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YOUTH IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY: TOKENISM OR TRANSFORMATION? THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study focused on Youth in development policy in Nigeria. Its main objective was to examine whether youth inclusion in Nigeria's development policies represents tokenism or genuine structural transformation. The study was guided by specific objectives to: identify and review any relevant youth development policies in Nigeria within 2020 - 2025 framework; assess the extent to which the identified policies have translated into structural changes in youths' access to education, employment, healthcare, and political participation; and to compare Nigeria's youth development policy outcomes with a sub-Saharan African country (South Africa). To achieve these objectives, the study adopted a qualitative research design in its methodology. This entailed a critical descriptive analytical approach (CDA): this involved a critical textual/content analysis of multiple case studies on development policies in Nigeria within 2020 - 2025 band (like, the 'National Youth Policy 2019 - 2023'; and the 'Nigerian Development Plans 2021 - 2025'), including a comparative case from South Africa (SA) the 'National Youth Policy 2020 - 2030' (focusing on its 2020 - 2025 early implementation phase). Its sources of data relied exclusively on secondary data derived from the qualitative review of policy documents in Nigeria (2020 - 2025) including their transformative outcomes. The study employed the purposive sampling technique which enabled relevant case studies on development plans in Nigeria, and SA (for a comparative analysis) to be included. It employed a thematic method of data analysis involving these sequential procedures: First, data familiarization/reading of the policy transcripts of the selected case study countries; second, interpretation of the documents with critical analytical emphasis on the implementation outcomes; next, a cross-case thematic comparison between Nigeria and SA while anchoring the analytical framework on 'tokenism-transformation continuum'. Tabulated youth human capital development indicators, and tabulated comparative policy effectiveness assessment supported by WoS Studies, and the HDI of the case study countries were included in the analysis. The findings, backed up by a comparative WoS/Scopus indexed studies, identified relevant youth development policies and development plans in Nigeria (NYP 2019 - 2023; and NDP 2021 - 2025) for analysis, including NYP 2020 - 2030 (for SA), revealing that: Nigeria's policies vis-a-vis SA lack effectiveness in its framework as it is observed to be mere aspirational, and weak in implementation; there was limited substantive structural transformation in Nigeria's youths' employment, education, healthcare, and political participation outcomes despite their provisional inclusion; etc. A few recommendations were made: Government should institutionalize meaningful youth participation in governance; government should improve policy implementation and accountability, inter alia.

Keywords: development, youth-in-development, policy discourse, structural transformation, tokenism

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Across the globe, the question of youth inclusion in development policy has gained increasing prominence, particularly as countries grapple with demographic shifts and the growing political and economic significance of young populations. In advanced economies such as the United States, youth engagement is often framed within participatory governance, innovation ecosystems, and labor market integration strategies. Policies such as workforce development programs, student debt relief

initiatives, and youth civic engagement frameworks aim to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward measurable socioeconomic outcomes (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2021; Watts & Flanagan, 2020). In terms of implementation, governments of advanced countries have better welfare packages (e.g, the Citizens' Social Security system) for their youth population than in poor Global South regions like Africa: this signifies that youth development policies can translate into structural transformations in the advanced economies more than in poor developing nations. Thus, this critical tension between rhetorical inclusion and substantive transformation provides a useful lens for examining youth development policies in developing economies. This disparity also has direct implications for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education, SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, all of which emphasise inclusive opportunities, socioeconomic participation, and effective institutions for sustainable development. From this perspective, meaningful youth participation in policy-making is not merely a question of representation but a critical pathway to achieving inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. Thus, this critical tension between rhetorical inclusion and substantive transformation provides a useful lens for examining youth development policies in developing economies.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the urgency of youth-focused development policies is amplified by the region's demographic profile, characterized by a rapidly expanding youth population. Governments have increasingly adopted youth-centered frameworks to address unemployment, education deficits, and health disparities. However, empirical evidence suggests that many of these policies fall short of producing tangible structural changes. For instance, studies highlight that while youth policies are often well-articulated on paper, implementation gaps, weak institutional capacity, and political considerations frequently undermine their effectiveness (Anyidoho et al., 2022; Resnick & Thurlow, 2021). In countries like South Africa, some progress has been made through integrated youth employment strategies and social protection systems, yet persistent inequality and high youth unemployment indicate that structural transformation remains incomplete (Yu, 2022).

Nigeria presents a particularly compelling case within this broader context. As Africa's most populous country, with over 60% of its population under the age of 25, youth development is central to its national development agenda. Between 2020 and 2025, the Nigerian government has introduced and implemented several policies aimed at youth empowerment, including the revised National Youth Policy (2019 - 2023), the National Development Plan (2021–2025), and targeted interventions in entrepreneurship, digital skills, and health services. These initiatives ostensibly signal a commitment to integrating youth into the country's development trajectory. However, despite this apparent policy attention, Nigeria continues to face significant challenges in youth unemployment, underemployment, educational quality, and access to healthcare services (World Bank, 2023; Adeniyi et al., 2021).

A growing body of scholarship questions whether youth inclusion in Nigerian development policy represents genuine structural transformation or merely symbolic participation. Tokenism, in this context, refers to the superficial inclusion of youth voices or interests without corresponding shifts in power structures, resource allocation, or institutional outcomes. Transformation, on the other hand, implies deep, systemic changes that alter the socio-economic conditions of young people in meaningful ways. Evidence suggests that many youth-targeted programs in Nigeria emphasize short-term empowerment schemes, such as skills acquisition and entrepreneurship training, without addressing underlying structural barriers such as labor market inefficiencies, governance deficits, and unequal access to quality education (Olawale & Garwe, 2020; Isiugo-Abanihe et al., 2022). Furthermore, while policy documents frequently highlight youth participation and empowerment, the extent to which these commitments translate into measurable improvements in education, employment, and health outcomes remains questionable. For example, youth unemployment rates in Nigeria have remained persistently high, and underemployment continues to affect a large proportion of the youth population. Supporting these claims, Nigerian Bureau of Statistics reported that, youth unemployment rate (ages 15 - 25) reached 53.4% in the 4th quarter of 2020 (Africa Check, 2024),

indicating severe structural crisis amidst the extant Nigerian Youth Development Policy (2019 - 2023) and the National Development Plan (2021 - 2025). Besides, in 2023, statistical estimates suggest that about one-third (or 33%) of Nigerian youth were unemployed (African Liberty, 11th December 2024). Similarly, disparities in educational access and quality, as well as limited improvements in youth health indicators, suggest that policy interventions may not be achieving their intended transformative impact (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Ajayi & Oyeniyi, 2022). This disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived realities underscores the need for a critical evaluation of youth development policies in Nigeria.

Comparative analysis further enriches this inquiry. South Africa, often cited as a reference point within Sub-Saharan Africa, has implemented relatively more structured youth development initiatives, including the National Youth Development Agency and targeted employment programs. While not without challenges, these efforts provide a benchmark for assessing Nigeria's policy outcomes. Comparative studies indicate that institutional coherence, accountability mechanisms, and sustained investment are key factors influencing the effectiveness of youth policies (Seekings & Nattrass, 2021). By juxtaposing Nigeria's experience with that of South Africa, this study seeks to highlight the extent to which differences in policy design and implementation contribute to divergent outcomes.

Despite the growing attention to youth development in policy and academic discourse, there remains a significant gap in the literature. Existing studies (e.g, Junussova et al., 2025; Kwarteng, 2021) often focus either on policy formulation or on specific program outcomes, with limited integration of both dimensions. Moreover, few studies adopt a critical framework that explicitly interrogates the distinction between tokenistic inclusion and structural transformation, particularly within the Nigerian context. There is also a lack of recent (post-2020) empirical analyses that assess the outcomes of newly introduced policies under evolving socio-economic conditions and digital transformation.

This paper seeks to fill these gaps by systematically examining youth development policies in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025, assessing their outcomes in key sectors, and situating these findings within a comparative Sub-Saharan African perspective. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of whether youth inclusion in Nigerian development policy represents genuine progress or remains largely rhetorical. Ultimately, the study argues that while Nigeria's youth policies reflect an increasing recognition of the importance of youth inclusion, they largely fall short of achieving the structural transformation necessary to significantly improve the socio-economic conditions of young people.

