



Nigeria, in its own words

July 2009



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In July 2009, Mark Weston, Co-Director of the Task Force secretariat, travelled around Nigeria to seek the opinions of the country's current and future leaders on how they think their nation should tackle its demographic challenges. Mark visited Lagos, Kano and Abuja, and in over 50 interviews he met politicians, civil society activists, writers, artists, businesspeople, teachers, academics and students. He reports on his trip here.

The study

Mark Weston conducted 56 interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes. A standard set of four questions was asked to each respondent, with additional questions tailored to the respondent's field of expertise. By consulting with a range of influential and engaged Nigerians, the aim of the study was to identify some of the country's key problems and to generate some hypotheses for moving forward. The standard questions were:

1. What do you see as the key challenges facing Nigeria today?
2. What are the specific challenges facing young people?
3. What policies are in place to meet the challenges facing young people?
4. What policies would be helpful but are not yet in place?

Interviewees were selected by the Next Generation Task Force secretariat and the British Council in Nigeria, based on the key themes identified in the literature review conducted for the project, and came from a range of backgrounds. They included state ministers, newspaper journalists, writers, playwrights, environmental lawyers and activists, human rights activists, artists, university students, primary, secondary and Islamiyya school teachers and pupils, university lecturers and managers, a think tank director, businesspeople, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, gender activists, international donors, and Nigerian education and health policy-makers. Interviewees included men and women of various ages, although most were aged between 20 and 50 years. The British Council arranged the meetings.

The report of Mark's visit follows.

The shape of things to come?

Nearly everyone I met in Nigeria is fully aware of the country's population problem. They see a mushrooming population which will nearly double again in the next forty years competing for vanishing resources – vanishing jobs, vanishing schools, vanishing public services. Opportunities have failed to keep up with population growth. Be it hospital beds, places in school, or jobs that pay a living wage, the scramble for a decent life is growing fiercer by the day, as *Guardian* journalist Paul Okunola explained:

“When I was much younger if you completed secondary school you had a very good chance of getting into university; now you have such large numbers of students with the qualifications for university but not enough places, so you must be more than good to get in, and there is huge frustration among those who don’t. And there are similar problems with jobs and housing. And there’s no back-up for those who miss out.”

Those who fail to gain a foothold risk sinking into poverty – “the average young Nigerian is out on the street hawking,” said the writer and choreographer Segun Adefila, “during the days when they should be laughing and playing.”

Some of those interviewed foresee disaster if Nigerian society fails to accommodate the burgeoning numbers of young people. Dr Murtala Mai, Country Representative of Pathfinder International, warned that “if we don’t do something about this young generation in the next decade, we’re doomed.” Others see the increasing violence in the Niger Delta as a sign of things to come, noting how kidnapping is already becoming more common in the north and east, while ritual killings appear to be on the rise in the north.

Should the country implode, it will be a disaster not just for Nigerians, but for the whole of West Africa. Many interviewees feel Nigeria should be leading its region forward, and are embarrassed that a country of 140 million people and enormous natural and human resources should look to Ghana – with a population of just 25 million – as a model for how to do things right.

It is not too late, however. The energy of the young Nigerians I met and the numerous ideas they had for setting their country on the correct path offer hope for the future. Young Nigerians have great initiative and work hard to carve out a path for themselves despite the obstacles. The challenges, as I outline in the next part of this report, are enormous, but not yet insurmountable, and in the final part of the report I lay out the ideas proposed by Nigerians for addressing the key problems of service provision, job creation, and governance.

The shortage of services

Provision of public services to Nigerians young and old has buckled under the weight of the population explosion. The country’s leaders failed to plan for this boom, and when they at last realised its scope they failed to invest sufficiently to catch up. Health care, education and infrastructure are the main areas of weakness.

The health care deficit

Young Nigerians suffer from the absence of public services from the moment they are born. According to a group of young people working on a USAID/COMPASS project on reproductive health, 65% of births take place at home. As a result, and because there is a dearth of health services for mothers and infants, infant mortality is about 99 per 1,000 live births and maternal mortality is among the highest in the world.¹

The COMPASS group noted a general lack of awareness of reproductive health among young Nigerians, which results in early marriage, unwanted pregnancies, abortions and continuing high fertility. Low contraceptive use is a further problem, contributing to a simmering HIV/AIDS epidemic, which several of those I interviewed believe will become an increasing threat to Nigerian youths in the years to come. Areas such as the far north and the Niger Delta are already grappling with high HIV infection rates, which could spread further afield if social instability takes hold in other regions.

