

Sustainability Capacity of Youth Employment Programs in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines the youth employment programs in Nigeria and the sustainability capacity of the programs to drive inclusive youth development in the face of a growing youth population with a diversity of aspirations. Several government regimes have attempted to address youth unemployment challenges over the years; nonetheless, the proportion of youth employed by these programs in comparison with the unemployed remains low. This is in view of a growing youth population, the high youth turnover from higher institutions requiring employment, increasing proportions of school dropouts, and the increasing spate of insecurity perpetrated by the unemployed youth who are becoming a social menace to society. The 2020 report of the National Bureau of Statistics showed that 58.8 percent of young people between the ages of 25 and 34 were unemployed. Beyond the program implementation to drive youth employment, the sustainability capacity of implemented programs is very critical because when programs are not designed in line with the aspirations and expectations of the beneficiaries, they will affect their participation and the overall programs' goals. The paper, therefore, analyzed youth employment programs, the inclusiveness of the program beneficiaries, and the sustainability capacity of implemented programs in Nigeria between 2001 and 2019. The paper used primary and secondary data. The primary data, which include both qualitative and quantitative data, were collected from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, and the Federal Ministry of Labor and Employment. The study found that the proportion of youth that has benefitted from the programs of the government is limited and such programs were not inclusive given the diverse categories of youth. Also, while some of the implemented programs were sustainable, the political environment in the country poses a barrier to program sustainability.

Keywords: Youth Employment Programs, Sustainability Capacity, Youth Inclusiveness, Youth Aspirations

Introduction

This study analyzed the sustainability capacity of programs targeted at addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria. Inclusive youth employment is crucial to addressing the rising rate of

youth unemployment in the country. This is important given the persistent and rising rate of unemployment, which increased from 13.7% in 2015 to 29.7% in 2018 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The National Bureau of Statistics—NBS (2018) report indicated that of the 9.7 million unemployed who did absolutely nothing in 2018, 90.1% of them, or 8.77 million, were reported to be unemployed and doing nothing because they were first-time job seekers. Being first-time job seekers implies that they are youth who are new entrants into the labor market. This becomes worrisome in light of the report of the World Bank (2016) which indicated that the working-age population in Nigeria was projected to increase by about 66 million people between 2010 and 2030 and will require an additional 40-50 million employment opportunities to employ new entrant between 2010 and 2030, translating to over two million additional jobs per year. Since the youth are at a disadvantage compared to the adults in acquiring employment, they will be the most affected by unemployment challenges in Nigeria. This is evident in the NBS (2018) report which indicated that 55% of young people in Nigeria were either underemployed or unemployed. In addition, even where employment opportunities are available, such opportunities are not in line with the expectations of the youth as such jobs hardly match their acquired skills (Adesugba and Mavrotas, 2016a).

In recent decades, the rising rates of youth unemployment have contributed to serious social challenges evident in the high level of social unrest and agitations, insecurity, and criminal activities in different parts of the country, with the youth, either directly or indirectly, as the culprits. To address the problem of youth unemployment in Nigeria will require the implementation of programs that respond to the needs and aspirations of the different categories of youth in Nigeria.

Youth participation in some government programs that are aimed at employment development has been flawed due to the mismatch that exists between the acquired skills of the youth and the programs being implemented, leading to poor participation of youth in such programs (Akande, 2014; Adesugba and Mavrotas, 2016a). Traditionally, programs that target youth employment in Nigeria have been narrowly designed with a generic conceptualization of the youths, either based on the geographic locations where they live, or their educational exposures.

This study therefore argues that extensive youth employment programs that target a majority of the youth, irrespective of where they live, must consider their aspirations and inclusiveness, and ensure the implementation of programs with high sustainability capacity. Thus, the study provides answers to three questions: (1) What are the programs implemented to drive youth employment in Nigeria? (2) To what extent are the programs inclusive of different youth categories? (3) What is the sustainability capacity of programs implemented to drive youth employment in Nigeria? Accordingly, the rest of the paper focuses on the clarifications of some concepts used in the analysis, the methodology, the results and discussion of the findings, and the conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification

Three major concepts undergird this paper. They are discussed one by one in the following subsections for clarity.

