

**EMPOWERING THE READIED LABOUR ARMIES: INFORMATION
TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGES OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND
POVETY IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The Nigerian paradox has continued to baffle the world because the poverty level in the country contradicts the country's immense wealth as over 70 percent of her citizen's wallow in absolute poverty without job, food, clothing or shelter. Successive regimes in Nigeria have embarked on several growth and development programmes to ameliorate these challenges since independent. These growth and development policies have failed to achieve her various core mandates. The evidence of their failures is an obvious manifestation of the increasing rate of poverty and massive rate of unemployment in the country; in an era that information technology is offering information and knowledge that are critical component for poverty alleviation/eradication and employment generation. This paper assessed information technology and the unending challenges of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria; this objective was accomplished through the utilization of secondary source of data, sourced mainly from journals both national and international, useful textbooks, government official gazettes among others. The paper is strictly an exploratory research analyzed from the theoretical platform of system theory. The study found that, the Nigerian government's inability to identify and invest in appropriate sectors critical for tackling any form of development challenges today; backed-up with lack of effective and efficient policies along this spectrum, among others, are the major issues contending against the various efforts put in place to overcome these hydra-headed challenges of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria. It is therefore the conclusion of this paper that, information technology is the most important tool that derives today's global economy. Nigerian government should therefore invest in this sector that presents several potentials and strengths of creating millions of job opportunities for our ever increasing readied labour armies of unemployed and poor population.

Keywords: Readied Labour Armies, Information Technology, Unemployment, Poverty and Development.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an explosion of information technology around the world. Its effects are particularly noteworthy with regard to the internet, the world's largest computer network. The Internet evolved from the Pentagon, the headquarters of the American military. Established in 1969 and first named the ARPA net, after the pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency. The aim was then limited, the ARPA sought to allow scientists working on military contracts in different parts of America to pool their resources and to share the

expensive equipment they were using then. Until recently, it was difficult to gain access to the internet without holding a position at a university or a government research laboratory. Today, however, virtually anyone can reach the Internet with a mobile phone, a computer, and a modem. People buy and sell Cars, trade stocks, auction off items, research new medical remedies, vote, and track down long-lost friends online – to mention just a few of the thousands of possibilities and opportunities that today’s advanced information technology offers (Schaefer, 2008; Giddens, 2004; Reddick & King, 2000).

The best known part of the internet is the World Wide Web (WWW). Indeed, like a cuckoo in a nest, it threatens to take over its host. The web is in effect a global multimedia library. It was invented by a software engineer at a Swiss physics lab in 1992; the software which popularized it across the world was written by an undergraduate at the University of Illinois. Users navigate the web with the help of an internet ‘browser’ – a software program that allows individuals to search for information, locate particular sites or WebPages; and through the web it is possible to download a wide variety of documents and programs. As websites have grown in sophistication, they have become a feast for the senses. The web also serves as the main interface for ‘e-commerce’ – business transaction conducted online, creating diverse opportunities and resolving the challenges of unemployment and poverty especially the absolute variant across the globe (Giddens, 2004).

Nigeria is the single largest geographical unit in West Africa. It occupies a land area of 923,768 square kilometers situated between longitude 3° and 15° East, and latitude 4° and 14° North (CBN, 2000). At the start of the 1960s, the basis of the Nigerian economy was a well-diversified agricultural sector that supported 75 percent of her population, provided 68 percent of GDP and 78 percent of exports and supplied the people with 94 percent of their food. Again, per capita income was estimated at US \$90 per capita and GDP growth was rapid at an annual rate nearly 5 percent (World Bank, 1996). However, a new development pattern gradually emerged (over the years) as agriculture began to stagnate due to the focus on the oil sector and the growing burden of taxation. Later rapidly growing industries began to exert considerable influence on the economy, including demands for special protection from imports. This led to a shift in the pattern of industrialization, from the processing of agricultural products for export, towards simple import substitution; as well as the emergence of petroleum extraction as a leading growth sector. Indeed, Nigeria is still undergoing a difficult political and economic transition after several years of military rule. The problems include pervasive poverty and widespread unemployment; deterioration of government institutions and inadequate capacity at all levels of government to deliver critical services effectively.