Having survived birth, young Nigerians face an array of health threats, but services are ill equipped to protect them. Basic immunisation is far from universal, and the COMPASS group reported that vaccination rates against basic childhood diseases are lower than 20% in some northern rural areas. The paucity of other health services, including ambulances, modern medical and surgical equipment, and poorly trained or unqualified health care personnel, is a further danger to Nigerians' health, and is exacerbated by successive governments' focus on tertiary health care institutions at the expense of primary services. The vast majority of health needs are at the primary level, but that is the level that is weakest in terms of funding. "If you have good primary health care," said one of the COMPASS interviewees, "you don't need all these expensive tertiary institutions."

The weakness of public health services forces many to turn to the private sector. Even where public services are provided free, such as immunisation or antiretroviral drugs for AIDS, facilities are often so far away or queues so long that people resort to private provision – 60% of the country's health care expenditure is out of pocket. With the private sector often offering an even worse service than the public – quality control is very weak and many providers are mere "quacks" – individuals seeking care too frequently find that they have spent precious resources for nothing.

The education problem

The country's education system is in a much worse state than the health system. Every one of the 56 influential Nigerians I spoke to believes schools and universities are in a parlous state. A primary school I visited in Lagos had no functioning toilet and no drinking water for its 290 pupils. A classroom had no glass in the windows and a large puddle of rainwater lay in the middle of the floor. The British Council had donated a computer to the school, but it had never been used as there was never any electricity; it sat on a table in the corner, under a plastic sheet. At an Islamiyya school in Kano, children crammed into a tiny unventilated classroom, sitting on the hard earth floor. Another class was sitting outside, on the pavement. And when I visited Kano's Bayero University, the halls and classrooms were silent, abandoned by students and staff since lecturers had begun an indefinite strike a week earlier.

Alhaji Musa Salihu Doguwa, the Kano State Commissioner for Education, explained that three factors had put intolerable pressure on the country's schools: unforeseen population growth, a growing public demand for education, and the international drive for universal basic education which resulted in Nigeria mandating and providing free of charge nine years of basic schooling. "We as the government didn't keep up with demand," he admitted, "so conditions are no longer conducive to teaching and learning." Students educated in the

1970s, said Alhaji Garba Yusuf Abubakar, the Kano State Commissioner for the Environment, received a much better standard of education than today's children.

A chronic lack of investment during the military dictatorships of the 1990s crippled the system, and the subsequent democratic governments have not made sufficient effort to make up the lost ground. With tens of millions of additional children to educate in the next few decades, the task will become harder with each passing day. Many interview respondents were harshly critical of the system, with most placing the blame on the country's leaders who, because their own children attend private rather than public schools, pay little attention and devote far too few resources to the problem:

"There is a 100% failure in education. Leaders' own children go to private schools so they don't care about the public system. We have no seats or equipment and there's no regard for teachers." (Islamiyya school teacher, Kano)

"The public school system is in a terrible state – poor, demotivated teachers who strike every other week because the government doesn't listen to them because politicians' own kids are in private schools. You don't find many people of means sending their kids to public schools." (Paul Okunola)

"The policy makers are not educationalists and they don't know what is happening in schools. They never come here to ask what is needed." (Primary school teacher, Lagos)

"If you invest in human development, you don't see the results for a long time – and they're not as visible as buildings or roads." (Dr Naiya Sada, Security, Justice and Growth programme)

"Education is going down the drain – the quality of education in schools and universities is terrible. Facilities are poor, teacher pay is too low so there is corruption." (Oil company communications director)

"The government spends only 3% of its budget on education, so you have to send your children to private schools." (Wole Oguntokun, playwright)

Several interviewees bemoaned the lack of school places, although this is seen as a greater problem in the north of the country, where historical opposition to western education was based in the belief that it was a Christian imposition on Muslims. There is more enthusiasm today, particularly among parents, but as Dr Mustapha Hussein Ismail, Executive Director of the Centre for Human Rights in Islam, argued, "the government doesn't provide enough funding" to satisfy the demand by increasing the number of schools and training more teachers. Dr Saidu Dukawa, Director General of the Kano State Hisbah Board, reported that "schools in the north are overpopulated – there are not enough schools or teachers to fulfil the Universal Basic Education policy."