Youth Employment Programs

The United Nations Declaration of Intent of Youth identified access to employment opportunities equal to their abilities as one of the intentions toward youth development (United Nations, 2010). Young people aspire for better livelihood and economic outcomes, particularly through decent

employment opportunities.

According to Umo (2012), about 40 major programs and projects have been implemented by the federal government in order to address the challenges of unemployment and poverty in Nigeria in the last 40 years. Some of the programs that have been implemented include the National Accelerated Poverty Reduction Program (NAPEP), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program (SURE-P), the Youth Enterprise With Innovation (You-WIN), Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES), N-Power, etc. (Umo, 2012; Akande, 2014; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2017). While some of the programs were said to be successful, others did not meet the expected set goals due to poor targeting of beneficiaries, meager budgets for youth employment programs, and lack of skills of implementing personnel (Umo, 2012; Akande, 2014). Adesugba and Mavrotas (2016a) observed that most of the programs have not achieved the desired goals as there is no sustainable and long-term action plan that ensures the jobs established are suitable for the educational qualification and type of vocational training required. They also noted that most youth employment programs are not evaluated to assess their effectiveness, whereas those that are assessed do not survive beyond the political ambitions that established them.

Program Sustainability

Scheirer and Dearing (2011) defined sustainability as the continual use of the components and activities of a program to achieve the desired program and outcomes for target populations. It is the program's capacity to sustain itself beyond the initial program cycle. The sustainability of most programs designed to address youth unemployment in Nigeria has been poor as such programs hardly succeed the government regime that initiated them. What is mostly obtainable is situations whereby implemented programs are criticized by new government regimes and terminated, thereby further worsening the socioeconomic situations of the youth who were employed by such programs. In Nigeria, program sustainability is hardly assessed as a way of determining the performance pathways either for scaling up or review which has remained a major challenge in the performance of programs aimed at reducing youth unemployment in the country. This is in tandem with the views of Scheirer and Dearing, (2011) who posited that sustainability research that tracks program pathways is scarce and that conceptualizing sustainability research into operational definitions or as a research paradigm is still evolving and not widely used in determining program performance.

Program sustainability assessment provides answers as to whether programs are generating the expected long-term outcomes or become obsolete after initial financial support ends. It provides ways of promoting and enhancing programs that can be sustained in the long run (Scheirer and Dearing, 2011). Schell et al. (2013) argued that the capacity of a program to sustain itself transcends the characteristics of the program to include the organizational and systemic characteristics of the program.

Sustainability capacity defines the existence of structures and processes that provide the necessary resources that are needed to effectively implement and maintain evidence-based policies and programs (Schell et al, 2013). The absence of sustainability capacity leads to waste of resources, generates distrust among stakeholders, and may limit a program's performance in terms of achieving its stated objectives (Schell et al, 2013). The interplay of the various systems from the policy design to implementation contributes to the sustainability of programs that are aimed at addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria. Additionally, neglecting the collective roles of the systems will lead to program failure. The lack of synergy among stakeholders in the policy design and implementation aimed at addressing youth unemployment in Nigeria remains the bane of the poor performance of

employment programs in the country (Akande, 2014; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). Evidence from the literature reveals that about 40% of all new programs that are implemented end a few years after the initial funding of such programs (Savaya, Spiro, and Elran-Barak, 2008), thereby underscoring the need for research on how to measure and improve the sustainability of programs given the high costs that are associated with program termination (Schell et al., 2013).

Sustainability Capacity of Implemented Programs

The Programme Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT), which was developed by Luke et al. (2014), and primarily used to assess the capacity for program sustainability for public health and other programs, fits well in assessing the sustainability of youth employment programs. The tool allows program stakeholders to rate the extent to which processes and structures are available that will ensure the likelihood of the sustainability of their programs. The rated scores provide insight into the sustainability capacity of the programs and can be used to identify programs that have the potential to be sustained and areas for improvement for the sustainability of weak programs as a way of ensuring long-term success in program implementation.

