

THE ROLE OF NYSC SKILLS ACQUISITION PROGRAMME IN REDUCING UNEMPLOYMENT AND BOOSTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment has been a social problem for a long period. It has been blamed for the scourge in the worsening security situation in the country including kidnapping, cybercrime, terrorism, armed robbery and other vices such as prostitution, human trafficking and drug addiction. For this, successive governments have attempted to address the menace of unemployment through the introduction of programmes aimed at providing employment through entrepreneurship. This paper therefore examines the role of the Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) which is a programme under the National Youth Service Corps. The paper adopted content analysis in examining how the SAED programme has helped in providing fresh graduates with entrepreneurial skills. Findings of the research revealed that lack of entrepreneurship skills among graduates especially the youth is responsible for the high rate of poverty and unemployment in Nigeria. It was discovered that the post-camp training of the SAED programme has contributed about 35% business employment for the participants. The paper recommends among others that conscious attention should be given to the post-camp training phase of the SAED scheme and that the NYSC management should collaborate with financial institutions to help in providing grants to the successful and certified participants of the post-camp training.

Keywords: unemployment, entrepreneurship, skills, programme, youth

INTRODUCTION

Unemployment has emerged as one of the most devastating challenges confronting Nigeria's developmental efforts. Each year, thousands of young graduates are produced from tertiary institutions, yet job opportunities remain scarce. Even after completing the compulsory one-year National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme, many of these graduates remain uncertain about their next steps, despite investing substantial time and financial resources in obtaining degrees or HND certificates. The government alone cannot be held entirely responsible for this situation, as a significant number of graduates lack employability skills or the competencies required for self-employment. In addition to this, there are also thousands of youths who were never privileged to acquire formal education or obtain any certificate. Faced with such a bleak reality, some young Nigerians resort to unethical and criminal means of livelihood, including cybercrime ("yahoo-yahoo"), kidnapping, banditry, oil theft, and political thuggery.

Unemployment has long been a serious social problem and a major obstacle to Nigeria's socio-economic development. Evidence from the National Bureau of Statistics indicates a persistent rise in unemployment over the years. Between 2008 and 2014, Nigeria's

unemployment rate remained relatively low and stable, fluctuating between approximately 3.7% and 3.9%. This period coincided with moderate economic growth driven largely by oil revenues and services-sector expansion. From 2015 onward, Nigeria experienced a gradual but sustained increase in unemployment. The rate rose from about 4.1% in 2015 to a peak of approximately 5.7% in 2020, before marginally declining in 2021.

This upward trend coincided with several adverse macroeconomic shocks, including the 2016 economic recession triggered by oil price collapse, fiscal constraints and exchange rate instability and the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic disruptions. From 2022 onwards, official unemployment figures show a sharp decline, falling to approximately 3.8% in 2022, 3.1% in 2023, and around 3.0% in 2024. (NBS, 2024)

It should however be noted that this decline is primarily due to methodological changes rather than a dramatic improvement in labour market conditions. Nigeria adopted revised labour force survey standards aligned with updated International Labour Organization (ILO) guidelines. Recognizing the dangers posed by rising unemployment, successive Nigerian governments have introduced several programmes aimed at reducing joblessness, poverty, and youth restiveness. Some of these policies and programmes

that have been adopted by successive government include among others the Agricultural Development Projects (ADP) of 1975 and Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) of 1978 both introduced by the Obasanjo military regime. In 1980, the Shagari regime continued in this line by introducing the Green Revolution. The National Directorate of Employment (NDE) of 1986 was set up to reduce the level of massive unemployment, especially among the productive youths in Nigeria. This Directorate was geared towards strengthening self-employment, skill acquisition and labour-intensive potentials (Nnamdi, Aminu and Emeka, 2013). The People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN) was also set up with a goal of encouraging the act of savings and provision of credit facilities for the rural downtrodden with little or no access to conventional banks. (Lamidi and Igbokwe, 2021)

In the democratic dispensation in 2000, the Obasanjo regime created a Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP). The immediate objective of PAP was to mop up from the labour market, in the shortest time, some 200,000 unemployed persons in the face of increasingly restive youth (Oyedele, Ganiyu, Willoughby and Abdulganiyu, 2020). Other poverty eradication cum employment generation programmes that were adopted by successive administrations include National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) 2001, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) 2003 and The Subsidy Re-investment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) 2012.

