Visual arts: A strategic tool for youth unemployment reduction and economic development

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is endowed with multifarious and multitudinous resources both human and material. However, due to gross mismanagement, profligate spending and adverse policies of various past and present governments, these resources have not been optimally utilized; these resources have not been adequately channeled to profitable investments to bring about maximum economic benefits. As a result of the foregoing, Nigeria has been bedeviled with unemployment and poverty. Economic growth, which is supposed to be a solution to the problems of youth unemployment and poverty, appears not to be so in our country. It is unfortunate that large numbers of Nigerian youths are unemployed. However in light of that, Somavia (2004) opined that majority of unemployed youths roaming the street in big cities looking for jobs in Nigeria are certified school leavers. In a similar view, Ogundele (2005) reported that half a million unskilled and unemployed youths graduate annually with no hope of getting employed in both public and private sectors. The implication according to Miller (2005) is that, youth unemployment which courses poverty is a major problem facing Nigeria. This situation should begin to receive the attention it deserves now if Nigeria would not want youth unemployment to be the biggest security risk she would have to contend with the shortest of time.

Youth unemployment in Nigeria

According to Miller (2005), an unwholesome aspect of youth unemployment in Nigeria is visible ‘idleness’, whereby youths both graduates and non-graduates congregate at bar and eating places to drink or converse and/or smoke marijuana for substantial parts of the day. These types of meeting place promote development of street gangs and criminal activities. It is evidently established that youth unemployment has encouraged gangsterism. Many youths now run criminal enterprises, engaged in violence, armed robbery, drug trafficking, car snatching, illegal fuel sale, oil pipeline vandalization and illegal importation of arms, of which many has reached alarming levels. Visual arts, which is an aspect of vocational education would have given most of these
youths’ skills to be responsible; creative and productive citizens who would be able to make at least 1 US Dollar a day. Okoro (1993) argued that individuals who are not able to secure legitimate and gainful employment set to acquire what they may consider their own share of the nation’s wealth through illegal and criminal means. He stated that the level of employment opportunities in a given country is directly proportional to the level of economic development. What this means is that economic development resulting from economic growth will manifest an increase in employment opportunities and wage rates of improvement in the quality of life of the average citizens. On the other hand, Okojie (2003) observed that, with stagnant economies and low economic growth rates in Nigeria, demand for labor has been low or decline, resulting in high levels of unemployment. Ogundele (2005) stated that youth unemployment is on the increase because of the shrink in the economy; thus, local manufacturing industries could no longer hire some of the surplus labor (the skilled youths).

More importantly, a shrink, stagnated and unstable economy like Nigeria would not allow small-scale enterprises to thrive especially for those who would want to be self-reliant or employed like the visual arts graduates; and with this type of situation, enhancing Inclusive Growth in Nigeria will be a mere wish since the individual (youths) do not have the opportunity to participate, contribute and benefit from the economy. A more definite way to reduce the level of youth unemployment, which is responsible for high poverty rate in Nigeria, would be to promote youth empowerment through encouraging Nigerian students to enroll in visual arts, which is an aspect of vocational education training capable of giving them skills for self-reliance.

Youth on the other hand can be defined as the time in a lifetime when a person is young especially the time before a child becomes an adult (18-30 years). Onyekwere (2001) traces the stages of development and concludes that adolescence starts from the age of fifteen years, while late adolescence graduates into adulthood as from the age of twenty years, having passed through early, middle and late adulthood. From these analysis and definitions, we can safely conclude that the youths are people from the ages of fifteen and above, but for the purpose of this paper; a youth is any person who is between the ages of eighteen to thirty five years (18 to 35 years). The Nigerian youths lack empowerment; they lack easy access to relevant trainings and information on how to participate in national development. There is no adequate engagement of youths in decisions making especially on issues affecting them such as unemployment, health and quality education; this has made their participation on economic growth and development process difficult. Poverty reduction, provision of quality education, health and job creation can be achieved faster in Nigeria if youths are empowered to contribute to economic growth and development. The government alone cannot handle the unemployment and poverty problems facing Nigeria presently; a more sure way to solving these problems is by promoting visual arts and encouraging youth empowerment through supporting visual arts graduates to be responsible, productive and creative citizens.

