

POST COVID-19 INDUCED UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING SERVICES

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many countries to close down their economies, borders and even businesses, leading to rise in unemployment rates in most countries including Nigeria. The most affected population as regards unemployment in Nigeria are the youths. The pandemic left most of the unemployed at the brink of mental health issues, a trend that is highly dangerous to the state of the nation as a whole. Thus, this paper x-rays COVID-19 as it relates with unemployment generally; youth unemployment in COVID-19 era in Nigeria; risk posed by COVID-19 within Nigeria; brief overview of lifelong learning and Guidance and Counselling; lifelong learning, guidance, counselling and youth empowerment in emergency situations; counselling services and the empowerment of the Nigerian youth. Based on the discussions, several recommendations were given among which are that communities should endeavour to set up well equipped, staffed and funded professional counselling units with the intent of equipping youth with entrepreneurial skills required for them to create a means of livelihood for themselves and address other issues that emanated as a result of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19; Youth, Counselling; Life-long, learning; Unemployment;

Introduction

The novel COVID-19 pandemic has been documented as “an unparalleled humanitarian crisis ever since the Second World War,” with far more devastating instantaneous consequences that have stretched various healthcare organizations globally to their limits. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only strained national economies and left many unemployed; it has also frustrated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN) and the economic and growth plans of many economies (Fenga & Son-Turan, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to grievous economic and labour market tremors. This culminated in an estimated rise in the number of people that are unemployed globally, most especially youths; the increment ranges from 5.3 million to 24.7 million across the nations of the world (ILO, 2020a). The effects on youth employment were so grave because youths in the age range of 15-24 years are already three times more likely to be unemployed than adults (ILO, 2020a).

Additionally, COVID-19-related impact on the labour market affected the quality of jobs available for youths, including zero-hour contracts or informal employment, just to mention a few. Such types of employment are evidently more common among young people, as 77% of employed young people are in informal jobs while 126 million remain in extreme or moderate poverty worldwide (CDC, 2020). Conspicuously, the impact on the quality and quantity of jobs excessively affected youths employed in the services sector and/or engaged in manual routine jobs. Furthermore, young people with these jobs were also pushed to the risk of suffering heightened health-related hazards because they cannot work remotely. In Nigeria, the unemployment crisis that had been high even before the pandemic broke out was predicted to rise even higher as the Nigerian Economic Sustainability Committee (ESC) admitted that the government anticipated 39.4 million job losses by December 2020 as a result of COVID-19 (Okunola, 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic and Unemployment Issues

The World Health Organization (WHO) asserted that the global pandemic is the first known to emerge as a result of a novel coronavirus, identified as SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). This respiratory disease is effortlessly transmissible, mostly from person to person, in droplet form, when a person that is infected coughs or sneezes where people are. Also, it spreads through coming in contact with objects or surfaces that have been contaminated. The signs related to COVID-19 range from very mild (with some cases with no reported symptoms) to severe or lethal. The casualty rate is high as the pandemic unfolds, and there exist some disparities across geographic regions and age brackets.

The pandemic commenced with an enquiry phase, followed by acknowledgement, initiation, and quickening phases (CDC, 2020). Also, different countries were and can still be in different phases of the pandemic at any point in time, as different parts of the same country can also experience different phases of the pandemic. At the onset, especially when the pandemic became rampant, most countries experienced what is called “community spread,” a phase of the pandemic also called the “acceleration phase.” Therefore, one of the most important tools public health officials needed was a reliable system that could quickly report accurate data about the outbreak. By so doing, administrators were able to rapidly identify and implement the most active interventions.

In response to the rampaging effects of the pandemic, various societies reacted through social and economic 'lock downs', 'extended lockdowns', 'down-sizing' of workforce, out-right retrenchment of workers, salary cuts, shutdowns and ensuing bankruptcies, and the gap between the rich and the poor sections of society in the developed and developing climes, appears to be broadening. The labour market was at the brink as the bulk of the world's workforce was affected

(ILO Monitor, 2020). Coibion et al. (2020) also forecasted that in the healthiest economies, job loss was projected to be in millions. This position was corroborated by the ILO Monitor (2020) which reported that 14.0 per cent worldwide (equivalent to 400 million full-time jobs) of workers were pushed into unemployment at the commencement of the COVID-19 crisis.

