



Retooling Nigeria's youth service corps to drive national transformation

By: 'Fisayo Alo*

Policy Recommendation

- *Without diluting the focus on national integration, new directions should be sought for the NYSC to prepare corps members for entrepreneurship and future leadership. Better alignment of skills and learning under the scheme to national priorities is germane.*
- *NYSC should work more deliberately to encourage entrepreneurship and job creation through the scheme. Entrepreneurial training should be mainstreamed into all NYSC activities in partnership with the private sector and relevant state agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), the National Planning Commission (NPC), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Nigeria Tourism Development Cooperation (NTDC).*
- *In collaboration with the NYSC, host organisations, agencies and communities should also be compelled to develop work plans which clearly spell out the goals for corps members to ensure that learning potentials are maximized.*
- *Government, private institutions and other relevant stakeholders must closely engage to define optimal criteria and strategies for deployment of corps members into various sectors of national life. A key priority should be the insulation of deployment from rigging and influence.*

Introduction

Nigeria is among the one hundred and six or so countries with no enforced conscription into its military. However, it has a mandatory civilian service for its fresh graduates who are less than 30 years of age as at the time of graduation and have not served or are actively serving in any state run security organisation. Several countries have the variants of the mandatory national service, with the objectives depending on the national context and needs. Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana are prominent African

countries with established national youth service schemes. Several other western nations also have the compulsory civilian service.

Typically, the mandatory civilian schemes focus on improving internal security, nation-building and disaster response as in the case of Kenya. Newly qualified graduates in Ghana and Nigeria are given the opportunity to have practical exposure on the job, both in the public and private sectors, as part of their civic responsibility to the state. This provides host organisations the opportunity to satisfy their manpower needs. Likewise, it affords communities that would otherwise have difficulty in accessing mainstream development initiatives a chance to access improved social services through youth service to the community.

The Nigeria experience

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) was established in Nigeria as a child of necessity after the Nigerian civil war. The purpose is to inculcate in Nigerian youths the spirit of selfless service to community, and to emphasize the oneness and brotherhood of all Nigerians, irrespective of cultural or social background.

Following Nigeria's civil war (1967-1970), the country faced numerous problems including poverty, mass-illiteracy, inadequate socio-economic infrastructures, bad roads, poor healthcare services and an ineffective communication system. With a view to mitigate these challenges, particularly to foster national unity and integration and build a strong, self-reliant nation with a dynamic economy, the military government of Gen. Yakubu Gowon established the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) by the Decree No. 24 of 22nd May 1973.

The NYSC mission was mandated to produce future leaders with positive national ethos - leadership that is vibrant, proud and committed to the unity and balanced



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development of the Nigerian state. In 1993, the NYSC Decree No. 51 of 16th June set fifteen specific objectives for the scheme, summed up as the drive for national unity, even development and integration. With this commendable vision, the scheme has helped in shaping the nation and building more responsible and responsive citizens.

It was estimated that from its humble beginning of about 2,000 corps members in 1973, it grew to an annual figure of 85,000 corps members in 1999. In 2016, it accommodated 260,000 corps members owing to the economic recession. In 2017, it mobilised 297,293 corps members nationwide paying out N67.3 billion in allowances. This was apart from the N2.5 billion spent on providing kits for the 297,293 corps members and N3.3 billion spent on meals for the 21 days orientation camp for the corps members and about 74,000 camp officials.

Reflecting the importance attached to this scheme, the NYSC act stipulates that a Nigerian graduate who is not officially exempted from being part of the scheme, and does not undertake the mandatory service, is not employable and cannot seek political office in the country. Recently, Nigeria's former minister of finance had to resign from her position because of her alleged forgery of the NYSC exemption certificate.

Interestingly, the episode made clear that many citizens are not sufficiently informed about the NYSC scheme, including that citizens graduating before reaching 35 years of age cannot be exempted. This is regardless of where they might have undertaken their studies. It further underscores the need for the scheme to do more in ensuring that relevant information about its activities and stipulations are properly disseminated to the public.

Current situation and downsides

According to news report in 2018, the NYSC increased the number of corps members mobilized by 53,000 graduates. This brought the total number for the 2018 cycle to about 350,000. About N83.2 billion was earmarked as allowances for corps members. Each corps member received the sum of N3,200 during the three-week orientation camp and N19,800 in monthly allowance for the service year. About N11.7 billion will be spent on kits, transport allowances and feeding for the corps members.

