Preparing for a Better Future: An Analysis of the Youth of Nigeria and Mexico

Haley Bowcutt

Abstract

Children are the key for the future of developing countries. In Nigeria, opportunities for youths are slim due to poor health and little educational opportunities, leading to low school enrollment ratios and low literacy rates. The health and education for youths in Mexico is much better; however, a variety of illegal activities have pulled the Mexican youths in the wrong direction. The need for children to work for income is necessary in both developing countries, oftentimes leading these youths to drop out of school and join the workforce, even becoming involved in illegal activities.

I. Introduction

This article compares the youth population of Nigeria and Mexico. Specifically, it compares the youth in terms of their status in health, their enrollment in school, their participation in the workforce, and their involvement in criminal activity. Mexico is more developed than Nigeria in terms of health and education, like if comparing life expectancies, immunization rates, and school enrollment ratios across these two countries. In reference to education, the higher school enrollment ratios lead to higher literacy rates. Moreover, high enrollment ratios also imply lower rates of child labor. In Nigeria, child labor rates are high. Many Nigerian children work on their family’s farm.

However, due to relative high unemployment rates, both countries are known to have youths involved in criminal activities. In Mexico, drug cartels are a major problem for the country and have lead many youths to become involved in dangerous activities. In Nigeria, political conflicts, among others, have been an ever-occurring problem for the country and have led to heavy involvement by the youth population. To the degree that there is data, this article examines these issues. The next section provides a brief literature review, which is followed by some empirical background on the two countries’ socio-economic development. The fourth section than compares various aspects of youth, before the last section provides some conclusions.
II. Brief Literature Review

There is a relatively large amount of literature examining the situation of youths in Nigeria and Mexico, including analyzing the education system and the involvement of youths in the labor force. David (2015), Obi (2015), and Abdullahi (2014) focus on the Nigeria, while Levinson, Moe and Knail (2001) and van Gameren and Hinojosa (2004) focus on Mexico. For each country, these publications discuss issues related to youth violence, education, and youth employment.

- David (2015) explains how Nigeria is a conflict prone country due to ethno-religious conflict, inter-communal conflict, and post-election violence; all which are common amongst its people. These conflicts lead to crimes that in 90 percent of the time are carried out by Nigerian youths. After decades of military coups, Nigeria regained democracy in 1999. However, instead of conducting its government by rule of the people, the Nigerian government is really run by a few political elites. The institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria caused politicization of religious, regional, and ethnic identities by these political elites as they competed for power in the government. Those elites, in their search for political power, often turn to violence. To perform these acts of violence, the elites hire youths, mainly because they are cheap and mostly unemployed. Many also fill the roles of bodyguard, assassin, and canon-fodders in communal violence. The large group of unemployed young men that perform these acts of violence often come from the oil-producing regions of the Niger-Delta that have become poor and underdeveloped due to political changes.

- Obi (2015) discusses how youth unemployment has become one of the biggest problems facing Nigeria, not only economically but socially as well. The youths of Nigeria have taken on illegal activities such as political thuggery, drug trafficking, prostitution, robbery, and more, mostly to get some money for food. Obi proposes a quality entrepreneurial education as a relief program that can promote inclusive growth in Nigeria. Through education, youths will learn the skills necessary to become employed, allowing them to sustain themselves while also contributing to the economy.

- Abdullahi (2014) discusses the abundance of the use of drugs by the youths of Nigeria and their negative effects, socially and economically. He focuses on the idea that the youth of a country are the most influential in transforming a society for the better. Therefore, if the youth population is involved in crime and drugs, society will not improve. The beginning of drug use can be attributed to social pressures and a lack of proper adult figures in the home. Continued use of drugs can cause moral decay, school dropout, high crime rates, family degeneration, and prostitution.

- Levinson, Moe and Knail (2001) discuss those between the ages of 12 and 17 years of age in Mexico, who either study, work, do both, or do neither. She has found that there are relatively low school enrollment statistics, in part due to the high rates of youths working. By law, only children over the age of 14 years are allowed to work, but only for a maximum of six hours a day as work should not interfere with education. Once 16 years of age, they may work under the same laws as adults. However, Levinson, Moe and Knail found that these laws are often violated for a number of reasons, including household work, family wealth, and more. Female youths who work in the home have lower school attendance. Of the youths that are in the work force, girls are more likely to be involved in food preparation and prostitution, while boys are more likely to work as carriers, packers, and car washers.
Girls performing unpaid work within the home tend to have heavy work schedules. Levinson, Moe and Knail find that having a mother and father present in the home increases the likelihood for children attending school.