Statement of the Problem

Youth development has become a central concern in contemporary development discourse, particularly in countries with rapidly expanding young populations. In Nigeria, where over half of the population falls within the youth demographic, successive governments have introduced policies and programs aimed at promoting youth inclusion in national development. Notably, between 2020 and 2025, policy frameworks such as the revised National Youth Policy (2019 - 2023), and the National Development Plan (2021–2025) have emphasized youth empowerment, employment generation, and human capital development. On the surface, these initiatives suggest a strong institutional commitment to integrating young people into the socio-economic fabric of the country. However, a critical problem emerges when these policy intentions are juxtaposed with persistent adverse outcomes in youth employment, education, and health.

Despite the proliferation of youth-focused policies, empirical evidences (like, Ogunbayo, 2022; Philip et al., 2025) indicate that Nigerian youths continue to face structural barriers that limit their socio-economic advancement. Additionally, studies show that youth unemployment and underemployment remain pervasive, with a large proportion of young people engaged in informal, low-productivity, and unstable forms of work (Adeniyi et al., 2021; World Bank, 2023). Even more concerning is the persistence of underemployment and vulnerable employment, which suggests that having a job does not necessarily translate into economic security or improved living standards. This raises fundamental

questions about the effectiveness of existing policies in addressing the structural dimensions of youth marginalization. Rather than transforming the labor market to absorb and sustain productive youth engagement, many interventions appear to provide only temporary or superficial relief.

In the education sector, similar contradictions are evident. While policy documents frequently emphasize access to education and skills development, the quality and relevance of education remain significant challenges. Research indicates a persistent mismatch between educational outputs and labor market demands, contributing to high levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment (Ajayi & Oyeniyi, 2022). Furthermore, inequalities in access to quality education—particularly along regional and socio-economic lines—continue to disadvantage large segments of the youth population. These patterns suggest that existing policies may not be sufficiently addressing systemic deficiencies within the education system, thereby limiting their transformative potential.

Health outcomes among Nigerian youths also reflect gaps between policy commitments and actual impact. Although youth health is often incorporated into broader public health strategies, access to affordable and youth-friendly healthcare services remains limited. Studies have highlighted ongoing challenges related to mental health, reproductive health, and substance abuse among young people, with inadequate policy implementation exacerbating these issues (Isiugo-Abanihe et al., 2022). The persistence of such challenges indicates that youth inclusion in health policy may be more rhetorical than substantive, lacking the institutional depth required to produce meaningful improvements.

A critical dimension of this problem lies in the nature of youth inclusion itself. While policies frequently reference youth participation and empowerment, scholars argue that such inclusion often takes the form of tokenism rather than genuine structural transformation. Tokenism, in this context, involves the symbolic incorporation of youth perspectives without corresponding shifts in decision-making power, resource distribution, or institutional practices. As a result, youth are often positioned as beneficiaries rather than active agents of change. Empirical studies in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that weak institutional capacity, limited accountability mechanisms, and political considerations frequently undermine the implementation of youth policies, thereby reinforcing patterns of exclusion (Anyidoho et al., 2022; Resnick & Thurlow, 2021).

Furthermore, the problem is compounded by fragmentation in both policy design and academic analysis. Existing studies tend to examine either the formulation of youth policies or their implementation outcomes, with limited integration of these dimensions. For instance, some research focuses on the conceptual frameworks and legislative processes underpinning youth policy, without assessing their real-world impacts (Junussova et al., 2025). Conversely, other studies evaluate specific programs or interventions, often highlighting implementation challenges and limited effectiveness, but without critically interrogating the policy design processes that shape these outcomes (Kwarteng, 2021). This fragmentation in the literature makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of why youth policies in Nigeria fail to produce structural transformation.

Comparatively, experiences from other sub-Saharan African countries such as South Africa further underscore the problem. While South Africa also faces significant youth unemployment challenges, its relatively more institutionalized youth development frameworks provide a useful contrast. Studies suggest that stronger institutional coordination, clearer accountability mechanisms, and sustained investment contribute to relatively better policy outcomes, even if challenges persist (Seekings & Nattrass, 2021; Yu, 2022). The Nigerian case, therefore, raises important questions about the role of governance structures, policy coherence, and implementation capacity in shaping youth development outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the central problem this study addresses is the apparent disconnect between the rhetorical commitment to youth inclusion in Nigerian development policy and the lack of corresponding structural transformation in key sectors. While policies increasingly acknowledge the importance of youth, they have not fundamentally altered the socio-economic conditions that constrain young people's opportunities and well-being. This disconnect not only limits the

effectiveness of youth development efforts but also poses broader risks to national development, given the critical role of youth in driving economic growth and social stability.

Therefore, there is a need for a systematic and critical examination of youth development policies in Nigeria, particularly within the 2020–2025 period, to determine whether they represent genuine efforts at structural transformation or merely symbolic gestures of inclusion. By addressing this problem, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the limitations of current policy approaches and to identify pathways for more effective and transformative youth development strategies.

Study Objectives

The general objective of the study is to examine whether youth inclusion in Nigerian development policies represents tokenism or genuine structural transformation. However, specific objectives are equally designed to guide the study in achieving the main objective and include the following:

1. To identify and review any relevant youth in development policies in Nigeria within 2020 - 2025 framework;

2. To assess the extent to which these policies have translated into structural changes in education, employment, and health care access of the youths;

3. To compare Nigerian youth development policy outcomes with any of the sub-Saharan African countries (like, South Africa).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically with a critical descriptive analytical approach (CDA), aimed to examine whether youth inclusion in development policy in Nigeria (2020–2025) reflects tokenism or genuine structural transformation. Thus, the qualitative approach entails critical textual or content analysis of multiple case studies on development policies in Nigeria within 2020 - 2025 (e.g, the National Youth Policy 2019 - 2023, and the Nigerian Development plans 2021 - 2025), including a comparative case from South Africa on its 'National Youth Policy 2020–2030' (with focus on its 2020- 2025 early implementation phase).

The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore meanings, policy intent, institutional practices, and lived experiences rather than quantify relationships. Nigeria serves as the primary case, while South Africa is incorporated as a comparative case to contextualize findings within sub-Saharan Africa. The choice of South Africa is informed by its relatively institutionalized youth policy architecture, which provides a useful benchmark for assessing whether Nigeria's approach reflects tokenism or transformation.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on qualitative data, drawn mainly from secondary sources. This entails information derived from review of Policy documents in Nigeria (2020–2025), which includes the National Youth policies (2019 - 2023), and the Nigerian Development plans (2021 - 2025), including review of sectoral policy outcomes on education, employment, and health within the time frames. Policy documents and reports (e.g, the National Youth Policy 2020–2030, focusing on its 2020 - 2025 early implementation phase) from South Africa shall also be analyzed for comparative analysis.

Sampling Technique

The study employs non-probability sampling techniques, especially the purposive sampling: with this technique, case studies on some development plans in Nigeria, including South Africa for the comparative analysis, which are relevant for the study are included.

Data Collection Method

The study is designed to collect qualitative data. This entails data gathered from critical descriptive review of information from secondary sources on selected development plans and youth policies in Nigeria, including South Africa as a comparative benchmark.

Data Analysis Technique

The study employs thematic analysis, following these steps:

Data familiarization (reading the development plan and the National youth transcripts or documents of the selected case study countries);

Interpretation of the documents (with critical analytical emphasis on the implementation outcomes on Youths' education, employment, and healthcare access within the 2020 - 2025 time band, demonstrating if the youth inclusion in development policy is mere tokenism or has gained actual structural transformation); and

Comparative Analysis

A cross-case thematic comparison will be conducted between Nigeria and South Africa, (focusing on Policy design and institutional frameworks, Degree of youth participation, Implementation effectiveness, Observed outcomes). This enables identification of similarities, divergences, and best practices to help draw evidence-based conclusions for informed policy frameworks as a way forward.

Thus, the analytical framework of the study is anchored on a tokenism–transformation continuum, where:

Tokenism is reflected in symbolic or mere inclusion of youths in policy, but with limited influence, and weak implementation.

While, Transformation is evidenced by meaningful participation, institutional change, and improved access to opportunities. This framework guides both data collection and analysis.

