

AN INTERVENTIONAL STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS OF THE YOUTH IN NIGERIA; LESSONS LEARNT

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Abstract

The youth constitute a critical age group especially in a populous nation like Nigeria. Therefore, a lot more needs to be done to address the needs (social development and reproductive health) of the youth. The Nigerian Academy of Science set up a project to address the needs of youth by working with the youth and various stakeholders, including two state governments, to identify and develop evidence-based policy to respond to the needs. The needs assessment involved data collection from the youth and other stakeholders and the collective review of the findings. Consequently, strategic plans were developed for each state. Diverse strategies were employed which promoted partnership among the stakeholders and led to ownership of the policy documents (strategic plans) developed.

Keywords: Youth, policy, evidence-based policymaking, intervention, strategy, Nigeria.

Introduction

The youth are a much talked about group though the definition of youth is often varied depending on diverse factors including social, economic, and cultural factors, among others. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, youth being a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood, explains the fluidity of that category compared to other age-groups (UNDESA, 2014). United Nations entities and regional organizations have somewhat different definitions but all put youth as those somewhere between the ages of 15 and 35 years. The World Health Organization defines youth as being between 10 and 24 years (UNDESA, 2014).

Globally, young people (aged 10 to 24 years) are about 1.8 billion, and more than 90% of them live in less developed countries (UNFPA, 2014). Africa is the most youthful continent with more than a third of the population being between 10 and 24 years while Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa (UNFPA and PRB, 2012; NPC and ICF, 2013). In Nigeria, the youth are estimated to be 80 million, representing 60% of the population. (Okafor EE, 2014).

Youth comprises a critical period of vulnerability due to the physiological and sociological changes taking place. Not only so, but the youth form a critical mass in the population structure of the society. They form a significant part of the workforce required for national development apart from constituting a significant fraction of the general population itself. It is now thought that sustainable national socio-economic development is only achievable with youth development (UNFPA, 2014).

However, the youth today are in a world that is far more complex than what it used to be and, consequently, are challenged in ways only imagined decades ago (Fatusi and Hindin, 2010). Globalization, technological advancements, political changes, migration, and economic challenges all pose serious challenges to the development of the youth, especially in developing countries. To measure up and be able to meet the productivity demands of the current age will take deliberate and concerted effort by the youth themselves and their governments.

The issues affecting the youth in Nigeria, and indeed globally, are many and relate to all aspects of life, be it developmental, economic, sociological, etc. They also include reproductive health challenges such as early sexual initiation, early marriage and unsafe sexual practices, among others, with the consequences of increasing rate of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and AIDS (Denno, Hoopes, and Chandra-Mouli, 2015; Bernat and Resnick, 2006). When the social development needs of the youth are not met, it is revealed in unemployment, restiveness, high crime rate, low literacy, lack of access to health care and non-involvement in decision making on national issues.

To respond to the challenges of young people's health and development, the governments in Nigeria (at federal and state levels) have drafted various policies and also set up ministries of youth to serve as focal ministries to adequately address the challenges facing the youth. The Child Rights Act has also been passed in at least 23 states of the federation. Despite these laudable acts, there seems to be a lack of a systematic and collaborative approach to dealing with the issues of the youth.

It has been suggested that, in order to effectively address the problems of the youth, strategies that promote collaboration among various partners should be utilized (Barton, Watkins, and Jarjoura, 1997). All stakeholders have to partner to develop the necessary policies as well implement them.

However, making effective policies in Nigeria is problematic for many reasons. There is a critical gap of translating research evidence into appropriate policies. Oftentimes, policies have been enacted without an adequate evidence-base leading to ineffective policies that fail to be implemented and, indeed, cannot be implemented. Policymakers have to develop a culture of evidence-based policymaking. Also, policies are developed without input from critical stakeholders. Many previous efforts at effective policymaking in Nigeria have focused more on developing the capacity of the policymakers to appreciate evidence and the use of same for policymaking and not particularly on strategies that promote collaboration among key stakeholders towards the development of policies (Uneke, Ezeoka, and Ndukwe, 2011; Uneke, Aulakh, Ndukwe, and Onwe, 2012).