Flowing from the general economic adversity, poverty, unemployment and other associated development challenges are growing in Nigeria; the number of Nigerians who are poor and unemployed may not be accurate, but all indicators (number of school age children not in school, people scavenging refuse dumps as

source of survival, number of people dying of treatable diseases) all indicate the number of Nigerians in a critical condition and in dire need of help. Clearly, Nigeria is a rich country with poor citizens! The current level of poverty and unemployment has a knocked-out effect on a whole range of opportunities and outcomes such as education, where many more children from poor families are dropping out of school; opportunities for skill training are less available for the poor and unemployed (Onu & Oche, 2015).

The cycle of poverty keep growing with all its attendant consequences; food security is currently an issue for many households in Nigeria as well as the rate of unemployment which is still perpetually high. Studies have shown that, more than quarters of Nigerians working age population aged fifteen (15) to sixty-five (65) years are not in the labour force. According to these studies, fully seventy (70) per cent of Nigeria's, which is over one hundred and sixty (160) million populations, are thirty (30) years of age or younger (Onu & Oche, 2017; Iweala, 2012; Treichel, 2010). If this figure is increasing eight (8) years ago; one can conclude today that, it is sky-rocking since it remain unattended to even with the much talked about development policies/programmes (NEEDs, Vision 20:2020 and the change mantra among others) to addressing their menace.

It therefore needs not to be overemphasized that a lot of Nigerians are trapped in the web of unemployment and poverty due to lack of adoption of an appropriate and modern workable development strategy. This paper therefore, assessed information technology and the challenges of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria.

Conceptualization of Key Words/Literature Review

The readied labour armies are basically young Nigerians who have been trained in diverse field of human endeavours, equipped and qualified to take-up gainful jobs and to create opportunities for several other jobs but are unable to find such suitable paid jobs and opportunities to practically exercise their professions or skills. It also encompasses all those currently not in a gainful or paid job of whatever variant either for themselves or others but are able and willing to work for pay or generating personal income and creating jobs from their own creativity and skills; actively searching for job and any open opportunity to engage in. Uwalaka, (2003) aptly refers to this group of highly deprived Nigerians with just hope pilling upon hope in their search as the “most bartered generation of the Nigerian project.” While Oche, (2006) poignantly refer to this group as “the wasted generation”. He further stressed that, the Nigeria society has become a grave yard for wasted talents and skills. And of grave concern is the fact that, Nigerian youths have become victims of an unwholesome political environment characterized by violence, hooliganism, lawlessness, manipulation, and corruption. The situation is robbing over on many young men and women who are now engaged in much dangerous and deviant behaviour like: armed robbery, kidnapping, Banditry, prostitution, fraud, assassination, etc. This is regrettable for as Soyinka cited in Oche, (2006 P. 26) mused:

It is immoral for us to transfer to a new generation a degraded environment that is degraded to a degree that even a miraculous generation of genius will find it beyond their power to regenerate without a violent upheaval.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on the other hand, is the infrastructure and components that enable modern computing. Although, there is no single, universal definition of ICT, the term is generally accepted to mean all devices, networking components, applications and systems that combined and allow people and organization (i.e. business, nonprofit agencies, governments etc) to interact in the digital work (Rouse, 2005).

ICT also extend to new media which described those aspects of media like hardware and software, as well as media institutions and the people and practices in them and outside them. Technological development in ICT such as the expansion and enhancement of the internet and larger and faster digital storage technologies, have allowed the new media to both diversify and spread. Cable, terrestrial and satellite television channels, plus widespread cheap access to the internet and digital technology, have flowed rapidly from the UK and USA to many other parts of the world (Schaefer, 2008; Giddens, 2004).

Developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are the forces for change in human society today. For example, when printing was invented and when electronic media were developed; important social changes began to take place. For McLuhan, (1964), the real importance of ICT lies not in their content, but in the way they themselves alter our social life.

Pushing our discussion to the concept of unemployment; as a concept and social challenge, unemployment seems to have a uniform understanding and usage but different approach to tackling its menace differ from society to society. Udu &

Ada (2005) conceptualized unemployment as a situation in which persons capable and willing to work are unable to find suitable paid employment. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2007) also conceived of unemployed persons as those who are currently not working but are willing and able to work for pay, currently available to work and are actively searching for work but cannot find one. While Hornby, (2010) added to our understanding by defining unemployment as “the facts of a number of people not having a job; the number of people without a job; and the state of not having a job.

Flowing from the various understanding above, unemployment is among the biggest threats to social stability in many countries (including Nigeria) with a current global rate of 6.6%. According to a recent ILO (2020) report, nearly one billion people around the world, approximately 30% of the entire global work force, are unemployed or under-employed in industrialized and developing countries alike. They therefore warned that, the growing numbers of “working poor” risk aggravating the social and economic ills caused by high jobless rate. When compared with her counterparts in the continent, Nigeria’s unemployment crisis (Africa’s largest economy) is more serious (currently at 33.3% up from 27.1 in the second quarter of 2020) has surge to the second highest on a global list of countries monitored by Bloomberg (NBS, 2021). According to NBS (2021) report, more than 60% of Nigeria’s working age populations are younger than 34 years. Unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 24 years stood at 53.4% in the fourth quarter and at 37.2% for people aged 25 to 34. The rate for women stood at 35.2% compare with 31.8% for men. Nigeria seems to be one of the worst hit. For

instance, while many government agencies and parastatals lay embargo on employment in the last two decades, within the same period, governmental reforms disengaged about 121,731 workers from the public service between 2006 and 2007. During the first phase of the rightsizing process of the 2005 public service reform, about 30,000 officers of the core civil service were disengaged from service. The banking industry also suffered adverse effects of the financial crisis; couple with the Covid-19 pandemic some banks in the banking sector massively ‘swept out’ their work force in a bid to remain in business and this has drastically increased the rate of unemployment in Nigeria (OECD, 2021; Onu & Oche, 2015; ILO, 2012; Adegoroye, 2006).

Poverty on the other hand is a state in which resources, usually but sometimes cultural, are not available. It can also be understood as a condition involving critical scarcity of command over commodities or resources, access to assets, and the ability to function in a society. From a practical point of view, the measurement of poverty focuses on assessing whether individuals and households have enough resources to meet their basic needs. This is though a commonly used technique for measuring poverty on the bases of monetary parameter; nonmonetary dimensions are equally relevant and should not be left out. The poor are not just poor only in income; they are also more likely than the non-poor to be cold, hungry, malnourished, illiterate, sick, alcoholic, depressed, or excluded from society. Thus, poverty is not just a shortage of quantifiable resources but a more general state of vulnerability marked by a lack of access to health services and

education, low self-confidence, and a sense of powerlessness (Onu & Oche, 2015; Nallari & Graffi, 2011).

Two different approaches and forms to understanding poverty have been longed favoured by sociologist and researchers. They are: absolute and relative poverty (Alubo, 2012; Giddens, 2004; Townsend, 1979). The absolute approach and form of poverty is grounded in the idea of subsistence – the basic condition that must be met in order to sustain a physically healthy existence. People who lack these fundamental requirements for human existence – such as: sufficient food, shelter and clothing are said to live in absolute poverty. The absolute form of poverty is seen as universally applicable. Not everyone accepts that it is possible and practicable to identify such a standard. They instead argued that, it is more appropriate to use the relative form of poverty which relates poverty to the overall standard of living that prevail in a particular society; the argument is that, poverty should be explained to extend beyond a simple lack of material resources.