The tool is based on eight domains that affect program sustainability. They are the following: (1) *Environmental support* defines the internal and external climates in which a program is operated; the economic and political environment affects the performance of programs indicative of the support of decision makers toward the intervention program; (2) *Funding stability* defines the consistency of the financial base of the program; funding for program sustainability will depend on multiple sources of funds that are consistently available for the program's goals to be sustained; (3) *Partnerships* define the synergy between the program and the stakeholders; (4) *Organizational capacity* denotes the internal support and resources needed for the effective management of the program; (5) *Program evaluation* describes program assessment for planning purposes and to track the progress of the program; (6) *Program adaptation* defines the actions taken to ensure the progressive effectiveness of the program; (7) *Communication* refers to the strategic and continual communication with stakeholders and the public about the program's performance; and (8) *Strategic planning*: defines the processes that drive program directions, goals, and strategies.

Data Collection Procedure

The spatial scope of the study is Nigeria and its temporal scope is from 2001 to 2019. The paper used primary and secondary data. The secondary data were collected from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) while the primary data were collected from the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (FMY&SD) and the National Directorate of Employment (NDE). The study analyzed implemented programs of the NDE from 2001 to 2019 and the NBS data of youth unemployment from 2010 to 2018.

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The primary data were generated through institutional assessments of officials of the FMY&SD and the NDE, which is the implementation arm of the Federal Ministry of Labor and Employment (FML&E). The institutional assessment involved the assessment of the sustainability of two programs that were implemented in the FMY&SD and NDE, respectively. The sustainability of the programs was determined by using the Programme Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT) developed by Luke et al. (2014).

Results and Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study are presented in this section. The key focus is on the sustainability capacity of youth employment programs in Nigeria.

Implemented Intervention Programs for Youth Employment

To situate the performance of the government as it relates to program implementation targeted at reducing youth unemployment in Nigeria, employment data from the NDE from 2001 to 2019 were analyzed. In this regard, the types of programs implemented and the number of beneficiaries were analyzed. The NDE, which is the program implementation arm of the FML&E, is comprised of four departments: (1) Vocational Skills Development Department, (2) Small Scale Enterprises Department, (3) Rural Employment Promotion Department, and (4) Special Public Works Department. These departments provide employment opportunities for youths through empowerment programs that usually span 12 months after which the youths are resettled (see Table 1). The programs were designed for male and female graduates and non-graduates (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of Beneficiaries of Implemented Programs.

NDE Department	Number of youth employed/trained	Duration of program	Categories of youth employed/trained	Permanence/exit plan
Vocational Skills Development	753175	12 months	Graduates/non-graduates, males/females	Empowered and resettled
Small Scale Enterprises	1137938	12 months	Graduates/non-graduates, males/females	Empowered and resettled
Rural Employment Promotion	94525	12 months	Graduates/non-graduates, males/females	Empowered and resettled
Special Public Works	680535	12 months	Graduates/non-graduates, males/females	Empowered and resettled

Source: Self-generated by the Author Using Data from the NDE

The results show that the number of youths empowered by the NDE increased from 72,831 in 2001 to 115,680 in 2019 (see Figure 1). Most of the programs were implemented by the small-scale enterprises, special public works, and the vocational skills development departments, with limited programs implemented by the rural employment promotion department (refer to Figure 1). This implies that most of the implemented programs have targeted urban youths, a situation that indicates a social marginalization of the rural youths in the employment programs of the government.

When the rural youths are excluded from employment opportunities, the implications will have a ripple effect on the other development efforts of the government, evident in the high rates of poverty in rural areas that are contributing to increasing cases of insecurity in Nigeria. For instance, the effect of the marginalization of rural youths is evident in the higher unemployment rate in rural areas (28%) compared to 25.4% in urban areas (NBS, 2020) and the worsening situations of rural poverty rates in rural areas (52.10%) compared to 18% in urban areas. The combined effect of higher rates of youth unemployment and poverty in the rural areas is a major trigger of the spate of insecurity that characterizes most of the rural areas in Nigeria (Balogun, 2021).