Despite these efforts, unemployment rates continue to soar. One major factor behind this persistent problem is the absence of practical skills to complement the academic knowledge acquired in higher institutions (Chizoba, Chitom & Uju, 2020). Moreover, many graduates continue to depend heavily on white-collar employment and show reluctance toward entrepreneurship or skill-based self-reliance. In response to the growing call for skill acquisition, the NYSC management introduced the Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme in March 2012 as part of its orientation course content. The SAED initiative was designed to equip corps members with essential entrepreneurial skills, encouraging them to pursue self-employment and reduce the time spent searching for jobs. The training runs for eleven days during orientation camp (Uju, Solomon & Chinwe, 2021), where each corps member selects a preferred skill area to learn. After camp, participants are expected to continue post-camp training in their chosen fields, with the duration depending on the nature of the skill. The mandate of SAED includes collaborating with relevant agencies and stakeholders on skill acquisition and entrepreneurship, advocating for youth empowerment policies, mobilizing and training over 200,000 corps members annually, and

instilling the spirit of self-reliance to promote job creation. The programme also aims to produce at least 100,000 young entrepreneurs each year and establish sustainable frameworks for long-term implementation (Umar, Okafor & Nweke, 2022). Ultimately, SAED seeks to transform corps members into employers of labour. As noted by Asogwa and Dim (2016), "the programme is expected to bring about responsible creation and expansion of opportunities to a large extent for the other two economic activities, that is, employment creation and entrepreneurship."

This paper therefore aims to study the role of NYSC – SAED programme on youth unemployment and entrepreneurship development in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Unemployment: According to ILO (2013) refers to "persons of working age who, during a specified recent reference period, were without work, currently available for work and actively seeking work." Therefore, unemployment under this framework is the proportion of the labour force (employed and unemployed) that is unemployed. Unemployment therefore refers to an economic condition when an active individual seeking job is unable to be gainfully engaged economically. A condition in which those who are capable and willing to work are unable to find any job in the formal and informal sectors. The negative impacts of unemployment on the socio-economic development of a country include escalation of crime rate, migration, poverty, loss of skills usage (Nicholas, 2010).

Entrepreneurship: According to Welter (2011) entrepreneurship "is a multidimensional social process that involves the formation and transformation of human, social, and economic capital through innovative and purposeful action under conditions of uncertainty." Entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of initiating change within markets, organizations, or communities by mobilizing individuals' capabilities and resources to address unmet needs through creative solutions. (Autio, Kenney, Mustar, Siegel & Wright, 2014)

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the paper reviews past literature on the impact of SAED on unemployment. Umar, Okafor and Nweke, (2022) examined the impact of NYSC skill acquisition and entrepreneurship development programme on job creation in Abuja. The study revealed that SAED programme has both in-camp and post-camp trainings. It showed that contributed to 35% business employment for those who completed the post-camp training. The however, identified some challenges with the programme which include inadequate time, non-conducive

training venues attitude of some trainers and the orientation/mindset of some corps members. The study recommends adequate sensitization, conducive training environment, availability of skill acquisition centres, accessibility to credit facilities and monitoring of skill acquisition training programmes in the post-camp exercises.

Uju, Solomon and Chinwe (2021) studied the role of NYSC's skill acquisition in solving youth restiveness and unemployment in Nigeria. Utilizing key informant interview and focus group discussions, the data were gathered from 60 serving corps members were analysed using simple percentages and descriptive statistics. Majority of the respondents were of the view that the training received had made them independent since they were able to establish their own company after their service year. The study recommends among others that NYSC management should collaborate with financial institutions to help in giving funds and protection which will help in improving the businesses of the participants.

