

**Promoting Positive Change among Youths for Sustainable Development in
the Benue Valley: A Study of Benue State, Nigeria, 1976-2023**

Kyegh, Aov Thaddeus, PhD¹

¹Department of History and International Studies
Faculty of Arts
Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria
Email:kyeghaov@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Benue Valley comprises part or complete Nigeria states of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, FCT, Niger, Kebbi, Kaduna South, Bauchi South, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe and Borno South. Benue State is one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which was created in 1976. It is blessed with a lot of human and material resources. However, sustainable development of the State appears to be dicey. It was on account of this that the paper was conceived to investigate the circumstances behind this ugly trend. Using appropriate interviews and a careful review of secondary sources, the paper finds out that the youths are the powerhouse of the State. However, they were ignorant of their central position in the scheme of affairs in the State. Therefore, they accept to be used as instruments of destruction at the ripe age when they were supposed to exhibit their positive talents, embrace quality mentorship and create a future for the State. Consequently, the State was robbed of opportunities for development. It was doomed! It concludes that the youths should eliminate ignorance and promote the spirit of positive change in order to achieve sustainable development in the State.*

***Keywords:** Appraisal, Benue Valley Positive Change, Youths, Sustainable Development etc.*

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Introduction

Historically, the political connotation of the Benue Valley began after agitation for the creation of the Middle Belt Forum or Congress by J.S. Tarka.¹ In 2023, it comprises part or complete Nigeria states of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, FCT, Niger, Kebbi, Kaduna South, Bauchi South, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, Adamawa, Gombe and Borno South.² It was later restructured to be called North Central Nigeria. By and large, what constitutes the Benue Valley was integrated

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into the north central Nigeria states of Benue, Taraba, southern Bauchi, southern Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kwara, Kogi, Adamawa and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT)³. And to be more specific, the Benue Valley was structured into eight states of Benue, Kaduna, Kogi, Kwara, Niger, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba and FCT.⁴ The physical geography of central Nigeria is varied in character. It has unique characteristics in terms of its geology, soil, landform, vegetation, drainage and climate⁵ Relatedly, physical geography combines with human geography to provide the uniqueness the area has, in terms of technology, cultural preferences and socio-economic and political organisations and development. The population distribution of the north central by state in the 1991 Census put the total figure at 18, 009,696⁶.

Recall that the colonial administration created the northern Region with its headquarters in Kaduna. After Independence, the military regime of General Gowon created Benue-Plateau state out of the Northern Region with Jos as the state capital. Benue State was created on 3rd February 1976 by the General Murtala Regime with its Capital in Makurdi⁷. These historical developments set the stage for meaningful development in all states of Nigeria.

Definition of Concepts

There is no standard global definition of 'youth'; as such, there are several dynamic definitions. For instance, the United Nation/UNESCO define Youth as a period between childhood and adulthood; that is 15-24 years⁸. It adds that youth end at 40. The Commonwealth defines youth as the age from 15-29 years. The African Youth Charter puts youth at 15-35 years. In Nigeria, the National Youth Policy in 2009, categorise youth to be aged between 18-35. In 2019, it pegged the period from 18-29 years to take care of the National Youths Service Corps (NYSC) scheme. Psychologists define youth in terms of numbers between 13 and 40 years. These definitions do not represent the realities in Nigeria, hence, the minister of youth is over 40 years. It means anyone below the age of 60 years could be categorised as a youth in Nigeria. Thus, this group of people formed the nucleus of our discussion.

Positive Change is a methodology based on implementing change initiatives in order to enhance performance at the level of individuals and groups⁹. It is based on changing the public system by introducing new practices aimed at improvement by charging the person with more energy with positive thoughts that lead to creativity, which leads him to the goals he seeks to achieve. The definition is contrary to the situation in Benue State where the youths who have more energy with positive thoughts to create the New Benue of our dreams, were consciously or unconsciously relegated to the background and used by the elders to commit social vices on their behalf or to their advantage. Positive change if adopted is very important because it increases the eagerness of the youths to accept and take responsibility for the affairs of the community, end bad conditions, increase opportunities for all, and ensure success in the society.