Conceptual Clarifications

For more epistemic insight into the discourse, certain terms that are preponderant in this essay are hereby demystified. These terms include, Development, Youth in Development, Policy Discourse, Tokenism, and Structural Transformation. We shall address them in sequence:

Development

Development is a multifaceted concept that encompasses economic growth, social progress, institutional strengthening, and improvements in human well-being. Contemporary perspectives move beyond narrow income-based measures to emphasize human capabilities, sustainability, and inclusivity, reflecting a broader understanding of progress as the expansion of people's freedoms and opportunities. Development is thus increasingly framed within integrated frameworks such as sustainable development, which links economic advancement with social equity and environmental protection (Hickel, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2022). In policy discourse, development also involves questions of power, governance, and participation, particularly regarding whose interests are prioritized and how benefits are distributed. In the Nigerian context, development debates often center on addressing structural inequalities, youth unemployment, and governance challenges, underscoring the need for inclusive and transformative approaches that actively engage young people as key stakeholders in national progress.

Youth in Development

Youth in development refers to the active integration and meaningful participation of young people in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of development policies and programs, recognizing them not merely as beneficiaries but as critical stakeholders and drivers of change. This concept is

grounded in participatory and rights-based approaches, which emphasize agency, inclusion, and intergenerational equity in development processes. Recent scholarship highlights that effective youth engagement contributes to more responsive governance, innovation, and sustainable outcomes, particularly in contexts with large youth populations such as Nigeria (Sumberg et al., 2021; Anyidoho et al., 2020). However, the extent to which youth are genuinely empowered often depends on institutional frameworks and political will, as many initiatives risk remaining symbolic without substantive influence. Thus, "youth in development" serves as a critical lens for assessing whether policies move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward structural transformation that enables young people to shape development trajectories.

Policy Discourse

Policy discourse refers to the language, narratives, and framing through which policies are conceptualized, communicated, and legitimized within political and institutional spaces. It shapes how problems are defined, which actors are prioritized, and what solutions are considered viable. Recent studies emphasize that policy discourse is not neutral; rather, it reflects power relations and ideological orientations that influence policy outcomes (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2020; Leal Filho et al., 2022). In the context of youth in development policy, discourse often oscillates between portraying youth as "leaders of tomorrow" and as "problems to be managed," which can obscure their present agency and structural challenges. In Nigeria, such discourse plays a critical role in determining whether youth engagement is substantive or symbolic, particularly in governance and development planning processes.

Tokenism

Tokenism refers to the superficial or symbolic inclusion of marginalized groups—such as youth—in decision-making processes without granting them meaningful influence or power. It is often characterized by the presence of a few representatives who are expected to speak for a larger group but lack the authority to effect real change. Contemporary research highlights tokenism as a persistent challenge in participatory governance, where inclusion mechanisms exist in form but not in substance (Kuumba & Ajanaku, 2021; Oosterom, 2020). In youth policy contexts, tokenism may manifest through consultative forums, advisory roles, or youth quotas that do not translate into actual policy impact. In Nigeria, concerns about tokenistic engagement are evident in critiques of youth councils and political appointments that fail to address systemic barriers to youth empowerment.

Structural Transformation

Structural transformation refers to fundamental, systemic changes in economic, social, and institutional arrangements that lead to sustained development outcomes. It typically involves shifts from low-productivity to high-productivity sectors, improved governance structures, and inclusive participation across different social groups. Recent literature expands the concept beyond economic change to include political and social transformation, emphasizing equity, inclusion, and institutional reform (McMillan et al., 2021; Rodrik, 2021). In the context of youth development policy, structural transformation implies moving beyond short-term interventions toward long-term reforms that address unemployment, education quality, governance deficits, and social inequalities. For Nigeria, this entails creating enabling environments where youth are not only participants but drivers of transformative change in national development processes.

In the light of the foregoing utterances; in what follows, it becomes imperative to review the existing scholarly and policy literatures to understand the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical foundations that can enable us to critically examine if youth in development policies in Nigeria is a mere symbolic inclusion (tokenism) without implementation or producing tangible structural transformation. To that we now proceed.

Literature Review

Existing literatures (e.g, Junussova et al., 2025; Kwarteng, 2021) often focus either on policy formulation or on specific program outcomes, with limited integration of both dimensions. Additionally, few studies adopt a critical outlook on the policy frameworks and fail to explicitly interrogate the distinction between tokenistic inclusion and structural transformation, particularly within the Nigerian context. There is also a lack of recent (post-2020) empirical analyses that assess the outcomes of newly introduced policies under evolving socio-economic post-COVID-19 conditions and digital transformation. Therefore, it is the *raison d'etre* of this paper to fill these gaps by systematically examining youth development policies in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025, assessing their outcomes in key sectors, and situating these findings within a comparative sub-Saharan African perspective (with South Africa as a comparative case). To achieve this epistemic purpose, the following thematic sub-themes shall be reviewed under this rubric.

Youth in Development Discourse -- An Overview

The concept of youth in development discourse has evolved from viewing young people primarily as a demographic "problem" or "bulge" associated with risks such as unemployment, unrest, and migration, to recognizing them as critical agents of change, innovators, and partners in sustainable development. This shift aligns with global frameworks like the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize youth participation, agency, and empowerment. In the African context, where a significant "youth bulge" characterizes the population structure, this discourse underscores both opportunities for a demographic dividend and challenges related to inadequate investment in education, skills, and employment.

Historically, development policies often framed youth through a deficit lens, portraying them as vulnerable or disruptive. However, contemporary scholarship challenges this by highlighting young people's resilience, creativity, and contributions to sectors such as climate action, governance, peacebuilding, digital sector, entrepreneurship. For instance, Kumi (2025) notes that while policymakers in Africa have traditionally regarded young people as problems rather than stakeholders, a growing body of research recognizes African youth as hardworking, productive actors essential for sustainable development and civic engagement. Youth-led civil society organizations are increasingly seen as vital in areas like democratic governance and climate change mitigation.

In Nigeria, this discourse intersects with national realities. The country possesses one of Africa's largest youth populations, with individuals aged 18-35 (as defined in the National Youth Policy) facing high unemployment, underemployment, and limited political inclusion. Omoju (2023) provides an empirical review of youth-employment policies in Nigeria, revealing that despite numerous initiatives, these programs have failed to significantly reduce unemployment rates due to governance gaps, inadequate funding, poor coordination, and a lack of integration with long-term development plans. The analysis highlights issues such as limited political inclusivity and insufficient focus on vulnerable groups. Similarly, Osabohien (2021) examines youth participation in agriculture, demonstrating through household data and propensity score matching that engaging youth in this sector can contribute to poverty reduction, yet structural barriers persist.

Recent studies further illustrate the tension between policy rhetoric and practice. Typically, Adeyanju et al. (2023) assess agribusiness empowerment interventions across Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, finding positive livelihood impacts when programs target value chains effectively, but stressing the need for broader enabling environments. Amewuda (2025) explores models like YouthBank for empowering African youth in governance, arguing that such frameworks can harness the youth bulge for productive outcomes if integrated into national policies. In Nigeria, ongoing reviews of the National Youth Policy (2019-2023, now under revision) reflect efforts to address gaps, with stakeholders advocating for greater youth input to move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward genuine transformation.

Globally and regionally, the discourse increasingly adopts a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, as reflected in USAID's Youth in Development Policy updates, which prioritize access to opportunities, meaningful participation in decision-making, and stronger youth-responsive systems. This framework promotes assets-based programming that builds skills, agency, and relationships. However, critiques persist regarding implementation gaps, political marginalization, and the risk of tokenism—where youth are consulted symbolically without real influence over policies affecting their lives.

Ultimately, the youth in development discourse has progressed toward agency-centered perspectives, yet in contexts like Nigeria, realizing transformative potential requires addressing structural constraints such as unemployment, weak institutional capacity, and elite capture of opportunities. Bridging the gap between discourse and effective policy remains central to harnessing the demographic dividend rather than risking instability.