Youth And Unemployment In Post Covid-19 Era In Nigeria

Globally, youths in the labour force have been experiencing tough times even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Youths within the age range of 18 to 24 more have been said to be more likely to be unemployed than the young adults that are 25 years and above (ILO, 2020c). ILO (2020b) averred that COVID-19 pandemic created a more stiffer stumbling block on the paths of youths that are already in the labour market. In addition, it quite worrisome for job searchers, as it took rather longer time to transit from school to work. The pandemic worsened the plight of young workers, who were already under the shackles of underemployment. Moreover, they have been at the risk of being laid off their jobs as a result of businesses that were collapsing and folding up due to social and economic lockdowns due to COVID-19 protocols.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, millions of youths all over the world were already employed in sectors that were the mostly affected by the pandemic. Such sectors included retail trade, accommodation, real estates, manufacturing, wholesales, food services, aviation, hospitality, road transportation among others (ILO, 2020a). A survey conducted by Gonzalez et al., (2020) reported that, one out of six youths within the ages of 18 to 29 (17.4%) stopped working since the outbreak of the pandemic. 6.9% of the youths investigated lost their jobs while 10.5% even though still in employment were not able to work after the outbreak of the pandemic. The latter cluster was mostly youths in wage employment, including those with temporary job losses, for example as a result of furloughing and youths in self-employment, own-account workers family workers who had changed income generating activities.

Gonzalez et al. (2020) revealed that 23.1% of the youth respondents within the age range of 18 to 24 who were working before the outbreak of the pandemic had stopped working compared to 13% of older youths (within 25-29) and 10.6% in 30-34 age group. The survey showed that more younger youths within the age range of 18-24 lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic compared to their older counterparts (30-34 age).

In Nigeria, before the outbreak of the pandemic, in 2019, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) testified that 40% of people in Africa's most populous country lived beneath the poverty mark of 137,430 Naira (\$354) a year (NBS, 2020). This implies that four out of every ten Nigerians live on less than \$354 annually. In line with the submissions of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in 2019. Also, in recent times, the World Poverty Clock has reported that there are 71 million extremely poor Nigerians (Ubanagu, 2023). This may be as a result of the advent of COVID-19, as statistics of job losses seems to be surging. For instance, in May, 2020, some banks in Nigeria were compelled to down-size their staff strength due to the effects of the pandemic on the banking institution. It had to take the intervention of the apex bank in Nigeria to put on hold staff layoffs so as to lessen the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homes and livelihoods. This intervention made banking institutions in the country to eventually settle for a rearrangement of salaries across the institution as a result of the impact of COVID-19 (Okunola, 2020).

National Bureau of Statistics (2020), revealed that joblessness rate in the second quarter (Q2) of 2020 was 27.1%, up from the 23.1% documented in third quarter (Q3) of 2018. The underemployment rate surged from 20.1% in third quarter (Q3) of 2018 to 28.6%. Although, the report did not attribute the increase in level of unemployment and underemployment to COVID-19, one can submit that one of the likely variables responsible for increase in unemployment level

in Nigeria was the COVID-19 pandemic. As regards joblessness rate among the youths, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2020) reported that for Q2, 2020, the joblessness rate among young people (15-34 years) surged to 34.9%, from 29.7%, while the rate of underemployment for the same age group appreciated to 28.2% from 25.7% in Q3, 2018. These rates seem to be the highest when compared to other age categories (NBS, 2020). The submission that the highest unemployment rate among different age groups is among the youths reveals that the youths of Nigeria are one of the worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Risk Posed by COVID-19 With Youth Unemployment In Nigeria

The unemployment rate in Nigeria, most especially among the youth population, poses lots of risks to the youths and the country as a whole. The likely risk that the increase in the unemployment rate as an aftermath of COVID-19 may result in the following:

- 1) **Poverty:** Poverty in developing countries such as Nigeria is predominantly tied to the underutilization of labour, whether in the form of open unemployment or massive underemployment. Again, poverty can be traced to unemployment, especially in urban areas that, in the last three decades, have expanded to accommodate huge influxes of jobseekers (Müller-Böcker, 2008). According to Adisa (2013), in Nigeria, the unemployment rate is so high, and the effect on the already poverty-stricken youths has resulted in the proliferation of groups with anti-social dispositions such as the “Area Boys,” a parlance for street urchins. This group of youths takes laws into their hands and is used by the political elites to advance their selfish agenda at the expense of the civil populace.
- 2) **Economic hardship:** The state of Nigeria's economy seems not to be stable because of its over-reliance on foreign markets. This trend tends to lead to the pauperization of the masses, especially the not-formally-educated, the urban poor, rural dwellers, and individuals who were not favored by the unfolding economic conditions. It is based on these reasons that Nigerians seem to feel the impacts of the global meltdown so seriously on economic growth.
- 3) **High crime rate:** Youth unemployment is a precursor of youths' involvement in crimes they would have hitherto never wanted to be associated with. For instance, in a study conducted in the Northern part of Nigeria by Galadima (2014), findings from the study revealed that youths are more likely to be recruited and used as political thugs by politicians as unemployment puts them in a very vulnerable and desperate state due to the hardship that results from not having a legal means of livelihood.
- 4) **Ethno-religious conflicts:** Most of the ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are championed by idle youths who have nothing meaningful to do with their time and lives. For instance, Galadima (2014) reported that one of the major consequences of youth unemployment is ethno-religious conflicts.
- 5) **Wanton destruction of lives and property:** During conflicts, which are mostly carried out by unemployed youths, valuables and human lives that are inestimable are destroyed. This was corroborated in a study carried out by Oduwole (2015), which reported that high unemployment rates among the youth population in Nigeria result in wanton destruction of lives and property, as most of them are restless and restive, such that at the slightest provocation, they engage in violent outrage.
- 6) **Mental health issues:** The effects of unemployment are proving terrible for the emotional disposition of young people and decreasing their self-esteem. They feel they are losing part of their social roles, their relationships are made dysfunctional, and eventually they lose their essence for living. There is a likelihood that an average Nigerian youth who lost his job due to COVID-19 and those that are yet to be gainfully employed may have

experienced mental health issues as well. This submission is in tandem with the earlier submission made by the United Nations (2020), which at that time projected that the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to affect people's mental health and that all hands should be on deck to provide assistance for the affected people.

Life-long Learning and Guidance and Counselling

Guidance and counselling is a lifelong learning didactic apparatus used in reshaping the orientation of individuals from destructive ideas that have hitherto been planted in individuals through peer-related influences. Hence the need for the counsellor to assist individuals in navigating the murky waters of daily life experiences through professional counselling and other psychotherapeutic approaches. Guidance and counselling is a life-long learning apparatus because its services are relevant in school, after school, on the job, out of a job, and even after retirement, as it assists people of any age to understand their world, present challenges, build the right mind-set, and get the skills that they need to make the best out of any situation they may find themselves in.

Professional counsellors in general are seen as role models and highly respected by their clients. The counsellors, by their training, are expected to be friends with their counselees and have the heart to accommodate their complaints and shortcomings and proffer guidance to them in the bid to mould them and inspire them on the right path to take in their life pursuit (Egenti, 2016). It is in comprehension of the aforementioned that all educational services that can help teaching and learning in schools should be given utmost attention by educational administrators. Counseling services are among schools' educational services. In the light of this, it is believed that guidance and counselling services in schools should develop, assess, and improve educational programmes, enhance teaching, improve the capability of the teacher, and reduce costs for the students.

Also, guidance and counselling are veritable tools that can promote life-long learning, as counselling services such as orientation and information services, among others, are services that support people to keep learning and become better equipped to overcome life challenges such as the present unemployment that is being experienced by a large population of the youths in Nigeria. Odeleye (2017) carried out a study that established the link between Guidance and Counselling and lifelong learning. He stated that people will need one form of counselling or another till death.

Guidance is appropriate for both young and old. No one is too old to be guided. Even counsellors have seasons they seek for a counsellor to counsel them as well. Thus, guidance and counselling is a serial, continuous, and developmental process, which commences from birth to death, just like the concept of life-long learning. That is, guidance and counselling commence from the nursery school through primary and secondary to the higher institutions. Therefore, it is not a once-and-for-all affair but a continuous process that is an integral part of the comprehensive educational programme throughout the school life of a person and can even sustain the person in the world of work.