But it is the quality of education that produces the most dismay. This extends from primary through to tertiary schooling and into vocational training institutions. All these schools are producing graduates who are badly equipped for the modern world. Among the most scathing comments were the following:

“If you send your child to a public school these days he will think you hate him.”
(Activist, Abuja)

“Secondary students come out half-baked.” (Politician, Kano)

“The teachers are not just poor quality, but dangerous.” (University student, Kano)

“A lot of universities are glorified secondary schools. The products of university education cannot even put a couple of sentences together.” (NGO activist, Abuja)

“The great majority of university graduates are unemployable. Companies advertise vacancies and have thousands of applicants but very few of them can even write a reasonable memo.” (University professor, Lagos)

Facilities are deficient at all levels. The primary school children in Lagos, when I asked how their schooling could be improved, listed drinking water, a toilet, comfortable chairs, fans and general maintenance to buildings as their main concerns. “The facilities we need are only partially provided,” said their teacher. “The materials and facilities are not adequate.” In a Lagos junior secondary school, two computers served 700 children, both donated by the British Council. In Bayero University in Kano, students told me that there are not enough seats for students, some of whom therefore have to stand throughout two-hour lectures – “people get too tired and hot [there are no fans] to listen or take notes,” they said.

The number of tertiary education institutions has exploded in recent decades, but monitoring of their quality has been inadequate. As Professor Juan Elegido, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Pan-African University in Lagos, observed, “there are lots of bad universities because the emphasis is on quantity, not quality.” The same can be said of primary and secondary schools. Professor Afolabi Falola of Bayero University in Kano reported that in some parts of the northeast primary and secondary schools had ratios of 100 pupils per teacher – “teaching does not take place,” he complained.

As well as deficient facilities, the standard of teaching is poor. The profession has fallen into disrespect – teachers themselves are badly trained, some of them buy rather than earn their teaching qualifications, and many view their jobs as a “last resort.” In the primary and secondary schools I visited in Lagos, I asked children what job they wanted to do when they grew up, and three different teachers whispered to me that “none of them will say they want to be a teacher.” With two exceptions out of several dozen children, they were right. None of the four teachers I spoke to in Lagos would speak on the record, moreover, for fear that their jobs would be at risk, suggesting a troubled relationship with the government. Many other interviewees commented on teachers’ corruption and lack of motivation and qualifications, which is rooted in poor pay and insufficient training and other support such as transport and housing:

“There’s no regard for teachers.” (Islamiyya school teacher, Kano)

“Teachers’ commitment has gone. Their wages are not sustaining them and they are often paid late, so their attentions are diverted to other activities to earn money and they don’t concentrate on teaching.” (Busola Eligbede, writer)

“Teachers’ colleges are absolutely corrupt – people can buy a certificate of education without even attending class.” (Umar, university student, Kano)

“If you are a poor person and you get to school, you can’t afford to bribe the evaluators so they don’t progress you to the next level.” (Businessman, Lagos)

“Lecturers don’t earn enough so they charge bribes for passing students. It’s a dysfunctional system.” (University professor, Lagos)

“Strikes are the bane of our educational sector.” (Frank Nweke, Director General, Economic Summit Group)

Under the new national education system, students are supposed to have six years of primary schooling, three years at junior secondary school, three years at senior secondary school, followed by four years in tertiary education. This “6-3-3-4” system was designed so that during junior secondary school, pupils would be identified as having either the talent to go on to a vocational college, or to continue through senior secondary school to university or polytechnic. In this way, young people’s abilities would be maximised and all young people would be equipped for a career.

This system, however, is not working. Primary and junior schools lack the facilities that will reveal whether or not children have technical abilities, and teachers are ill equipped to identify such skills. In a secondary school I visited in Lagos, for example, computers lay unused because there were no teachers with the requisite skills to teach ICT.

Thousands of young people are therefore dropping out of the education system after primary or junior secondary school, and they are then left to fend for themselves, without any of the skills necessary for the job market. As Professor Falola said, “the kids who drop out of school aren’t learning any trades.” Frank Nweke of the Economic Summit Group agreed, saying that “not enough is spent on those who drop out of primary and secondary school – there’s no investment in vocational training.”

Those who do attend vocational schools receive training that leaves them not much better equipped than those who drop out altogether. A professor at a Lagos University told me that “both the quality and quantity of vocational training are terrible.” According to *Guardian* journalist Martin Oloja, “there used to be functioning technical schools, but now they are moribund.” The weakness of vocational training has helped turn public attitudes against blue-collar jobs, as several interviewees explained:

“The system doesn’t encourage diversity. Society looks down on vocational training, technical work isn’t respected and people prefer white-collar jobs. If vocational schools were available it would be a back-up, but they’re not promoted and not equipped.” (Chioma Eze, Programme Officer, Golden Heart Foundation)

“Not everyone is university material, you can do vocational training instead and it shouldn’t be looked down on. Technical subjects are also looked down on.” (Emem Ema, artist manager)

“Everybody wants white collar jobs but we need to get away from that. We need attitudinal change.” (Junior secondary school Principal, Lagos)

Another fallback option for children in the north of Nigeria is Islamic schooling. Tens of thousands of children attend only Islamic schools. The quality of teaching in these institutions varies widely (several interviewees said that they are rarely monitored), and some continue to teach only religious subjects such as Arabic and Koranic studies. The government is attempting to integrate western subjects into Islamic schooling, including English, mathematics, social studies and science, but these efforts have failed to penetrate many rural areas, where pupils therefore continue to emerge with few of the skills needed to survive in the modern workplace.

