

Sustainable Peace: Youth and Development in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract: The role of youth in fostering sustainable peace and development has gained significant attention of different stakeholders across the world. Young people from all walks of life are making impact on culture-sensitive peace initiative. Research has shown that Rivers youth have not only protected and supported children and youth in conflict but have also developed critical thinking on sustainable solutions to the complex and multifaceted Niger Delta conflict. Young people constitute a significant portion of the population, but their potential is often underdeveloped, underutilized or diverted into unproductive ventures. This paper argues that youth should not only be seen as beneficiaries of development but also as active agents and drivers of change. Using secondary sources of data and a qualitative approach, the study explores the nexus of youth, peacebuilding and development in Rivers State. It identifies the challenges limiting youth engagement in governance, economic innovation, and community development, while emphasizing the transformative role of youth in bridging divides and promoting inclusive growth. The paper concludes that harnessing the creativity, energy and resilience of Rivers youth remains central to addressing structural violence, reducing insecurity and catalysing sustainable development in Nigeria. Development of critical thinking on sustainable solutions for Rivers State by the youth and reduction of structural violence will promote security and enhance sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Peace, Youth, Development, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Introduction

“Everyone complains about a lack of money but no one complains about a lack of brains” (Jewish proverb).

“The faster way to success is to replace bad habits with good habits” (Tom Ziglar)

“A great attitude drives efforts and skill” (Tom Ziglar).

“God lives in an honest heart” (Japanese proverb).

The twenty-first century has placed youth at the centre of debates on peace, governance and development. With nearly half of Nigeria's population under the age of 30, the country's development trajectory depends on how effectively this demographic is engaged. The nexus of peace and development is widely recognized as cyclical and mutually reinforcing. Without peace, development is hindered and, without development, sustainable peace remains elusive (United Nations, 2015). Central to this in Nigeria, especially in Rivers State, is the critical role of youth, who constitute a significant demographic segment in Nigeria, with over 60% of the population under the age of 25 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Harnessing the potential of this youthful population could serve as a powerful engine for socio-economic advancement, peacebuilding and sustainable development in Rivers State. Rivers State, one of Nigeria's most resource-rich yet conflict-prone states, reflects some paradox. While blessed with abundant human and natural resources, its youth face high unemployment, political marginalization and a culture of violence reinforced by oil-related grievances.

The youth are young and energetic people in their active years. They are within the age bracket late teens to fifty years. They are agents of change and development when their potential is harnessed for peace and development through the instrumentality of human rights and discipline education. The youth of any nation are the vanguard of democracy, and should demonstrate democratic values at all times. They are a reliable resource in every society, which, if properly harnessed and equipped with the requisite skills, could create positive transformation in society. Youth, when mobilized constructively, are agents of innovation, community resilience and sustainable growth. Conversely, when neglected or excluded, they can become instruments of unrest and insecurity.

The need to rethink the role of Rivers youth within the framework of development is urgent. Therefore, this paper reframes youth not as problems but as solutions. It examines how Rivers youth can contribute to peace and development, highlighting their potential as catalysts for change. The paper underscores the critical pathways through which youth engagement can foster sustainable peace and inclusive development in Rivers State and Nigeria, at large.

Statement of the Problem

Despite being the backbone of society, youth in Rivers State are often sidelined from decision-making processes and denied access to opportunities for meaningful development. Unemployment, poor security governance and absence of enabling structures have left many young people disillusioned. Reports suggest that youth unemployment in Rivers State is higher than the national average (NBS, 2023), with many young people resorting to informal or illicit activities for survival. The oil-dependent economy has also fostered resource-based conflicts, in which youth are often both victims and perpetrators.

The marginalization of youth in governance and development efforts poses a dual challenge: it undermines their potential contributions while reinforcing cycles of poverty and insecurity. The persistence of cult violence, electoral thuggery and militancy underscores the risks of underutilized youth potential. Against this backdrop, the question arises: How can Rivers youth be transformed into genuine drivers of peace and development? Addressing this challenge requires exploring pathways for constructive youth engagement and empowerment within Rivers State. The central thesis is that, without security governance, there is no peace; without peace, there is no development; without development, there is no peace; without the youth, there is no sustainable peace and development.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the role of Rivers youth in fostering peace and sustainable development;
2. Explore the structural barriers limiting youth participation in governance and economic opportunities;

