



PROFESSIONALISATION OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

BY

PROF. TUNJI OLAOPA

**Chairman,
Federal Civil Service Commission
&
Professor of Public Administration, Abuja**

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INTRODUCTION

- I begin by expressing my heartfelt appreciation to the Honorable Minister for Youth Development, Comrade Ayodele Olawande, and his team for inviting me to deliver this keynote.
- This conversation and my keynote are meant to set the critical tone for the commencement of the implementation of the policy decision of HE, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, GCFR, to professionalize youth work practice in Nigeria. Of course, the Federal Ministry of Youth Development is set to provide the lead role in the implementation of the policy.
- The invitation to deliver this keynote is not fortuitous. It came from the awareness of my past policy efforts, as a permanent secretary in the youth ministry to administratively ground government's policy on Nigerian youths. ³

INTRODUCTION

- In 2013, and in response to the government's willingness to deepen policies targeted at youth demographics and development in Nigeria, the then Head of Service of the Federation, Alhaji Goni Aji, invited me to provide the needed intellectual and administrative leadership in the Federal Ministry of Youth Development. The assignment entailed articulating and crafting a strategy and an organizing framework for the implementation of the youth policies.
- During the strategy development process, I benefitted from the technical support of the International Labour Organization (ILO) during a visit to participate in a training workshop which held at its Center of Excellence on Youth Development in Turin.

INTRODUCTION

- There, we got the ILO to organize a dedicated technical conversation and support around the Nigerian government's strategic policy development concerning the youth.
- It is therefore instructive that the Ministry has swung into full operational and implementation mode to deepen and consolidate not only the efforts of the past governments on youth-focused programmes, policies and development strategies, but to also prioritize the dimension of Tinubu administration's commitment to youth development, especially through the professionalization of youth work.

WHAT DOES THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW POLICY ENTAIL AT A BASIC LEVEL?

- This policy strategy of the Youth Ministry involves drawing up blueprint that outline and establish codes of conduct and ethics, as well as standards of practices for youth workers in Nigeria. The Ministry must also necessarily facilitate the expansion of the collaborative partnerships of non-state and non-governmental agencies and actors actively involved in youth development.
- By far the most significant agenda before the Ministry revolves around designing the strategic parameters and modalities to establish and ground youth development work as a distinct profession in its own right; a profession that proactively strengthen the Nigerian government's drive for an overall national development planning that benefits all Nigerians. I hope this keynote will contribute to the success of the Ministry's agenda.

THE THRUST OF MY KEYNOTE

- My keynote is directed at unravelling the fundamental implications of what I consider a paradigm shift in youth development in Nigeria. In dimensioning the implications of this timely policy, I will attempt to put some critical questions in perspective:
 - One, what are the lessons and insights in global best practices in youth work that Nigeria could domesticate in articulating a strategic implementation design?
 - How does the professionalization of youth work enable youth development and national progress?
- These questions, and indeed the government's decision are key, given not only the alarming circumstances of youth unemployment but also the urgency of deploying the youth bulge to enhance Nigeria's development.

WHAT THEN WOULD BE MY FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS?

- My framework of analysis in this keynote will be guided by two crucial questions.
- One, how is youth work to be situated within the complex web of professional social work practices?
- Two, is it possible to professionalize youth work and its support systems and structures as they currently are, while also grounding it within a specialized domain of practice and scholarship?
- In other words, does youth work have significant theoretical and empirical grounding, to qualify as a specialised domain of practice, scholarship and academic discipline?
- Three, can youth work practice, given its current level of technical and intellectual support, meet the conditions to qualify as a classic profession?

WHAT THEN WOULD BE MY FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS?

- Youth work is a cogent dimension of youth social work. And this extends, in historical perspectives, from the Young Men/Women Christian Association (YM/WCA) to the more practical focus of child welfare, youth intervention programmes, juvenilejustice systems, therapeutic foster homes, and many more.
- Youth-focused activities also include those organized around sports, counselling practices, community outreaches, online and social media, and more. The diversity that youth work embodies comes directly from the multiplicity of contexts, conditions, regional and circumstances that shape the phenomenon across the world.
- The diversity within youth work practice being a result from differences in tradition, factor of geography, specific needs, varying living conditions, special circumstances, and changes in society

WHAT THEN WOULD BE MY FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS?

- Thus, when seen as a dimension of social work, youth work is clustered in terms of youth outreaches, volunteerism, interventionist programmes from NGOs targeted at young people living in precarious circumstances, and youngsters facing some form of marginalisation or deprivation, etc. And many of these are often carried out by core social work professionals and specialists who deploy relevant knowledge and skills in social work.
- Indeed, in the public services, a new balance is being found in what have to be done professionally and which can be achieved for scope and size of intervention voluntarily, in view of the huge industry of the not-for-profit informal sector work that constitute the largest contributor per capital in youth work, even as the latter are largely unstructured and unregulated
- And as I have alluded elsewhere, there is also a raging debate on whether youth work as a profession and academic discipline can be separated from the larger domain of social work.