Visual arts in Nigerian institutions and the challenges

Visual arts is an intrinsic aspect of human nature; it is a creative force that has accompanied human from cradle to grave. It is one of the most constant forms of human behavior (Newman, 1974). It is also a means of self-expression through the skillful use of a medium. It concerns itself with the expression, reproduction and communication of nature with human feeling through the use of media and materials. The various aspects of visual arts include drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, graphics and probably textile. It designate those form of arts addressed primarily to the sense of visual. Visual arts are works are concrete and the creativity can be seen, felt and touched when the artist put his imaginary objects into drawing or painting, unlike dramatic and theater arts. The development of visual art can be traced to the nineteenth century Christian Missionaries who emphasis the use of alphabetical symbols as a tool for basic knowledge. Ugiomoh (2012) reviewed various meanings, definitions and discussions on art, “The word Art sits at the foundation of all human activities and achievements”; considering the Roman translation of Arts, which means skill. Ugiomoh (2012) opines that, it is also synonymous to ability, cleverness, dexterity etc. Quoting Marxist Scholar Ernst Fisher, Ugiomoh (2012) stated that, “the earliest hominoid created the first work of art by responding to the inadequacies of objects nature adapted for specific objectives. For example, a stick without a stub to harvest a fruit will demand that it be properly adapted and filled with such device to serve the purpose of harvest and/or other functions that might have been necessary. Restooling or reinventing, which the stick has undergone automatically converts it to an artifact; a product of culture” such activities undertaken by man need skill, as art. That, which was created during the mediaeval period, reveals art as skill (Enamhe and Umana, 2013).

Visual arts, since its formal introduction in 1927 in the curriculum to be taught in schools, have stood out as a discipline that promotes power of thinking and imagination; and to fully develop the instinctive tendency in the child (Dashen and Nyohom, 2012). Uzoagba (1982) opines that, art activities can be easily assimilated to play activities. It is also a subject of study in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Dashen and Nyohom (2012) supported the statement when they stated that children are imaginative and experimental with
any material they handle. It is important to understand that equipping citizens to meet the current developmental challenges is to introduce them early enough to areas of learning that stimulate creativity.

Visual arts as a field of study have suffered neglect in Nigerian Education system. Majority of students hardly make visual arts a first choice course of study when preparing to sit for higher institution entrance qualifying examination. Nigerian students lack motivation and interest to willingly study visual arts in higher institutions. Most of the students studying visual arts are mostly those who could not be admitted into first and second choice departments. Although with time they may end up loving visual arts. In most Nigerian institutions offering the course of study, there are inadequate manpower, equipment and materials that enhance teaching and learning. Most teaching staff often borrow materials from road side artists to teach undergraduates during visual arts lessons. Visual arts must be given the attentions it deserves from the government to enable graduates in the field be self-reliant, create jobs and become employers of labor.

The following are factors militating against effective training of students in visual arts in Nigerian institutions:

- **Lack of Modern Facilities**: Most visual arts departments in Nigeria institutions do not have laboratories or workshop spaces let alone usable equipment and facilities and where they exist, they are grossly inadequate, as the laboratories only have the items or equipment that were provided when the institutions were established. It is however most surprising to know that most visual arts departments still depend on theoretical works only and this is due to lack of equipment and modern materials. This is a shame and a high degree of irresponsibility on the part of the operators of such school programs. The available facilities for programs in some higher institutions currently are inadequate quantitatively and qualitatively besides being obsolete (Daramola, 2005). The inadequacy in teaching and workshop facilities according to Inyiagu (2005), has contributed to the diminution of the quality of graduates in Nigeria.

- **Lack of staff training**: The training of academic staff is ordinarily a continuous exercise to ensure consistent improvement in the quality of their outputs. The training is in two-fold: training to acquire minimum qualification to teach and continued professional training. Both types of training can be acquired either locally or overseas. According to Ekemode (2005), usually, local training within the nation is cheaper than overseas training but more strenuous because of inadequate facilities, literature and distractions arising from the need to meet the necessary demands. Overseas training requires a lot of foreign exchange but the enabling environment exists to achieve success in a record time. However, over time it has always been difficult to get the trainees back to their respective countries after the completion of their study.

- **Poor learning conditions**: According to Inyiagu (2006), the conditions under which visual arts is imparted in most Nigerian institutions are experiencing poverty of training equipment, shortage of staff, inadequate funding, inability to provide variety of training programs and equipment such that recipients turn out to both national development and the image of visual arts.

- **Lack of modern equipment**: Most visual arts departments in Nigerian Institutions according to Ekpenyong (2005) lack modern equipment relevant to societal needs. This equipment should be supplied to departments by the relevant authorities for effective training to take place. Most schools use obsolete materials while some do not have equipment at all. The students now depend only on the theoretical aspects of the training program; lack of practical works by the students due to lack of modern equipment will only leave the students in a state of confusion whenever they find themselves in their field of work after graduation.

