

Innovations and Entrepreneurship in Benue State: Driving Youth Employment, Empowerment, and Economic Growth in Selected Local Governments in Benue State-Nigeria

Janet Mbanegen Aondoakaa¹, Ungwa Emmanuel Vandekan PhD²

^{1,2} General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic Wannune, Benue State-Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study assessed the role of innovations and entrepreneurship in promoting youth employment, empowerment, and economic growth in Benue State, Nigeria. The objectives were to examine the impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation and identify the key challenges and opportunities for promoting innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth. Results showed a significant impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation ($R=0.450$, $R^2=0.203$, $F(1,381) = 96.001$; $P<0.01$), with entrepreneurship initiatives accounting for 20.3% of the total variance observed in youth employment generation. Challenges contributed statistically significant to innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth ($\beta=0.417$, $t=6.353$; $P<0.01$), while opportunities did not significantly influence innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment ($\beta=0.051$, $t=0.784$; $P>0.05$). The study recommends enhancing entrepreneurship initiatives, addressing challenges such as inadequate funding and limited access to resources, and promoting innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth in Benue State, Nigeria

KEYWORDS

Innovations, Entrepreneurship, Youth Employment, Empowerment, Economic Growth

I. INTRODUCTION

The experience of Asian Tigers or Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) notably (China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Malaysia) with very impressive growth in the 90s was driven by entrepreneurial revolution. Their ability to sustain growth based on access to resources, knowledge/technology and markets, rests fundamentally on innovation which is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship that endows resource with new capacity to create wealth. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), youth unemployment and poverty have persisted over the years despite various efforts of governments (Enyindah & Ronald, 2021). One of the fundamental approaches has been to enhance youth entrepreneurship capacity and skills to play active role in private sector-led growth. The traditional, micro or small enterprises development in SSA has been hindered by poor quality education, lack of modern technology despite information and communication (ICT) penetration, political instability, strong dependence on industrialized economies, and so on. The emergence of 4th industrial revolution where technology, artificial intelligence and robotics drives economic activities in advanced economies reechoes the increasing and

vital role of entrepreneurship in job creation and growth in African economies generally and Nigerian in particular.

Youth are the engine of growth and development in the economy particularly in Nigeria with a youthful population of about 60% of its entire population (Ukanwa & Akpanabia, 2019). They constitute the resource that needs to be engaged to drive social and economic activities especially in this era ICT and social capital. The percentage of youth labor force that is without job and under-employed is worrisome in Nigeria (Egbefo & Abe, 2019). According to World Bank (2019) the unemployment rate steadily increased from 12% of the working age population in 2006 to 24% in 2011 and further to 29.3% in 2017. The National Bureau of statistics (NBS) (2021) estimates the unemployment rate in Nigeria to be about 34.4%. The macroeconomic environment is facing challenges amidst stagflation (high inflation and minimal growth). Nigeria is a country with abundant economic and business potentials due to its natural endowment of human and material resources. Promoting youth innovation and creativity has become the hallmark of government policies and programs. Job creation has been inadequate to keep pace with the expanding working age population. The shrinking job spaces in the public sector that hitherto generated employment for many youths raise the need for a private sector-led growth and self-employment. The youth potential which remains a major source of economic prosperity is largely untapped (Emmanuel, 2019). There has been several interventions and institutional arrangements geared towards empowering the youth and enhancing their livelihoods in the society. Some of the institutional arrangements include Raw Material Research and Development Council (RMRDC), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Bank of Industry (BOI), Bank of Agriculture (BOA), Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDAN), and National Development Bank (NDB). The special interventions include Youth with Innovation (YOUWIN), Subsidy-Reinvestment Program (SURE-P), and the recent Social Investment Program (SIP) of the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. Though the programs were initiated by the federal government of Nigeria, Benue state is a beneficiary.

As Nigeria yearns for economic growth, emphasis must be laid on entrepreneurship. Some entrepreneurial programs already embarked upon by the Federal Government of Nigeria include: Family Economic Advancement Program (FEAP), Peoples Bank of Nigeria, National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (SMEDAN), Small and Medium Industries Equity Investment Scheme (SMIEIS) and so on are all targeted towards promoting a vibrant entrepreneurial class that will actively articulate the economic development process.

A. Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a process of owning and managing a new venture or improving on an existing product(s) or service(s) that create value, assuming the accompanied risks and receiving the resulting rewards and independence. To Schumpeter (1934) entrepreneurship is process that result into new product, new methods, new markets or form of organization. Entrepreneurship helps to create wealth by creating demand in the market from a newly introduced innovation. Entrepreneurship increases earnings and mobilizes savings for investment. Thus, it's enhancing institutional capital formation, investments and improved standard of living.

B. Economic Growth

Economic growth can be defined as an increase in the real value of goods and services produced in the economy from one year to the next. In other words, the country is aiming to have more goods and services available for sale every year. Other scholars view economic growth as "a positive change in the level of production of goods and services by a country over a certain period of time" (Investors words, 20). It refers only to the quantity of goods and services produced. It is often measured as the rate of change in GDP (Wikipedia, 2024).

Entrepreneurship is based on actualization of new ideas and creativity that lead to economic growth. This is possible by the ability of entrepreneurs to bear-risks. Some culture, beliefs, values system can as well increase the supply of entrepreneurs in a given society. Entrepreneurship can lead to industrialization of nations through its participation in private driven economy. Entrepreneurship creates employment opportunities, utilizes local raw materials, creates wealth and has the potential to reduce poverty in developing societies. Entrepreneurs may also discover areas of socio-economic needs and take advantage of such to the benefit of the society. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (1999) argues that the national level of entrepreneurial activities has a statistically significant association with subsequent levels of economic growth. GEM further argued that there are no countries with high levels of entrepreneurship and low levels of economic growth. It was observed assumed that an analysis of countries over a long period of time have accumulated substantial evidence of a positive link between high rates of entrepreneurship and economic growth.

Youth empowerment has emerged as a pivotal developmental strategy in many countries, particularly those with large youth populations, such as Nigeria. In a nation where the youth demographic constitutes a significant portion of the population, empowering young people with the necessary skills, resources, and opportunities is crucial for fostering economic growth, social stability, and national development. Youth empowerment in Nigeria encompasses a broad range of dimensions, including educational, economic, social, and political aspects. The ultimate goal of these initiatives is to enable young people to gain control over their lives, fostering self-reliance, active citizenship, and meaningful participation in society. Various programs have been implemented at both the national and state levels, with the Nigerian government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international bodies playing key roles. For instance, the National Youth Policy emphasizes the importance of education, skills acquisition, and entrepreneurship as critical areas for youth empowerment (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019). Studies have shown that effective youth empowerment can lead to significant socio-economic benefits. According to Akinyemi and Olatunji (2022), well-designed empowerment programs improve participants' employability, increase their income potential, and enhance their overall quality of life. These programs not only provide immediate economic benefits but also contribute to long-term social stability by reducing the factors that contribute to crime. However, despite the clear benefits, these programs often face considerable challenges that hinder their effectiveness. Inadequate funding, limited reach, and inconsistent implementation are some of the common issues. Furthermore, Okafor and Okafor (2021) highlight the problem of inadequate infrastructure, which hampers the effective delivery of training and other essential services.

Empowerment programs are increasingly recognized as essential tools for reducing crime. The state has experienced significant socio-economic challenges, with crime being one of the most pressing issues. High crime rates among the youth in Benue State are often attributed to factors such as unemployment, poverty, and a lack of education. The state's unique socio-political landscape, characterized by ethnic tensions and political instability, further exacerbates these issues. Research indicates that socio-economic deprivation often pushes young people towards criminal activities as a means of survival or as an expression of frustration (Nwankwo et al., 2023). Empowerment initiatives in Benue State, therefore, aim to provide young people with the skills and opportunities needed for gainful employment, thereby reducing the likelihood of their involvement in crime. For example, the Benue State Youth Empowerment Scheme (BSYES) is one of the flagship programs that offer vocational training in trades such as tailoring, carpentry, and information and communication technology (ICT). This initiative aims to enhance the employability of young people and foster entrepreneurship, which is seen as a proactive approach to mitigate the socio-economic conditions that often lead to criminal behavior. One of the critical challenges faced by youth empowerment programs in Benue State is the disparity in access between urban and rural youths. While urban youths often have more opportunities to participate in these programs, rural youths are frequently left out due to factors such as geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, and limited information. This disparity creates a situation where the benefits of empowerment programs are unevenly distributed, which can perpetuate socio economic inequalities and limit the overall impact of these initiatives.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Benue State, Nigeria, faces significant socio-economic challenges including high rates of unemployment, particularly among youths, limited economic opportunities, and the need for sustainable livelihood strategies. Despite the state's rich agricultural potential and human capital, harnessing these resources for economic growth and development remains a critical issue. Entrepreneurship and innovations are recognized as vital for driving economic progress, generating employment, and fostering empowerment; however, their impact and the factors influencing their success in Benue State are not fully understood. Youth unemployment contributes to socio-economic challenges including poverty and increased vulnerability to crime, underscoring the importance of effective youth empowerment initiatives. Barriers to business growth such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and skills gaps hinder entrepreneurship and innovation. Women in Benue State face specific challenges in entrepreneurship, including access to resources and socio-cultural barriers, impacting their contribution to economic growth. The state's economy is largely agrarian, pointing to a need for diversification and innovation to drive sustainable economic growth and employment generation. The effectiveness and sustainability of youth empowerment and entrepreneurship initiatives among selected local governments in Benue State need assessment to inform policy and practice. There may be mismatches between the skills imparted through education and training programs and the needs of the economy and employers. Optimal utilization of Benue State's agricultural and human resources for economic development through entrepreneurship and innovations is a critical consideration. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires understanding the current state of innovations and entrepreneurship in Benue State, identifying factors influencing their success, and examining their impact on

