

Youth Restiveness and Corruption: A Cogent Way to Underdevelopment in Africa

By

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Abstract

Youth restiveness and corruption have become twin challenges to Africa's socio-economic and political stability. This paper explores the connection between youth restiveness, corruption, and underdevelopment in Africa, using Nigeria as a case study. It examines how systemic corruption and unaddressed grievances among young people contribute to cycles of violence, unemployment, insecurity, and political instability. Conceptual analyses drawing on conflict and frustration-aggression theories were used to explain these dynamics, thereby highlighting the roles of education, good governance, institutional reforms, and inclusive economic policies as potential solutions to these challenges. Findings indicate that tackling corruption effectively is crucial, as youth restiveness will persist and otherwise hinder Africa's sustainable development efforts. The paper further recommends stronger anti-corruption frameworks, youth empowerment initiatives, and accountable governance as pathways toward peace and prosperity in Africa.

Keywords: Youth restiveness, Corruption, Underdevelopment, Africa, Nigeria, Good governance

Introduction

Across Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, youth restiveness and corruption stand out as two of the most pressing challenges undermining development. Africa is home to the world's youngest population, with over 60% of its population under 25 (United Nations, 2022). While this demographic structure has the potential to drive innovation and economic growth, the absence of effective governance and equitable economic opportunities has transformed Africa's youth bulge into a source of instability. Youth restiveness — often expressed through violent protests, militancy, cultism, internet fraud (popularly known as "Yahoo Yahoo"), and political thuggery — has become both a symptom and a cause of underdevelopment (Aghedo & Eke, 2013; Akinwale, 2010).

On the other hand, corruption continues to erode the foundations of governance in many African states. Transparency International (2023) consistently ranks several African nations, including Nigeria, among the most corrupt in the world. The consequences are profound: mismanagement of resources, weakened institutions, and a lack of public trust in leadership. Scholars such as Okolo and Akpokighe (2014) argue that corruption in Nigeria has become systemic, affecting every aspect of governance from the judiciary to the electoral system. The result is a vicious cycle: corruption limits opportunities for youth, and marginalised youth, in turn, engage in restive behaviours that further destabilise the political and economic landscape.

In Nigeria, this cycle has been vividly demonstrated in the Niger Delta militancy, Boko Haram insurgency, and more recently, the #EndSARS protests of 2020. The Niger Delta militancy emerged from grievances over environmental degradation, unemployment, and perceived marginalisation, while Boko Haram capitalised on poverty and corruption in governance to recruit marginalised youths (Ogege, 2011; Ibrahim, 2015). Similarly, the #EndSARS protests reflected broader frustration with state corruption, police brutality, and limited opportunities

for youth empowerment (Ojebode, 2021). Each of these movements underscores the dangerous intersection between unaddressed youth grievances and systemic corruption.

At the continental level, youth restiveness and corruption are not confined to Nigeria. The Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa, youth protests in South Africa against corruption, and student-led movements in Kenya and Ghana demonstrate the pan-African character of these challenges (Omilusi, 2017). These movements reveal a pattern: corruption delegitimises state institutions, while disenfranchised youths become active challengers to the political status quo, sometimes through violence and insurgency.

The question then arises: how do youth restiveness and corruption serve as barriers to Africa's development, and what measures can be implemented to reverse this trajectory? This paper addresses these questions by situating youth restiveness and corruption within Africa's development crisis. It employs a conceptual and empirical review of existing literature, drawing particularly on Nigerian scholarship, to unpack the structural, political, and economic dynamics that perpetuate these phenomena.

This study is premised on the view that underdevelopment in Africa is not merely a result of external dependency or colonial legacies, as dependency theorists often suggest, but also the outcome of internal contradictions, notably corruption and poor youth governance. While foreign aid and globalisation have their role, the persistent failure to effectively engage Africa's youthful population and eradicate corruption undermines domestic efforts at transformation (Adebajo, 2016; Adebani & Obadare, 2011).