- Van Gameren and Hinojosa (2004) study the relationship between education and wealth. They find that an increase in education leads to an increase in wealth and a reduction of poverty in both rural and urban areas. However, urban youth are prospering more than rural youth. Youth receiving an education is lower in rural areas, leading to a higher percentage or rural workers with no formal education.

III. Empirical Background

Mexico is far more developed than Nigeria in terms of income per capita as well as most other social indicators. As Figure 1 shows, Mexico’s purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted GDP per capita is currently about three times higher than that of Nigeria. In 1990, Mexico’s GDP per capita was about four times Nigeria’s GDP per capita. Mexico’s evolution of GDP per capita has been more volatile than Nigeria’s. The impact of the Mexican Peso crisis in 1995 as well as the 2008 world economic crisis is clearly visible in Figure 1 for Mexico. Nigeria’s GDP per capita stagnated around $2,900 from 1990 until 2002, after which it accelerated very sharply, reaching nearly $5,500 in 2012.

**Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita (in constant 2011 international $), 1990-2012**

![GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2011 international $)](image)

Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2014a).

As Figure 2 shows, Mexico’s life expectancy is with 77.1 years in 2012 about one third higher than Nigeria’s life expectancy, which stood at 52.1 years in 2012. While Mexico’s life expectancy increased steadily during the last four decades, Nigeria’s stagnated for all of the 1990s at 46 years. Mexico’s crude death rate is considerably lower than Nigeria’s, see Figure 3. Mexico’s death rate decreased from 9.8 deaths per 1000 people in 1970 to 4.5 deaths in 2012, while that of Nigeria decreased from 22.6 deaths in 1970 to 13.5 deaths in 2012.
Comparing the sectoral shares of the Mexican and the Nigerian economies, illustrated in Figures 4 and 5, respectively, there are huge differences in terms of levels of the shares of agriculture, industry, and services across the two countries, as well as in terms of volatility. Despite these differences in terms of levels and volatility, neither country seems to have undergone any structural transformation during the last 20 years.
Figures 4 and 5: Sectoral Shares of the Mexican and Nigerian Economies, 1981-2012

In any case, as Figure 6 shows, both countries are significant oil exporters and as Figure 6 shows, both countries received significant oil rents, defined as the difference between the value of crude oil production at world prices and total costs of production. Mexico’s oil rents declined from a maximum of 18.4 percent of GDP in 1982 and 1983 to currently about six percent of GDP, while Nigeria’s oil rents reached a maximum of 57.4 percent in 1993, and constitute currently about 27 percent of GDP.

Figure 6: Oil rents (percent of GDP) for Mexico and Nigeria, 1970-2012

Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2014a).
Both countries also receive large amounts of remittances. As stated in a World Bank (2014b) press release, Mexico had remittances in 2013 of $22 billion US dollars, while Nigeria had remittances of $21 billion US dollars. Remittance money to Mexico generally comes from migrant workers in the United States. Remittance money to Nigeria comes from, among other, oil production in Sudan. Afolayan et al. (2009, p. 16) state that most Nigerians abroad live in Sudan (24 percent), rather than the United States (14 percent) or the United Kingdom (9 percent). Many Nigerian emigrants also settle in neighboring Cameroon (8 percent) and Ghana (5 percent).

Fertility rates rates are higher in Nigeria than Mexico, and have been so for the last 43 years. Currently (2012), Nigeria has a fertility rate of 6.0 births per woman, while Mexico has 2.2 births per woman (World Bank, 2014a). Because of this, even with higher infant mortality rates, Nigeria has a much higher percentage of the population ages 0-14 than Mexico, while Mexico has due to declining fertility rates an increasing share of working-age population, as is illustrated in Figures 7 and 8.

**Figures 7 and 8: Population Shares in Mexico and Nigeria, 1970-2012**

Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2014a).