Underpowered

The third public service in desperate need of attention is infrastructure provision.

The most pressing infrastructure problem is the chronic weakness of the power sector. Power cuts are an almost hourly occurrence in all three of the cities I visited. As well as impeding the effective delivery of health care and education (when I asked a teacher in an Islamiyya school in Kano if they had electricity, he laughed and replied: “Sir, you are in Nigeria”), power shortages are a huge deterrent to businesses. Firms are forced to buy or hire generators to plug the gaps in electricity. Purchasing, fuelling and maintaining these generators adds enormously to the cost of doing business, and renders Nigeria uncompetitive relative to her neighbours. Industry has shrivelled – according to the writer Kaine Agary, “most industries have moved out because of the power shortages – the textiles industry has gone to Ghana, for example. You can’t be competitive without power.” Alade Adeleke, Director of Technical Programmes at the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, said the country produces less than 20% of its power needs, adding, “there’s no point processing goods because you need electricity for that and it’s not viable to run your processing machinery on generators.”

The power problem is a major barrier to providing Nigeria’s next generation with employment. Industries deserting the country means even fewer salaried jobs. As a Shell contractor in Lagos observed, “24-hour power would enable manufacturing companies to stay open all day, and instead of one shift you could have three. This would triple the number of employees in some firms.” Young people attempting to set up their own businesses are also thwarted. The cost of providing your own power via a generator is impossible to bear for most young Nigerians, so they cannot afford to set up companies. As a consequence, many resort to hawking in the street, or to crime and violence.

Since the discovery of oil, investment in other critical infrastructure has also withered. Many interviewees (and indeed their interviewer!) noted the parlous state of Nigeria’s roads, while the water supply, particularly in rural areas, does not meet the country’s needs. Agriculture has been especially hard hit by the crumbling of infrastructure. As Alade Adeleke reported, “there is a low emphasis on rural development, so people leave the country for the cities because they’re not getting returns on agriculture.” The north of the country has great potential for agriculture, but as several interviewees noted, there has been no government

interest in improving the sector. Bad roads, inadequate irrigation and a reliance on outdated technologies have pushed young people off the land. “Kids run away from their villages to the city because making a living from farming is too hard,” said a junior secondary school principal in Lagos, while university students in Kano said they themselves would work in farming in their spare time if there were modern technologies for them to use.

Growing frustration

The need for leadership

The lack of investment in health, education and infrastructure reflects the failure of successive leaders to accept and respond to Nigeria’s demographic challenges. An interviewee from an oil company echoed the feelings of many, saying “the political leadership doesn’t understand the urgency of taking action.” Segun Adefila was more critical: “We have irresponsible leadership that doesn’t believe in the future. There is no long-term project.” Pastor Zephaniah Isa, President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria Kano Chapter, argued that “the country needs an agenda for the youth,” and Alhaji Musa Salifu Doguwa said “there has to be a deliberate program to address youth issues. Existing programs are ad hoc and inconsistent.”

Many other interviewees saw politicians as selfish, corrupt and shortsighted, with the following comments typical:

“People get into government for money and influence, not for good purposes – they ask what’s in it for them and for their people.”

“We have some of the most irresponsible leaders in the world. They loot, steal, pillage – they are like marauders. Politicians are just the same group year after year, the same clique of friends pillaging year after year.”

“People enter politics for themselves or for their people – it’s not about what they can do for their country.”

“Politicians are corrupt and incompetent.”

Of the three cities I visited, frustration with the leadership was greatest in the northern city of Kano. In Lagos in the south, when asked for policy suggestions to help the country’s next generation, interviewees’ recommendations focused on what their government should do. In Kano, on the other hand, nearly everybody had ideas for what foreign donors could do, but none had anything to say about what their own government could do. Dr Mustapha Hussein Ismail encapsulated this sense of despair with the country’s leaders, saying “there is a complete lack of political will. I doubt the ruling class has the capacity to make any difference, or the will.” All the northerners I spoke to believed the government had neglected their region.