Either understanding or measuring poverty from the absolute or relative form, poverty is practically and obviously growing in Nigeria. The rate of poor Nigerians may not be accurate, but on the bases of all obvious and practical indicators (number of people not in any gainful job, people scavenging refuse dumps, number of people dying daily in various hospitals for one treatable ailment or the other, etc); indicate the numbers of Nigerians in dire need of help. The current level of poverty (over 48%) has a knock-on effects on the whole range of opportunities and outcome such as: education, health, shelter, electricity etc. in Nigeria today.

Theoretical Framework: System Theory

A number of Sociologists like: Bailey, (1995; 2001); Ball, (1978); Buckley, (1967), have all worked in the area of systems theory, but the most prominent among them is Luhmann (1998). He developed a Sociological approach that combined elements of Parson's structural functionalism with general system theory. General systems theory is an interdisciplinary research area that traces its roots to the 1960s (Bailey, 2005). It draws on field such as biology, cognitive psychology, organizational theory, computer science and information theory (cybernetics), phenomenology and sociology among others. It assumes that phenomena as diverse as biological organisms, ecosystems, human cognition, and information processing can all be treated as systems that operate according to shared set of principles. Recently, systems theory has been taken up by scholars in the human sciences who are interested in fusing insight from the natural sciences with poststructuralist thought (Rasch, 2000; Wolfe, 2000). Luhmann (1998) has served as a bridge between these two presumably distinct scholarly fields.

He saw Parson's later ideas as the only general theory complex enough to form the basis for a new sociological approach that could incorporate the latest findings in biological and cybernetic systems. Like Parson, Luhmann studied social systems as functionally differentiated units. However, in his reliance on systems theory, he presents a much more dynamic conception of social systems, their formation and evolution. In particular, he moved beyond Parsons in two ways. First, he adds the concept of **SELF – REFERENCE** – i.e. society's ability to take itself as an object of analysis and action. According to him, self-reference is

central to our understanding of society as a system. Societies are systems insofar as they work on themselves. Second, Luhmann relies upon the concept of **CONTINGENCY**. Contingency refers to the idea that social systems do not possess universal and everlasting structures and function. Instead, system organization is a limited – term accomplishment. Systems changes and evolve as demanded by their relationship with an external environment.

As a sociologist, Luhmann's most important contribution to systems theory is his analysis of social systems. In this view, three concepts that are of central importance to Luhmann's analysis of social system are: 1. the distinction between the system and environment, 2. Autopoiesis, and 3. Differentiation. In brief, the theory argues that, social systems bring themselves into existence when they differentiate themselves from their surrounding environment and then generate further division within themselves.

1. **SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENT:** The key understanding of what Luhmann means by a system can be found in the distinction between a system and its environment. Every system is situated in an environment and a system is separate from its environment by a boundary. An example of a boundary is the distinction between a human body and the world around it. The human body is a system situated in an environment that contains, among others things, other people and objects. Another example of a boundary is the distinction between a country such as Nigeria, and the surrounding countries to which it relates. Nigeria is the system and the collections of other countries are the environment of that system.

- 2. AUTOPOIESIS:** Luhmann borrowed the concept from the biologist Humberto Maturana Francisco Varela (1980). Autopoiesis has been used to refer to a diversity of system from biological cells to the entire world system and Luhmann uses it to refer to systems such as the economy, the political system, the legal system, the scientific system, and bureaucracies among others. The word is derived from classic Greek: “Poiesis” meaning the act of making, and “auto” refers to the self. As such, “autopoiesis means that systems are self – making, or more broadly self – generating, or self – organizing. In other words, the system is ultimately responsible for its own organization and development.
- 3. DIFFERENTIATION:** Luhmann argued that, differentiation is the principal feature of modern society. It’s the means by which a system deals with the complexity of its environment. For our purposes we can say that, differentiation refers to the process by which system make distinctions.

