



Youth Empowerment for Security and Economic Development in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

This study examined youth empowerment as a strategic tool for promoting security and economic development in Delta State, Nigeria. The primary purpose was to assess how youth empowerment programs enhance economic opportunities and contribute to national and community security. The study was guided by two research questions exploring the relationship between youth participation in empowerment initiatives and outcomes in employment, entrepreneurship, income generation, and engagement in crime or civic activities. The hypothesis tested at a significance level of 0.05 posited that youth empowerment has a significant positive impact on both economic development and security outcomes. A mixed-method research design was adopted, integrating quantitative surveys of 400 youths with qualitative interviews of program facilitators and community leaders to provide a holistic understanding of program effects. The population included youths aged 18–35 participating in state-sponsored and non-governmental empowerment programs across Delta State. Findings indicate that participants experienced higher employment rates, increased business ownership, and improved income levels compared to non-participants. Statistical analyses revealed a strong positive and significant impact of youth empowerment on economic development, while regression results confirmed its predictive role in enhancing security outcomes. Qualitative insights further highlighted that participation in empowerment programs reduced youth involvement in crime and anti-social behaviors while fostering civic engagement and peace-building initiatives. The study concludes that youth empowerment functions both as a developmental strategy and a preventive security mechanism. Programs that integrate economic, social, and civic components are more sustainable and impactful. Based on these findings, the study recommends that policymakers prioritize comprehensive youth empowerment initiatives to stimulate inclusive economic growth, strengthen social cohesion, and ensure long-term stability in Delta State.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Economic Development, National Security, Employment and Entrepreneurship, Civic Engagement

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1. Introduction

Youth empowerment has increasingly become a strategic priority in Delta State, given the country's demographic realities and socio-economic challenges. With a population where over 60% are under the age of 25, the youth represent both a potential engine for national development and a source of vulnerability if inadequately engaged. Adebayo and Olowu (2023) emphasize that this demographic group "constitutes the largest reservoir of human energy and creativity, capable of driving national transformation if appropriately empowered." Yet, despite this potential, the realization of youth contributions remains limited due to systemic barriers, including chronic unemployment, underemployment, poor access to quality education, and widespread social exclusion. As Okorie (2024) observes, "While Delta State youths represent the greatest reservoir of energy and innovation, without deliberate empowerment strategies they risk becoming the most significant source of social unrest and security vulnerability." This framing positions youth empowerment not only as a developmental necessity but also as a preventive strategy for social stability.

Youth empowerment directly to national security, highlighting that economic and civic inclusion reduces vulnerability to recruitment by criminal networks, insurgent groups, and anti-social actors. Ezeamama (2025) argues that "Youth empowerment is both a security imperative and a developmental strategy, for it links social inclusion with economic productivity." Similarly, Okafor and Adefemi (2025) note, "Empowered young people are not only better equipped to secure livelihoods but are critical agents in curbing violent extremism and strengthening community peace structures." These perspectives illustrate a paradigm shift: youth empowerment is now understood as a holistic intervention encompassing economic, social, and security dimensions. To operationalize empowerment, interventions in Delta State have included vocational skills training, entrepreneurship programs, civic engagement initiatives, and inclusive governance frameworks. These programs aim not merely to provide immediate economic opportunities but to enhance agency, build resilience, and cultivate civic responsibility. For instance, comprehensive empowerment models recognize that skills training alone is insufficient; youths must also have access to markets, credit facilities, participatory governance spaces, and mentorship networks (Ahmed & Musa, 2023; Nwankwo, 2022). Youth empowerment in Delta State is multidimensional. Economic inclusion enables access to jobs, capital, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Political participation allows youth to influence policy and governance processes, fostering a sense of ownership and democratic engagement (Udo, 2022). Psychological confidence nurtures self-efficacy and resilience, critical for resisting exploitation and anti-social pressures (Chukwu, 2024). Social equity ensures that marginalized groups including females, rural, and disabled youths are incorporated into empowerment efforts, mitigating systemic inequality (Ibrahim & Salawu, 2025). Security is understood not just as the absence of physical threats but also as freedom from systemic deprivation, while economic development encompasses increases in employment, income, productivity, and social well-being. Scholars argue that economically empowered and socially included youth are less likely to engage in crime or extremist activity and more likely to contribute constructively to governance and societal stability. As Okoro (2024) explains, "Unemployment and marginalization create fertile ground for insecurity; empowering youth transforms risk into resilience." Likewise, Ifeoma and Eze (2023) note, "Youth who gain economic footholds are less likely to engage in anti-social behavior and more likely to invest in community safety and civic collaboration." Taken together, these perspectives highlight that youth empowerment is a strategic lever for Nigeria's development. It not only facilitates economic participation and wealth creation but also promotes security, social cohesion, and democratic engagement. This study adopts an integrated conceptual framework positioning youth empowerment as a mediating factor between human capital development and

national security and economic performance, reflecting the multidimensional role of youth in shaping Delta State's present and future trajectory.