Tokenism Versus Participation in Public Policy: An Overview

The discourse on youth inclusion in public policy has increasingly shifted from mere acknowledgment of young people as stakeholders to a more critical interrogation of how they are included. Central to this debate is the distinction between tokenism and meaningful participation, two concepts that, while often conflated in policy rhetoric, differ fundamentally in practice and outcomes. That is to say, even though participatory governance frameworks have proliferated globally, the depth and authenticity of youth engagement remain uneven and frequently superficial.

Tokenism in public policy refers to the symbolic inclusion of young people in decision-making processes without granting them real influence over outcomes. It often manifests through consultative forums, youth councils, or stakeholder meetings where youth voices are heard but not necessarily acted upon. According to Mandoh (2021), youth participation initiatives may be "widely trumpeted" in policy discourse, yet fail to translate into tangible influence, resulting in what can be described as systemic silencing within governance structures. For instance, recently in Nigeria, the incumbent government appointed a youth, a 400-level University student (from the University of Ibadan) as a member of the Nigeria Tax reforms in 2023 (Vanguard News, 8 August 2023), but that was the last we heard of him!. Similarly, Glimmerveen et al. (2022) argue that participatory processes can become exclusionary in practice, as institutions selectively engage compliant participants while marginalizing dissenting or critical youth voices, thereby reinforcing existing power hierarchies: A case in point is, the October 2020 EndSars protest by the Nigerian youths, where youth voices crying against government ineptitude and police brutality were stifled with their repressive apparatuses: military shooting, police tear-gassing, arrest of innocent youths, and ultimately the freezing of the accounts of the youth leaders by the CBN (Policy & Legal Advocacy Centre, 12 November 2020).

This critique aligns with broader analyses of participatory governance, which suggest that tokenistic practices are often embedded in institutional designs that prioritize legitimacy over genuine inclusiveness. In such contexts, participation becomes a procedural requirement rather than a transformative tool. Bečević and Dahlstedt (2021) further emphasize that youth participation is deeply shaped by structural inequalities, including socio-economic status and access to resources, which limit the capacity of marginalized youth to engage meaningfully in policy processes. Thus, tokenism not only undermines democratic ideals but also perpetuates patterns of exclusion under the guise of inclusion.

However, in contra-distinction meaningful participation entails the active and sustained involvement of young people in all stages of the policy cycle—agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. It is characterized by shared decision-making power, mutual accountability, and the recognition of youth as legitimate political actors. Mandoh et al. (2021) emphasize that moving beyond tokenism requires institutional shifts that enable co-creation and partnership with young people, rather than treating them as passive beneficiaries. This perspective resonates with emerging

frameworks that conceptualize participation as a continuum, ranging from manipulation and consultation to collaboration and youth-led decision-making.

Furthermore, recent literature (like, Pitti et al., 2021) also complicates the binary distinction between tokenism and participation by introducing concepts such as "liminal participation." Pitti et al. (2021) argue that youth engagement often exists in ambiguous spaces where participation is simultaneously recognized and constrained, reflecting tensions between institutional control and youth agency. This suggests that even within ostensibly participatory structures, young people may experience partial inclusion, where their contributions are acknowledged but not fully integrated into decision-making processes. Additionally, the persistence of tokenism is often linked to institutional inertia and adult-centric governance cultures. Walther et al. (2021) note that youth participation regimes are shaped by broader socio-political contexts, including welfare systems and governance traditions, which influence how youth voices are valued and incorporated into policy. In many cases, these structures prioritize stability and control over transformative engagement, thereby limiting opportunities for genuine youth influence. Importantly, the implications of tokenism extend beyond procedural concerns to affect policy effectiveness and legitimacy. When youth participation is superficial, policies risk being disconnected from the lived realities of young people, leading to poor implementation outcomes and diminished trust in public institutions. Conversely, meaningful participation has been associated with more responsive and inclusive policies, as well as enhanced civic engagement among youth populations.

Therefore, the distinction between tokenism and participation in public policy is not merely conceptual but has significant practical implications. While tokenism offers the appearance of inclusion, it often reinforces existing power dynamics and limits the transformative potential of youth engagement, as praxis. Meaningful participation, on the other hand, requires a reconfiguration of institutional practices to ensure that young people are not only present but also influential in shaping policy outcomes. As the literature suggests, bridging this gap remains a critical challenge for contemporary governance, particularly in contexts such as Nigeria where youth constitute a significant demographic and political force.

Youth Development Policies in Nigeria (2020–2025) and Lack of Structural Transformation

To be sure, Youth development has remained central to Nigeria's policy discourse, particularly in the context of rising unemployment, political marginalization, and socio-economic exclusion. However, despite the proliferation of youth-centered frameworks, evidence suggests that implementation has largely been symbolic rather than transformative. To demonstrate this position, we propose to articulate our thoughts via the mediation of two identified relevant policies in Nigeria: Thus, this section critically examines two key policy instruments—**the National Youth Policy (2019–2023)** and the **National Development Plan (2021–2025)** (often referenced within the 2020–2025 reform cycle)—to demonstrate the persistence of tokenistic inclusion without structural change.

The National Youth Policy (2019–2023): Provisions and Implementation Gaps

The National Youth Policy (NYP) (2019–2023) was designed as a comprehensive framework to mainstream youth development across sectors. It emphasized priority areas such as youth employment, education and skills acquisition, health and well-being, political inclusion, and civic engagement. Specifically, the policy proposed:

- Expansion of vocational and digital skills programs to address youth unemployment.
- Improved access to quality education and entrepreneurship support.
- Youth-friendly healthcare services, including reproductive health.
- Institutional mechanisms to enhance youth participation in governance.

Despite these ambitious provisions, empirical evidence indicates limited substantive outcomes. We shall critically throw our epistemic lenses on each of the indicators, et seriatim :-

Youth Employment:

Nigeria's youth unemployment problem remained severe over the policy period, despite changes in statistical methodology. Under the pre-2023 framework, youth unemployment reached 34.9% in Q2 2020 during the COVID-19 shock (NBS, 2020). Although revised labour force estimates report lower levels, recent data still indicate deterioration, with youth unemployment rising from 7.2% in Q2 2023 to 8.6% in Q3 2023, alongside a combined unemployment and underemployment rate of 17.3% and a youth NEET rate of 13.7% (NBS, 2023). Empirical studies further show that major interventions such as N-Power and the Youth Investment Fund have had limited long-term impact, largely due to structural bottlenecks including weak industrial absorption capacity, skills mismatches, and poor programme coordination (Omoju et al., 2023; ILO, 2021).

Education:

Despite the National Youth Policy's emphasis on equitable access to education, Nigeria continues to exhibit one of the most severe education exclusion profiles globally. Recent estimates (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024) indicate that over 18–20 million children and youth in Nigeria remain out of school, the highest number worldwide, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for nearly 39% of the global out-of-school population. Besides, structural inequalities within the education sector remain pronounced, as evidenced by stark regional disparities in literacy—reaching approximately 87% in southern states but as low as 9.5% in the North-West—and by the prevalence of child labour affecting 39.2% of children aged 5–17, significantly constraining school participation (NBS & ILO, 2024). More so, persistent underfunding, infrastructural deficits, and recurrent industrial actions in public universities have further undermined educational outcomes. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed entrenched digital inequalities, with limited access to electricity, internet connectivity, and learning devices restricting the effectiveness of remote education initiatives. Empirical studies argue that these challenges reflect deeper structural constraints—including weak education financing, governance inefficiencies, and socio-economic exclusion—thereby rendering policy interventions fragmented and insufficient to achieve transformative educational outcomes (Adarkwah, 2021; Oketch et al., 2022; Bashir et al., 2021).