- **Lack of funding of most activities in visual arts departments**: Sometimes, the governments do not give proper attention to the department as required. Funds are not provided in a timely manner or sometimes not provided at all and this brings down the financial aspects of running the visual arts programs.

- **Lack of teachers’ motivation**: Most a times, the teachers are not paid salaries on time or not paid at all. This results in strike action by the teachers and this type of attitude by the government diminishes the interest of the teachers on imparting the required professional skills to the students.

### Visual arts and economic development in Nigeria

As a skilled vocation with various specialized areas, visual arts have great potentials in the economic development of Nigeria as well as moral empowerment of the youths. For all the campaigns about economic empowerment in poverty reduction in Nigeria to be effective, it must as a matter of urgency and be directed towards skilled or specialized subjects, which will make them dexterous and direct their thoughts towards creative activity. The importance of visual arts to any society or nation cannot be overemphasized. For many years ago, this field of study has suffered lack of recognition and low participation. Conferences, workshops, and seminars have been organized with the aim of making things right. Efforts made by the Federal Government on reforms in all sectors of the economy have proved abortive. The Federal Government Educational Policy, to include fine arts as a subject in the school curriculum has failed, it may be, due to lack of teachers in the primary and secondary schools. Uzoagba (1982) stated that visual arts have been extremely neglected in Nigeria and
Arts train students for productivity. This comes from the philosophical notion that real knowledge is experimental. The reason why the tertiary institutions cannot produce the needed manpower in visual arts is because the foundation is faulty, and because it is faulty, the house suffers (Ajibade et al., 2011). Most graduates from schools are jobless and so are redundant; some have joined illegal groups for the purpose of committing crime and other multilavarious activities. It is high time for people to begin to develop themselves by studying vocational education courses such as visual arts, that will alleviate this problem since the public sector is diminishing in job creation. Also, it is worth mentioning that some careers are becoming economic wastelands in skills needed for application of techniques in solving problems and creating objects.

According to Ganagana (2001), art has helped the individual to appreciate the importance and the study of visual arts to the child in particular, and the society at large. He also added that this trend contributed immensely in enlightening individuals about the inevitable role played by visual art as it is from the bedrock of all discipline. Curiously, Odesanmi (2000) affirmed that creativity and visual arts are two inseparable bed-mates, the products of their romance are inventions, breakthrough, technological achievements and so on. Akolo (1992) agrees that creativity is the foundation of technology. He concluded that no country should take her education system with a light hand as it affects creativity. These views no doubt confirmed that creativity is one of the tendencies that will give way to invention and then to technological achievement in Nigeria.

Sustainable empowerment means: To give official authority or legal power to; to enable and; to promote selfactualization or influence. Okolie and Nwuzo (2013) noted that youth empowerment means developing competences needed to become successful contributing members of the communities. Empowerment can also become one of the most effective strategies for providing youth with opportunities to develop saleable skills which will not only be for the employment but also to bring about the much designed industrial and technical developments in developing nations. According to Fajimi (2005), looking at Nigerian youths today for instance, many are unemployed. This probably could be that the expected jobs are not available or that majority posses no saleable skills due to lack of proper guidance and counseling on the right form of career choice to make. If these unemployed youths are encouraged to pass through visual arts, probably things will become better for the nation as most of them will be independent of government jobs which are not readily available in the societies. Empowering youths is a process through which adults begins to share responsibility and power with young people. It is the same idea of teaching the youths skills that they will need to survive in life. However it is important that youth are empowered as it will lead to competence and the competence will lead to self-esteem. Additionally, youths with increased competence can become a great resource for organization, communities and the nation, because they will assure increasing responsibility within the day to day activities and running the overall programs of the nation (Okolie and Nwuzo, 2013).

Visual arts could be rightly regarded as education for work empowerment and empowerment brings economic growth and national development. Apparently, when a person learns how to work through receiving vocational training, which visual arts is part of. In acquiring marketable skills, the individual discovers what he needed to know, what he needs to be able to do and how well he must be able to do it to meet standards set by his employer, by the consumers or by society. In addition to that, Fajimi (2005) concluded that in acquiring this knowledge and ability, he or she also acquires habits and attitudes necessary for success on the job. Training in the visual arts empowers students with skills and develop eventually constructive mental ability (Enamhe and Umana, 2013). Dashen and Nyohom (2012) are of the opinion that on the process of creating, certain useful qualities are acquired such as, observation, the ability or power to observe objects and to represent some on any suitable surface. Imagination is the aspect which reveals how the work of art is achieved. It is known that all works of invention are produced or created from imagination and critical thinking which comes out from the abundance stored in the mind. Visual art is the answer to empower teaming youths that roam about without doing any meaningful work in the society today. From the above analysis and explanations, one can deduce that visual arts are art in education that portends the following specific social benefits as outlined by (Enamhe and Umana, 2013):