The Nigerian Academy of Science (NAS) had also explored ways of influencing evidence-based health policies by enhancing the capacity of policymakers to use evidence (Hawkes et al. 2015). For the current effort at addressing youth development, the evidence to policy gap is bridged by working with the youth and key stakeholders in two states in Nigeria to develop strategic plans of action. The aim of the project was to help two state governments come to a realization of the challenges facing the youth in their localities, think through what needs to be done, and work with the stakeholders in their states to address the social wellbeing and reproductive health of the youth.

This paper summarises the strategy used for the development of appropriate policies (strategic plans) to address the social reproductive health of the youth in two Nigerian states with a focus to highlight lessons learnt.

Goal and Objectives of Project

The goal of the intervention project was to mainstream the promotion of life skills, livelihood, and social development of youth into the broader development agenda at all levels in Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the project were as follows:

- 1) To build partnerships and collaboration for understanding the social development and reproductive health needs of youth aged 10-24 years in Nassarawa and Ekiti States of Nigeria;
- 2) To develop a strategic plan of action for improving the social development and reproductive health of the youth in partnership with policymakers and official gatekeepers in the two states using the results of the needs assessment; and
- 3) To mobilize top level political leadership and relevant multi-stakeholders in both states to accept the plan and to commit resources to implementing it and sustaining it over time.

Strategies for implementing the project

Intervention Sites

The states were purposively selected based on their reputation for purpose-driven governance as well as the relative ease of access to their governments at the highest level, given the clout of the members of the Nigerian Academy of Science within the states.

Ekiti State is located in the south-western geo-political zone of Nigeria. The 2006 national census (the last one conducted till date) put the population of the state at 2,384,212. On the other hand, Nasarawa State is located in the north-central geo-political zone of Nigeria. The state is bordered on the west by the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. According to the 2006 population figures, the population of the state is 1,863,275.

The project was carried out in two main phases in both states. The first phase was a needs assessment study with the objective of determining the needs of the youth in the states, present the report to the relevant stakeholders, and obtain their commitment to address the needs by committing to a process of drafting appropriate strategic plans.

The second phase was the inclusive development of state-specific strategic plans that address the needs identified (in phase one above) and adoption of the same by the states. It was important that the strategy used to develop the strategic plans encouraged collaborative partnership among the stakeholders to achieve ownership of the plans developed.

Conducting a Needs Assessment Study

There were advocacy visits to the executive council and legislature of each state at the start of the project. The visits were led by the President of the Nigerian Academy of Science to secure the consent of the highest political leaders in the states. Then, field study teams were competitively selected to conduct needs assessment studies using various data collection tools including questionnaires, observational checklists, as well as focus group discussion

and interview guidelines. The studies were conducted between October and December 2013.

Subsequently, a meeting of key stakeholders (including the youth) was held where the findings of the needs assessment study were presented and discussed before the report of the study was finalised for publishing.

Ethical approval for the needs assessment study was received from the Nasarawa State Ministry of Health. With the approval of the Ekiti State government, ethical clearance for the study was received from the Oyo State Ministry of Health Ethics Review Committee (as Ekiti State had no approved Ethics Review Committee at the time).

Development of Strategic Plans

At the meetings to discuss the findings of the needs assessment studies, the stakeholders constituted two multi-stakeholder committees towards the drafting of strategic plans for their states. The Political Committee, consisting of high level political office holders, was for advocacy and helped to facilitate interactions with stakeholders (especially government) within the state. The second was the Technical Committee with the responsibility of drafting the strategic plan.

Specifically, in Nasarawa State, the Political Committee consisted of the Commissioners of Finance, Health, Youth and Sports, Women Affairs and Social Development, and Education, Science and Technology, as well as the Chairman of the Committee on Youth and Sports at the Legislature. The Technical Committee had 20 members drawn from the government ministries, schools, and youth related non-governmental organisations.

The Political Committee in Ekiti State had 14 members including Commissioners and Permanent Secretaries of related ministries as well as a Special Adviser to the Governor and two senior legislators (the Majority Leader and the Chair of the Health Committee). The Technical Committee had 25 members with a similar composition as in Nasarawa, but with representatives from the job creation agency and skills acquisition centres in the state.

In all, there were two strategic planning sessions held in each state in June and July 2014. The sessions in Ekiti were hosted by the Ministry of Health while the Ministry of Finance hosted the meetings in Nasarawa.