There is much intersection among various definitions, but considerable agreement is evident that guidance is a process of assisting individuals to understand themselves and their world. Literarily, the concept 'guidance' derives its root from the word 'guide,' which connotes directing, watching over, know, pilot, manage, steer, aid, lead and enlighten (Oladele, 2007). The concept 'counselling' is viewed as a relationship between a professionally trained, competent person (counsellor) and an individual (client) seeking for assistance in gaining self-understanding and enhanced decision making as well as behavioural modification skills for problem solving, decision making and for general growth.

Also, it can be seen as one form of personal help carried out mainly by means of interpersonal communication where the professional counsellor assists the counsellee in achieving attitudinal and insight behaviour (Salawu, 1995). According to Denga (1986), the term counselling is a cluster of formalized services through which help is given to individuals in situations where adjustments, planning, interpretation of information, and choices are needed. These services are relevant in assisting vulnerable youths to develop skills that can empower them to create a means of livelihood for themselves.

LIFELONG learning, Guidance and Counselling and Youth Empowerment In Emergency Situations

Lifelong Learning (LLL), as a phenomenon, transcends the totality of existence of an individual and social system. As a process, it dwells more on converting experience into knowledge, attitudes, skills, emotions, values, and beliefs (Jarvis, 2002). Embedded in the concept is not only continuing education but also the underlying framework for the improvement of recipients' adaptability, acceptability, and employability (Fragoulis, 2002).

The functionality of lifelong learning in Nigeria, as an illustration, is harped on the fulcrum of learning opportunities that cut across individuals' lifespans with the active involvement of individual adults in educational-based and training-oriented activities, providing knowledge-driven alternatives for individuals at different stages of the lifecycle (Clemans et al., 2013). To the authors, the notion of lifelong learning conveys learning as a process controlled by the individual learners through their personal dedication and commitment to acquiring knowledge, which will eventually be to their own advantage.

Mckenzie (2001) considers lifelong learning as an endlessly supportive process that kindles and empowers individuals to gain all the knowledge, skills, competence, understanding, and values that they will need to survive and function maximally during their lifetime and to apply them with confidence, creativity, and gratification in all circumstances and roles wherever they find themselves. As a concept, lifelong learning embraces all tactics and programmes taking place in an individual's life to pave ways for opportunities to learn. It is simply a process of continuous education throughout individuals' lives, addressing the needs of both the individual and that of his community (Abukari, 2005).

Estonian Ministry of Education (2005) sees lifelong learning as extending from birth to death and includes any training undertaken in a lifetime. The term, according to the body, is associated with the notion that learning does not end after leaving school but continues throughout life; here the thrust of the argument is on the learning so acquired after the completion of initial education. In essence, the body sees lifelong learning as a subset of education—adult education, to be precise—that deals with the prevalence of different types of educational provisions at different levels aimed at different social segments. As a phenomenon, lifelong learning embraces school education and out-of-school education as well as comprises the attainment of socio-economic goals (Uysal, 2009).

The thrusts of lifelong learning are based on the principle that learning is no longer the prime responsibility of the government but the bulk has now been conceded to private individuals, who, as active entities, are liable for their own education. From employment perspectives, lifelong learning as an entity rests on the premise that individuals' continuous growing levels of skill development strongly impact their relevance to the world of work, their relationships to social dynamics, and a host of other things.

In the submission of the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2012), in the time of economic recession, employment is usually hard hit, and unskilled workers are worse hit compared to their skilled counterparts. In addition, changing technology and globalization often require people to acquire skills to execute and swap work roles or get adapted to changing work

within work roles as situations demand. All these require heavy input of lifelong learning, especially adequate foundational skills of language and numeracy and the flexibility to change and adapt, which is then linked to employability.

In another dimension, the knowledge-based economy, the latest technologies, the rapid changes of technological apparatus, and globalization have all required the need to improve the skills of individuals in the society (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). The idea accommodates the whole range of learning that includes formal, informal, and non-formal learning (Marjan & Peyman, 2012). It includes the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors individuals acquire in their day-to-day lives and experiences (Dunn, 2003).