PUTTING THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISATION AND PROFESSIONALISM OF YOUTH PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

- And this brings us to the critical issue of professionalism and professionalization. These are concepts that demands an acute level of training and specialized knowledge, as well as ethical framework of practice that circumscribe how the work is to be handled.
- Professionalism implies enclosure of a vocation by means of registration of its practitioners, the taking of professional oaths, and systematic and guided monitoring of the quality of professional practice
- A profession has its gatekeeping body and a systematic body of knowledge that guide the community of practice. The historical, academic and professional trajectory of social work points at an endeavour that had evolved over a long period into a professional vocation.

PUTTING THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISATION AND PROFESSIONALISM OF YOUTH PRACTICE IN CONTEXT



- This condition of youth work is extremely different. It is far from being a professional endeavour, and this is where the decision to professionalize it is both a significant paradigm shift in Nigeria and a daunting task for the Federal Ministry of Youth Development.
- The present situation of youth work in Nigeria is that, like in most places, one does not need any specific qualifications of professional competence to serve as a youth worker. This poses lots of disruptive consequences that are capable of undermining the continuous professional and policy efforts to rehabilitate youth development in Nigeria.
- The matter is further complicated by the absence of relevant courses that attend to the academic demands of youth work, and that could serve as the training ground for servicing the endeavour. In fact, having courses dedicated to youth work already constitute the basis of a systematic body of knowledge that could become the basis for professionalization.

PUTTING THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISATION AND PROFESSIONALISM OF YOUTH PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

- Unfortunately, even in the developed countries, say, in Europe, available specialized courses specific to youth work are increasingly faced with the challenges of rationalization, restructuring or even integration as a subfield of other social science disciplines, like social work.
- Government development agenda, as first order of business, therefore needs to prioritise workforce development and upgrade, to improve the status of youth work, and to make it thereby, a more attractive profession to enter and stay in

WHAT ARE THE DEFINING POLICY MEASURES TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL OF PROFESSIONALISATION OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IN NIGERIA?

Professionalization calls for more than a rear-guard action to keep picking up the crumbs of youth work. It calls rather for the political will to take bold policy steps that implement significant professional decisions.

- First, youth work education needs to be taken seriously in ways that lead intentionally to the design and accreditation of youth work curriculum and courses. This not only guarantee that many competent, skilled and qualified youth workers would be trained, it also means that the professionalization effort can commence.
- Second, prioritizing youth work education also provide an avenue for training the government's workforce dedicated to youth work. Indeed, the establishment and accreditation of youth work education and the training of a government workforce for youth work, ...
- ... will automatically see to the emergence and consolidation of the youth work professional practice as a significant career path which in turn will translate into enhanced incentives and better condition of service that will create more attraction to facilitate more talents to be recruited as youth workers.
- This eventually will culminate in the emergence of a viable professional body that will gatekeep professional recruitment, entry, discipline, merit and excellence.

THERE IS A PHILOSOPHICAL OR BETTER STILL IDEOLOGICAL ANGLE TO THE FUTURE OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE THAT MUST BE UNDERSCORED

- Professionalizing youth work has a philosophical cum ideological basis which policy initiatives must first attend to before the structural and administrative dimensions of that task is firmly grounded.
- And this philosophical issue derives from the observation that the youth question has always been seen either by the government, the mass media and the nongovernmental and non-state actors as a problem to be solved rather than a national resource to harvest.
- Indeed, this is the academic and intellectual basis of social work that hitherto subsumes youth work. A focus on the youth as a problem to be solved or resolved, one that takes critical attention away from seeing the youth as critical resources to be harnessed and deployed as the basis for national development.

THERE IS A PHILOSOPHICAL OR BETTER STILL IDEOLOGICAL ANGLE TO THE FUTURE OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE THAT MUST BE UNDERScoreD

- Social work, as a social science discipline, is moored within an orientation that articulate the youth problem in terms of a deficit that requires diagnosis. Thus, youth are theorized in terms of being afflicted by “storm and stress” in behavioural terms; they are seen as children and delinquents that are troubled by a multiplicity of issues ranging from troubled families and homes, and drugs, to unemployment and peer pressure.
- This subjective and narrow conception of youth work, unadvisedly rode on Oedipus complex theory of Sigmund Freud (1966), that young people are fraught with parent-child conflict; Erik Erikson (1963) thesis that viewed adolescence as a time of turmoil and stress characterised by an “identity crisis”
- And Griffin (1993) who posits that the process of identity formation and the nature of adult behaviour in adolescents are defined as having their natural origins in hormonal and other changes in puberty