employment generation, empowerment, and economic growth, with a view to informing strategies for promoting sustainable economic development and reducing unemployment and poverty.

III. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study is to assess the role of innovations and entrepreneurship in promoting youth employment, empowerment, and economic growth in Benue State, Nigeria.

Specific Objectives

- 1) To examine the impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria.
- 2) To identify the key challenges and opportunities for promoting innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment among selected local governments in Benue State-Nigeria.

IV. HYPOTHESES

The study denotes the following hypotheses:

1. They will be a significant impact on entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria.
2. They will be a significant influence on the challenges and opportunities for promoting innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment among selected local governments in Benue State-Nigeria.

V. LITERATURE

A. Conceptual, Theoretical and Empirical Review

Entrepreneur is one who organizes and manages business, undertakes and assumes the risks, evaluates available opportunities and strives to take decisions to maximize profit (Pickle and Abrahamson, 1990). An entrepreneur is seen as an element or agent of change in the economy. Entrepreneurship according to Schumpeter (1934) is the process that results into new product, new methods, new markets or form of organization. It helps to create wealth by creating demand in the market from a newly introduced innovation or creativity. Thus, entrepreneurship is a process through which individuals identify opportunities, allocate resources, and create value in a manner that promotes change management, creative thinking, opportunity seeking, and innovativeness.

According to Coleman (1988), entrepreneurs see problems as opportunities and act to identify solutions and market. Entrepreneurial success is simply a function of the ability (capacity and attitude) of an entrepreneur to see opportunities in the marketplace, initiate change (or take advantage of change) and creates value through solutions (commercialize solutions). The advent of information and communication technology has made it possible for youth to access information and requisite technology to create and innovate in their choice career or endeavor. Entrepreneurship has become a channel through which most

developing economies like Nigeria are leveraging to create jobs amidst escalating unemployment, inequality and poverty rates.

The innate characteristics of youth creativity and innovation make them agents of change and productivity. The fourth industrial era comes with opportunities for entrepreneurial youth to take advantage of and create value in their economies and the world over. The context of entrepreneurship among Nigerian youth relates to self-employment, self-reliance or self-contentment as government design and implements policies including entrepreneurship education to drive job creation through entrepreneurship. Youth empowerment has been a prominent topic in global development literature for several decades, emphasizing its critical role in fostering individual and societal progress.

Economic empowerment through job opportunities and entrepreneurship is another key theme, as studies from the International Labour Organization (ILO) demonstrate the significant impact of decent work on reducing poverty and deterring youth from engaging in criminal activities. Civic engagement and leadership have also been extensively explored, with the United Nations and scholarly articles in the *Journal of Youth Studies* emphasizing how involving young people in governance and community service contributes to democratic processes and societal stability.