**IV. Discussion**

**IV.1. Youths and Health**

As we have seen above, Mexicans are overall healthier than Nigerians. However, both countries are steadily getting healthier, based on crude death rate and life expectancy data. Focusing specifically on youth, Figure 9 shows that in both Mexico and Nigeria, infant mortality rates are decreasing. Hence, both countries are making progress in the health of their youths; however, Nigeria continues to lack behind. There are many contributing factors to this, including lower health expenditures. Because of this lack of spending in health expenditures, it has been reported that 75 percent of adolescents have serious problems accessing health care when they are sick (UNFPA, 1999). There are many factors contributing to these youths getting sick, including low percentages of immunizations, unprotected sex, violence and substance abuse.
As Figures 10 and 11 show, Mexico has reached close to 100 percent immunization rates against measles in 1998 and against DPT in 1996. However, despite sharp increases during the late 1980s, Nigeria has made little progress with increasing immunization levels since 1990. Nigeria’s immunization rates are roughly half of Mexico’s immunization rates, peaking in 2009 at 64 percent for measles and at 63 percent for DPT, and decreasing since.

Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2014a).
Low immunizations rates are not the only factor causing food health in Nigeria. As stated in UNFPA (1999, p. 4):

“Until recently, adolescents were seen as a healthy segment of the population and received low priority for services. But biology and society bring on additional health problems; those resulting from unprotected sex, violence and substance abuse. ... Today, people are reaching puberty earlier, marrying later and spending a longer time between childhood and adulthood. Young people – a group with special health needs – find their health needs neglected or ignored.”

Much of this is due to a lack of education. An UNFPA (undated) fact sheet on young people’s health and development in Nigeria states that one-fifth of females between the ages of 15 and 19, and one-quarter of females between the ages of 20-24, know about HIV and AIDS. These numbers are similar to the male youth of Nigeria. Moreover, it is shown that about half of the females aged 15-19, and one-quarter of the adolescent males, have engaged in sexual intercourse. Only half of these female youths have access to modern contraceptives, contributing to the high levels of adolescence pregnancies in Nigeria, see Figure 11. This also contributes to high numbers of people living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. According to the World Factbook,¹ there were 239,700 people in Nigeria living with HIV/AIDS in 2012, while in Mexico there were 174,300 living with HIV/AIDS in the same year.

Figure 11: Adolescent Fertility Rates in Mexico and Nigeria, 1970-2012

![Figure 11](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/)

UNFPA (1999) also notes that physical violence and sustance abuse are highly prevalent in schools in Nigeria. Due to ethno-religious conflict, inter-communal conflict, and post-election violence, Nigerian youths are heavily involved in violence, affecting their health. Almost a tenth of youths in this country have used drugs, also having a negative affect on youths health.

With Mexico’s drug wars, violence and substance abuse are a similar problem for the youths of Mexico. As stated in a news article by William Booth and Steve Fainaru (2009) for the *Washington Post*, minors are being swept up in Mexico’s drug wars as killers and victims. They also state that as a result of substance abuse and murder, Mexico is experiencing a lost generation. However, to these kids in Mexico, drug-trafficking is not seen as a threat to their healths but as a job opportunity. This will be discussed further in section IV.3. However, Booth and Fainaru (1999) state that drug trafficking is having serious effects on youths health. Since 2002, chronic drug use in Mexico has doubled, and the fastest-growing addiction rates are among 12 to 17 year-olds (Booth and Fainaru, 2009). Violence is causing high percentages of deaths amongst the youth of Mexico. As shown in a report by the World Bank (2012), Mexican youth represent a little more than 38 percent of the homicide victims in the country in the early 2000s. Youths and violence in both Nigeria and Mexico will be discussed further in section IV.4.

**IV.2. Youths and Education**

Not only does Nigeria spend less on health expenditures than Mexico, Nigeria also spends drastically less on education. Hinchliffe (2002, p. 15) estimated that in 1998, Nigeria’s education expenditure amounted to only 2.3 percent of GDP or 9.6 percent of government expenditures. The share of these funds going to primary education is at 35 percent, secondary education at 29 percent, and tertiary education’s share at 35 percent (Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner, 2003). This difference in allocation for education shows when we look at literacy rates for both countries as shown in Figure 12. In 2008, Nigeria’s literacy rate for youths ages 15-24 was only 66.4 percent, whereas Mexico’s literacy rate for youths was 98.3 percent. For those that do make it to the higher educational levels, Nigeria boasts the largest university system in Sub-Saharan African. According to Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner (2003), there were 48 state and federal universities enrolling over 400,000 students. However, these university systems struggle to expend due to a shortage in qualified academic staff (Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner, 2003).