Ownership and Adoption of Strategic Plans

The process of building ownership and adoption of the strategic plans in the states started with the advocacy visits by the Academy at the commencement of the project. Further advocacy visits were made by the field study teams and the staff of the Academy at intermittent periods throughout the project.

The youth and other stakeholders were involved in the project from its beginning, having completed questionnaires and participated in interviews and focus group discussions. Additionally, meetings were held with the stakeholders within each state following the collection and analysis of needs assessment data in the state. The drafting of the strategic plans involved representatives of the various stakeholders.

Outcome of intervention project

The project set out to build partnerships and collaboration for understanding the social development and health needs of the youth, and develop a strategic plan that would be owned and accepted by the stakeholders in the state. The strategy employed to achieve this is described below.

Partnership for Understanding the Needs of the Youth

The needs assessment reports of the studies conducted were well received and adopted by the states. Following the advocacy visit by the Academy leadership to the executive councils and legislature of each state, the field study teams paid additional advocacy visits to stakeholders (having received official letters of introduction from the Academy) before commencing the needs assessment studies. Intermittently, during the program, staff of the Academy liaised with government officials and other stakeholders (through site visits, telephone, and email communication) to ensure their continued support and involvement in the process.

The selection of study teams had to be carefully done. It was important to select teams with the capacity as well as local knowledge (especially given that the needs assessment study would request sensitive information on reproductive health) to conduct the studies. It was important that the teams inspired collaboration among the different stakeholders. Teams were recruited only following interviews by the Academy's project team.

Data collection tools were developed collectively among the study teams to enable comparison of the findings in the two states as may be necessary. Two joint meetings were held to develop and harmonise the tools. The tools were then tested on the field and adapted, to ensure appropriateness for the stakeholders, before being deployed for the needs assessment studies.

In order to ensure the participation of the youth, needs assessment studies were planned with consideration for the school calendar. Given the challenge of program timeline (as agreed with the funder), data collection was timed to coincide with the end of examinations but before school closure for holidays. In all, 633 in-school and out-of-school youth participated.

To promote partnership, among the various stakeholders, for understanding the social development and reproductive health needs of the youth in each state, the stakeholders participated in the needs assessment study. Also, closed door meetings were held with the youth and other stakeholders present to discuss the findings of the studies and to agree on plans of action for developing strategic plans that address the needs identified.

The project held at a time of political instability and violence in both states. There were governorship elections held in both states during the period of the program in the states, and such is often marked by instability and even violence in the country. Teams travelling in and out of the states had to be aware of the security implications at each period and conducted their visits accordingly. In addition, the needs assessment findings had to be presented during closed-door meetings (with the exclusion of media representatives) to avoid the studies being used as instruments during the political campaigns.

Having presented the needs assessment reports to the stakeholders, it was necessary to ensure that the strategic plans to be developed would be accepted by the top level political leadership and other stakeholders. This was achieved by ensuring that the stakeholders present during the presentation of the findings of the needs assessment study immediately

constituted two committees (in each state) towards the development of the strategic plans. Both committees were chaired by senior government officials.

The first committee (the Political Committee) constituted towards the development of the strategic plans was for advocacy and, consequently, had senior policymakers as members. The committee facilitated interactions with government at any level required and ensured the hosting of the strategic planning meetings at venues provided by government ministries.

The second committee (the Technical Committee) consisted of the youth, senior and middle level government officials, and other stakeholders. The committee held two strategic planning sessions (in each state) to analyse, discuss, and agree on the contents of the plan. The meetings were facilitated by the academy's study teams, which also wrote the draft plans. The draft strategic plans were subsequently shared with various stakeholders and senior government officials for their input before being finalised for publishing.

Political Acceptance and Ownership of Strategic Plans

The strategic plans, having been developed inclusively by relevant stakeholders in the state, were launched by the governors of the states at events that were well publicised. Attendance at these events were by all relevant stakeholders including the youth, civil society groups, government officials, and the media. Policy statements indicating their adoption of the reports and support for implementation were made by the governors and other policymakers at the events. Other stakeholders also expressed their support for the implementation of the plans.

Forewords to the strategic plan reports were written by the most senior government officials of some of the ministries (ministries of youth, education, women affairs, science and technology, and health) involved in both states. Having obtained the necessary permission, the plans were also branded with the insignias of the respective state governments. These were important to demonstrate ownership and adoption of the plans by the governments.