- Through art, pupils can develop their skill in the use of materials through experimentation, manipulation and practice.
- Art is a way to become a creative person in almost all fields of endeavor.
- Art is a way to become flexible and confident person through the presentation of ideas in visual language.
- Art is the way to clarify and fix ideas in the mind through visual reiteration, strengthening what has been learnt about something.
- Art finds practical use in other subjects; some subjects need illustrations and experiments. Good and accurate illustrations are helpful in explaining points,
which may be difficult to explain in words (Enamhe, 2001).

The specialized areas in visual arts that can provide opportunities for youth unemployment reduction and improve economic and development in Nigeria are as follows:

**Graphics:** This is an aspect of visual art that deal with the production of designs that facilitates visual communication. It deals with production of logos, posters, hand bills, flairs, greeting cards, book covers, billboards, printing of various types of banners. All these are for the purpose of communications. Each of these areas of visual art is money making spinning venture in Nigeria if properly harnessed. Well trained graphic artist can be employed or be self-reliant and become an employer of labor. Fine art is not an expensive course of study yet it lacks a good number of students and teaching staff in most Nigerian institutions. Empowering youths in this field of study will enhance economic growth and development in Nigeria in few years to come.

**Painting:** This aspect of visual art is a process of coating a surface with colored pigments or materials with a result. This is a skill oriented vocation and can be a high means of sustenance for youths who desire and practice it (Odey et al., 2005). It is also noted that there are many genus in painting, which one can harness to make a living, and these include; landscaping, still life, life as figurative composition and abstraction. Youths that equip themselves with skills in painting would not lack; and such individual would contribute massively to the development of his or her nation. Portrait painting is another area with prospects of empowering the youths; since it involves the painting recognizable human beings, it easily attracts monetary rewards. Painting on unusual materials like shirts, trousers, shelves, wardrobes, curtain rails etc. are not common in Nigeria; therefore such new venture would be economically viable if youths think in that direction.

**Sculpture:** This is part of visual art that deals with forms and exists in three dimensions. It also means to sculpt from a solid mass. The availability of materials for this does not pose a problem since most them such as clay, cement, metal, metal scraps, glass, bronze, brass etc. are readily available in the local markets. Sculptures are very viable area in the visual arts that is capable of creating jobs for the teaming youths roaming the streets in search for white-collar jobs, which are not readily available.

**Ceramics:** This is an aspect of visual art that refers to all products made of clay, hardened and glazed by heat treatment through the firing process. Ceramics comprises such varied products like tiles, porcelain wears, vases, dinning sets, goblets, jugs, ceramic conductors, etc. The economic viability of ceramics due to its utilitarian nature makes it highly recommended for adoption as a vehicle for economic empowerment of the youths in Nigeria. It is this strategic economic viability of ceramics that informs the advocacy for the establishment of ceramics industries as a means of youth empowerment. Ojie (2000) maintains that it is very important to consider this issue of empowering the Nigerian youths towards setting up small scales ceramics/ pottery industries since most of the raw materials are locally available.

**Textile design:** This is about creative decoration of fabrics and other allied products for clothing, drapes and furniture. The decoration may take the form of dying, printing, painting, embroidery, stitching, appliqué, etc. Clothing is one of basic necessities of life besides food and shelter. The fact that every human being; irrespective of class, race, creed or color needs clothing, make textile design an important means for sustainable economic growth and development.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper presents how visual art could be used as a strategic instrument for poverty reduction in Nigeria and also a strategic tool for economic development. It also concludes that if visual arts is given the attention it deserves; and students motivated largely to enroll to study the course in Nigerian institutions, the youths in Nigeria (graduates) will become self-employed and also become employers of labor, capable of contributing to and at the same time benefiting from the economic growth and development. It is therefore pertinent that the subject be introduced in primary and secondary schools. The importance as it pertains to child development cannot be overlooked because the creative process begins from the scratch. Parents, teachers and educational planners should be well informed as stake holders. This understanding and knowledge will create awareness and delineate the impression that art is for failures and a dumping ground for the never do well. Stakeholders in educational sector should take advantages of abundant resourcefulness of visual art education if they want youth unemployment to be reduced and as well improve economic growth and development in Nigeria.

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