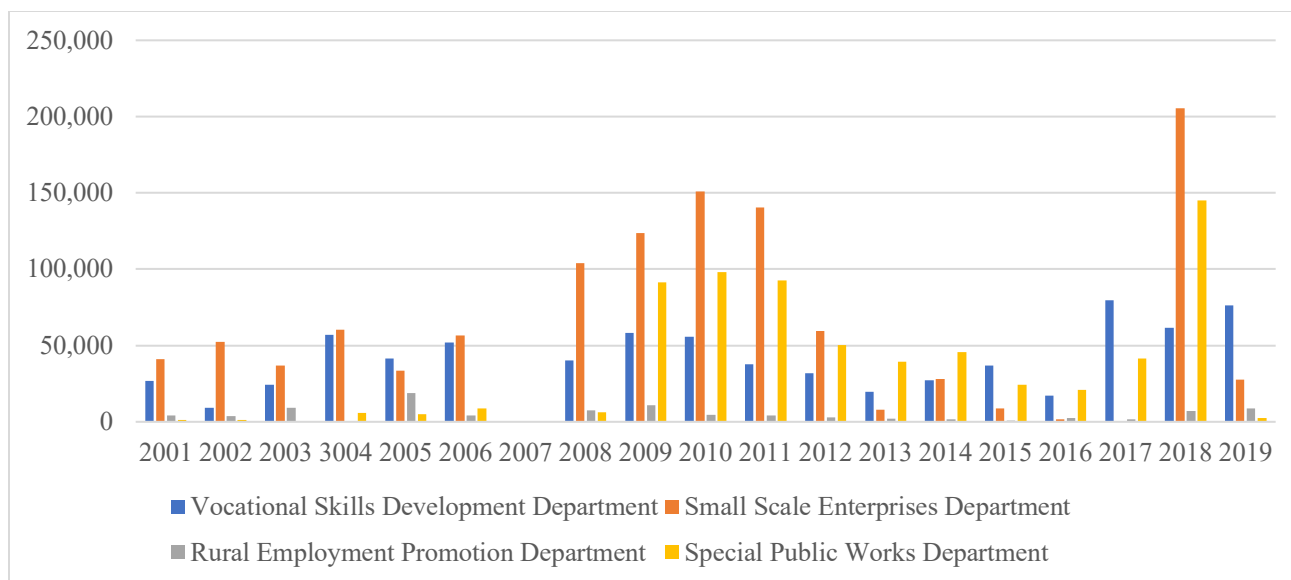


Figure 1: Number of Youths Empowered through Implemented Programs of the National Directorate of Employment (2001 to 2019)

Source: Self-generated by the Author Using Data from the NDE

Youth Inclusiveness in Implemented Programs

While the programs implemented by the NDE captured males and females who were either graduates or non-graduates, the selection of the beneficiaries based on these criteria did not reflect the proportion of each category in terms of who benefitted from the programs. A broader reflection of the youth categorization which was along geographic locations (i.e. either as youth living in urban or rural areas) provides a better picture of the inclusiveness or otherwise of the youths in employment opportunities in Nigeria. As indicated in Figure 1, most of the programs focused on urban areas, a situation that reflects the poor inclusiveness of the rural youths in interventions of the government that target addressing the youth unemployment problem in Nigeria.

The narrowed concentration of programs in the urban areas at the expense of the employment opportunities for rural youths is also evident in the relatively low number of beneficiaries of the NDE programs when compared to the rising rates of unemployment in Nigeria. For example, between 2001 and 2019, only 2,666,173 youths benefitted from the programs (see Figure 2). When compared to the unemployed youth population, which increased from 1,866,116 in 2010 to 13,145,708 in 2018 (NBS, 2018), the performance of programs implemented to drive youth employment in Nigeria has been low.

Although the programs were designed for graduate, non-graduate, urban and rural youth, the relatively low number of youths that had benefitted from the programs over the years implied that implemented programs failed to capture the aspirations of the heterogeneous categories of the youths, with varied socio-demographic backgrounds in the country. This is because the resources and facilities that are available in the rural areas are different from those in the urban areas. In most of rural Nigeria that is deficient in social infrastructures, programs that will address the employment expectations of the rural areas should consider what the local environment permits and, where necessary, upscaling the infrastructural deficits to ensure program success. Conversely, implementing programs that are not technology-driven in urban areas where the youths have better access to infrastructures with innovative aspirations may not gain the interest of the youths to partake in such

programs.