The change in political leadership in Ekiti State, following governorship elections held, and just before the state's strategic plan was to be publicly presented necessitated a delay in the event. An advocacy visits by the Academy leadership had to be made to the Governor (and the team was received by the Deputy Governor) to intimate him about the project and the need to ensure continuity. The strategic plan developed was presented and the governor's review requested. With the consent of the new government in Ekiti, a date was agreed when the public presentation of the plan was done.

Facilitating the commitment of state resources to the implementation of the strategic plans was the reason for the inclusion of representatives of the ministries of finance and the legislature in the program from the beginning. In fact, the chairman of the Political Committee in Nasarawa was the Commissioner of Finance and the strategic planning sessions in the state were held in the conference room of that ministry.

Media Presentation of Strategic Plans

The academy organised a presentation of the strategic plans to representatives of various media agencies (covering television, radio, and newspaper organizations) to ensure wide publicity and indirectly stimulate political will and commitment. Various media representatives were invited to the event where a brief presentation of the process of development and the key contents of the plans were made. This was followed by a robust discussion session which allowed the media representatives to clarify issues. Copies of the plans were then given to them. The involvement of the media was also to ensure that the strategic plans were well publicised and many more stakeholders would be aware of their existence. Ultimately, this would help to ensure that the governments kept youth development and the implementation of the plans on their agenda for development in their states.

Lessons Learnt

Several lessons were learnt in the course of implementing the intervention studies in the two states. Some of the key lessons are with respect to the development of program timelines, the importance of advocacy in influencing evidence-based policymaking, the need to ensure a process that engenders ownership of projects by stakeholders, and the need to work with all categories of government officials (employees/decision makers) and not elected officials (political office holders) alone in implementing such programs. Various

Flexibility in Program Design

Given the unpredictable nature of the socio-political environment, there is a need to design programs with some flexibility in-built. There were some occurrences of violence in both states during the period of the program that necessitated variations in timing of activities and visits. There were also sudden cancellation of appointments given by the state officials due to the prevailing circumstances and, sometimes, unexplained reasons. Without a degree of flexibility being built into the programmatic timeline to accommodate some of these changes, the project would have failed.

Importance of Advocacy

The project would not have been a success without the use of advocacy. It was particularly important to have paid advocacy visits to the top level government officials. Visits made to the governors and their respective executive councils at the inception of the project facilitated access to the government ministries and schools in implementing the project. Necessary access to records was made easy by the prior advocacy visits. The project was at risk of being abandoned in Ekiti following the change of governors in the state. Delaying the publishing of the report till after an advocacy visit was made to the new government helped to keep the project on track by securing the buy-in of the new government.

Involvement of Career Civil Servants and not just Political Office Holders

The involvement of the career civil servants and not just elected policymakers aided continuity of the project in Ekiti. Oftentimes, emphasis is put on the need to engage the highest level of policymakers in influencing policymaking for the youth, especially as they are often much older and belong to another generation. These high level policymakers are usually elected into office and so may leave before the desired policies can be enacted or

implemented. As it occurred in Ekiti State, the senior career government officials at the ministries, helped to ensure continuity of the program having been involved from the beginning. These officials were able to brief the new government of the existing program and advise on the need for continuity.

Importance of Ownership

Policies are written up many times that are never accepted by the relevant stakeholders. Uzo. To ensure that these strategic plans to address the social development and reproductive health needs of the youth were well accepted by all stakeholders in both states steps to engender ownership had to be implemented at various stages of the development of the plans.

Various stakeholders participated in the data collection, completing questionnaires, or being interviewed or participated in focus group discussions. Also, all the stakeholders attended the meeting to discuss the findings of the needs assessment study. All were also represented in the committees that developed the strategic plans. Obasanjo and Oduwole (ND), in analysing how HIV/AIDS programs and policies is influenced in Nigeria pointed out the important role of a participatory approach and even involving the stakeholders in research.

The advocacy visits to the top level political leadership, involvement of government and other stakeholders in the development of the plans, and the public presentation of the plans by these political leaders eased acceptance by all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The project set out to promote collaboration among stakeholders to address the social and development needs of the youth. The participatory approach employed in the conduct of a needs assessment and strategic plan development in Nasarawa and Ekiti States resulted in the launching of policy documents that were acceptable to the youth and the other stakeholders in the states.

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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