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs''¹⁰. It means it is an attempt to balance different, and often competing needs against an awareness of the environmental, social and economic limitations the society faces. It is therefore, important for the youth of the Benue valley to reflect on the activities they indulge in, whether they were capable to meet the good needs of the masses in the 21st Century and future generations.

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Development Theory

Development was a term coined by the United States of America in the 1940s which refers to national economic growth¹¹. Though it was meant to be associated with the American foreign policy to shape the future of the newly independent states to prevent them from being absorbed into the communist Soviet Bloc, it has gone beyond that, hence, its focus is on the relationship between development and governance. It means crucial structures of governance are interpreted and shaped by the goals of development. And the drivers of these goals are the youths. Development theory has changed over time with changes in ideology and the international environment after World War II involving innumerable variables, including economic, social, political, gender, cultural, religious and environmental factors¹². It is on the basis of these factors that this study considers the youths as the most viable instrument that can attract and execute development in theory and practice, while the statesmen and stateswomen merely support them.

Origin, Migration and Settlement of the major Ethnic groups in the Benue Valley

There is no doubt to say that the entire Niger River Area were occupied by diverse ethnic groups who came from different geographical areas of the Africa Continent. Lawal affirms that the area known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria was a host to myriads of groups of migrants with no single state to exercise control over them until the 13th and 14th centuries when kingdoms and empires emerged¹³. In the process of migration, people lost their kinship ties, because some moved forward, others were left behind and some were captured by other ethnic groups. In view of the above, each state in Nigeria is multi-ethnic/multi-cultural. Subsequently, about 200 ethnic groups found in north central Nigeria are of mixed race¹⁴. The major ethnic groups are the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Igala, Ebirra, Nupe, and Gbagi or Gwari. They all migrated from different geographical regions in search of greener pastures to settle in the Benue Valley. Thus, this common denominator of mixed races and migrations should serve as a bond of permanent unity without which there will be no positive change for sustainable development in the Region; particularly in Benue State.

Overview of Developmental Strides in Benue State

The developmental efforts in the Benue State can be divided into three phases, namely, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.

The pre-colonial (before 1900 AD)

Benue State has three major ethnic groups, namely; the Tiv, Idoma and Igede whose traditional political organisations were described by the colonialists as “non-centralised”, “Segmentary” and “stateless”. However, the government in these traditional states achieved the same positive developmental strides as that of advanced states. For instance, politically, leadership was vested in the hands of heads of families where the eldest person chaired the council of elders. This system was very effective because it helps to solve social, economic and political problems. In

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other words, the system ensured balance of power and authority. It rendered selfless service to the family, village and ethnic groups at large. The gerontocracy enabled the elders to be accountable to the councils and society in general. However, the colonialists did not understand the system, and because they wanted to introduce Indirect Rule where the chief represented the masses, they tagged the entire central Nigeria chiefdoms as stateless states and subjugated them under the authorities of the northern emirs¹⁵. One of the immediate consequences of this subjugation into an alien political structure was the Tiv riot of 1960-1964¹⁶. The Indirect Rule political system affected Benue State more negatively than positively up to the 21st Century. Before Indirect Rule, there was relative peace, and all the ethnic groups were in inter-group relations. They sacrifice their resources and lives for the welfare of their neighbours in terms of defence, intermarriages and religious festivals, either from the same ethnic group or the other; minor violent conflicts notwithstanding. Erim notes that a variety of links existed in the precolonial period between various states and peoples, and these relationships sometimes expressed themselves in form of war and enslavement, diplomacy and treaties and so on¹⁷.

Economically, pottery, blacksmith, cloth weaving, making of thatched houses, apprenticeship, farming, hunting, community projects and trading were in full force. For instance, market towns were linked by various trade routes that crisscrossed the Nigerian area¹⁸. In the Niger-Benue confluence, a network of routes that facilitated the movement of traders such as the Yoruba, Hausa, Nupe, Kakanda, Igbirra, Bini, Igala, Tiv, Idoma, Jukun and Igbo who developed some means of communication that promoted multilateral relations and facilitated exchange of goods and services¹⁹. In a nutshell, these pre-colonial economic activities were organised without the influence of the Europeans until the last two decades of the 19th century.