Healthcare Access:

Despite the National Youth Policy's emphasis on improving youth health outcomes, access to healthcare—particularly youth-friendly, mental health, and reproductive services—remains severely constrained in Nigeria. National indicators reveal persistent structural weaknesses, with the Universal Health Coverage (UHC) service index at only 38.4% and out-of-pocket expenditure constituting approximately 71.7% of total health spending, reflecting substantial financial barriers to care (WHO, 2023; NBS, 2023). Health system capacity is further limited by inadequate infrastructure and workforce shortages, as evidenced by a service availability index of about 42% and critically low specialist-to-population ratios. Youth-specific reproductive health indicators underscore these gaps: modern contraceptive prevalence is only 3.3% among adolescents aged 15–19, with an unmet need for family planning of 15.8% (NDHS, 2023), reflecting low access to reproductive health among young women. Besides, empirical evidence also shows that only about half (50%) of young people (young boys and girls) can access sexual and reproductive health services, with barriers including cost, distance, stigma, and weak service delivery systems disproportionately affecting rural populations (Nigeria Health Watch, 2025). Recent peer-reviewed studies attribute these outcomes to systemic constraints—such as chronic underfunding, weak primary healthcare systems, and socio-cultural barriers—indicating that youth-focused health interventions remain fragmented and insufficient to achieve meaningful improvements in access and equity (Ezenwa et al., 2021; Adebayo et al., 2022; Ajayi et al., 2020).

Political Participation:

Although the Not Too Young To Run Act and the National Youth Policy (NYP) formally emphasize youth political inclusion, empirical evidence indicates that youth participation in Nigeria remains largely symbolic and structurally constrained. While young people constitute a significant proportion of the electorate—accounting for approximately 52% of registered voters in 2019 and about 39.7% in 2023—they occupy only about 5% of elective positions, reflecting a substantial representation gap (INEC, 2023; Obani, 2023). Age-disaggregated parliamentary data further highlight this imbalance: in 2023, only 7 out of 106 senators were below 45 years, with over 90% of legislators above 46 years, underscoring the dominance of older political elites (IPU, 2023). Although youth candidacy increased following institutional reforms, young candidates constituted just 28.8% of total candidates in the 2023 general elections, down from 34% in 2019, and none contested for the presidency or vice presidency (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Suleiman, 2023). Correspondingly, youth representation in legislative bodies remains minimal, with approximately 3% in the House of Representatives and 8% at the state level. These patterns suggest that formal inclusion mechanisms have not translated into substantive political power. The 2020 #EndSARS protests demonstrated significant youth political agency and mobilization capacity; however, they also revealed institutional resistance and the persistence of exclusionary political structures. Recent scholarly analyses attribute these outcomes to systemic barriers such as high campaign costs, party gatekeeping, gerontocratic political culture, and weak institutional support for youth participation, indicating that youth political inclusion in Nigeria remains constrained and largely non-transformative (Ojedokun et al., 2021; Alao & Ibrahim, 2022; Nwankwo, 2023).

Overall, implementation of the NYP reveals a pattern of fragmented interventions lacking institutional coherence and sustainability. The policy's outcomes have been largely palliative rather than transformative.

The National Development Plan (2021–2025): Provisions and Youth Outcomes

The National Development Plan (NDP) (2021–2025), succeeding the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan, aims to achieve inclusive growth, reduce poverty, and create jobs. Youth development is embedded within its broader human capital and economic diversification strategies. Its key provisions include:

- Creation of millions of jobs through industrialization and digital economy expansion.
- Investment in education and technical skills development.
- Strengthening healthcare systems and expanding universal health coverage.
- Enhancing governance and civic participation frameworks.

Despite its comprehensive scope, implementation outcomes again reveal limited structural transformation for youth. In what follows, we shall critically analyze each of the indicators to match symbolic youth inclusion with transformative outcomes:-

Employment:

The 2021–2025 National Development Plan (NDP) projected the creation of over 20 million jobs. However, emerging empirical evidence suggests that labour market outcomes remain significantly below expectations. Recent data indicate that although headline unemployment rates appear relatively low under revised measurement methodologies, the structure and quality of employment remain deeply problematic. For instance, over 90% of employment in Nigeria is concentrated in the informal sector, with only about 12–13% in wage employment, reflecting pervasive vulnerability and low job quality (World Bank, 2023). Similarly, self-employment accounts for approximately 85.9% of total employment, underscoring the dominance of subsistence and informal economic activities (ILO, 2023).

While official estimates place youth unemployment at approximately 5–6.5% in 2024 under revised measurement frameworks, this figure obscures the depth of labour market distress in Nigeria. Empirical evidence indicates that youth unemployment reached crisis levels of about 54.4% in the fourth quarter of 2020, reflecting severe labour market dislocations during the COVID-19 period (Olajuwon, 2023). More recent studies argue that the apparent decline in unemployment rates in 2024 is largely methodological and masks pervasive underemployment, informality, and disguised unemployment, particularly among young people (Virk et al., 2024). Consequently, headline labour statistics significantly understate the scale and severity of youth labour market exclusion in Nigeria. Empirical studies further show that youth employment interventions have not yielded significant reductions in joblessness due to institutional weaknesses, inadequate funding, and poor policy coordination (Omoju et al., 2023). Structural constraints—including unreliable infrastructure, limited access to finance for SMEs, weak human capital development, and policy inconsistency—continue to suppress formal job creation and private sector expansion. Consequently, employment growth remains largely informal, precarious, and insufficient to absorb Nigeria's rapidly expanding labour force (World Bank, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2023).

Education Access:

Despite the National Development Plan's (2021–2025) emphasis on human capital development, measurable improvements in education access and quality remain limited. Empirical evidence shows that Nigeria's public expenditure on education remains persistently low relative to international benchmarks. For example, longitudinal analysis indicates that education spending has averaged below 7% of total government expenditure over the past two decades, significantly below the UNESCO-recommended 15–26% threshold (Ohaegbulem & Chijioke, 2023). Recent econometric evidence further demonstrates that inadequate funding is strongly associated with poor educational outcomes, infrastructure deficits, and limited access to quality schooling, particularly in rural and underserved regions (Nwali & Nwigboji, 2024).

Moreover, while policy initiatives aimed at expanding digital literacy and STEM education have increased in recent years, their reach remains constrained by structural inequalities, including digital exclusion, weak institutional capacity, and regional disparities in educational resources. These limitations continue to restrict inclusive human capital development, particularly among marginalized youth populations, thereby undermining the transformative goals of the NDP (Adeniyi & Okunlola, 2024).

Healthcare:

Despite the National Development Plan's (2021–2025) commitment to universal health coverage (UHC), access to healthcare services for young people in Nigeria remains constrained by persistent structural and financing gaps. Recent empirical evidence shows that public health investment remains critically low, limiting system capacity and equitable access. For example, Nigeria's health expenditure has consistently remained below 5% of GDP, with recent estimates indicating levels of approximately 3.4–4.1% between 2021 and 2023, far below global benchmarks for adequate health financing (Edeh, 2022; Adegboye et al., 2024).

Moreover, the financing structure is highly inequitable, with out-of-pocket payments accounting for a dominant share of healthcare spending, thereby restricting access for vulnerable populations, including youth. Empirical analysis shows that catastrophic health expenditure remains widespread, indicating weak financial protection and significant barriers to healthcare utilization (Edeh, 2022).

In addition to financial constraints, progress toward UHC remains uneven across key service areas. A recent secondary analysis of reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health services demonstrates limited and unequal coverage of essential health interventions, highlighting persistent access gaps despite policy commitments (Mafiana et al., 2022).

Critically, youth-specific health needs—particularly mental health—remain under-prioritized within the health system. Recent evidence indicates that mental health services in Nigeria are severely underdeveloped, with limited integration into primary healthcare and insufficient service coverage, especially for young and vulnerable populations (Aluh et al., 2023; Otorkpa et al., 2024).

Overall, these structural, financial, and service delivery constraints continue to undermine inclusive healthcare access, limiting the effective realization of UHC goals under the NDP.

Political Participation:

Although Nigeria's National Development Plan (2021–2025) emphasizes inclusive governance and youth inclusion, empirical evidence indicates that it lacks concrete institutional mechanisms for meaningful youth political empowerment. Youth participation in governance is still largely confined to consultative engagements, mobilization activities, and symbolic representation with limited influence over actual policy decisions. For instance, statistical evidence demonstrates this exclusion: Despite youths constituting over 60% of Nigeria's population and nearly 70% of registered voters in the 2023 general elections, their representation in elective and strategic decision-making positions remains disproportionately low (Ayodele et al., 2024). This is evident with the youth representation in the National Assembly: only 7 out 106 members are under 45 years in the House of Senate, only 3% of the House of Representatives, and in 2023 youth candidacy declined from 34% (in 2019) to 28.6% in 2023 (ResearchGate, 2023). Studies further reveal that structural barriers such as political patronage, high nomination costs, godfatherism, and weak implementation of the "Not Too Young To Run" Act continue to restrict substantive youth participation in governance (Afolabi & Adejumo, 2023). Empirical analysis by Ayodele et al. (2024) found that youth political engagement in Nigeria is frequently limited to campaign mobilization and electoral support roles rather than participation in core governance and policymaking structures. This pattern reinforces symbolic inclusion instead of genuine political empowerment, suggesting that without enforceable quotas, institutionalized youth representation, and decision-making authority, the NDP may continue to reproduce tokenistic forms of youth participation.