Labour market bottlenecks

The failure to invest in education and infrastructure leaves young Nigerians emerging into the labour market under-prepared for its demands, and the labour market itself is not big enough to accommodate them. Although several interviewees noted the immense energy and entrepreneurial spirit of young Nigerians, there are currently few outlets for this. As Martin Oloja said, “unemployment is acute – the young leave university or school and then have no jobs. The private sector isn’t growing and the government can’t provide jobs to everybody.” Francis Ohanyido of the COMPASS group agreed, saying “the private sector depends on the public sector – we need a private sector that generates its own ideas and innovation and is independent.”

As an illustration of this employment bottleneck, Yakubu Lawal, of the *Guardian* newspaper in Lagos, related how he placed an advertisement in the recruitment section of his newspaper for a company seeking a new business development manager. He realised when he saw the following day’s paper that he had forgotten to include the job title, so he phoned the company and offered as compensation to run the advertisement again, for free. “No, please don’t,” said the company’s fraught-sounding boss. “We’ve had 2,000 applicants for the job already in two days, even without them knowing the job title. We can’t handle any more applications!”

Corruption in the workplace makes matters worse. Recruitment, pay and promotion are widely seen as being determined more by who you know than what you know. One Shell contractor described the country as “a mediocracy, not a meritocracy,” while Charles Mba, Chairperson of the Human Rights Network, said “you get the wrong people in the wrong jobs because people help their relatives, not those who have the right skills.” Many others made similar observations:

“People do jobs they’re not qualified for. Appointments are political, not by merit, so you get the wrong people in jobs.” (Likko, university student, Lagos)

“It’s all about who you know.” (Sunday Ojeme, *The Punch*)

“If you don’t belong to the leaders’ circles it’s hard to get a job. There are no jobs for the common man.” (Islamiyya school teacher, Kano)

Although Nigerians are seen as highly enterprising, young people who cannot obtain formal jobs often lack the knowledge and resources to set up in business on their own.

Entrepreneurship skills are not taught in schools - as Dr Murtala Mai said, “the academic system is tailored to people getting jobs, not being entrepreneurial.” Professor Falola illustrated this with the example of young farmers, who could get better interest rates on bank loans by joining together as co-operatives, “but this doesn’t happen because young people are not shown the right path.”

Anger mismanagement

Left without job prospects and with limited possibilities of establishing their own firms, therefore, it is unsurprising that many young Nigerians are increasingly frustrated and

angry. “There’s nothing for young people to wake up to,” explained Paul Okunola of the *Guardian* newspaper. Professor Falola of Bayero University said, “you can see and feel the anger of youth.”

Many of those interviewed spoke about young people’s “cultural disorientation.” “You have a lot of young people who don’t know where they fit in,” said Paul Okunola. “There are frustrations on university campuses and in the Delta because people don’t have assurances about their future.” Segun Adefila observed that “the average Nigerian youth doesn’t know where he is coming from. He’s not part of himself. Youth can empower themselves if they have the right direction and know what to do, but they need role models to look up to.”

These role models are lacking. Instead of good examples, young Nigerians see many of their elders engaged in a desperate struggle for personal wealth, with no regard for the ethics of how they achieve it. This has a pernicious influence on young people’s own aspirations:

“There is a lack of values, people worship wealth without minding where it comes from.” (Dr Emanuel Okechukwu, Director, Family Foundation)

“Everyone wants quick money because you see role models who have got rich quick – you’re respected even if you’ve cheated to get there. Who do parents have as examples to show their kids?” (Funlola Aofiyebi, actress and presenter)

“When I was growing up it mattered how you made your money. Now it doesn’t. Nobody asks how you got rich.” (Kaine Agary)

“We’re brought up to think everything is corrupt so we have to fall in line. We have no idea of serving our nation, just our pockets.” (Moyin, university student, Lagos)

This materialistic ethos, combined with intense frustration with the Nigerian government, has weakened young people’s sense of society and of pride in their country. As Paul Okunola argued, “there is a disconnect between individuals and the state. Nigerians don’t have enough loyalty to the idea of Nigeria. We need a stronger sense of the collective.” Funlola Aofiyebi added, “nobody thinks of Nigeria in ten years’ time – everyone thinks of what he or she can get now.”