With the amount of resources invested in the NYSC, it is important that it delivers maximum benefits to the country. However, the NYSC like many public institutions in Nigeria has not been insulated from the ills of society. It has degenerated in terms of management, though its core values of community service, friendship, cultural and language absorption, and national unity remains. Some even argue that the scheme is a conduit for massive corruption, while others see it as government providing cheap labour for the economy.

The issues undermining the 45 years old NYSC scheme almost eclipse its achievements. Viewed through this prism, it seems in its present form to have outlived its relevance. The scheme grapples with the untoward rigging of posting for primary assignment. Many participants induce NYSC officials with money to secure posting to major cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt and Abuja. This to a large extent erodes one of the major objective of the scheme, which is to allow corps members to have experience of Nigerian languages and cultures outside their own areas of origin. This is partly a fallout of the poor remuneration provided to corps members and the consequent desperation for "juicy" postings.

There is also the growing concern over the security of corps members especially in volatile regions. Some youth involved in the program



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have been caught up in religious, ethnic or political violence in the regions where they were sent. Lastly, there is widespread lack of transparency, which deprives the public of the necessary awareness of NYSC activities.

Retooling for purpose

Whilst perhaps extreme to call for the scrapping of the NYSC scheme, a thorough reassessment has become necessary with a view to reposition and make it more relevant to Nigeria's prevailing circumstances. Perhaps too much emphasis is being placed on national integration, an objective that has seen limited success. The new direction is to prepare corps members for future leadership and align their orientation and skills to national priorities. In other countries with similar schemes, there is strong collaboration with the host organisations and benefitting communities which Nigeria should emulate.

There should be comprehensive engagement to ensure that the organisations and communities, especially those in rural areas, derive maximum benefits from the expertise of young professionals who are deployed annually by the scheme.

In the face of prevailing challenges including the insecurity of life, properties and food shortage in parts of the country, perhaps it might even be optimal to have a two-year national service. One of those years could be devoted to para-military training. This would ensure that the nation has a pool of trained reservists to supplement existing capacities for emergency response. The military would have to be reorganized to oversee this.

The second year would focus on mainstreaming the corps members into specialized skills in science, technology, education, health, communications and leadership etc. During this period some could be matched to job vacancies

whilst others could be encouraged to start-up businesses as individuals or in groups.

The scheme should be restructured to offer a seamless transition from the world of organized learning to the world of work. It should become the major conveyor belt through which all educated young Nigerians are given the opportunity to first encounter and appreciate formal work while offering them an opportunity for national service. It should offer scheme participants clearer guidance to enable them reflect intelligently on their career options.

To this end, the scheme needs urgently to augment its talent pool by bringing in more youth, including young artisans who have acquired vocational skills in the technical, agriculture, fashion, hospitality and entertainment fields. This will help mobilize a greater pool of skills that can be effectively deployed across the country for balanced development.

Conclusion

In reflection of national challenges, the NYSC should move closer to a problem-solving orientation by mobilising the youth to tackle practical challenges head-on. These include the need to reduce youth unemployment and expand the functional public infrastructure stock. The NYSC can do this by engaging relevant organs of state, private institutions and civil society in devising joint strategies to optimise the NYSC scheme and enhance its contribution to national development beyond its present focal sectors.

This will aid better cross-sectorial synergy for development and job creation to benefit the youths. State agencies that can support in this joint revamping of the NYSC scheme include the National Orientation Agency (NOA), the National Planning Commission (NPC), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Nigeria Tourism Development Cooperation (NTDC).



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The governing board of the NYSC may also need to be altered to reflect a more entrepreneurial emphasis.

Furthermore, emphasising leadership and entrepreneurial skills through the scheme will directly contribute to the upscaling of existing capacities for grassroots development. NYSC members can and should become more directly involved in the maintenance and construction of public infrastructure especially in the rural areas.

When incentives are provided for corps members to enter into new entrepreneurial fields such as solar power installations and maintenance, this will significantly expand access to power and help kick-start processing and value-addition in the grassroots economy. More joined-up thinking among stakeholders will also help to ensure smoother deployment of NYSC personnel into the vital sectors such as agriculture, food security, health, education, physical planning, civil engineering, water, sanitation and other areas relevant for Nigeria's socio-economic transformation.

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