Thus, the objective of this paper lies in three dimensions. First, it underscores the urgency of addressing corruption as a root cause of youth restiveness. Second, it highlights how youth restiveness perpetuates insecurity and instability, thereby stalling investment and development. Third, it argues for a holistic approach, i.e., combining anti-corruption reforms, youth empowerment, and inclusive governance as the true panacea to underdevelopment in Africa.

Conceptual Review

Youth Restiveness

The concept of youth restiveness has been defined and applied differently by scholars. According to Adeyemi (2017), youth restiveness refers to sustained protests, agitation, or disruptive behaviour by young people, often triggered by neglect, unemployment, or political manipulation. In Nigeria, youth restiveness is commonly associated with violent demonstrations, cultism in higher institutions, internet fraud, militancy in the Niger Delta, and insurgency in the Northeast.

Okwueze (2019) argues that youth restiveness is not inherently negative, as it sometimes emerges as a legitimate demand for social justice. However, when such grievances are ignored or suppressed, restiveness tends to escalate into violent confrontations, which undermine peace and stability. Similarly, Ogege (2011) views youth restiveness as a reaction to structural inequality, corruption, and exclusion from economic and political opportunities.

A critical component of youth restiveness in Africa is the demographic factor. The continent's large youth population, while potentially advantageous, becomes a liability when employment and empowerment opportunities are absent (UNDP, 2017). This "youth bulge" can either propel development or intensify insecurity, depending on how effectively states engage their young citizens (Okoli & Agada, 2014).

Corruption

In the African context, corruption is described as the misuse of public office for personal gain. Nye (1967) offered a foundational definition, noting that corruption involves behaviours that deviate from formal duties in pursuit of private-regarding pecuniary or status gains. Nigerian scholars such as Okolo and Akpokighe (2014) argue that corruption in Nigeria has transcended individual behaviour to become systemic, embedded in institutions, and normalised within governance structures.

Ajayi (2014) further distinguishes between petty corruption (everyday bribery and favouritism) and grand corruption (large-scale embezzlement and state capture). Both forms erode trust in governance and perpetuate underdevelopment. The most visible manifestations of corruption in Nigeria include electoral fraud, contract inflation, looting of public funds, and mismanagement of oil revenues.

The intersection of corruption and youth restiveness becomes evident when corrupt governance denies youths opportunities, leading them to resort to violent agitation. Transparency International (2023) reports that Nigeria ranks among the lowest in corruption perception indexes, which directly correlates with unemployment rates, poor infrastructure, and widespread insecurity.

Under-development in Africa

Underdevelopment, as a concept, extends beyond economic stagnation to encompass political instability, weak institutions, underdeveloped human capital, and insecurity. Rodney (1972) famously argued that underdevelopment is not merely an absence of development but a condition created through historical exploitation. While this perspective highlights colonial legacies, recent Nigerian scholars stress internal factors such as corruption, poor leadership, and exclusionary governance as critical drivers (Akinola, 2015; Emeh, 2012).

In contemporary Africa, underdevelopment manifests through poverty, infrastructural decay, limited industrialisation, brain drain, and dependency on foreign aid. Youth restiveness and corruption exacerbate these conditions by creating insecurity and discouraging investment.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies highlight the nexus between youth restiveness, corruption, and underdevelopment.

Nigeria's Niger Delta Experience

Aghedo and Osumah (2012) conducted a study on militancy in the Niger Delta and found that youth restiveness was fueled by environmental degradation, unemployment, and perceived marginalisation. The study revealed that corruption in the management of oil revenues intensified these grievances, leading to cycles of violence and instability.

Boko Haram Insurgency

Ibrahim (2015) examined the roots of Boko Haram insurgency and established that corruption within the Nigerian security and political system created fertile ground for the group's recruitment. Youths without economic opportunities were easily radicalised, highlighting how corruption-induced poverty fuels restiveness.

EndSARS Movement

Ojebode (2021) studied the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria and concluded that while the movement began as resistance against police brutality, it broadened into an anti-corruption and

governance protest. The involvement of unemployed and disenfranchised youths demonstrated that restiveness arises from systemic corruption and institutional failure.

Continental Comparisons

On a broader African scale, Omilusi (2017) compared youth uprisings in Nigeria, Tunisia, and South Africa, showing that corruption and poor governance were common denominators across the three countries. Youth restiveness often took the form of protests, riots, or militancy, all of which destabilised development.