Those who miss out on the gravy train vent their anger with increasing violence. Professor Juan Elegido, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the Pan-African University in Lagos warned that “the violence that is happening in the Niger Delta could end up happening all over Nigeria. It’s already reached the East and there are some signs of it reaching the North and South.” Others too noted the increase in crime and street violence. Although some blame the violence outside the Delta on religion, several of those I interviewed in Kano believe the underlying cause is young people’s frustration:

“If we have a crisis or violence in Nigeria that they call religious, it’s really about poverty. Most of the rioters in northern Nigeria are uneducated. It’s the poor who are easily recruited.” (Professor Falola)

“Young people in the north are angry. The violence in the north is not because of religion but frustration and anger about poverty and corruption.” (Hamza, polytechnic student, Kano)

“The root of religious violence boils down to the selfishness of our leaders, who use religion as a tool to gain popularity and votes.” (Pastor Zephaniah Isa)

Peaceful outlets for expressing their frustration are scarce. There was a widespread feeling among those I interviewed that the older generations who rule the country do not listen to the young or respect their views. Although matters have improved slightly in the last few years, since the advent of democracy, it remains very difficult for young people to influence national, state-level or local policy-making. On World Environment Day, for example, Dr Olanrewaju Fagbohun, Executive Director of the Environmental Law Research Institute, asked the Ministry of Environment if it planned to involve young people, but the Ministry had no programme to do so. Desmond Majekodunmi from the Nigerian Conservation Foundation summarised the problem:

“There is a hierarchical political and social system that oppresses the opinion of youth. The leadership is not at all representative of the country in terms of its age. The traditional system which is still in place muzzles the youth, so it’s very difficult for the sentiments of people below the age of 40 to be heard. Youth are seen as a separate group, not an integral part of national issues or the policy process. Very few young people are involved in decision making.”

Young people themselves told me how difficult it is for them to become involved in politics, which requires huge sums of money and influential connections. According to Dr Mustapha Hussein Ismail, “political godfathers have to allow you in – if you stick your neck out and challenge them you are in trouble. People like me who want to solve society’s problems are not welcomed.” Osman, a university student in Kano, wants to go into politics, “but it’s hard because you need money. I need a good job first to be able to afford it, and if someone sponsors me instead I’ll have to reward him with contracts later.” He added that “even to work your way up through a political party you have to pay.”

A system where large sums of money are needed to advance a political career naturally excludes the young from politics. Many young people cannot afford to eat regularly, much less pay bribes to parties. Power therefore remains in the hands of older, wealthier generations. Desmond Majekodunmi acknowledged this problem, arguing that “getting elected is very expensive, so it’s especially hard for the young. We need a proper democratic system where it’s not all about money.” A consequence of this and of frustration with their leaders is that young people are becoming dangerously disconnected from politics – none of the four students I spoke to in Kano voted in the last election, believing it is a waste of time. “It’s better to sleep at home,” said one, “because nothing changes if you vote.”

Even when young people’s rights are directly violated, it is difficult for them to make themselves heard. According to Chioma Eze of the Golden Heart Foundation, “young people are not enlightened about their rights, and there is no emphasis on human rights in schools anymore. So they can’t challenge schools when their rights are violated.” Charles

Mba provided an example of such a violation, reporting that when in his university a group of students complained about the standard of teaching, the whole class was failed and had to repeat a semester. “The right to a fair hearing in schools doesn’t exist,” he said. “The authorities don’t listen or they fail you if you complain.” In another example in Kano, the state government allocated some land owned by the city’s polytechnic to property developers to build shops. When lecturers and students protested, the government closed the school down for a week and arrested the director.

Young women, too, find it difficult to voice their problems and claim their rights. According to Judith Giwa-Amu of UNICEF, there is a “culture of silence where women don’t talk about exploitation.” Uche Ekenna, Chief of Part of the USAID/COMPASS project, added, “a young girl who is raped doesn’t voice it because of stigma and because if she does she’ll get harassed in court or in hospital.” Dr Naiya Sada argued that women need better access to courts and to mediation centres to claim their rights as daughters and wives. Others believe gender equality is not high enough on the government’s priorities, citing the small proportion of female members of parliament as evidence of leaders’ disregard for women.

Stopping the rot

Notwithstanding the general frustration with the country’s leadership and with the direction the country is heading in, there was a great deal of energy for change among the young people I interviewed. Although things are bad, they feel, all is not lost and there is still time to turn Nigeria around. They suggested a number of policy areas that merit further exploration by the Next Generation Task Force.

Many felt that the main problem was not the range of policies, but their implementation. There are policies that mandate compulsory basic education for all, for example, a Child Rights Act, and a Youth Policy that has not yet been legislated on. The National Youth Service Corps, which many see as a potentially useful tool both for promoting patriotism and civic mindedness in young people and for solving some of the country’s infrastructure and service provision problems, is suffering from large backlogs and a dearth of places. “Policies we don’t lack,” said Uche Ekenna, “but they sit on the shelves.” Martin Oloja of the *Guardian* encapsulated many people’s views, saying:

“I’ve not seen any seriousness from policy-makers in tackling the youth problem. They don’t budget for it. There are lots of policies and lots of workshops and seminars, but policies are never implemented because the will is not there. People with passion to change things are not in government.”

