

African Multidisciplinary Journal of Development (AMJD)

Page: 09- 17

<https://amjd.kiu.ac.ug/>

GOVERNMENT EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME AND REDUCTION IN UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG YOUTHS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Unemployment constitutes a challenge in the Nigerian economy, despite being a top priority for Nigeria's consecutive governments, the issue of unemployment still exists with a high number of graduate turnouts yearly. The research investigated the connection between the N-power empowerment programme and the reduction in unemployment among youths in Nigeria (Cross River State). Literature related to the variable was reviewed. One research question and hypothesis were formulated for the study and tested at a .05 significance level. For the study, a correlational research design was chosen. The research population consisted of 7,000. Ten per cent of the population of 700 respondents constituted the sample using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. A questionnaire was used for data collection. The instrument's reliability was measured using the Cronbach alpha reliability estimate, and the result showed a reliability index ranging from .74 to .95. Simple regression statistical technique was used for data analysis. The study found that participants viewed the N-power programme as significantly empowering, particularly in promoting self-employment, self-reliance, and improved living standards. However, they felt the programme was less effective in providing job opportunities and enhancing self-confidence. Additionally, there was a positive relationship between the N-power programme and the reduction of youth unemployment, indicating that greater participation led to lower unemployment rates among young people. Among other things, it was suggested that beneficiaries of the N-power government empowerment programme should be kept on the initiative until they secure a job that pays /opportunities rather than be sent back to the street after the duration of their programme, where they roam the streets as jobless citizens with attendant psychological problem.

Keywords: N-power, Government, Empowerment programme, Unemployment, Youths

Introduction

When someone actively looks for work and is willing to work, but is unable to find it, that person is said to be unemployed. Despite the country's GDP growing at a faster pace, Nigeria continues to have high unemployment rates. According to Erring (2018), the working population in Nigeria and Cross River State in particular, which includes a sizable number of youths who make up more than half of the nation's population, tends to witness a persistent increase in unemployment rates. The majority of Cross River state's workforce is employed by departments, ministries, and agencies owned by the federal and state governments, implying that the state is a civil service state. Researchers have noted a decline in the state's industrial services sector as well as a low graduate absorption capacity in privately held businesses. This problem has resulted in high unemployment rates, low productivity, low per capita income, and low living standards among young people in the state.

Given the severe difficulties that Cross River State and Nigeria's unemployment poses, the government at all levels developed the idea of youth empowerment programmes as a way to lower unemployment by giving young people employment opportunities in their diverse fields of specialization. Erim (2021) asserted that empowerment is a relative concept that is appealing to society and denotes a means of acquiring the ability to positively impact a person's life. N-power programme is part of the government of Nigeria social intervention programmes designed to tackle youth unemployment problems and boost the economy. Within the framework of the National Social Investment Program (NSIP), this initiative was introduced in 2016. Through N-power, young Nigerians are given the tools and platform they need to develop and contribute positively towards the growth and development of the country.

Nigerian youths in the age range of eighteen (18) to thirty-five (35) are eligible for N-power. Each participant in N-power's modular programmes is guaranteed to learn and apply most of the abilities needed to find or produce employment. Two general categories can be used to group the N-power programmes: Graduate Volunteers of N-power and Non-graduate Volunteers N-power Categories. N-power Volunteer Corps also called N-power Graduates. The programme is a two-year paid volunteer opportunity which takes place within the beneficiary immediate areas, the graduates carry out their main responsibilities in designated public services.

Every N-power Volunteer is entitled to a computer device that holds data required for their particular role as well as data for ongoing professional growth and training. The 2017 N-power Information Guide states that N-power volunteers offer guidance, education, and teaching in four main areas, which are as follows:

1. **N-power Agro:** Farmers all throughout the nation can receive consulting services from N-power Agro Volunteers. They contribute to the dissemination of knowledge collected in the area of agricultural and rural development extension services by the Federal Department of Agriculture. The purpose of N-power Agro volunteers is to serve as a liaison between researchers and farmers. They assist farmers in making decisions and ensure that the appropriate information is used to get the greatest results on their farms by serving as mediators and communicators.
2. **N-power Health:** Volunteers from N-power Health support weak people in the community, such as expectant mothers and children, as well as families and individuals, by enhancing and promoting preventive healthcare in local areas. As a component of the N-power Corps, the N-power Health program trains fresh graduates to work as public health assistants. Then they are also qualified to offer simple diagnostic procedures.
3. **N-power Teach:** Beneficiaries in this group are expected to help in enhancing Nigeria's provision of basic education. In Nigerian elementary and secondary educational institutions that seem to be understaffed, N-power Teach Volunteers are assigned as teaching assistants. Rather than taking the role of the current educators, they are anticipated to serve as support instructors around the nation, helping with teaching, school administration, and other duties. Where feasible, they are expected to help provide elementary education to kids in isolated areas as documented in (N-Power Information Guide, 2017).
4. **N-power Tax:** Beneficiaries of N-power Tax are chosen to serve as Liaison Tax Officers in local communities for the state tax authorities in the states where they now reside. Managing customers, responding to online inquiries, and raising awareness of tax compliance are among the duties assigned to the N-power community tax liaison officers.

In a bid to develop non-graduates with abilities that they may utilize to improve both their own lives and the overall economy, the category of N-power Non-Graduate was created. For all selected

beneficiaries, the programme provides training and certification. The N-power Non-graduate category offer certifications and instruction in two major fields, namely;

i. N-power Knowledge: The first move taken through the federal government of Nigeria to diversify the knowledge economy is the N-power Knowledge programme. This programme provides technological and creative industry incubation and acceleration in collaboration with the eight planned innovation hubs (EIH) across the nation. According to the Federal Ministry of Youth Development in the year (2019), this initiative, which involves a "Training to Jobs" program, basically guarantees beneficiaries entry into the workforce as independent contractors, employees, or entrepreneurs. This programme supports the incubation and acceleration of the technology and creative sectors in conjunction with the eight innovation hubs that are slated to be established across the nation. The initiative is, in fact, thoughtfully crafted to reduce youth unemployment rate by helping to solve the problems of unemployment among young people. Sophia (2021) stated that the goal of N-power is to give young people who have graduated or are not yet graduates the means of subsistence, skills, and resources necessary to move from a state of disempowerment to one of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

As stated in the 2017 N-power Information Guide, the following are the aims and objectives of the Nigerian N-power Programme:

- a) To take action and immediately enhance the living standard for a sufficient number of young Nigerians who are unemployed.
- b) To provide a technical, entrepreneurial, and employability skills transfer system in a qualitative manner.
- c) To develop an ecosystem of remedies for ailing public services and policies of government diversification.
- d) To advance and strengthen the knowledge economy in Nigeria.

N-power is a volunteer-driven programme designed to create jobs, reduce poverty, and support empowerment programmes. It also aims to instill the learn-work entrepreneurship culture in Nigerian youth.

Also, Sophia (2021) examined N-power's contribution to reduction of unemployment in Nigeria. Examining N-power's role in reducing unemployment in Nigeria was the study's goal. The study area was Rivers State. This study employed a survey research design. For the study, a sample of four hundred young respondents was selected. Following examination, 381 copies (or 95.25% of the total response rate) were determined to be helpful for the data analysis. The study employed both inferential and descriptive statistics in data analysis. The hypotheses were tested using correlation coefficient of Pearson's Product Moment (r). According to the study, the main N-power initiatives employed in Rivers State to reduce unemployment include N-technology hardware, N-power tax, N-power health, N-technology software, N-teach, N-build, N-creative, and N-agro. University and polytechnic graduates comprised the vast majority of those who benefited from the N-power Programmes, according to the outcome of the research. The research also revealed that the primary factors negatively influencing the execution of N-power initiatives were inadequate data, failure to provide participants with their stipend by the deadline, bribery and corruption, incorrect bank verification numbers (BVNs), and the overbearing involvement of politicians in the initiative. According to the study's findings, N-power programmes and the reduction of unemployment in Rivers State are significantly related. The study thus suggested that N-power programmes be used by the relevant authorities to support rural development.