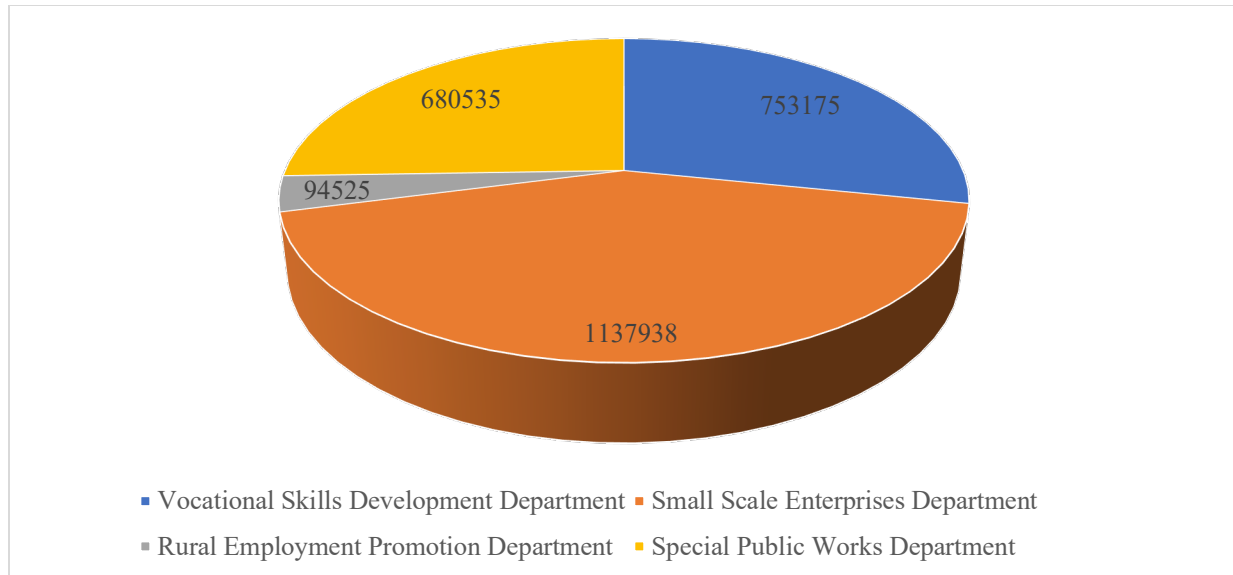


Figure 2: Total Number of Empowered Youths (2001-2019)
Source: Self-generated by the Author Using Data from the NDE

Where programs fail to take into consideration the dynamics of the youths in terms of their educational, social and spatial diversities, achieving the aims of such programs may remain elusive. Oosterom (2018) argued that efforts at generating employment opportunities for youths must not only focus on the demand and supply factors that engender youth unemployment, but also the aspirations of youths and young people's views on the costs and benefits of the opportunities offered as well as the conditions that serve as enablers or constraints to the uptake of an individual youth in employment opportunities.

When programs are not in line with people's career aspirations, their interest may not be sustained for participation. This is very crucial, especially in the digital age where technology drives development. Programs that will attract the youth in a world driven by digital technologies should be focused on opportunities that are also technology-driven to ensure that the interests of the youths are sustained for their maximum participation. The result agrees with Umo (2012) and Akande (2014) who noted that most programs designed to generate employment for youths in Nigeria failed to meet the expected goals due to poor targeting of beneficiaries. Adequate targeting of program beneficiaries therefore implies understanding the interests, aspirations, expectations, skills capacities, and qualifications of those for whom the programs are designed.

Sustainability Capacity of Implemented Programs

As mentioned earlier, the sustainability capacity of programs that were implemented to drive youth employment in Nigeria was determined using the PSAT developed by Luke et al. (2014). The tool has eight domains: (1) environmental sustainability, (2) funding stability, (3) partnerships, (4) organizational capacity, (5) program evaluation, (6) program adaptation, (7) communications, and (8) strategic planning. As also noted previously, the PSAT was used to determine the sustainability of two programs that were implemented by the FMY&SD and the NDE. The implemented programs of the FMY&SD are the Financial Inclusion Program (FIP) and the Youth

Entrepreneurship Training (YET) while the implemented programs of the NDE that were analyzed are the Sustainable Agricultural Development Training Scheme (SADTS) and the Graduate Attachment Program (GAP). The scores of the individual domains and the overall sustainability capacity scores of the respective programs were determined. The program domains were measured on a scale of five items each with a minimum and maximum rating of 0 and 7, respectively. The total score for each domain was summed up and the average was taken.

