the out-of-school peace education must be functional and flexible enough to make the beneficiaries sufficiently gain from it. The most favoured approach in this case is for non-governmental organizations, usually funded by international development agencies, to organize three to five days conflict

transformation training for the youth drawn together from crisis- ridden communities. This kind of training, though very important, usually focuses only on changing the attitude and behaviour of the participants. In some cases, the workshops help the participants to acquire peer mediation skills. One would be asking for too much to expect these young people to become more peaceful, on sustainable level, after such training as the focus is usually on changing their negative attitudes and behaviour and hardly on removing the main causes of their problems. It is for this reason that this paper suggests that such training must be followed up by two other methods: counselling and employment.

### **Life skills Counselling**

The point was made at the earlier part of this paper that most violent youths are produced by their society. But this is usually in different ways. Violent youths come from different backgrounds, some are produced by the general neglect of youth development by community leaders. In addition, some of the youth come from broken homes. Yet, some are pathologically deviant: they come from good homes but simply decide to be negatively affected by peer influence. Yet, there are violent youths who do what they do simply because they have some sorts of mental disorder that must be understood by psychotherapists. It is therefore impossible for a group conflict transformation training programme to positively affect all of them in the same way. Some would benefit; a few others would not. This is why the project must proceed to the next stage where the youths are provided individual life skills counselling.

Generally speaking, counselling has to do with the provision of assistance and guidance in resolving personal, social, or psychological problems and difficulties, especially, by a trained person on a professional basis. On the other hand, the goal of lifeskills counselling is to provide emotional support to the client by helping to manage his/her problems better, and most importantly helping to identify and deal with poor skills that sustain the antisocial attitude and behaviour. In this case, through effective

communication both the counsellor and the client work together to identify the root of the problems, their effect and how they could be removed or managed (Nelson-Jones 2007:11-13).

However, it makes no sense for counsellors to advise their clients on life transformation strategies that the clients might have no capacity to activate. It is in this respect that this paper would want to treat issues relating to transformation of violent youths as a societal responsibility. This is because where these violent youngsters are not positively transformed, they become a liability to the whole of the society as we now see in the activities of young people involved in violent religious, ethnic and electoral crisis in Nigeria.

### **Employment Opportunities**

Most of the youths engaged in violent activities in Nigeria today do so because they are employed or underemployed. Many of them lack skills and qualifications that could provide them with gainful employment and so fraternize with peers that could lure them into all manners of anti-social behaviour. It logically follows that conflict transformation workshops and lifeskills counselling alone would not remove the problems faced by this young people. The package for their transformation is only complete when they are provided employment opportunities.

### **Issues of Professionalism**

It is easier to call attention to the three approaches discussed above than to get professionals to activate them. Two problems are faced in the area of providing conflict transformation training. The first is that many of the NGOs that conduct these training programmes lack sufficient skills for doing some of the things they do. Many of them become trainers after attending one week workshops. The truth however is that training for capacity to become experts in the transformation of violent youths requires careful capacity building spanning quite some time. Such background training needs to include modules on the psychology of

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the youth. The trainer must himself be properly schooled in how to design context-specific training programmes.

Some of the defects observed with those doing conflict transformation training programmes for youths in Nigeria would probably have been eased if these professionals have working relationships with conflict management scholars or scholars focusing on the study of young people - most especially psychologists. There is the need for both trainers and scholars working on youths to interact more closely and it is in this respect that the role of society for peace studies and practice (SPSP) in building peace in Nigeria is very important. The society enables everybody doing peace work to exchange ideas freely during its annual conference which takes place once in a year.

The second gap in professionalism that has been noticed is that the NGOs doing peace work and the scholars studying youth crisis in Nigeria hardly factor issues relating to counselling into their analysis on conflict transformation. This is because the training received by many of these peace workers did not include modules on counselling. Not even the Peace and Conflict Studies Programme of the University of Ibadan, which is the most authoritative in West Africa, has a course on counselling. This gap has to be filled immediately in order to strengthen the structures for peace in Nigeria and far beyond.

For now, the Nigerian state has no structures for formally engaging in any of the three transformation strategies discussed in this paper. The government has a National Directorate for Employment (NDE) but the effect of this agency in dealing with the issue of youth employment is yet to be significantly felt. The responsibility for conducting conflict transformation training programmes in Nigeria for now falls on non-governmental organizations who also depend on international development agencies for doing their projects. The Nigerian state is hardly interested in this kind of project though this is the strategy now being adopted to deal with the ex-militants from the Niger Delta.

The idea of having public counselling centres where the youth could be counselled and provided lifeskills help is also still new to Nigeria. All this explains why the youth crisis in Nigeria is becoming more and more complex.

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