The Colonial Rule 1900-1960

The Colonial masters introduced modern infrastructure which commenced with the opening up of roads, religious/educational institutions, commerce and industries, transport and communication, the modern judiciary, armed forces, politics, and the creation of four (4) regions, namely; Northern Region, Western Region, Eastern Region and Mid-Western Region²⁰. These developmental steps, however, did not meet the yearnings and aspirations of the people. They tilted towards the welfare of the minority colonial masters in Nigeria and their home governments. For instance, the British imposed chiefs, heavy taxes, cash crops economy, rail and telegram construction, importation of manufactured goods, and forced labour among others, to maximise exploitation and accrue benefits²¹. These unfriendly policies resulted in internal and external dissatisfaction and conflicts. Consequently, it paved the way for agitation for self-determination (nationalism) which resulted in independence for the amalgamated traditional nation-states to be called Nigeria in October 1960.

Post-colonial period 1960-2023

The Post-colonial period marked the split of the four regions into 12 States later rose to 36 states and FCT Abuja which was in force up to 2023. One of these states was Benue State which is the main focus of this paper. Since its creation in 1976, Benue has had her own share of development from the military to civilian' administrations. Thus, Benue State in 2023 had 23 local government areas with a network of roads, electricity, pipe-bone water, educational institutions, health institutions, civil service schemes and private enterprises which were

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however, poor and inadequate. Indeed, they were grossly inadequate compared to the federal allocations received monthly and the internally generated revenue accrued in relation to the population these facilities were expected to serve.

In addition, partisan politics has produced governors, national/state assembly members, and local councils who work in conjunction with the traditional rulers to help drive home the dividends of democracy. However, the expected dividends of democracy appear to be minimal in the State. Instead, communal conflicts, hunger, insurgency, bribery and corruption, kidnapping, thuggery, violent politicking, and a host of other social vices have become the order of the day. The study reveals that the elites may be accused of sponsoring these vices, but on the other hand, the active and practical executors were the youths. In this connection, it is important to examine why the youths cannot perform maximally in the State.

Obstacles to Positive Change among the Youths of Benue State 1976-2023

There has been a long controversial debate on who should pilot the affairs of a state between the youths and adults. The research shows that the youths have an indispensable role in nation-building to provide fresh perspectives and energy to help drive economic development and social progress towards making society better for everyone²². Suffice it to say that, youth is a golden period to cherish a big dream full of passion and energy and to pursue it to a logical conclusion²³. Furthermore, youth participation contributes to positive youth development in itself. This shows that young people who are supported to participate in decision-making are more likely to have increased confidence and self-belief, exercise positive career choices and have greater involvement and responsibility in the future²⁴. In addition, youths' involvement increases competencies, self-esteem, skills and knowledge, it enhances individual development as it provides youth with opportunities to generate real community change; it increases status and stature in the community; increases self-discipline and time management²⁵.

On the other hand, adult participation in government is to promote legitimacy/support for the government in power which ought to be the youth. It helps to create political awareness. It makes the government reliable and accountable²⁶. Where the adults relegate this statesmanship position, the state in question denies itself of a reliable and accountable government. Hence, the adults who are supposed to police the state become prime suspects by indulging in or sponsoring criminal activities with reckless abandon because they are not accountable to their subordinates. This allay the fears of the youths who automatically bow to their pressure to do odd jobs on their behalf. But any time they rebel against them, they vent their anger on the innocent masses. This abnormality is most prevalent among black Africans, especially in Nigeria (Benue State inclusive) where the youths use the do-or-die approach to support the elders who are physically and mentally weak to perform in governance to ascend to leadership positions. The fundamental problem of the research is to find out why this ugly scenario has been on for many generations, and the youths who are supposed to be game changers have muted or perpetrated the act in Benue State since 1976.