System theory like any other sociological theory has been criticized. Luhmann’s concept of society’s ability to take itself as an object of analysis and action has been criticized on the ground of his treating society as an animate object. Although, man is part and parcel of society, since society itself is the product of man. Despite this criticism, one of the major arguments of system theory is centered on the fact that, social system like Nigeria do not possessed a universal and everlasting structures and functions. Systems therefore changes and evolve; it is upon this base line that this paper argue that, society have evolve from agrarian, to industrial and now to information age or era. The major driver of today’s global

economy is Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and as such any strategy, policies/programme to be drawn or formulated to tackle today's global development challenges like unemployment and poverty among others in Nigeria must be in line or turn with today's single driver of global economy – Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Development strategy or policies/programmes formulated on the bases of the agrarian and industrial era or epoch which do not drive today's modern global economy will be very difficult to address or tackle the challenges of development like: unemployment and poverty in Nigeria today. It is upon this ground that this theory proves relevant or potent for this study despite the criticism leveled against it.

The Potentials of Information Technology to Addressing Unemployment and Poverty Challenges in Nigeria

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a leveraged for economic, societal and interpersonal transactions and interactions. ICT has drastically changed how people work, communicate, learn and live. ICT's importance to economic development and business growth has been so monumental; in fact, it is credited with ushering in what many have labeled the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Rouse, 2005).

For businesses, advances within ICT have brought a slew of cost savings, opportunities and conveniences. They range from highly automated businesses processes that have cut costs, to the big data revolution where organizations are turning the vast trove of data generated by ICT into insights that drive new products and services (Gopalakrishna, 2005).

ICT technologies are not just improving lives, but also creating jobs and tackling unemployment and poverty challenges globally. It is connecting low-income, high-potential youths with employment opportunities, specifically digital jobs globally; the possibilities of digital jobs are staggering; over two (2) quintillion bytes of data exists in the world today – ninety (90) per cent of which has been created in the last three years. Business and organizations of all sizes and scope – companies, universities, libraries, and government need workers who can curate and manage that data, from transcribing printed books into digital formats to creating databases to mine insight from customer data. These tasks that ICT offer can be performed from almost any location in the world, not just onsite at a company's headquarters, and often at lower costs. With the opportunities that ICT offers and still offering, American and other advanced world internet and multi-billion dollars companies can set up outposts in Nigeria as they have done in India and other countries with effective and efficient ICT infrastructure, generating over 800,000 new jobs and seventeen (17) billion dollars in revenue for India between 2008 and 2010 (Onu & Oche, 2017; McKinsey, (2008)

Conclusion/Recommendation: From Lamentation to Remedial Actions

This paper assessed a troubling social phenomenon in Nigeria – the ever increasing development challenges like: unemployment and poverty from the theoretical platform of system theory – a variant of functionalist theory; and the failed attempts at various levels to create sustainable policies/programmes in an ICT governed world. ICTs are seen today as critical resources for the promotion of socio-economic development globally, with the potential of tackling any

variant of development challenges globally. Tapping into the ICT potential to tackle our development challenges in today's ICT driven world is germane and critical for overcoming these challenges.

This paper therefore offers the following recommendations as base line to overcoming these challenges: first, there is a need for the Nigerian government to make ICT the hub of her policy wheel; and to link the various sectors and absorb the cost at the initial stage of implementing the policy. The infrastructure development of the country should be tackled seriously for decentralization of ICT to take place in all local government areas to facilitate socio-economic development of the country and reduce to the minimum the challenges of unemployment and poverty among others.

Second, the socio-economic state of the country should be integrated to the design of ICT projects. Local initiative should be encourage as well, exploring the opportunities that ICT offers and incorporate participatory communication and learning processes. The necessary resources must be available at all levels of education in the country to facilitate the teaching and learning of ICTs in the country's key institutions.

Finally, the Nigerian government must continue with her liberalization policies/programmes in the telecommunication sectors to attract more private sector investment in the ICT development and utilization as it has done for the maker of 'Zinox' computer. This will make ICT more accessible and cheap. The policies must also be consistent, stable and investment friendly.

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