Chizoba, Chitom and Uju (2020) studied the effect of skill acquisition on youth employability in Nigeria. Utilizing a structured questionnaire, 100 respondents were studied and the data was presented using tables and percentages. Data were analysed using mean score rating method based on the 2.5 acceptance region format to answer the research questions, while to address the research hypothesis, the chi-square was used. The study found that much emphasis on academic excellence, lack of quality skilled trainers, acute shortage of facilities, inconsistent follow up by government and poor funding are problems facing skills acquisition employment in Nigeria.

Adofu and Ocheja (2013) examined the relationship between skill acquisition and training in alleviating poverty and unemployment in Kogi state Nigeria using descriptive statistics. To test the validity or the effect of entrepreneurship skill acquisition on poverty alleviation, chi square was employed and primary sources were used to collect data from the six local government areas that made up the four district of the state. It was found that lack of entrepreneurship skills among youth is responsible for the high rate of poverty/unemployment in Nigeria. The result also revealed that individual that benefitted from the skills acquisition programme can now afford the basic necessity of life. The study recommends that the government should begin to think of the way of developing the programme to eradicate poverty/unemployment since most people that benefitted from the programme could now afford the basic needs of life.

The Aims of the SAED of the Programme

The goals of the SAED scheme include the following:

1. Sensitizing and preparing 200,000 young graduates annually for skill acquisition.
2. Training 100,000 corps members yearly in skill acquisition and business enterprise development.
3. Promoting public-private partnerships for youth entrepreneurship and self-reliance.
4. Documenting and sharing best practices on youth empowerment.
5. Strengthening policy advocacy on youth empowerment.
6. Mobilizing corps members for participation in skill and business training programmes.
7. Developing a standard curriculum for in-camp training.
8. Partnering with organizations at the state level for specialized training.
9. Attaching corps members to various organizations for practical experience.
10. Ensuring continuous monitoring and supervision of trainees.
11. Facilitating access to funding opportunities.

Theoretical Framework: This study is anchored on Strain Theory, which provides a useful sociological explanation for youth unemployment and the role of entrepreneurship interventions in Nigeria. Strain theory posits that social problems arise when there is a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and the legitimate means available to individuals for achieving those goals (Merton, 1938). In modern societies, economic self-reliance and gainful employment are widely valued goals; however, structural limitations often restrict access to formal employment opportunities, especially for young graduates.

In the Nigerian context, graduate unemployment constitutes a significant form of structural strain. Despite years of formal education, many graduates are unable to secure paid employment due to limited job availability and labour market mismatch. According to Merton (1968), such conditions generate frustration and pressure as individuals are prevented from achieving socially approved goals through legitimate means. This strain compels individuals to seek alternative pathways of adaptation. Agnew's General Strain Theory further expands this perspective by emphasizing that unemployment and economic deprivation act as negative stimuli that generate stress and emotional responses, which in turn influence behavioural outcomes (Agnew, 1992; Agnew, 2001).

Within this theoretical lens, the National Youth Service Corps Skills Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (NYSC SAED) programme is conceptualized as an institutional mechanism designed to reduce structural strain among Nigerian graduates. The programme equips corps members with vocational and

entrepreneurial skills, thereby expanding legitimate means of achieving economic success. By promoting self-employment and small business development, SAED aligns individual aspirations with attainable opportunities, reducing dependence on scarce white-collar jobs. This intervention reflects strain theory's central assumption that increasing access to legitimate means reduces the negative consequences associated with blocked opportunities (Merton, 1938).