Statistical Evidence

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022), Nigeria's youth unemployment rate (15–34 years) was above 42%, one of the highest globally. This figure directly correlates with rising cybercrime and violent unrest. Similarly, Transparency International (2023) ranks Nigeria 150 out of 180 countries on corruption perception. These empirical realities show that youth restiveness and corruption are not isolated issues but interconnected barriers to development.

Theoretical Framework

The study of youth restiveness and corruption as barriers to Africa's development is best understood through multiple theoretical lenses. Nigerian and African scholars have adapted several theories to explain these dynamics.

Frustration–Aggression Theory

This theory, initially proposed by Dollard et al. (1939), posits that aggression often results from frustration arising from blocked opportunities. Applied to youth restiveness in Africa, Adeyemi (2017) explains that unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion create frustration among youths, which manifests as violent protests, militancy, or cybercrime. In Nigeria, the government's inability to provide equitable access to jobs and education has fueled youth frustration, thereby sustaining restiveness.

Relative Deprivation Theory

Gurr (1970) argues that individuals become restive not necessarily because they lack basic needs, but because they perceive themselves as unfairly deprived relative to others. Ogege (2011) extends this argument to Nigeria, stating that when youths observe elite politicians amassing wealth through corruption while they remain impoverished, feelings of injustice spark restiveness. This perspective explains why corruption and restiveness are intertwined: corruption exacerbates perceived inequalities.

Social Contract Theory

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau emphasised the state's obligation to protect citizens in exchange for citizens' obedience. In the Nigerian context, Akinola (2015) observes that corruption erodes the social contract, as leaders prioritise personal enrichment over public welfare. When the state fails to fulfil its obligations, youths withdraw consent through restiveness, protests, or insurgencies.

Dependency Theory

Rodney (1972) and later African scholars argue that exploitative relationships with global powers perpetuate underdevelopment. However, Ajayi (2014) adapts this framework to internal

governance, asserting that corruption maintains dependency by siphoning resources abroad and leaving Africa underdeveloped. Youth restiveness, therefore, becomes both a reaction to global inequality and domestic corruption.

Systems Theory

Easton's (1965) systems analysis views society as an interconnected system where disturbances in one part affect the whole. Okoli and Agada (2014) argue that youth restiveness is not an isolated problem but a symptom of systemic governance failure. Corruption disrupts the flow of political goods such as education, jobs, and security, leading to a breakdown of stability and perpetuating underdevelopment.

However, Systems theory has been adopted, as governance activities are cyclical. The study emphasises that youth restiveness and corruption are not spontaneous phenomena but predictable outcomes of poor governance, systemic inequality, and weak institutional frameworks.

Methodology

Research Design

This article employs a qualitative research design, relying on secondary sources, content analysis, and comparative case studies. It adopts a conversational-academic style to make the subject accessible to both scholarly and public audiences, while maintaining rigour through citations and structured argumentation.

Sources of Data

The study draws data from: Academic Journals: Works by Nigerian scholars such as Ogege (2011), Adeyemi (2017), and Akinola (2015). Books: Foundational texts like Rodney (1972) and Nye (1967). Institutional Reports: National Bureau of Statistics (2022), UNDP (2017), Transparency International (2023). Policy Documents: African Union Agenda 2063, Nigeria's National Youth Policy (2019).

Method of Data Collection

Data was collected through a review of published materials using databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). Reports from Nigerian government agencies and NGOs provided updated statistical and empirical evidence.

Method of Analysis

The research utilised thematic analysis to identify recurring themes—youth restiveness, corruption, and underdevelopment—and their interlinkages. It also employed comparative analysis, contrasting Nigeria's experience with other African contexts (e.g., the Arab Spring, South African student protests).