Pastor Mathew Ashimolowo answered this question in his Book entitled, 'What is wrong with Being Black?'²⁷ He x-rayed the black man's life and further tried to find out whether something or somebody was holding blacks back from achieving their developmental dream, and why he is being used and abused for generations. Why the richest Continent, Africa (Benue State) is inhabited by the poorest people. Finally, he wondered when the victimization mentality would

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be overcome in Africa. Having read the whole Book, the researcher believes that it is safe to conclude that there is nothing wrong with being Black. That Africans are responsible for their troubles, sufferings, misfortunes, disasters, poverty and failed states because of superstition, prostitution, witchcraft, slavery, distorted family values, disunity, crimes, ethnicity, misgovernance, leadership crisis, dependency syndrome, colonial heritage, faulted education systems, self-image problem, marginalisation and lack of positive change of mindset. This is also where the problem of the youths of Benue State lies.

For instance, the introduction of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam has created generations of half-baked people who are neither true believers nor traditional worshippers. As a result, things have fallen apart. They believe in superstition and witchcraft as a source of wealth rather than scientific ideas which rule the world in the 21st Century. For instance, in April 2022, Benue youths burnt an 89-year-old over alleged witchcraft²⁸, some shaved grey hair of elderly people²⁹, the court reminded 4 for allegedly dismembering a hunchback³⁰, they were also charged with criminal conspiracy, kidnapping, culpable homicide and illegal possession of firearms. In addition, Benue youths buried two elders alive over alleged witchcraft simply because of a thunderstruck that killed a youth, wife and child³¹. Such widely held, but unfounded beliefs cannot foster positive thinking and sustainable development. It makes the youths in Benue State slaves to unrealistic beliefs and those who manipulate them.

In addition, family values such as respect for elders and one another, mentorship, decent appearance, and good hygiene are distorted among youths in Benue State. That explains why there was a high number of prostitution cases especially among girls of Benue origin in every state of the Federation and outside Nigeria. For instance, a 24-year-old woman was jailed for trafficking Benue young girls to Mali for prostitution³². Again, four Benue girls were turned into prostitutes in Calabar³³. Adeleye notes that, in Shaki, the girls who were involved in prostitution were from Togo, Benin Republic and Benue State of Nigeria³⁴. Similarly, Ochefu also wrote on the socio-economic impact of prostitution in the Idoma land of Benue State³⁵. All these disgraceful misconducts happened because the youths (girls) were ignorant of the power they possessed in handling the socio-economic and political affairs of their own state.

Indeed, non-recognition of the indispensable role of youths as stakeholders in governance in the State explains why they were used and dumped as election tickets, agents of disunity from family to ethnic level, engaged during leadership crises (in partisan politics and chieftaincy institutions), and tools used for marginalisation. Consequently, they have self-image problems resulting in inferiority complexes and no longer have concerns about the dignity of their personal and family names. Thus, after many misguided adventures, some of them return as dependent on one or a few elites of the older generation who were already overburdened with dependants. In this connection, they fail to take proper care of themselves and die prematurely. In light of the above, one may not be completely right to blame the colonial masters for establishing a faulty education system which is not pragmatic and does not offer survival strategies to cope with contemporary challenges. Recall that Nigeria got her Independence in 1960, and 63 years down the line, not much has been achieved. Perhaps, a shift has taken place in the 21st Century, but many youths are unaware. This paper is part of enlightenment to intimate the youths of Benue State to embrace the shift in order to develop a positive change of mindset from colonial education to the modern educational system which emphasises skill acquisition to avoid recruitment into social vices on account of joblessness after graduation.

How to Promote Positive Change for Sustainable Development

There are many measures to be taken to ensure sustainable development in Benue State. This paper will highlight some of them.