Comparably, an assessment study of N-power programme effects in order to better understand the consequences of the N-power initiative on job creation, beneficiaries' economic well-being, and

beneficiaries' ability to enhance their job skills, The Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State was the subject of research by Bisong (2019). The research methodology employed for the study was the survey design. Two hundred and fifty respondents were chosen as a sample using the purposive sampling technique. Quantitative data for the study were gathered using the questionnaire. The hypotheses were tested using Pearson product moment correlation. According to the study's findings, the N-power programme along with the subsequent factors have a good and substantial relationship with employment creation, work skill upgrading, and economic well-being. In light of the outcome of the research it was suggested that volunteers be required to attend workshops and receive training in areas like agriculture and ICT in order to improve their ability to get employment once the programme ends. It was also suggested that the government lend money to willing volunteers at no interest in order to help them launch small- to medium-sized businesses.

Frank and Simon (2018) also looked into how Nigerian youth perceived the "N-power social investment programme as a tool for youth empowerment." Using a stratified sampling technique, a sample of 322 respondents was chosen for the study, which utilized a survey research design. The questionnaire functioned as the data collection tool, and the hypotheses were tested using the independent t-test. The results of analysis revealed that the N-power initiative has empowered young people by fostering their skill development and acquisition. The study's conclusions led to recommendations that youth empowerment, skill development, and entrepreneurial policies and centers receive sufficient funding, equipment, and attention from every tier of government (federal, state, and local) in order to act as a focal point for the nation's massive creation of youth employment.

Again, Frank, Thomas, Mary, and Hussein (2021) looked at the National N-power Scheme's effect on employment creation. The research design used for the study was ex post facto. A self-structured questionnaire was used to gather information from 398 samples out of 632 plan beneficiaries. Inferential and descriptive statistics were used to analyze field data. Simple percentages, charts, means, standard deviation, and frequency distribution are examples of descriptive statistics used for analysis of data. After that, parametric statistics with a 0.05 confidence level was applied to the outcome of the descriptive statistics. Of the 398 instruments that were distributed, only 389 were brought back and examined. Almost all of the respondents (96.92%) were unemployed prior to becoming N-power Scheme beneficiaries, according to the report. It was also discovered that, out of all the registered programs, only three of the initiatives mentioned under the scheme N-teach, N-agro, and N-health—had beneficiaries in Bekwara. N-power and the Creation of Jobs were found to have a significant association based on the research that was conducted using lineal regression. The study recommends, among other things, that those who have benefited from the Scheme in the Local Government Area need to be increased in light of these findings.

Similar research was done by Obukohwo & Patricia (2020), with an emphasis on Delta State, on how the N-power initiative has affected Nigeria's unemployment rate. With Delta State serving as a model, the study looked at how the N-Power programme affected unemployment in Nigeria. The research used 875 volunteers as a sample from twenty-five council wards around the study area, using multi-stage sampling methodologies. The empirical analysis's finding demonstrated that the N-power scheme did not considerably improve the volunteers' job abilities, which would have increased their employability in the future. The likelihood that the N-power volunteers will find jobs diminishes over time, which further complicate matters. This suggests that when the programme, which typically last two years ends, the volunteers could not have a job. According to the study, the N-Power's health and tax sub-programmes were the only ones that effectively and efficiently prepared volunteers for potential jobs

at the programme's conclusion. Overall, the survey indicated that N-power initiative hasn't made a big difference on Delta State unemployment rate. Moreover, the abrupt termination of batches A and B in the midst of outbreak of Covid-19 epidemic without providing the required social and economic support to enable the volunteers has not significantly decreased the rate of unemployment in Nigeria. The research findings further indicate that while the N-power programme was intended to enhance skill training, its impact on the labor supply in Nigeria has not been statistically noteworthy. As a result, highly skilled but jobless youth have replaced trained labor in the economy. The study suggested that in order to restructure the N-power scheme and boost participation rates, federal government should implement a more comprehensive social intervention programme based on its findings. Vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, can be added to the current programme. The report suggested that the government redesign the programme to give participants the fundamental skills required by employers.

Purpose of the study

The study examined the relationship between Government Empowerment Programme and Reduction in Unemployment among Youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. The research specifically sought to:

1. Ascertain the degree to which participants perceive that the N-power initiative contributes to empowerment of youth in Cross River State.
2. Assess the predictive relationship between the N-power empowerment programme and youth unemployment reduction in Cross River State.