3. Identify the strategies for empowering Rivers youth as active agents of peace and development; and
4. Present the youth with the knowledge and skills to promote positive relationships, academic achievements and mental well-being.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research design, relying mainly on secondary sources of data. The materials consulted included peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy briefs and publications by international development agencies. These sources provided critical insights into the nexus of youth, peace and development within the Nigerian, specifically Rivers State, context. Content analysis was employed to examine themes related to youth empowerment, conflict dynamics, and pathways to sustainable development. This approach was particularly useful for synthesizing diverse perspectives and highlighting patterns that may guide policy formulation. The paper captured both theoretical debates and practical experiences. The paper ensured a credible and evidence-driven analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored to Human Capital Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory. The Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) posits that investment in the education, skills and health of individuals enhances productivity and economic growth. Applied to Rivers youth, this theory underscores the importance of equipping young people with the skills and opportunities necessary to contribute meaningfully to development. When youth are empowered through education and vocational training, they become assets to society rather than liabilities.

The Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1995) provides a complementary perspective. It emphasizes addressing the root causes of conflict by transforming relationships, structures and attitudes that fuel violence. Within Rivers State, where youth are often mobilized for violent activities, this theory advocates a paradigm shift that sees youth as peacebuilders. It calls for long-term structural changes, such as inclusive governance, economic empowerment and social justice that integrate youth into the processes of peace and development.

Literature Review

Development involves multifaceted progress in economic, social, political and human capital dimensions (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Youth, due to their number, creativity and energizing potential, are pivotal to driving these dimensions forward (UNDP, 2021). Studies have asserted that investing in youth is not merely about social inclusion; it is a strategic priority for national growth and stability (World Bank, 2018). Youth engage in entrepreneurship, innovation and community activism, fostering economic growth and addressing societal challenges (International Labour Organization, 2020).

The literature on youth, peace and development consistently highlights the dual role of young people as both risks and resources. Urdal (2006) argues that a “youth bulge”, if not harnessed productively, can exacerbate instability. In Nigeria, youth have often been linked to electoral violence, militancy and social unrest (Ikelegbe, 2014). Rivers State in particular has been a hotspot of youth-driven militancy linked to oil resource conflicts, unemployment and governance failure (Okonta & Douglas, 2003).

Peacebuilding is a fundamental pillar for sustainable development (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017). The engagement of the youth in peacebuilding activities, mediation, conflict resolution and promotion of social cohesion, has proven effective in various contexts globally. According to Lederach (1997), youth involvement in peace processes brings innovative perspectives and contributes to durable solutions. In the Nigerian context, youth-led peace initiatives have been instrumental in addressing ethno-religious conflicts and communal violence (Adebayo, 2021). However, youth are often marginalized

from mainstream political and peace processes, which creates fertile grounds for frustration and recruitment into violent groups (Adejumobi, 2019).

Nwobueze (2021: 105) claims that:

The Niger Delta youth can be categorized into three: the first group question their current socio-economic situation and the disadvantages associated with it and insist that the government must address the destruction of their means of livelihood, unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation and lack of basic social amenities, and infrastructures. While this group is seen as interested in the positive youth development, its strategy can be, but are not always, through violence or civil disruption. The second category includes young people who have been manipulated by corrupt leaders and are typically employed as thugs to exert pressure on the public or political opponents. Hence, in dealing with social and political problems, they use violence, intimidation and extortion to fight for what they believe is rightly theirs. The third category of youth claims to be engaged in civil disobedience to better the circumstances of the Niger Delta but they are often agitating for narrow and selfish reasons. These young people are often involved in sabotaging pipelines, crude oil theft, kidnapping and other vices with the primary goal of extorting money through inducements and ransoms.

In the view of Albert (2009:6):

The young ones are also involved in violence partly because the resources meant for making life more peaceful for them are stolen by their leaders who are daily implicated in monumental cases of financial corruption and wastage of the country's resources on projects that hardly promote national growth.

Young people need continuous exposure to positive experiences, settings, and people, as well as abundant opportunities to refine their life skills, so that they have the means to move into productive jobs and other roles that build fulfilling relationships. Many of these are absent under the present dispensation in Nigeria

Sustainable peace is a significant framework which focuses on long-term solutions so as to prevent recurrence of conflict and facilitate continuing healthy human relationships and community development. This framework emphasizes economic development, social cohesion, inclusive governance, justice, kindness, decency, equality, compassion, love and non-violence. Addressing these issues in Rivers State is imperative, as youth inclusion corresponds strongly with reduction in violence and improvements in governance (Péclard & Kambere, 2020).