Transforming the role and approach of government is seen as crucial. “People should understand that leadership is about service, not personal enrichment. We need a system where what you do gives you power,” said Dr Murtala Mai. “You need a sense of purpose and service among people in government,” said Paul Okunola, while Frank Nweke called for a “national vision, with leaders who can both inspire and implement the vision.”

Interviewees suggested several ways of effecting this change. Foreign donors, according to Dr Mustapha Hussein Ismail, should support and mentor young leaders, not the old guard,

while university students in Kano went further, arguing that foreign aid to federal, state and local governments should be stopped altogether. Civil society also has an important role, in pressuring the government to implement its policies in an honest and transparent way. Monitoring of policy is vital. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is a step in the right direction in this area, but it should be extended to all levels of government, and move beyond the monitoring of oil revenues. As Dr Mai commented, “we need local communities to be able to see what is happening to the money local governments receive – what is happening to this money?”

Although the media is seen as quite robust, outspoken and free, there were mixed feelings about the strength of civil society organisations. Martin Oloja described civil society as “docile – when things go wrong we leave everything to God instead of protesting. We suffer and smile.” He suggested that the strongest non-governmental organisations work in the health field, which receives large amounts of donor funding, rather than in public policy which is less fashionable with international partners. Several interviewees highlighted the need to build the capacity of young people to voice their concerns and agitate for their rights. International donors, several argued, have an important role in funding and strengthening the NGO sector.

Ideas for education

Perhaps more important than all of the above is education. Education will “lead people to make more demands of their leaders,” said Dr Habib Sadauki, Project Director for Pathfinder International. “We need to educate young leaders on how to drive change,” agreed Dr Mustapha Hussein Ismail.

Existing education policies, said Professor Juan Elegido of the Pan-African University, “are like giving aspirin to a man with cancer.” Frank Nweke is among many others who believe investment in education is far from adequate, and that government excuses that there are other priorities too are no longer valid:

“The government needs discipline to put more than 3% of the budget into education. They say there are competing demands on funds, but how long do these demands compete for? When targets in other areas are reached, the money should be diverted into the education budget.”

The policy mandating basic education has not been implemented effectively. Millions of children remain outside school, and millions of those who do attend receive only the bare bones of an education. The government has called for more private sector companies to invest in education and told schools to seek sponsorship. As one oil company communications director pointed out, however, even if private firms do invest it will never be sufficient to cover the needs of tens of millions of Nigerians.

Perhaps a more promising approach, according to a handful of interviewees, is to involve other stakeholders in improving schooling. The Kano State Education Commissioner told me that he is seeking greater community participation in education, including active parent-teacher associations (PTAs) which solve small problems without resorting to official

channels; alumni associations; and school-based management committees which can engage in helping run the school and even in academic issues.

Altering what is taught is also seen as important. The basic education curriculum has recently been updated and is now being delivered in schools, with the new senior secondary curriculum to be launched in 2011. Those interviewed were in favour of the new curriculum's inclusion of civics lessons, which they believe will help promote a national identity and inculcate a culture of service to one's community and country. The inclusion of entrepreneurship was also welcomed, and many emphasised the importance of teaching young people to think for themselves and be self-reliant, so that if they cannot find salaried jobs when they enter the labour market, they can find alternatives.

There was some scepticism, however, about whether teachers and schools will be sufficiently equipped to teach the new curriculum well. There is currently no independent monitoring agency to ensure education policies are implemented and to evaluate quality, although Dr Ismail Junaidu, Director of the Curriculum Development Centre, reported that such a body is being considered. As several interviewees argued, such a body is crucial if new education policies are not to go the way of all the other programs governments have failed to implement.

Many believe that more investment in teachers is also needed. As well as better salaries and assistance with transport and accommodation, teacher training should receive more attention. Professor Falola of Bayero University said that some teachers he knew who went on a mathematics retraining course recently returned saying they were now looking forward to going back into the classroom as the training had reinvigorated them. University lecturers would also benefit from updating their skills – as Martin Oloja commented, the current strike is not just about pay but also a demand for more exchange programs, equipment and research funding.

The neglect of vocational training, argued many interviewees, should be reversed. The sector needs much more funding. Professor Juan Elegido noted that “people shun vocational training because the standard is so bad that graduates don't earn anything. If you do it well and graduates are seen to earn a good living, Nigerians will start wanting it and respecting it.” Investment is also needed in vocational subjects in secondary school, including in training teachers to teach and identify technical abilities. Without this, as Frank Nweke observed, millions of children will drop out after junior secondary school and “be left to hawk on the street.”