Findings

This section presents the significant findings on the nexus between youth restiveness, corruption, and underdevelopment in Africa, with Nigeria as the focal point. The findings of the work highlighted that;

Youth Restiveness as a Product of Economic Marginalisation

One key finding is that youth restiveness in Nigeria is a response to economic marginalisation. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) reported that youth unemployment rose to 53.4% in 2022, the highest in West Africa. The mismatch between educational attainment and job opportunities generates frustration. Ogege (2011) found that unemployed graduates are more likely to engage in protests, cybercrime, and political thuggery. This is reflected in the Niger Delta militancy, which, according to Okoli & Agada (2014), was triggered by perceived neglect of oil-producing communities despite their contribution to Nigeria's GDP. The End SARS protest of 2020 reflected pent-up frustration among urban youths against unemployment, police brutality, and exclusion from governance (Akinola, 2021).

Corruption as an Institutional Driver of Restiveness

The study also found that corruption fuels youth restiveness by eroding trust in state institutions. Transparency International (2023) ranked Nigeria 150th out of 180 countries in its Corruption Perceptions Index. Funds allocated to youth development, education, and job creation are frequently mismanaged. For instance, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was accused of misappropriating over ₦81 billion (House of Representatives Report, 2020). This mismanagement deprived communities of projects and fueled agitation. Again, corruption in the Universal Basic Education Board (UBEC) has led to dilapidated schools, pushing many youths into street hawking (Adeyemi, 2017). These scenarios underscore Akinola's (2015) argument that corruption delegitimises governance and weakens the social contract.

Restiveness and Insecurity Nexus

Another finding is the close linkage between youth restiveness and insecurity. In Northern Nigeria, the failure of the government to tackle unemployment and corruption provided fertile ground for Boko Haram recruitment. Between 2009 and 2021, over 35,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced (UNDP, 2021).

Similarly, in the South-East, the rise of secessionist movements such as IPOB has roots in perceived political exclusion and corrupt governance structures. The militarisation of protests further worsens restiveness, leading to cycles of violence.

Comparative African Experiences

Nigeria's experience mirrors broader African realities:

In Tunisia, high youth unemployment and corruption triggered the 2011 Arab Spring, leading to regime change (Gelvin, 2015). In South Africa, the "Fees Must Fall" protest (2015–2017) revealed frustration with inequality and corruption in higher education (Mamdani, 2016). Again, the 2019 revolution in Sudan was driven by youth anger against corruption and economic hardship, culminating in the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir. These cases show that youth restiveness is a continental phenomenon linked to corruption and underdevelopment.

Underdevelopment as an Outcome

The final finding is that corruption and youth restiveness jointly undermine Africa's development prospects.

Economic costs: Nigeria loses over \$18 billion annually to illicit financial flows driven by corruption (Global Financial Integrity, 2021).

Human capital drain: Youth restiveness leads to infrastructure destruction, school closures, and brain drain as youths migrate abroad (NBS, 2022).

Governance crisis: Corruption undermines state legitimacy, while restiveness destabilises governance, delaying the implementation of reforms.

Table 1: Interplay between Youth Restiveness, Corruption, and Underdevelopment in Nigeria

Variables	Manifestation	Impact on Development	Source
Youth Restiveness	Militancy, End SARS protests, IPOB agitations	Disruption of the economy, insecurity, and social instability	Ogege (2011), Akinola (2021)
Corruption	Embezzlement in NDDC, UBEC fraud	Loss of funds for education, jobs, and infrastructure	Adeyemi (2017), House of Reps (2020)
Economic Underdevelopment	High unemployment, poor infrastructure	Stunted GDP growth, brain drain, dependency on imports	NBS (2022), UNDP (2021)
Governance Failure	Weak institutions, poor accountability	Delegitimisation of the state, protests, and migration pressures	Transparency Int'l (2023), Okoli & Agada (2014)

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight a vicious cycle between youth restiveness, corruption, and underdevelopment in Nigeria and across Africa. Youth restiveness, expressed through militancy, protests, and violent agitations, is not merely a spontaneous reaction but a structured response to deep-seated socio-economic deprivation and governance failure. As Ogege (2011) emphasises, restiveness is symptomatic of unfulfilled expectations and exclusion from development opportunities.

Corruption emerges as the institutional driver of underdevelopment, eroding trust, diverting resources, and perpetuating poverty. Akinola (2015) rightly notes that corruption not only weakens state institutions but also delegitimises the state's authority to govern effectively. Youths, faced with unemployment and disillusionment, become both victims and agents of unrest.