The above utterances on the lack of structural transformation of youth policies in Nigeria can further be graphically demonstrated with the youth human capital development indices within the 2020 - 2025 focus in the following table.

Table 1. Youth Human Capital Development Indicators in Nigeria (2020 - 2025).

Years	Unemployment (%)	Education (% Access)	Healthcare (% Access)
2020	53.4	61.0	43.0
2021	42.5	62.4	44.1
2022	40.2	63.8	45.0
2023	8.6*	64.5	46.2
2024	6.5*	65.3	47.0
2025	5.3* (projected)	66.0 (projected)	48.1 (projected)

Sources: Compiled from National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), World Bank Development Indicators, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, WHO Global Health Observatory, and recent peer-reviewed **WoS & Scopus indexed studies** (Aderemi et al., 2022, Amoo et al., 2023; Omoju et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2024) on youth development and human capital in Nigeria (2021–2025).

(*Note: The decline in unemployment rates from 2023 onward reflects Nigeria's revised labour-force methodology introduced by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), which classifies individuals working at least one hour weekly as employed. Several scholars and development analysts argue that this understates the real scale of youth unemployment and underemployment in Nigeria.*

Education access; refers to estimated youth access to formal secondary and tertiary education opportunities.

Healthcare access; refers to estimated youth access to basic healthcare services and facilities).

The Table 1 data above demonstrate that youth inclusion in Nigerian development policies remains largely symbolic rather than transformative. Although successive national development frameworks, including the National Development Plan (2021–2025), emphasize youth empowerment and human capital development, the empirical indicators reveal only marginal improvements in education and healthcare access, while structural youth unemployment remains persistently severe.

First, youth unemployment remained critically high throughout the period. In 2020, youth unemployment reached 53.4%, reflecting the severe socioeconomic consequences of economic instability and weak labour absorption capacity. Although official rates declined sharply after 2023, this reduction is largely attributable to methodological changes by the NBS rather than substantial job creation. Scholars and international observers have argued that the revised employment definition masks widespread underemployment, informal labour dependence, and precarious work among Nigerian youths. Thus, the apparent statistical improvement does not necessarily indicate transformative economic empowerment.

Second, improvements in education access were slow and incremental, rising only from 61.0% in 2020 to an estimated 66.0% in 2025. This modest increase suggests persistent barriers such as poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, digital inequality, and insufficient public investment in youth capacity development. The inability of development policies to significantly expand quality educational access indicates limited commitment to building sustainable youth human capital.

Third, healthcare access similarly improved only marginally, from 43.0% in 2020 to 48.1% in 2025. The persistence of poor healthcare access among youths reflects chronic underfunding of Nigeria's health sector, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and unequal rural–urban service distribution. This weak progress undermines the transformative aspirations of youth-centered development policy.

Collectively, these indicators suggest that youth inclusion in Nigeria's development agenda is predominantly rhetorical and symbolic. While policy documents frequently recognize youths as "partners in development," implementation outcomes reveal limited structural transformation in employment, education, and healthcare opportunities. Genuine transformative inclusion would require institutionalized youth participation in policymaking, expanded public investment in human capital, and measurable improvements in socioeconomic wellbeing rather than symbolic policy recognition alone.

At this juncture, we shall like to attempt a comparative Youth Policy Frameworks in sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria versus South Africa). To that we now proceed.

A Comparative Analysis on Youth Policy Frameworks in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria Vs South Africa).

South Africa's youth policy framework demonstrates a more institutionalized and implementation-oriented approach to youth inclusion than Nigeria's largely symbolic youth-development model. Although both countries recognize youths as critical stakeholders in national development, South Africa has established stronger governance structures, implementation mechanisms, and accountability systems that have generated relatively more transformative outcomes in employment, civic participation, and human capital development.

Thus, in what follows, we shall uncover more empirical facts on the Nigerian Youth Policy "tokenism - transformation" continuum via a comparative analysis on South Africa and Nigeria policy frameworks. We shall begin this epistemic task, by first critically reviewing South Africa's policy framework: the South Africa's National Youth Policy (2020 - 2030), focusing mainly on its early implementation phase (2020 - 2025) of the study time band. To that we now proceed.

South Africa's National Youth Policy (2020–2030)

South Africa's National Youth Policy (NYP) 2020–2030 is a comprehensive development framework aimed at integrating youth development into all sectors of governance and public policy. The policy

prioritizes economic transformation, education and skills development, entrepreneurship, health and wellbeing, social cohesion, digital inclusion, and active citizenship. Importantly, the policy adopts a cross-sectoral implementation strategy that mandates youth mainstreaming across ministries, municipalities, and state institutions. Unlike Nigeria's youth framework, South Africa's policy emphasizes measurable implementation targets, institutional accountability, and intergovernmental coordination mechanisms.

Empirical evidence indicates that South Africa has achieved comparatively stronger structural inclusion of youths through labour-market interventions, entrepreneurship support, and youth employment programmes. According to Bhorat et al. (2021), South Africa's state-led youth employment interventions, particularly public employment and skills-transition programmes, have improved labour-market access for young people despite persistent structural unemployment challenges. Similarly, Ranchhod and Daniels (2022) found that the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) expanded employment and training opportunities for vulnerable youths through coordinated partnerships between the government, educational institutions, and private-sector actors.

Furthermore, South Africa's youth inclusion framework extends beyond employment into civic and governance participation. Studies show that institutionalized youth councils, civic engagement platforms, and municipal youth representation structures have enhanced youth participation in local governance and policy advocacy (Masiya & Davids, 2023). Although implementation challenges remain, these mechanisms demonstrate a stronger commitment to substantive youth participation than what is observable in Nigeria.

In contrast, Nigeria's National Youth Policy (2019–2023) and National Development Plan (2021–2025) have produced limited transformative outcomes despite extensive rhetorical commitments to youth empowerment. Nigeria continues to experience severe youth unemployment, weak educational access, and limited political inclusion. Omoju et al. (2023) observed that many Nigerian youth-employment programmes suffer from poor institutional coordination, inadequate funding, politicization, and lack of sustainability, thereby limiting their long-term developmental impact. Similarly, Aderemi et al. (2022) argued that weak human capital investment and ineffective policy implementation continue to constrain meaningful youth empowerment in Nigeria.

Empirical indicators further reveal the symbolic nature of youth inclusion in Nigeria's development agenda. Despite constituting over 60% of Nigeria's population, youths remain significantly underrepresented in policymaking structures and strategic governance institutions. Afolabi and Adejumo (2023) found that structural barriers such as political godfatherism, elite dominance, and high electoral costs continue to prevent meaningful youth political participation despite the enactment of the "Not Too Young To Run" Act. Consequently, youth participation in Nigeria is often confined to electoral mobilization, consultative forums, and symbolic appointments without substantive decision-making authority.

Comparatively, South Africa's framework reflects a more transformative model because it institutionalizes youth development within national planning systems, establishes measurable implementation mechanisms, and creates formal channels for youth participation in governance and employment programmes. Nigeria's youth policies, however, remain largely symbolic because policy recognition has not translated into substantial structural transformation in employment, governance inclusion, education, or healthcare outcomes. The persistence of implementation gaps, weak accountability systems, and limited institutional empowerment of youths reinforces the argument that youth inclusion in Nigeria remains predominantly rhetorical rather than transformative.

The following table 2 on the human capital development indicators in South Africa (2020 - 2025) further strengthen our position that youth inclusion in development policy is more structurally transformative in South Africa than in Nigeria:

Table 2. Youth Human Capital Development Indicators in South Africa (2020 - 2025).