The population segment between 15 and 24 years of age is referred to as youth according to United Nations (Baniduro, 2003). However, this seems narrow in countries like Nigeria. For instance, youth has been defined as all individuals between 18 and 35 years (Emmanuel, 2019). The African Union Youth Charter states that youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Young people in this age group require social, economic and political support because of their high levels of socioeconomic uncertainty and vulnerable in realizing their full potential. Empowerment means assisting young people to overcome obstacles which might prevent them from achieving their potentials. Youth empowerment according to Blanchard (1996) is an attitudinal, structural, and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority, and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and the lives of other people.

B. Empirical Evidence

On empirical studies that relate to the topic under investigation, Aslam, Latif and Muhammad (2019) examined the problems faced by women and youth entrepreneurs and their impact on working efficiency in Pakistan. Using quantitative analysis, the study found that women and youth are faced with entrepreneurial/business problems, social/personal problems and technical problems which negatively affect their working efficiency.

Gulani and Ene (2019) used both qualitative and quantitative approaches in Ghana. They found that Ghanaian women have the same attributes with their counterpart in the rest of the globe in terms of their personality traits. The youth in Ghana are making substantial contributions to economic growth of Ghana in terms of innovation, job creation, reduction in poverty and unemployment.

Uwantege and Mbabazi (2020) examined the impact of youth and women economic empowerment projects on their socio-economic development using Agaseke project in

Kigali Kenya. The findings showed that the project enables women to be self-employed, enhance decision making power, decline domestic violence, increased their incomes as well as improving their socio-economic conditions.

Enyindah and Ronald (2021) assessed the extent of youth involvement in entrepreneurial activities in government programmes on youth's empowerment in Adamawa State, Nigeria. The findings showed that government youths' empowerment programs had positive impact on youths in terms of employment creating and improve livelihood.

Ukanwa and Akpanabia (2019) analyzed employment generation through entrepreneurship development in Nigeria. They found a significant and positive relationship between entrepreneurship and youth socioeconomic enhancement. Adeoye and Afolabi (2019) used narrative textual case study (NTCS) to examine the effect of entrepreneurship on growth and development in Nigeria. The study found that entrepreneurship enhances growth through job creation, income generation and better livelihoods of people.

Adebayo (2018) examined the impact of government entrepreneurial programs on young people micro and small enterprises in Nigeria. The study found that the programs on financial, infrastructural and capacity building have impact positively on new venture creation among the youth.

Kpetai and Tersoo (2016) investigated the impact of youth and women entrepreneurship in economic performance in Benue State, Nigeria using ANOVA. The study found positive effect of entrepreneurship on state economy especially on the youth. Also, Okafor and Mordi (2015) examined the effect of environmental factors on youth entrepreneurship development (YED) in Lagos State-Nigeria. The result revealed that government policy such as: environmental factor has negative correlation with youth entrepreneurship development.

VI. METHODOLOGY

A. Description of the Study Area/Site

The study is conducted in Benue State, Nigeria, a region with significant agricultural potential and a youthful population. Benue State faces socio-economic challenges including high youth unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and needs for sustainable livelihood strategies.

B. Subjects

The subjects of the study are youths in Benue State, Nigeria, typically defined as individuals between 18 and 35 years old, aligning with the African Union Youth Charter's definition. The study considers both urban and rural youths, entrepreneurs, and participants in youth empowerment programs.

C. Population

The population comprises youths (18-35 years) in Benue State, Nigeria, including those engaged in entrepreneurial activities, beneficiaries of empowerment programs, and those seeking employment opportunities from the 23 local government in Benue State. The total population for this study comprises of 12 selected local governments from each of the senatorial Zones in below state as display below:

S/No	Local Government	Population
1	Gboko	11945
2	Guma	6754
3	Gwer East	5432
4	Katsina-Ala	6454
5	Kwande	8495
6	Logo	1433
7	Makurdi	11745
8	Obi	1321
9	Oju	1120
10	Tarka	1647
11	Ushongo	2312
12	Vandeikya	4234
Total		62992

Sample Size

Using Taro Yamane's formula for calculating the sample size from the total population of 62,992, therefore, the sample size is 398 respondents.

VII. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Structured questionnaires were administered to youths and entrepreneurs in Benue State to gather data on entrepreneurship, challenges, and impacts on employment and economic growth.

A. Sampling Technique

Stratified Sampling was used to ensure representation of various youth groups (urban/rural, gender, age subsets) and entrepreneurs in Benue State. Purposive Sampling was employed for selecting specific respondents with relevant experiences or involvement in entrepreneurship and empowerment initiatives.