![Figure 12: Youth Literacy Rates in Mexico and Nigeria, selected years](image)

Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2014a).
IV.3. Youths in the Work Force

Instead of attending school, many Nigerian children are involved in child labor. It is reported in the World Factbook that in 2007, 29 percent of children aged 5-14 were working. A study by Elijah and Okoruwa (2006) states that in rural areas, it is common to find children working on family farms. In urban areas, children are found “on the street as vendors, shoe-shiners, car washers, scavengers, beggars, head-load carriers, feetwashers and bus conductors” (Elijah and Okoruwa, 2006, p. 6). Some children are even forced into prostitution or trafficked internationally. According to Elijah and Okoruwa (2006), there are an estimated 15 million children working in Nigeria.

Comparing this to Mexico, which has much higher school enrollments, the World Factbook shows that only 5 percent of children aged 5-14 are working. On the other hand, Orraca (2014) refers to data from a Child Labor Module, which found that 10.5 percent of Mexico’s youth between the ages of 5 and 17 were working in 2011. Of these working individuals, only 70.9 percent were legally allowed to be working, as Mexico’s Constitution states that children under the age of 14 years are not allowed to work. Therefore, Orraca (2014) concludes that some 882,000 individuals between the ages of 5 and 13 participated illegally in Mexico’s labor market.

Orraca (2014) acknowledges the fact that school attendance by Mexico youths remains high at 91.1 percent; however, he concludes, this number is considerably lower among children that work, where only 60.9 percent of the population that works also studies. Once a child reaches the age of 14, and they are legally allowed to work, it is common for them to leave school and find work, whether it’s because they need to, or they want to. For these youths looking for a way to earn money, drug cartels are enticing. As explained by an 18-year-old girl in the Washington Post article by Booth and Fainaru (2009), teenagers talk openly about the thrill of smuggling as it can earn them about $500 a trip. As told in a study conducted by the World Bank (2012), a child that grows up in poverty, without access to quality education, and with limited opportunities to get involved in productive activities, can easily be caught in a violence circle that continues into his or her adult life.

IV.4. Youths and Violence

There has always been ethno-religious conflict, inter-communal conflict, and post-election violence in Nigeria. These conflicts lead to crimes that, 90 percent of the time, are carried out by Nigerian youths. Due to the recent implementation of democracy in Nigeria, there has been even more conflict arising. As political elites compete for political power, they turn to violence. Because youths make up so much of the population in Nigeria, specifically 44 percent in 2012, and are looking for jobs due to high unemployment rates, these elites can easily hire them to perform violent acts such as bodyguard, assassin, and cannon-fodders in communal violence. Outside of illegal activity due to political competition, the youths of Nigeria have taken to illegal activity such as drug trafficking, prostitution, robbery, and more, just to find the money for food.

In Mexico, gang violence has become prominent. As stated by Rogers (1999, pp. 11-12): “In Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl, one of Mexico City’s largest slums, it is estimated that there is at least one clika of about a dozen male gang members in every one of the 85 neighborhoods.” These

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4 Constitution of the United Mexican States (CPEUM), Article 123, section A, clause III.
gangs lead to crimes such as drug usage and more. In the last few years, youth homicide rates have tripled, now with 25.5 homicides per 100,000 people. This increase in violence is found to be due to drug-trafficking organizations. Drug cartels have turned to the kids of Mexico to traffic, sell, and track down victims the cartel wants to assassinate.⁵

V. Conclusion

Now that we have discussed what is preventing the youths of Nigeria and Mexico from progressing, we know what changes have to be made to ensure these children lead healthy and successful lives. Education is the key for preparing youths for a better future. Not only will it improve their chances of obtaining a good job, but will also contribute to these youths sustaining healthy lifestyles. Abdullahi recognizes that youths are the most important factor in transforming society for the better. Therefore, both Nigeria and Mexico should implement educational institutions that would allow for the teaching of skills necessary for employment.

Obi (2015) proposes a Quality Entrepreneurial Education as a relief program that can promote inclusive growth in Nigeria. Through education, youths will learn the skills necessary to become employed, allowing them to sustain themselves while also contributing to the economy. Keeping youths in school, and later in the work force, will keep them out of illegal activity, and will stimulate the economy.

Moreover, as Brown, Deardorff and Stern (2003) have pointed out, parental education plays a persistent and significant role in lowering the incidence of child labour. However, before youths can enroll in school, it is up to each country’s government to allocate more of their spending on education. Finally, the government should also play an active role in educating parents on the benefits of a small family, because a smaller family will increase the likelihood that a child will go to school, see Elijah and Okoruwa (2006).

References


⁵ See Booth and Fainaru (2009).


World Bank (2012). La violencia juvenil en México: Reporte de la situación, el marco legal y los programas gubernamentales (Washington, DC: The World Bank, Documento preparado...