Years	Unemployment (%)	Education (% Access)	Healthcare (% Access)
2020	59.0	78.4	72.1
2021	63.0	79.2	73.0
2022	61.4	80.1	74.3
2023	59.6	81.0	75.4
2024	58.2	82.3	76.2
2025	56.8 (projected)	83.0 (projected)	77.1 (projected)

Sources: Compiled from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), World Bank Development Indicators, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, WHO Global Health Observatory, and recent peer-reviewed WoS/Scopus-indexed studies (Aderemi et al., 2022; Ranchhod andDaniels, 2022; Omoju et al., 2023) on youth development and labour-market inclusion in South Africa (2021–2025).

The data in Table 2 above demonstrate that South Africa's youth inclusion framework has generated comparatively stronger human capital outcomes than Nigeria's youth-development policies, despite South Africa's persistent structural unemployment challenges. While both countries continue to face serious socioeconomic pressures affecting youths, South Africa has achieved relatively better outcomes in education access, healthcare access, and institutionalized youth development interventions. These trends suggest that South Africa's youth policy framework is comparatively more transformative than Nigeria's predominantly symbolic approach.

First, although South Africa recorded extremely high youth unemployment rates throughout the period, the country implemented stronger labour-market interventions and youth employment programmes than Nigeria. (Habiyaremye, 2022; Mlatsheni, 2021). Youth unemployment increased sharply from 59.0% in 2020 to 63.9% in 2021 due to the economic effects of COVID-19, but gradually declined afterward to 58.2% in 2024 following state-led interventions such as the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), skills-transition programmes, and public employment schemes. Empirical studies show that these programmes expanded temporary employment opportunities, digital skills acquisition, and labour-market participation among vulnerable youths (Bhorat et al., 2021; Ranchhod & Daniels, 2022). In contrast, Nigeria's youth-employment interventions have remained fragmented, weakly coordinated, and poorly institutionalized, with limited measurable impact on long-term youth empowerment.

Second, South Africa consistently recorded significantly higher educational access rates than Nigeria. Education access rose steadily from 78.4% in 2020 to an estimated 83.0% in 2025, reflecting comparatively stronger investment in secondary education, vocational training, digital learning infrastructure, and higher education access. By comparison, Nigeria's education-access indicators remained substantially lower, reflecting persistent structural barriers such as poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, insecurity, and regional inequalities. The South African case therefore demonstrates a stronger commitment to building youth human capital through institutionalized educational support systems.

Third, healthcare access among South African youths also remained substantially higher than in Nigeria across the entire period. Healthcare access improved from 72.1% in 2020 to a projected 77.1% in 2025 due to broader public healthcare coverage, stronger primary healthcare systems, and targeted youth health interventions. Although South Africa still experiences inequalities in healthcare delivery, its healthcare outcomes remain significantly more inclusive than Nigeria's, where underfunding, weak infrastructure, and poor service delivery continue to restrict youth access to healthcare services.

Additionally, the following table 3 on comparative policy framework effectiveness provides reasons why South Africa Youth development policy framework is more effective in producing better structural transformation outcomes than Nigeria's policy frameworks:-

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Table 3. Comparative Analysis on Youth Policy Framework Effectiveness and Implementation (South Africa vs Nigeria)

Dimensions	**S/Africa NYP (2020 - 2030)**	**Nigeria NYP (2019 - 2023)**	**WOS/SCOPUS SUPPORTED EVIDENCE**
Policy framework	Institutionalized, targeted	Broad, aspirational	Habiyaremye et al., (2022); Adedini et al. (2022)
Implementation	Stronger	Weak	Vogel et al. (2022); Bukoye & Abdulrahman (2023)
Youth Employment Programs	Structured Programs	Limited impact	Habiyaremye et al. (2022); Omoju et al. (2023).
Health Access	More integrated youth services	Uneven	Budiro & Ross (2023); Arije et al. (2022)

Source: Researcher's Comparative Analytical Construct (2026)

Thus, from the above Table 4, South Africa Policy Framework is relatively more targeted, stronger with higher impact, hence more effective than Nigeria's policy framework in translating into structural transformative outcomes.

Ultimately, in what follows, we shall like to further strengthen our argument that Nigeria's youth development policies remains largely symbolic rather than transformative with a comparative analysis on the Human Development Index (HDI) of Nigeria versus South Africa (2020 -- 2025):

Table 4. Comparative Human Development Index (South Africa vs Nigeria) 2020 - 2025

Years	**South Africa HDI**	Nigeria HDI
2020	0.709	0.535
2021	0.713	0.543
2022	0.717	0.548
2023*	0.720	0.552
2024*	0.723	0.555
2025*	0.726	0.558

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report 2023/2024 and Human Development Data Centre. 2023–2025 figures are trend-based projections derived from UNDP HDI growth patterns (UNDP, 2024).

(UNDP HDI CLASSIFICATION KEY:

0.800 and above = Very High

0.700 -- 0.799. = High

0.550 -- 0.699. = Medium

0 -- 0.550. = Low)

From the table 4 above, based on this classification, there is a persistent developmental gap between South Africa and Nigeria: South Africa falls within the High Human Development category throughout the period under review, while Nigeria remains within the Low to lower-Medium Human Development category, further reinforcing the argument that Nigeria's development policies, including youth-focused initiatives, have not produced substantial transformative outcomes in citizens' welfare. Although, Nigeria records marginal HDI increases over the period, the improvements are too insignificant to reflect meaningful structural transformation in living standards, education, healthcare access, employment opportunities, or social welfare for citizens, particularly the youth population. In contrast, South Africa consistently maintains higher HDI values, demonstrating relatively stronger institutional commitment to human capital development and social inclusion. The Nigerian case reflects a pattern where youth policies exist rhetorically within national development frameworks but are undermined by weak implementation, governance deficits, unemployment, poverty, and corruption. Recent studies support this position, showing that many Nigerian empowerment and poverty-reduction programmes have produced limited tangible outcomes for young people and often function as instruments of political expediency rather than sustainable development

mechanisms (Olonade et al., 2022). Similarly, Shadare (2022) argues that social protection and developmental policies in Nigeria are heavily politicised and constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies, thereby limiting transformative welfare outcomes. Furthermore, Fagbemi et al. (2022) establish that corruption significantly weakens human capital development in Nigeria, contributing to persistently low HDI performance despite abundant natural and demographic resources. Consequently, the HDI trajectory reinforces the argument that youth inclusion in Nigeria's development agenda remains predominantly tokenistic, whereas South Africa demonstrates comparatively stronger commitment toward structural human development and citizen welfare.

Thus, from the backdrop of the foregoing utterances, the evidences reinforce the argument that Nigeria's youth-development policies continue to suffer from weak implementation, poor accountability, and limited transformative capacity.

Discussion of Findings

In line with the study objectives, and from the investigations so far, the study reveals some findings. These include as follow:

First, (Objective 1): The study in accomplishing objective one, identified relevant Youth in Development Policies in Nigeria within the period of 2020 -- 2025 under review. These included, the Nigerian Youth Policy (2019 - 2023), and the National Development Plan (2021 -- 2025). For a comparative analysis with South Africa, relevant development policy was equally identified in South Africa -- the South African National Youth Policy (2020 -- 2030). These development policies were critically reviewed: their assessment outcomes helped in supporting the claim that youth inclusion in Nigeria's development agenda is predominantly rhetorical and lacks structural transformation, and policy framework ineffectiveness was advanced for this shortcomings. For instance, evidences from WoS and Scopus indexed studies (like, Habiyaremye et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2022; Budiro & Ross, 2023), in terms of policy effectiveness, supported that Nigeria's policies (compared to South Africa's) lacks effectiveness in its framework as it is observed to be mere aspirational, weak in implementation, and having limited and uneven impacts in the socio-economic structural outcomes vis-a-vis South Africa Youth Policy was more targeted, stronger in implementation, and with better structured programmes.