However, emerging scholarship challenges the narrative of youth as merely a threat. Hilker & Fraser (2009) note that youth possess significant agency and should be viewed as partners in development. Similarly, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) emphasizes youth participation in peace and security, acknowledging their potential to build inclusive and resilient societies. In the Niger Delta, initiatives such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme have demonstrated that investing in youth development reduces violence (Aghedo, 2013). Yet critics argue that many interventions remain short-term and fail to address structural inequalities (Omotola, 2010). The literature underscores a gap between rhetoric and practice: while the potential of youth is widely acknowledged, systemic barriers, such as unemployment, marginalization and weak institutions, continue to constrain their contributions.

The Role of Rivers Youth in Fostering Peace and Sustainable Development

Youth are increasingly recognized as critical stakeholders in peacebuilding and sustainable development. In Rivers State, where violent conflicts, resource struggles and political instability have recurrently disrupted development, young people possess both the energy and creativity to drive positive change. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) underscores the importance of youth participation in peace and security, affirming their role as partners rather than passive beneficiaries.

In practice, Rivers youth have demonstrated agency through local peace initiatives, community mediation and civil society engagement. Studies showed that young people in the Niger Delta have been instrumental in grassroots peacebuilding efforts, particularly after the post-amnesty period, by forming associations that discourage violence and promote alternative livelihoods (Aghedo, 2013; Ikelegbe, 2014). Their demographic dominance, constituting the largest segment of the state's population, gives them significant potential to influence socio-political outcomes. When empowered, youth become innovators, entrepreneurs and civic leaders who bridge the divides between communities and promote inclusive growth (Hilker & Fraser, 2009).

The right thing to do is to equip the youth through formal and non-formal education with comprehensive knowledge, skills and practices on the nexus of peace and development. So, the capacity of the youth must be built to address complex conflicts and promote sustainable development. Particular emphasis should be on in-depth understanding of peacebuilding and development strategies, practical skills for conflict management and development work, ability to analyse complex conflict and develop effective interventions, knowledge of international frameworks and best practices, and capacity to design and implement peacebuilding and development projects.

Therefore, Rivers youth, if meaningfully engaged, can serve as key actors in transforming violent conflict into opportunities for reconciliation and progress. This positions them as indispensable agents of peace and sustainable development.

Structural Barriers Limiting Youth Participation in Governance and Economic Opportunities

Despite their potential, Rivers youth face persistent structural barriers that undermine their contributions to peace and development. Chief among these is unemployment. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2023), youth unemployment in Rivers State exceeds the national average, compelling many young people to resort to informal or illicit survival strategies. This economic vulnerability makes them susceptible to recruitment into cult groups, militancy or electoral violence (Okonta & Douglas, 2003).

Furthermore, educational and skill gaps constrain youth competitiveness in the labour market. The mismatch between formal education and industry needs, coupled with limited vocational training opportunities, hinders their economic empowerment (Omotola, 2010). Infrastructural decay and limited access to credit for entrepreneurship further restrict youth-driven innovation. Omission and neglect of democracy and human rights education in school curriculum have resulted in poor attention to the analysis of the institution and mechanisms of democratic governance, challenges and opportunities for democratic governance, development of skills for promoting good governance and democratic participation, and application of critical thinking to democracy and governance challenges.

Another major barrier is political exclusion. The political culture in Rivers State is often dominated by elite patronage networks, where youth are mobilized primarily as instruments of thuggery during elections but rarely included in decision-making (Ikelegbe, 2005). This tokenistic engagement reinforces alienation and mistrust between youth and the political class.

These structural barriers not only marginalize Rivers youth from governance and economic opportunities but also perpetuate cycles of underdevelopment and insecurity.

Strategies for Empowering Rivers Youth as Active Agents of Peace and Development

Rivers State policy frameworks emphasize youth empowerment through skills acquisition, entrepreneurship programmes and inclusive governance (Rivers State Ministry of Youth Development, 2024). These programmes align with global best practices that position youth at the centre of socio-economic transformation (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Addressing the marginalization of youth requires holistic and multi-sectoral strategies that promote inclusion, empowerment and accountability. First, investment in human capital development is central. Education and vocational training tailored to local needs, such as ICT, agriculture and creative industries, will equip youth with the skills required for self-reliance and innovation (Becker, 1964).