Research question

To what extent do participants perceive that the N-power programmes contributes to youth empowerment in Cross River State?

Statement of hypothesis

N-power empowerment programme has no significant relationship with unemployment reduction among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Methodology

The correlational research design is adopted for this study. This design is preferred, because it entails keeping track of two variables in order to determine a statistically significant correlation between them. In other words, this design is used in the study since it is intended to investigate and determine the correlation between the variables. The area of study is Nigeria and specifically Cross River State. Cross River State is part of South South Nigeria. The area of the study is a coastal axis of the Niger Delta region. With 3,737,517 people living there (estimate from NPC 2016), the state is roughly 20,156 square kilometers in size. Enugu and Abia states lies to the west, Benue State lies to the north, to the east, the Cameroon Republic, and the Atlantic Ocean. Akwa-Ibom to the southern region are its shared borders. Respondents for the survey comprised both male and female youths between 18 – 35 years who are current beneficiaries of N-power empowerment programme within the study area. A sample of 707 youths which is ten percent of the beneficiaries constituted the sample selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. The stratified technique was adopted in order to stratify the state into three senatorial districts and deliberately interview willing and readily accessible N-power programme volunteers. The questionnaire which was used to collect data had two segments A and B. segment 'A' comprised of personal variables while segment 'B' had information on the survey sub-variable which was approved by two experts in Evaluation and Measurement in the University of Calabar, this was done to ensure that the items measured what they were expected to measure. 700 questionnaire

copies were distributed and retrieved accordingly. Simple regression statistical tool was used to analyse the data.

Results

Perception of the N-power programme's contribution to youth empowerment

The research question of this study is: to what extent do participants perceive that the N-power programme contributes to empowerment of youth in Cross River State? Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for participants' perceptions of the N-power programme. The overall mean score of 2.67 (SD = 1.19) indicates that participants generally perceive the N-power programme as having a high impact on their empowerment, based on a criterion mean of 2.50, where values above 2.50 indicate a high extent and values below 2.50 indicate a low extent.

Specifically, participants agreed that the programme has made them self-employed to a high extent (M = 3.23, SD = 0.81). Similarly, they perceived themselves as becoming more self-reliant (M = 2.87, SD = 1.13) and having an improved standard of living (M = 2.56, SD = 1.02) to a high extent. The provision of skills, tools, and livelihood to enable employability was also rated highly (M = 2.64, SD = 1.03). Conversely, participants perceived the programme as having a lower impact on exposing them to employment opportunities (M = 2.35, SD = 1.13) and boosting their self-confidence (M = 2.42, SD = 2.04), both rated to a low extent. In summary, while the N-power programme is perceived to be effective in fostering self-reliance, self-employment, and employability, its impact on increasing access to employment opportunities and boosting self-confidence is viewed as less impactful.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Perceptions of the N-power Programme's Impact on Youth Empowerment

SN	Item Description	M	SD	Remark
1.	Through the N-power programme I am now self-reliant.	2.87	1.13	High
2.	The N-power programme has improved my standard of living.	2.56	1.02	High
3.	The N-power programme has made me self-employed.	3.23	0.81	High
4.	The N-power empowerment programme has exposed me to employment opportunities.	2.35	1.13	Low
5.	The N-power programme has provided me with skills, tools and livelihood to enable me become employable.	2.64	1.03	High
6.	The N-power programme has helped boost my self-confidence.	2.42	2.04	Low
	Overall	2.67	1.19	High

Criterion mean = 2.50; Values above 2.50 = High extent; values below 2.50 = Low extent.

Relationship between the N-power programme and unemployment reduction

The hypothesis of this study states that: the N-power empowerment programme has no significant relationship with unemployment reduction among youths in Cross River State, Nigeria. The independent variable is the N-power empowerment programme, while the dependent variable is unemployment reduction among youths, both measured continuously. A simple linear regression analysis was performed to test the hypothesis at the .05 level of significance. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

The regression analysis revealed a weak positive relationship between the N-power empowerment programme and the reduction of unemployment among youths ($R = .162$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .026$) indicates that the N-power programme is responsible for approximately 2.6% of the variance in reducing youth unemployment. The analysis of variance yielded a significant F-ratio indicating that the relationship between the N-Power programme and unemployment reduction is

statistically significant, $F(1, 699) = 18.862$, $p < .05$. The coefficient of unstandardized regression ($B = 0.234$) suggests that for each one-unit increase in the N-power empowerment programme score, the reduction in unemployment among youths increases by 0.234 units. The standardised coefficient ($\beta = .162$) indicates a small effect size. Given the significance level ($p < .05$), we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a substantial correlation between the N-power empowerment program and the decline in youth unemployment.