The study also concludes that underdevelopment is both a cause and an effect of restiveness. Nigeria's loss of over \$18 billion annually to illicit financial flows (Global Financial Integrity, 2021), coupled with the destruction of infrastructure through militant activities, demonstrates how restiveness and corruption reinforce poverty and governance collapse. Thus, Africa's underdevelopment cannot be adequately explained without recognising this triangular nexus.

Importantly, the Nigerian case is not isolated. From Tunisia's Arab Spring to Sudan's 2019 youth-led revolution, corruption and exclusion consistently fuel youth restiveness, with severe consequences for governance stability and development.

In sum, the evidence demonstrates that unless deliberate policies are designed to combat corruption, expand opportunities for youth, and strengthen governance, Africa risks being locked into a cycle of underdevelopment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Policy-Level Recommendations

Strengthening Anti-Corruption Frameworks: Nigeria should reinforce the independence of anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC).

Beyond punitive measures, a preventive anti-corruption strategy should be adopted, focusing on transparency in budgeting, e-governance, and real-time monitoring of project implementation (Aiyede, 2016).

Youth-Centric Economic Policies: The government must invest in youth employment schemes that go beyond tokenistic empowerment programs. For instance, the Youth Enterprise with Innovation in Nigeria (YouWiN!) program had potential but collapsed due to corruption (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018). A redesigned program with robust monitoring could provide sustainable jobs.

Expansion of vocational and technical education should be prioritised to equip youths with employable skills (Nwabufo, 2015).

Security Sector Reforms: Military-centric approaches to youth restiveness often exacerbate conflict. A community-based policing strategy that incorporates dialogue and trust-building is more effective (Aghedo, 2013). Amnesty programs, like that of the Niger Delta in 2009, should be restructured to avoid corruption and elite capture.

Institutional-Level Recommendations

Inclusive Governance: Youths should be mainstreamed into governance. Implementation of the “Not Too Young to Run Act” (2018) must move beyond rhetoric by reducing electoral costs and barriers to youth candidacy (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2019).

Education Reform: Universities should partner with industries to redesign curricula aligned with market demands. This will address the mismatch between graduates and labour needs (Okebukola, 2020). It is thus important that civic education be revitalised to inculcate values of integrity, accountability, and citizenship.

Public Finance Management: Ministries and agencies should adopt open budgeting systems that make project details publicly accessible. This will reduce the chances of misappropriation and increase accountability (BudgIT Nigeria, 2022).

Community-Level Recommendations

Strengthening Traditional and Religious Institutions: These institutions still command legitimacy and can serve as mediators between government and restive youths (Adewale, 2010).

Community-driven monitoring of development projects should be encouraged to limit corruption.

Youth Dialogue Platforms

Establishing structured youth parliaments at the local level can channel grievances constructively rather than through violence.

NGOs should collaborate with youths in leadership training, entrepreneurship, and peacebuilding.

Practical Recommendations for Youths

Constructive Engagement: Youths should leverage social media for advocacy, mobilisation, and accountability rather than violence. The success of the #EndSARS protest in gaining global visibility shows the power of digital activism (Akinola, 2021).

Entrepreneurship: With over 200 million people, Nigeria has a large domestic market. Youths should be encouraged to tap into agriculture, ICT, and the creative industries, supported by state-backed credit facilities (Eneji, Mai-Lafia, & Weiping, 2013).

Regional Cooperation: Youth networks across Africa can collaborate to exchange strategies in combating corruption and driving development, building a Pan-African solidarity movement.

Final Reflection: The battle against youth restiveness and corruption is ultimately a battle for Africa's future. Nigeria, with its population of over 200 million, stands as a litmus test for the continent. If Nigeria can harness its youthful population through transparent governance, inclusive policies, and sustainable development strategies, it will not only address its internal challenges but also inspire continental transformation.

As Achebe (1983) once observed, "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." Today, that failure manifests as corruption and youth restiveness. However, the same Nigeria, with its resilient and innovative youth, also holds the key to Africa's rebirth.

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