1. Benue youths should identify factors that inhibit development such as those identified above and eliminate them. It would amount to deeper injuries for the youth to spend a whole day lamenting over these vices that they can control. They should say 'NO' to indulge in or serve as agents of those sponsoring them to commit the vices, by this firm decision, crimes will decline and die off.
2. It is important for the youths to understand that hard work still pays. A youth in Benue, Jacob Gwa, PhD, suffered at the hands of politicians as a thug, Jacob applied for admission into the Benue State University, Makurdi, but was not successful³⁶. He left for College of Agriculture Yandev-Gboko where his brilliant performance led him to study for his OND and HND simultaneously. He emerged as the best-serving NYSC member in Imo State and at the collation centre in Abuja. Consequently, he was awarded a scholarship by the Federal Ministry of Education to study for his Master's and PhD in any part of the world. Jacob chose to study in the United Kingdom where he successfully completed the two-degree programmes. He did not wait to depend on anyone to survive and did not wait for manner to for from heaven. He was conscious of the fact that an idle mind is the devil's workshop.
3. The youths should also believe in themselves in order to shape their destiny for success. The inability to strongly hold onto 'belief' without giving up account for why many Benue youths have become beggars. A Benue youth was quoted in the newspaper soliciting more leadership opportunities from elders (who were holding tight to leadership positions) to relinquish it to the youths to govern³⁷. The Benue youths lack the audacity to build the confidence to believe in themselves and that is why they help the elders to scheme them out of governance in the State. After which they return back begging for inclusion in governance. Reports from the press showed that Benue youths usually engage in Ballot-Box-snatching³⁸, systematic rigging³⁹, election violence⁴⁰, thuggery, voter intimidation and inducement, and use of firearms (killings) in order to perpetuate leadership of elders who are supposed to hand to other persons in the principle of 'eat and give your brother' (a rotational leadership positions). These happen because the youth fail to carry out their constitutional duties.
4. The youths should seek quality mentors to redirect their minds towards positive thinking and actions. These mentors should be in both the private and public sectors. The likes of Engineer Felix Atume, who rose through the ranks in the civil service, and joined politics, was the governorship hopeful, but his mandate was snatched by desperate politicians and still remains a hub of wisdom. The youngest Senator ever in the Masev, Ihyarev and Nongov Development Association (MINDA) axis, Titus Tartenger Zam, PhD, is one outstanding figure in that direction. Apart from them, retired and serving professors, civil servants, and businessmen/women among others are of great importance. The likes of Jacob Gwa and many of his type among youths in Benue State and outside are available. It is important to note that successful people

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learn. Therefore, read motivational books every day. Your mentors will educate you on how to prepare for leadership so that you can become leaders of today and not leaders of tomorrow.

5. The youths of Benue have to join the train of globalisation which offers a lot of internet services that can make an individual an all-round personality instead of depending on others to survive. For instance, economically, Network Marketing is the best solution. Find genuine network marketing organisations such as Century 21st Freedom Group International headed by Ambassador Dr, Michael Okoli of Nigeria, of which the Author is a member/connector and you and your generations yet unborn will be financially free for life. Robert Kiyosaki affirms that this is the business of the 21st century⁴¹. Mark Zuckerberg says, 'Network marketing is the only industry worldwide that allows common people to make millions with very minimal investment and zero overhead'⁴². He added that the three magic words which work for those of them who made it to the pinnacle which he believes can work for the Benue youths if they are determined are; 'JUST DON'T QUIT'. Most of the millionaires/billionaires in America are successful because of network marketing. Singapore survives on this business. The youths have a moral choice to make in order to bring positive sustainable change in the Region/State. Nations that have developed have moral conscience and the youths cannot remain in the state of immorality the country/State found itself in order to pave way for development to thrive.
6. In essence, the youths must accept responsibility for their actions and inactions. 'When you accept yourself the way you are, the world will recognise you' and you will learn how to activate the genius in you. The Benue youths should stop the blame game and look inward to proffer solutions to their problems; be it socio-economic and political trajectories.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the youths have the talent to exploit the abundant human and natural resources available in Benue State. Therefore, they have to be patient, but persistent in their struggle to carve a niche for themselves. They should never give up, they should measure the results of what they do and change the environment where necessary. They should identify and understand what they want to change, they should rid themselves of negativity, pay more attention to themselves, and actively chase their dreams. They should remember that a failed relationship isn't a reflection of one's life. They have to set specific goals and pursue them and be uncomfortable with their present conditions. By taking these appropriate steps, the goal of promoting positive change for sustainable development in Benue State will be achieved.

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