B. Techniques for Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics was used to summarize and describe the bio-data of the respondents. Multiple Regression Analysis will be used to test hypothesis one while Factor Analysis will be used to test hypothesis two.

VIII. RESULTS

The study assessed the role of innovations and entrepreneurship in promoting youth employment, empowerment, and economic growth in Benue State, Nigeria. The results are presented below:

Hypothesis One: There will be a significant impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria.

Table 1: Summary Table of Linear Regression Analysis showing the impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria.

Variable	R	R ²	df	F	Sig	B	t	Sig
Constant	.450	.203	1,381	96.001	.000		15.026	.000
Entrepreneurship initiatives						.450	9.550	.000

Dependent Variable: Youth employment

The result in Table 1 shows that there was a significant impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria [$R=.450$, $R^2=.203$ $F(1,381) = 96.001$; $P<.01$]. The result indicates that entrepreneurship initiatives accounted for 20.3% of the total variance observed in youth employment generation.

Hypothesis Two: There will be a significant influence on the challenges and opportunities for promoting innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on Youth Empowerment among selected local governments in Benue State-Nigeria.

Table 2: Summary Table of Simple Linear Multiple Regression Analysis showing the influence of challenges and opportunities on innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on Youth empowerment among selected local governments in Benue State-Nigeria.

Variable	R	R ²	df	F	Sig	β	t	Sig
Constant	.520	.270	2,30	70.983	.000		18.026	.000
Challenges and Opportunities						.417	6.353	.000
Economic Growth						.051	.784	.434

Dependent Variable: Youth Empowerment

The result in Table 2 indicated that challenges contributed statistically significant to innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment among selected local governments in Benue State-Nigeria ($\beta=.417$, $t=6.353$; $P<.01$).

Opportunities did not significantly influence innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment ($\beta=.051$, $t=.784$; $P>.05$).

IX. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study's findings revealed a significant impact of entrepreneurship initiatives on youth employment generation among selected local governments in Benue State, Nigeria. This suggests that entrepreneurship initiatives are crucial for promoting youth employment in the region. The findings align with previous research that highlights the importance of entrepreneurship in enhancing youth employment (Adeyemi & Adeyemo, 2017; Kumar & Singh, 2015).

The study also identified challenges as a significant contributor to innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth, implying that addressing challenges enhances innovations and entrepreneurship. However, opportunities did not significantly influence innovations and entrepreneurship for economic growth on youth empowerment, suggesting that opportunities are not a determinant of innovations and entrepreneurship in this context.

X. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that entrepreneurship initiatives have a significant impact on youth employment generation in Benue State, Nigeria. This means that when young people are supported and empowered to start their own businesses, it can lead to job creation and economic growth in the region. The findings suggest that entrepreneurship initiatives can be a powerful tool for addressing youth unemployment and promoting economic development in Benue State.

The study also highlights the importance of addressing challenges that hinder innovations and entrepreneurship in the region. Challenges such as inadequate funding, limited access to resources, and infrastructure gaps can stifle entrepreneurial activity and limit economic growth. By addressing these challenges, policymakers and stakeholders can create an environment that supports entrepreneurship and promotes economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers therefore recommended that government/top politicians in Benue State should prioritize strategies to enhance Youth Employment, Empowerment in order to increase Economic Growth. This can be achieved by:

1. Enhance entrepreneurship initiatives by strengthening programs and providing necessary support to promote youth employment generation in Benue State. This can include providing access to funding, training, and mentorship for young entrepreneurs. Policymakers should prioritize entrepreneurship development and allocate resources to support youth-led startups and businesses.
2. Address challenges hindering innovations and entrepreneurship, such as inadequate funding, limited access to resources, and infrastructure gaps. This can be achieved by promoting public-private partnerships, improving regulatory frameworks, and investing in infrastructure development. By addressing these challenges,

policymakers can create an enabling environment that supports entrepreneurship and promotes economic growth.

3. Promote opportunities for youth to engage in entrepreneurship and innovations, focusing on sectors with high growth potential, such as agriculture, technology, and manufacturing. Empower youth with skills necessary for entrepreneurship and economic growth through training, mentorship, and resources. Establish a framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact of entrepreneurship initiatives and empowerment programs to inform policy and practice, and make adjustments as needed to ensure sustainable economic growth and development in Benue State.

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