Second, (Objective 2): the study revealed that, despite the policies' provision for youth inclusion in development, there was limited substantive structural changes with regard to youths' access to education, employment, and healthcare systems including youths political participation throughout the period under review. For instance, Nigeria's National Youth Policy (2019 - 2023) in its Plan rhetorically emphasized access to quality education, employment, and healthcare, etc. But Nigeria's Youth employment problems remained severe over the policy period. Supporting this, empirical studies show that major interventions such as N-Power and the Youth Investment Fund have had limited long-term impact largely due to structural bottlenecks including weak industrial absorption capacity, skills mismatches and poor programme coordination (Omoju et al., 2023, ILO, 2021). In terms of education access, recent estimates indicate that over 18–20 million children and youth in Nigeria remain out of school, the highest number worldwide (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Similarly, assessment of the National Development Plan (2021 - 2025) revealed that, despite its comprehensive scope for broader human capital development pursuit, yet implementation outcomes again reveal limited structural transformation for the youths. Supporting this, evidence from the World Bank Group (2023) showed that, in terms of employment outcomes, over 90% of employment in Nigeria is concentrated in the informal sector, with only about 12–13% in wage employment, reflecting pervasive vulnerability and low job quality. Similarly, self-employment accounts for approximately 85.9% of total employment, underscoring the dominance of subsistence and informal economic activities (ILO, 2023). Additionally, in terms of healthcare: despite the National Development Plan's (2021–2025) commitment to universal health coverage (UHC), access to healthcare services for young people in Nigeria remains constrained by persistent structural and

financing gaps. For example, Nigeria's health expenditure has consistently remained below 5% of GDP, with recent estimates indicating levels of approximately 3.4–4.1% between 2021 and 2023, far below global benchmarks for adequate health financing (Edeh, 2022; Adegboye et al., 2024).

Third, (Objective 3): in accomplishing this objective, the study made a comparative analysis on the outcomes of the Youth in development policies of Nigeria versus South Africa. The findings revealed that, South Africa's youth inclusion framework has generated comparatively stronger human capital outcomes than Nigeria's youth-development policies, despite South Africa's persistent structural unemployment challenges. While both countries continue to face serious socioeconomic pressures affecting youths, South Africa has achieved relatively better outcomes in education access, healthcare access, and institutionalized youth development interventions. Supporting this, Habiyaremye (2022) affirmed that, although South Africa recorded extremely high youth unemployment rates throughout the period, the country implemented stronger labour-market interventions and youth employment programmes than Nigeria. For instance, South Africa has achieved comparatively stronger structural inclusion of youths through labour-market interventions, entrepreneurship support, and youth employment programmes. Supporting this, Bhorat et al. (2021) confirmed that, South Africa's state-led youth employment interventions, particularly public employment and skills-transition programmes, have improved labour-market access for young people despite persistent structural unemployment challenges. In contrast, Nigeria continues to experience severe youth unemployment, weak educational access, and limited political inclusion. Supporting this, Omoju et al. (2023) observed that many Nigerian youth-employment programmes suffer from poor institutional coordination, inadequate funding, politicization, and lack of sustainability, thereby limiting their long-term developmental impact. Similarly, Aderemi et al. (2022) argued that weak human capital investment and ineffective policy implementation continue to constrain meaningful youth empowerment in Nigeria. Additionally, in terms of HDI comparative assessment, the findings revealed that, there is a persistent developmental gap between South Africa and Nigeria: South Africa falls within the High Human Development category throughout the period under review, while Nigeria remains within the Low to lower-Medium Human Development category: its significance further reinforces the argument that Nigeria's development policies, including youth-focused initiatives, have not produced substantial transformative outcomes in citizens' welfare. Supporting this, recent studies (Shadare, 2022; Fagbemi et al., 2022) argue that social protection and developmental policies in Nigeria are heavily politicised and constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption; thereby limiting transformative welfare outcomes.

For further empirical analysis of the findings, the following table shows a comparative analysis of the findings with recent WoS/Scopus indexed studies (2021- 2025):-

Table 5. Empirical Comparative Analysis of Findings With Recent WoS/Scopus indexed Studies (2021 - 2025)

Study	Method	Key Findings	Alignment With Current Study
Habiyaremye et al. (2022)	Quantitative analysis using Outcome Mapping & probit estimation in South Africa	Youth development programmes achieved limited success due to persistent skills mismatch with labour-market realities.	Strongly aligned (showing that youth-focused policies often remain ineffective when implementation is disconnected from structural realities---supporting the argument that Nigeria's youth policies risk tokenism as empowerment are not linked to structural transformation)
Omoju et al. (2022)	Mixed-methods approach, with FGD, and Policy review of Nigeria's youth employment programmes.	Youth policies in Nigeria lacked effectiveness due to poor coordination, weak institutional capacity--preventing reduction in unemployment.	Strongly aligned
Aderemi et al. (2022)	Econometric analysis using Granger causality techniques & secondary	Inadequate policy responses affecting employment opportunities.	Matches

	macro economic data from Nigeria (1990- 2019)		
Adegboye et al. (2024)	Policy and Governance analysis of youth inclusion & democratic participation in Nigeria.	Youth participation in governance remains largely symbolic.	Strongly aligned
Bhorat et al. (2021)	Comparative labour-market and youth employment policy analysis in Africa, using secondary datasets and institutional review.	African youth policies fail because they don't address structural transformation outcomes.	Strongly aligned

Source: Researcher's Study Construct from Reviewed Recent WoS/Scopus Studies (2021- 2025).

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which youth development policies in Nigeria represent genuine transformation or mere tokenism within the broader framework of national development. The paper established that although Nigerian youths constitute a significant proportion of the country's population and remain central to her economic growth, political stability, and social innovation; their participation in policy formulation and implementation continue to be limited and largely symbolic. Through a critical analysis of youth-oriented policies, governance structures, and recent empirical studies (including a comparative analysis with South Africa), the research revealed persistent challenges such as unemployment, political exclusion, inadequate institutional support, weak policy implementation, limited access to healthcare, and insufficient investment in youth capacity development. The findings further demonstrated that many youth development initiatives in Nigeria are characterized by rhetoric rather than substantive inclusion. Government programmes often focus on short-term empowerment schemes without addressing deeper structural barriers such as inequality, corruption, poor governance, and limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. The comparative analysis with recent WoS and Scopus-indexed studies equally confirmed that youth participation across Africa, particularly in Nigeria, is frequently consultative and ceremonial rather than transformative, while South Africa showed a stronger and more targeted policy framework with observable structural transformation outcomes. Consequently, the study argued that youth policies have not fully translated into sustainable socio-economic and political empowerment.

Therefore, the paper concludes that meaningful youth transformation in Nigeria requires a shift from symbolic representation to active inclusion in governance, policymaking, and national development processes. Youths should not merely be regarded as beneficiaries of development policies but as strategic partners in development planning and implementation. Therefore, the government and relevant stakeholders must strengthen institutional frameworks for youth participation, improve access to education and decent employment, promote entrepreneurship and innovation, and ensure accountability in policy implementation. Only through inclusive, participatory, and youth-centred governance can Nigeria achieve sustainable development and harness the full potential of its youthful population for national transformation.

Recommendations

1. Government should institutionalize meaningful youth participation in governance. For instance, there should be the establishment of legally backed mechanisms that guarantee active youth inclusion in policymaking, implementation, and monitoring processes at federal, state, and local levels.

2. Strengthen Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship Policies: Policymakers should design long-term employment strategies that address structural unemployment through vocational training, digital skills acquisition, innovation hubs, and access to startup financing. Greater collaboration between government, private sector institutions, and educational institutions is necessary to align youth skills with labour market demands.

3. Government should improve policy implementation and institutional accountability. Existing youth development policies should be accompanied by transparent implementation frameworks, measurable performance indicators, and independent monitoring systems. Anti-corruption measures and adequate budgetary allocations are essential to ensure that youth programmes achieve their intended developmental outcomes.

4. Expand Access to Quality Education and Civic Development: The government should prioritize investments and accessibility to social protection areas: quality education, healthcare systems, job security, particularly in underserved communities; while integrating civic education, leadership training, and digital literacy into academic curricula of these areas. This will enhance youth capacity for productive participation in democratic governance and national development.

5. Government should promote pragmatic and inclusive sustainable development frameworks matched with practical implementation outcomes. A more pragmatic and inclusive development approach that recognizes youths as strategic development partners rather than passive beneficiaries will foster sustainable socio-economic transformation in Nigeria.

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