The results show that sustainability capacity domains such as the internal and external support of the program environment (2.8), the stability of funds available for the program (2.8), collaboration with stakeholders (0.6) and the adaptation of the program to changes (2.8) were low for the Youth Employment Training (YET) of the FMY&SD (see Table 2). Nevertheless, the SADTS and the GAP of the National Directorate of Employment and the Financial Inclusion Program (NDEFI) of the FMY&SD show better sustainability capacities from their domain scores (refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Domain score of sustainability capacity of programs

Ministry/ Agency	Program	Environmental support	Funding stability	Partnerships	Organizational capacity	Program evaluation	Program adaptation	Communication	Strategic planning
NDE	SADTS	5	3.4	5	5.2	4.8	4.8	4.8	4.6
	GAP	5.6	4	4.8	4.8	5	5.6	4.6	4.4
FMY&SD	FIP	4.6	4.2	4.8	4.6	5.6	3.6	4.6	5.6
	YET	2.8	2.8	0.6	5.2	5.4	2.8	4.6	6.4

Source: Self-generated by the Author

The results further indicate that the sustainability capacity scores for the programs vary. For example, the SADTS (4.7), GAP (4.85) of the NDE and the FIP (4.7) of the FMY&SD have better capacity for sustainability compared to the YET (3.75) of the FMY&SD (see Figure 3).

The preceding finding implies that programs with high sustainability scores will be more sustainable in generating employment opportunities for the youths than programs with lower sustainability scores. The capacity for the sustainability of the programs notwithstanding, the will to sustain the programs is a function of the political will of the government to continue programs with high sustainability scores not minding changes in political regimes and the willingness to commit adequate funds to the programs. These will determine the extent to which the programs can be up-scaled for inclusiveness to ensure that a large proportion of the unemployed are included in opportunities that will improve their wellbeing and reduce unemployment and poverty, especially in rural areas where higher rates of unemployment abound.

This will be achieved when the government makes the necessary commitment to change the narrative that generally characterizes program implementations that are geared toward generating employment opportunities for the youths: i.e. situations where programs were terminated without ascertaining their capacity due to changes in government regimes. A major barrier to the sustainability of programs that were implemented to drive youth employment is the changes in the political environment in the country. Adesugba and Mavrotas (2016b) noted that most youth employment programs are not evaluated to assess their effectiveness, whereas those that are assessed do not survive beyond the political ambitions that established them. The changes in political regimes

have equally remained a major barrier to youth employment programs in Nigeria. What is obtainable in most cases is the absence of continuity in implemented programs when the initiator of such programs exits the office, irrespective of the sustainability capacity of such programs.