Table 1: Simple regression analysis of the correlation between N-power empowerment initiative and unemployment reduction of among youths.

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F-ratio	P
Regression	183.388	1	183.388	18.862*	.000
Residual	6795.933	699	9.722		
Total	6979.321	700			

$R = .162$, $R^2 = .026$; $Adj R^2 = .025$, $B = 0.234$; $Beta = .162$; $Std Error = 3.118$

*=Significant at .05 level

Discussion of findings

The first finding of this study reveals that participants perceive the N-power programme as having a significant impact on their empowerment, especially in fostering self-employment and self-reliance and improving their standard of living. However, the programme is seen as less effective in exposing participants to employment opportunities and boosting their self-confidence. From a practical standpoint, the result shows that the N-power programme effectively promoted economic independence and improved participants' lives by encouraging self-employment and self-reliance. It provided people with the skills and resources needed to start and manage their own businesses, empowering them in the process. However, the programme had less success in helping participants find jobs or build their self-confidence. This might be due to a lack of job placement support, networking opportunities, or mentorship to help participants explore the job market. While it offered practical skills, it may not have fully addressed personal growth areas like boosting self-esteem and confidence in the workplace. The finding suggests that while the N-power programme supported entrepreneurship, it could be improved by adding more job search support, career counselling, and activities to build participants' confidence in professional settings.

The finding aligns with the results of Frank and Simon (2018) that the N-power initiative has empowered young people by fostering their skill development and acquisition. On the contrary, the finding disagrees with the finding of Obukohwo and Patricia's (2020) whose study reported that the N-power scheme did not considerably improve the volunteers' job abilities, which would have increased their employability in the future. The likelihood that the N-Power volunteers will find jobs diminishes over time, further complicating matters. The disparity in the findings of the present and cited studies is understandable due to the differences in the context where both studies were conducted. Although the N-power programme was a national initiative with a nationwide implementation, the implementers and beneficiaries, including their characteristics, varied with each state of the federation. Such differences in character and culture could have led to variations in the implementation, leading to variations in the outcomes and perception of the programme. Therefore, further studies are needed to clarify the arguments among the studies.

The second finding of this study revealed a significant positive correlation between the N-power scheme and unemployment reduction among youths. The programme plays a role in reducing unemployment; as participation increases, unemployment reduction among youths increases. This means that as more young people participated in the programme, the number of unemployed youths decreased. From a practical perspective, this suggests that the programme effectively equips participants with skills and opportunities that help them find jobs or start their own businesses, contributing to a decrease in overall youth unemployment. Possible explanations for this relationship could include the programme providing essential training, resources, and support that make participants more employable. Additionally, the programme may have created job opportunities directly or indirectly through partnerships with businesses and community organizations. This finding implies that the N-power programme is valuable in addressing youth unemployment. Thus, the finding highlights the importance of continuing and possibly expanding the programme to reach more young people. By doing so, it could further reduce unemployment rates and support the economic growth of the community. This finding corroborates the study conducted by Bisong (2019), which found a favourable positive connection between the N-power initiative and the subsequent variables; economic well-being, improving work skills and creating jobs.

Conclusion / Recommendation

According to the research outcome, we concluded that N-power empowerment programme has seemingly achieved her objectives of reducing unemployment among youths in the study area. Consequently, we recommend that government should endeavor to ensure that N-power volunteers remain on the programme until they secure paid employment, as opposed to terminating and exiting beneficiaries after two years and adding them to the ranks of the youth without jobs. Through N-power initiatives, authorities should support rural development. Also, different tiers of government should revive dormant industries and businesses and broaden the scope of N-power programme in this regard.

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