Furthermore, SAED can be interpreted as facilitating conformist and innovative adaptations within strain theory. Rather than resorting to deviant or illegitimate activities, corps members are encouraged to adopt socially acceptable alternatives through entrepreneurship and self-reliance as pathways to economic attainment. This aligns with Cloward and Ohlin's (1960) argument that when legitimate opportunities are expanded, individuals are more likely to pursue approved adaptations. Empirical studies on NYSC-SAED indicate that participation in the programme enhances entrepreneurial intention, improves self-employment outcomes, and contributes to job creation, thereby mitigating unemployment-related strain among youths (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2013; Ojo & Ibrahim, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk-review methodology and relied exclusively on secondary data. Relevant peer-reviewed articles, conferences papers, official NYSC and government documents, and credible online materials published between 2020 and 2025 were systematically reviewed. Sources were selected based on their relevance, currency and contribution to understanding the role of the NYSC SAED programme in youth skill acquisition and entrepreneurial development. The materials were analysed using thematic content analysis to synthesise existing evidence and identify key patterns in the literature.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the literature reviewed and the NYSC administrative documents report studied, it is evident that large numbers of corps members sensitized in-camp and registered for SAED activities annually, and partnerships that provide a small number of grants. However, multiple studies show a steep drop from in-camp participants to those who actually complete post-camp training or receive grants. For example, Umar (2022) documents that of nearly 25,000 corps members who participated in in-camp training (2017–2020), only 1,298 completed post-camp training. This suggests a decline in completing the process of skill acquisition.

Also, available evidence indicates that the NYSC–SAED scheme has made a significant impact on employment generation. Its goals include mobilizing graduates for skill

acquisition and fostering partnerships for entrepreneurship development. The programme has helped numerous graduates become self-reliant and job creators, reducing overdependence on white-collar employment.

According to Thisday (2024), with the introduction of SAED, corps members have established over 38,433 businesses, while 11,881 have received financial support from partner organizations. The scheme has also trained more than 3,306,646 corps members, with 565,489 currently engaged in various ongoing training programmes.

Multiple evaluations and program reviews show that where SAED is combined with apprenticeship placements, mentoring and access to start-up finance, business survival and growth rates are higher. Conversely, many trainees fail to sustain enterprises when training is not followed by finance or market access.

Furthermore, studies consistently show that when SAED is complemented by mentoring, apprenticeship, and access to start-up capital, participants record higher rates of business establishment and sustainability. Conversely, where these supports are lacking, many trainees struggle to convert skills into viable enterprises. Umar (2022) also noted that only about 35% of post-camp completers succeeded in establishing businesses, underscoring the need for more structured follow-up and support mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

Findings from previous studies indicate that the NYSC's Skills Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) programme is gradually contributing to a reduction in unemployment across the country. A central objective of the SAED initiative is to reshape the mindset of corps members thereby moving them away from an exclusive dependence on white-collar employment toward embracing vocational skills, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance. Achieving this transformation requires that participants be convinced from the very beginning that the programme is practical, impactful, and capable of yielding sustainable livelihood opportunities. This in turn depends on consistent, well-structured, and long-term motivation mechanisms.

However, the literature also highlights several persistent challenges undermining the effectiveness of the scheme. These include low interest and weak commitment from many corps members, poor continuity of training beyond the orientation camp, and the absence of adequate financial support or credit facilities needed to establish the skills acquired during the service year. These gaps collectively limit the programme's capacity to produce the desired entrepreneurial outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION

In view of the foregoing, this paper recommends the following:

1. Pre-service Sensitization: Prospective graduates should be thoroughly sensitized on the critical importance of entrepreneurship, innovation, and skill acquisition as viable alternatives to white-collar employment. Early awareness will help shape their expectations before joining the service year.
2. Strengthening Post-Camp Training: Deliberate efforts must be directed at reinforcing the post-camp component of the SAED programme. To achieve this, the NYSC management should collaborate closely with corps members' Places of Primary Assignment (PPAs) to adjust work schedules—particularly closing hours—to enable corps members to attend and benefit from their selected skill acquisition centres without conflicting with their primary duties.
3. Monitoring and Evaluation: A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be instituted to track participation, performance, and progress. Leveraging modern technological tools such as digital attendance systems, mobile applications, and periodic virtual assessments to monitor participants. This will significantly improve oversight and ensure higher levels of engagement.
4. Provision of Educators and Materials: The NYSC/SAED management should ensure the availability of qualified SAED instructors and provide adequate training equipment and materials. This will enhance the quality of instruction, facilitate effective knowledge transfer, and boost the confidence of corps members in the programme's long-term value.

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