Creating jobs

Ideas for job creation focused on three sectors – industry, agriculture and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Interviewees felt that diversifying the economy away from a dependence on oil is essential if the country's huge numbers of young people are to be productively employed. Kaine Agary said: “We need bigger industries or public works to absorb young people.” Kaine also pointed to the need for higher value agriculture, citing the example of palm nut fruit, which is used in the Niger Delta to make ‘banga’ soup. Although the fruit is grown in the area, nowadays it is imported from Ghana in cans and the women

of the Delta buy this instead of pounding it themselves. Nigeria, she believes, is failing to cash in on a product grown on its own doorstep, and instead Ghanaians are extracting value from the fruit. “We need agricultural extension programmes,” argued a teacher from Lagos, “to train people to cultivate with new methods and techniques.”

For each of industry, agriculture and SMEs to work well, of course, infrastructure must be robust. “Once the infrastructure is in place,” said Kaine Agary, “investors and jobs will come.” Interviewees pointed out that good roads and irrigation are required for agriculture to flourish, and that a reliable power supply is urgently needed. Pastor Zephaniah Isa was among several who believe private companies should be allowed into the electricity sector. In Jos, he said, a private power firm is very effective in supplying electricity to its part of the city, but the government does not allow it to roll out its service to other areas, which remain blighted by power failures. Some interviewees compared the struggling power sector with the telecommunications sector, which has thrived since private companies were allowed into the market. As Professor Juan Elegido noted, the latter has created huge numbers of informal jobs for young people who sell mobile top-up cards in the streets. Liberalisation of other sectors could have similar positive impacts.

The legal and tax environment is another determinant of success in agriculture and industry. An oil company representative said that people need incentives to farm, including a clear legal framework, property and ownership rights, and the right to hold on to your revenues. With industry, too, the government should provide a favourable legal and tax framework. The insecurity caused by an absence of rights in these areas, he added, is a major deterrent to entrepreneurship.

Similar measures could help small and medium enterprises. As Professor Elegido commented, as well as education and training in entrepreneurial skills, the government can help greatly by “getting out of the way” and ensuring that small firms are able to keep their profits and not have to hand them over to corrupt officials.

Microfinance schemes, so successful in helping SMEs in some other developing countries, have largely failed in Nigeria because they were taken over by major banks, which only lend large sums and expect repayments very quickly. As some pointed out, this excludes numerous small businesses from accessing loans. As Kaine Agary observed, “microfinance schemes so far have given loans to traders but with no business support like training and access to markets, so they haven’t worked and the banks then complain about the low repayment rate.” According to Emanuel Okechukwu, “microfinance has been corrupted by the banks. They took it over but are only after quick returns.” Many saw potential for microfinance in boosting the sector, but they believe NGOs should provide it rather than large banks.

Conclusion

Nigeria has been slow to appreciate the scale of the demographic challenges it faces. It has so far failed to provide a decent education to its young people and has taken too few steps to give them productive employment. With over 100 million additional young people to accommodate in the next forty years, if the country continues on its current trajectory it may

face a demographic crisis, where tens of millions of unemployed, angry youths turn to crime and violence to express their frustration. Such an eventuality would make the current problems in the Niger Delta look like a minor squabble.

The Delta offers a microcosm of the challenges facing the whole country. As Segun Adefila noted, “combating crime in the Niger Delta isn’t just a matter of getting more guns for the police. You need to give young people alternatives.” Short-term measures like strengthening security forces are merely a stopgap measure – they will only paper over the cracks until young people’s frustration eventually bursts through.

Many of those interviewed believe that what is needed instead is a long-term project, a compact between Nigeria’s leaders and its young people, an agenda for youth. The country’s leaders are seen as too distant from young people, and the latter’s opportunities to shape their country too limited. A serious agenda for youth would involve the next generation in reforming education and health care, strengthening infrastructure, democratising and diversifying the labour market, and opening up the political process to new voices. Significant investment, sustained over the long-term, is seen as a prerequisite to such a program. As several interviewees pointed out, investing just 0.9% of per capita gross national income in education is an indicator that the government is not serious about rescuing the sector.

Nigeria’s government has already developed a raft of policies that might help young people. But these policies are often not implemented. The new basic education curriculum, for example, which includes needed civics and entrepreneurship lessons as well as vocational subjects, looks promising on paper, but has not yet been backed up by investment in teacher training and equipment, and its implementation is not monitored. Those young people I interviewed in Nigeria were generally pessimistic about their country’s future, but they at least had a strong idea of what is going wrong and what remedies are needed. It is not yet too late for Nigeria to make the best of its next generation, they believe, but if the current stasis continues, it soon will be.

ⁱ See Next Generation Literature Review for detailed figures.