Second, promoting inclusive governance is critical. Creating platforms for youth representation in decision-making processes at local and state levels would foster ownership and accountability. Mechanisms such as youth councils, participatory budgeting and political mentorship programmes could institutionalize youth voices in governance (Lederach, 1995).

Third, economic empowerment strategies should focus on entrepreneurship and job creation. Providing access to microcredit, business incubation and partnerships with the private sector would harness youth creativity while reducing unemployment (UNDP, 2014).

Human rights, character and financial literacy education programmes are necessary to change the perception of youth as perpetrators of violence to viewing them agents of peace. Civil society and faith-based organizations can collaborate with government to scale up initiatives that build entrepreneurial and conflict resolution skills, and promote civic responsibility, and patriotic democratic citizens.

Education is a site for moulding minds and attitudes. There should be deliberate inclusion of peacebuilding and development, human security and peace education in the curriculum of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Rivers State. Peacebuilding and development should focus on equipping young people with comprehensive knowledge, skills and practices on the nexus of peace and development. With these identified strategies, Rivers State can unlock the transformative potential of its youth, positioning them as architects of peace and sustainable development rather than bystanders in cycles of violence and underdevelopment (Nwobueze, 2025).

Democratic peace does not just emerge; it has to be worked for by all stakeholders in the multi-track spectrum. The responsibility for ensuring sustainable peace starts but does not end with the government; it must include civil society groups, business organizations, individuals, academic institutions, religious bodies, the media and the international community. All of these agencies must also be willing to work collaboratively.

The time is ripe to provide a framework for developing self-awareness and self-regulation, building effective relationships and communication skills, applying problem-solving and decision-making strategies, and fostering empathy, diversity and inclusivity. The youth must develop democratic values and lifestyles characterised by joint problem-solving attitudes and behaviours, such as compromise, cooperation, understanding, contentment, due process, forgiveness and reconciliation, transparency and accountability as well as preference for peaceful settlement of differences and not lawlessness and violence.

Major Findings

1. Youth as Agents of Peacebuilding

Rivers youth, when constructively engaged, have the potential to mediate community disputes, promote inter-ethnic harmony, and reduce violence. Local youth-led organizations have already shown capacity for promoting grassroots peace initiatives.

2. Structural Barriers to Youth Development

Unproductive lifestyles or risky behaviours, unemployment, lack of political inclusion and weak educational systems continue to hinder Rivers youth. Without systemic reforms, their contributions to development will remain stifled.

3. Pathways for Empowerment

Policy frameworks must shift from tokenistic youth engagement to sustained investment in education, entrepreneurship and civic inclusion. These are vital to unlocking youth potential. Ultimately, the adoption of the principles of diligence, productivity, honesty, integrity, and care for the poor and vulnerable will create strong youth. This will facilitate conflict transformation, sustainable peace and development in Rivers State.

Conclusion

The youth of Rivers State represent both the present and the future of Nigeria's development. They are a valuable but underutilized resource for peace and developmental agendas. Creating the opportunities to unlock their potential through strategic investments, inclusive policies and empowerment initiatives holds the promise of sustainable peace and socio-economic growth. This paper has argued that youth should not be framed as problems but as the panacea for peace and progress. Drawing from Human Capital and Conflict Transformation, the study emphasized that meaningful investment in youth is both a developmental necessity and a peacebuilding imperative.

The challenges facing Rivers youth are worth noting and require urgent attention: unemployment, exclusion and exposure to violence remain pressing realities. Yet, the findings demonstrate that with the right policies and opportunities, these same youth can drive innovation, mediate conflicts, and build sustainable communities.

For Rivers State, the call to action is clear: invest in youth education, expand economic opportunities, promote inclusive governance, and strengthen local institutions that empower young people. Failure to act could engender perpetuating cycles of violence and underdevelopment, while decisive action could transform Rivers youth into champions of peace and progress. The future of Rivers State and Nigeria hinges on whether the potential of the youth is wasted or wisely harnessed. Youth, indeed, are not just beneficiaries of development; they are also its architects. There is no justification whatsoever for criminality; lawlessness should not be tolerated.

Defining and rethinking peace and security systems in Rivers State are critical. The following key issues in security reforms should be taken seriously: development of a clear institutional framework for the provision of security that integrates security and development of policies and includes all relevant peace and development actors; strengthening the governance of the security institutions in a manner that respects human rights; and building capable and professional security forces that are accountable to civil authorities; and formulating appropriate strategies. These will calm the turbulence of rivers where Rivers State metaphorically derived its name and then the state will find peace to share towards the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria.

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