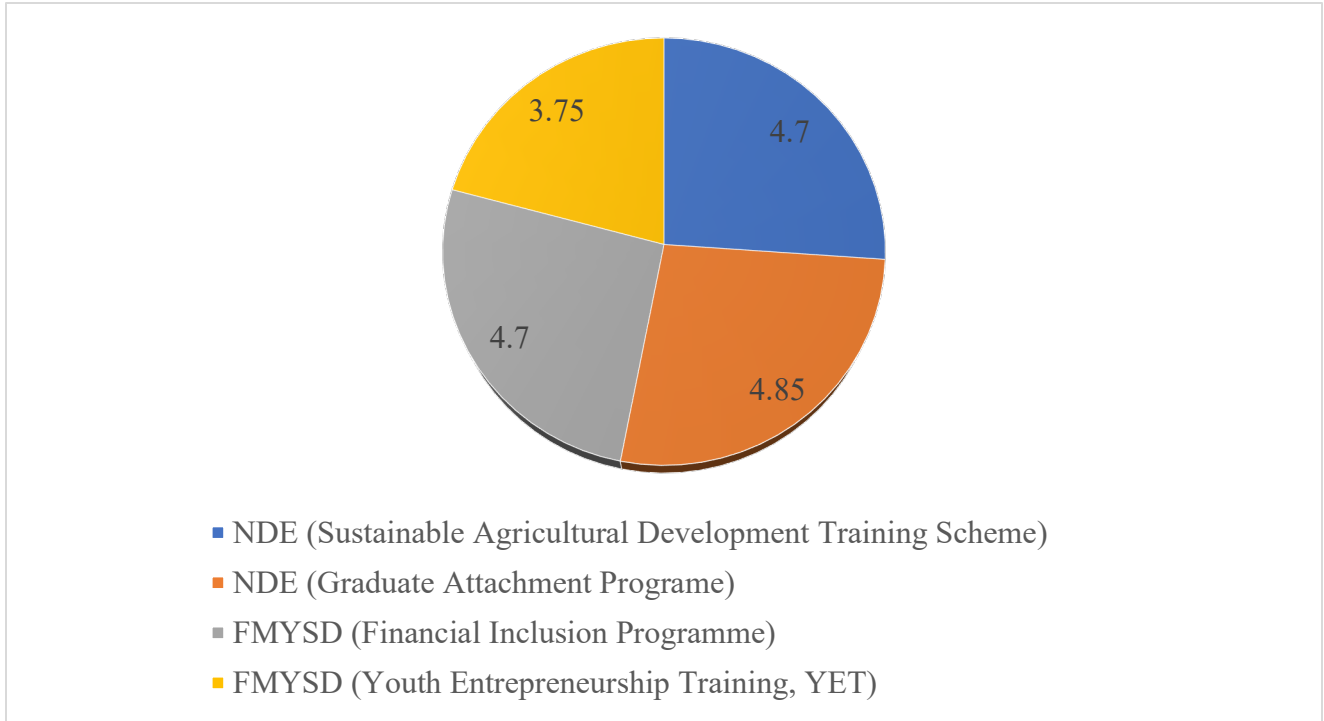


Figure 3: Program Sustainability Scores
Source: Self-generated by the Author

Where such changes are allowed, it makes it difficult to ascertain or determine the sustainability of implemented programs and to identify areas of weak capacity for improvements to ensure better programs. As noted by Adesugba and Mavrotas (2016b), most programs implemented to address youth unemployment in Nigeria have not achieved the desired goals because no sustainable and long-term action plan to ensure the jobs generated are suitable for the educational qualification and type of vocational training required. Determining the sustainability capacity of programs will therefore ensure that programs that are implemented are sustainable, particularly when the expectations, aspirations and social diversities of the youth are taken into consideration.

It will also ensure that scarce economic resources are judiciously used rather than wasted on programs that are not sustainable. Schell et al. (2013) posited that when the sustainability capacity of programs is not assessed, it leads to a waste of resources, fosters distrust among stakeholders, and may limit a program’s performance in terms of achieving its stated objectives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Youth unemployment remains a major challenge in Nigeria with multiplier effects on poverty outcomes and rising spates of insecurity. While the government has made several efforts to address youth unemployment through the implementation of employment programs, the proportion of youths who have benefitted from these programs since 2001 remains low compared to the millions

of youth in need of employment opportunities for better wellbeing.

Similarly, one major problem that continues to undermine the wide-range employment with a meaningful reduction in youth unemployment is the poor targeting of employment program beneficiaries. A narrowed conceptualization of youths that lacks their social contextual differences and dynamics may not achieve the goal of inclusive youth employment. This is because targeting beneficiaries based on the narrow and traditional indices of geographic locations may not attract the interests of today's youths who live in a changing world that is driven by technology. Without taking cognizance of the aspirations and expectations of the youths, their social contexts, and technological innovativeness which may be dynamic based on where they live, and their access to social infrastructures as determining factors in the design of programs, inclusive youth employment may be difficult to attain.

One way to remove these ambiguities, therefore, is to determine the sustainability capacity of implemented programs as this will help to ensure that programs with higher sustainability capacity with high upscaling potential are implemented rather than focusing on programs that are not sustainable yet with economic costs. Accordingly, three recommendations are presented. First, increasing the number of programs that are targeted at youth employment is important to addressing the increasing rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria. This will require more funding from the government and other supporting organizations. Second, programs that are aimed at employing the teeming youth population in Nigeria should ensure that the aspirations and expectations of the youths are considered for the inclusiveness of a majority of the unemployed. Third, in order to reduce the waste of resources and economic loss due to poor program participation and impact, there is a need to determine the sustainability capacity of programs targeted at youth employment in Nigeria.

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