Lifelong learning deals with the continuous development of recipients' skills and knowledge throughout the individuals' lifetimes. As a phenomenon, it accommodates social inclusion, active citizenship, personal development, competitiveness, and employability. Lifelong learning assists people to achieve their set goals, which may be different from their primarily set goals; this may include actively taking part in civic life, living a more supportable lifestyle, and enhancing people's health and general wellbeing.

At the societal level, lifelong learning benefits society by assisting and reducing criminal activities and encouraging community activities.

The issue of globalization and the enhanced development of the fast-changing, knowledge-driven economy also suggests or translates into the fact that people require upgrading their skills throughout their adult lives to be able to meet with the dynamism of contemporary life both at work and in private lives, given the fact that on a daily basis, there are more and more significant basic skills to be acquired in an ever-changing, technologically driven world (Marjan & Peyman, 2012). Bryce et al. (2000) view lifelong learning as an endlessly supportive process that stimulates and empowers the recipients to acquire all the needed knowledge, skills, values, and understanding they will make use of throughout their entire lifespan and to make use of them with confidence, creativity, and pleasure in all positions and situations and wherever they find themselves. In essence, lifelong learning is a process aimed at providing for the needs of the recipients.

Counselling Services And The Empowerment Of Nigerian Youths

It is assumed that youths make up a significant percentage of Nigeria's population, and some of them are deemed to be vulnerable due to the high level of unemployment, poverty, and economic hardship in the land. Other challenges that hinder the smooth transition of youths to adulthood in Nigeria are unemployment, poverty, lack of quality education, inadequate recreational facilities, and poor humanitarian and social welfare services. All these call for the intervention of professional guidance and counselling services in the quest of equipping the youths with the requisite economic skills that can enable them to become self-reliant. The following guidance and counselling services are worth mentioning:

Educational services: In guidance and counselling, all issues associated with education as they relate to the physical environment of the school, the organizational make-up of the school, happenings within the school, students' enrolment, students' development, and compliance within the school are all taken into consideration (Egbule, 2006). Educational services are all guidance and counselling services that are rendered in relation to the educational growth of the clients. Through this platform, youths can be exposed by the professional counsellors to skills that are bound to be relevant in the post COVID-19 era.

Appraisal services: This involves a methodical way of collecting, processing, storing, and using information that is useful in helping individuals to understand themselves as well as the mental health challenges that may have ensued during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (Odeleye,

2017). Furthermore, through appraisal services, psychological tests can be administered to youths that are out of jobs as a result of the pandemic or that are unemployed to know their training needs so as to know the kind of entrepreneurial and empowerment training that is relevant to their personality.

Vocational services: These are guidance and counselling services that are offered to support counselees to choose careers and prepare them for such careers in order for them to make meaningful progress in their chosen careers. They also involve services provided by the counsellor to assist counselees to begin early enough to plan for proper vocation in line with their passion, strength, capacity, and duration of training, sponsors, family, and societal needs (Egbule, 2006).

Personal-social guidance: Personal-social guidance counselling services assist people, such as young adults, to take care of their socio-personal challenges that have to do with their personality maladjustments (Ugwuebulem & Igbokwe, 1996) that may have been triggered by challenges posed by COVID-19.

Recommendations

Based on the apparent benefits of guidance counselling as a tool for enabling individuals' interpersonal, study, career, and problem-solving skills and modifying individuals' behaviour, it is recommended that:

- In tackling the unemployment challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, lifelong learning programmes with counselling services can be deployed to equip, reskill, or retool, as well as emotionally empower the youths. Furthermore, counselling services give room for a lifelong learning process; therefore, youths that have been laid off and/or unemployed can be empowered with the requisite productive skills needed to create their own businesses and bounce back from the setback caused by COVID-19 as regards their job status.
- In collaboration with other professionals in the field of mental health, such as psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, nurses, medical doctors, and other relevant professionals, Guidance Counsellors should regularly deploy their expertise in assisting youths who may have developed mental health issues as a result of unemployment.
- Communities should endeavour to set up community-based professional counseling units that should be well equipped, staffed, funded, and functional in order for it to yield positive results.
- Lastly, a policy should be put in place that makes guidance and counselling available to all youths. This will enable them to benefit from guidance and counselling services, as it has been made evident that this has a positive influence on the development of vocational, interpersonal, educational, and problem-solving skills of individuals.

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