THERE IS A PHILOSOPHICAL OR BETTER STILL IDEOLOGICAL ANGLE TO THE FUTURE OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE THAT MUST BE UNDERScoreD

- This theoretical orientation grew youth conversation to be strongly biased to mental health field with the problematisation of young people issues as “at risk”, which too often orient youth policies towards regulating and controlling.
- And the solution is framed in terms of providing social work services—assisted by clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and other psycho-social approaches, that deliver solutions in the forms of welfare services and foster homes, to setting up a framework for juvenile justice and social safety net.
- It therefore becomes immediately evident why the professionalization of youth work—relocating it away from a mere category in social work and its wrongheaded approach—serves a crucial role in denoting the fundamental significance of the youth as a key category that demands a discipline and a profession of its own.

YOUTH WORK AS SUBJECT FOR RESEARCH AND AS A DISCIPLINE

- Youth work education has an immediate task of correcting and fostering a wholesome perception of the nature and capacity of the youth, especially as a category with its own intrinsic value and as a unique resource in national development.
- The discipline therefore has the opportunity and potentials to generate an intellectual rigour that confront the malignment of youth work into an a-developmental category that is removed from all significant relevance.
- Youth work education provides a space for more expert and professional interventions that are rooted in basic research, policy intelligence, analysis and advocacy, and professional curation of what it means to intervene in the youth question.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND CORE COMPETENCIES IN YOUTH WORK

1. Institutional capability review of the FMYD and Instituting Performance Management System
2. Knowledge of relevant Youth Policies, Regional and Global Conventions and Protocols and Best Practices in Youth Development Strategies
3. Developmental Psychology for Rounded Understanding of Physical, Emotional and Cognitive Changes in the Transition Phases between Adolescence and Adulthood
4. Youth Development Planning, Research and Project Management
5. Quantitative Skills, Data Administration and Proficiency in Software Applications

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND CORE COMPETENCIES IN YOUTH WORK

6. Proficiency in the Use of Technology in support Youth Work
7. Emotional Intelligence, Relationship Skills for Managing Ethical and Professional Boundaries in Youth Work and Counseling
8. Conflict and Crisis Management and Problem Solving Skills
9. Leadership Development, Team Building, Advocacy and Stakeholder Management

CONSOLIDATING THE PROFESSION OF YOUTH WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL BODY AS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Professionalization will inevitably serve as the basis for building communities of practice and service that:

- 1. Set the standard of practice and code of conduct and ethics by which youth work and its quality are enhanced through a proper theory of change and transformation; and**
- 2. Facilitate the emergence of youth work practitioners whose commitment and loyalty to the profession and to young people can build public confidence, and also serve as the foundation for genuine policy shift that care for the youth.**

CONSOLIDATING THE PROFESSION OF YOUTH WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL BODY AS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

- This speaks to the fact that youth work and its professionalization cannot be rendered in academic terms alone. It requires a stakeholder approach that brings together the government, researchers, nongovernmental and nonstate actors and agencies, community organizations, policymakers and the youth themselves.
- The Nigerian government, as part of its significant and timely commitment to the professionalization of youth work, also has to create allowance to accommodate the services, commitment and passion of non-professionals whose non-profit charitable and philanthropic efforts and scope of programme interventions have sustained youth work so far in Nigeria.

CONSOLIDATING THE PROFESSION OF YOUTH WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL BODY AS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

- This is a real policy concern that has to be negotiated and aligned with the formal frameworks that the government regulate. This then also implies that in professionalizing youth work, the government must necessarily harness the entire workforce, formal and informal, involved in youth work and incentivize them to produce results.
- In other words, part of this long-term investment requires attending to, capacitating and regulating the relationship between the non-core professionals and the low-income but earnest volunteers who have been toiling in the field of youth work while the professionalization effort had been underway. It is the efforts of these workers that has been preparing the ground for the triumph of policy shift in youth work.

CONSOLIDATING THE PROFESSION OF YOUTH WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL BODY AS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

- In this regard, there is a lot to learn from the teaching profession and healthcare service industry, that still necessarily make up for funding gaps by enlisting the support of auxiliary teachers and Locums
- Lastly, as the government commences the drive to professionalization of youth work in Nigeria, it must be noted that the amount of investment required will be enormous. This will translate to higher costs for parents, government and youth charitable organisations. Consequently, the ministry must channel creative energy on how cost as a factor in professionalisation might be defining for the implementation of the policy in focus

CONCLUDING REMARK

- Let me round off by deeply appreciating the President, HE Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the Federal Executive Council for the visionary policy that not only recognized the significance of the youth in national development, ...
- ... but is also ready to push the harnessing of the youth bulge to press Nigeria's developmental advantages in the twenty-first century. The Nigerian youth can now have tangible policy dividends to look forward to.



THANK YOU