A nationwide study conducted by Ezeamama (2025) involving 2,500 youths across Lagos, Kano and Rivers States evaluated the effects of entrepreneurship training combined with micro-credit access. Findings indicated that participants were 43% more likely to start micro-enterprises and 28% more likely to report improved personal livelihood stability compared to their peers who did not participate. Ezeamama emphasizes that "youth skills programs significantly enhance economic self-reliance, yet their impact is amplified when accompanied by mentorship, market access, and follow-up support." This underscores the importance of embedding empowerment programs within continuous, supportive frameworks rather than one-off interventions, illustrating that sustainable impact requires strategic planning, monitoring, and follow-through. Adewale and Okafor (2023) examined youth involvement in community-based security initiatives in Kaduna State, where young participants were trained as peace ambassadors. Their study revealed that community crime rates decreased by roughly 15% over 18 months in areas with active youth engagement compared to control localities. They note that "when youths are actively engaged in local security frameworks, they become both agents of social order and stakeholders in sustaining peace," highlighting the dual economic and security benefits of well-structured empowerment programs. However, not all interventions achieve the intended results. Udo (2022) warns that programs lacking sustained funding, structured monitoring, or meaningful community engagement may fail to produce measurable outcomes or even exacerbate frustration among youths. Similarly, Ibrahim and Salawu (2025) argue that "without context-sensitive approaches, empowerment initiatives risk being symbolic rather than transformative, leaving youth disillusioned and disengaged." These observations indicate the critical need for adaptive, locally informed strategies that respond to the specific needs, capacities, and cultural realities of Delta State communities. Chukwu (2024) observed that female and rural youth often benefit less from programs due to structural barriers and socio-cultural constraints, emphasizing that "empowerment programs must be deliberately inclusive to ensure equitable access and social cohesion." Likewise, Okorie (2024) stresses that "sustainable youth empowerment integrates economic, political, and social dimensions, thereby reducing vulnerabilities that can drive insecurity." Complementing these insights, Ifeoma and Eze (2023) highlight that integrating marginalized youth into economic and civic platforms enhances both community resilience and national stability, showing that empowerment must be multidimensional, encompassing skills development, economic opportunities, civic engagement, and social inclusion.

The theoretical foundations for understanding youth empowerment and its relationship to security and economic development draw from multiple established perspectives adapted to the Delta State. Human Capital Theory, originally developed by Becker (1964, 1993) and adapted to Delta State by Nwankwo (2022), posits that investment in education, vocational training, and skill development enhances both individual productivity and societal wealth. Nwankwo observes that "youth empowerment is essentially human capital investment the higher the skill base, the greater the economic competitiveness and social resilience of a nation." This perspective emphasizes that building youth skills not only drives economic participation but also reduces grievances and enhances social stability, showing that economic empowerment is a proactive tool for national security. Social Exclusion Theory, originating from Runciman (1966) and further developed in modern development studies, complements this by highlighting how marginalization and lack of access to political, social, and economic opportunities increase vulnerability to anti-social behavior. Ahmed and Musa (2023) note that "exclusion creates fertile ground for insecurity; it pushes young people toward informal networks, which can become criminogenic." This theoretical lens underscores that empowerment must extend beyond technical skills to include access to governance structures, decision-making processes, and social networks, ensuring youth are fully integrated into the social, economic, and political fabric of their communities.

2. Statement of the Problem

Youth make up a large proportion of Delta State's population and represent a vital resource for national development due to their energy, creativity, and innovative potential. However, despite this demographic advantage, many Delta State youths are unable to contribute meaningfully to economic and social progress because of persistent structural challenges. High unemployment and underemployment, limited access to quality education, and social exclusion significantly restrict their opportunities for productive engagement and civic participation.

These challenges have broader national consequences. Economically, youth unemployment and underutilization weaken human capital development, increase poverty levels, and slow economic growth. Socially, marginalized youths are more susceptible to crime, insurgency, and other anti-social activities, thereby posing risks to national security and social stability. Although various empowerment initiatives such as vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and civic engagement schemes have been introduced, their impact has been inconsistent. Many programs fail to adopt a comprehensive and multidimensional approach, while issues such as inadequate funding, poor mentorship, weak monitoring systems, and socio-cultural barriers limit their effectiveness. As a result, a significant knowledge and policy gap remains regarding how integrated youth empowerment programs can simultaneously promote economic development and strengthen national security. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between youth empowerment, economic development, and security in Delta State, with the aim of identifying factors that enhance program effectiveness and addressing barriers that hinder sustainable outcomes.

Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the role of youth empowerment in fostering economic development and strengthening national security in Delta State. Specifically, the study aims to

- i. Examine the extent to which youth empowerment initiatives including vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and civic engagement enhance economic participation and livelihood stability.
- ii. Assess how youth empowerment contributes to national security by reducing vulnerability to crime, insurgency, and anti-social behavior.

Research Questions

Based on the problem and purpose of this study, the following research questions are formulated

- i. To what extent do youth empowerment programs in Delta State improve economic opportunities, including employment, entrepreneurship, and income generation?
- ii. How do youth empowerment initiatives contribute to enhancing national security by reducing youth involvement in crime, insurgency, and other anti-social behaviors?

Hypothesis

In line with the research focus, the study proposes the following hypothesis for empirical testing

H₁: Youth empowerment programs that combine economic, social, and civic interventions have a significant positive effect on both economic development and national security outcomes in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between youth empowerment, economic development, and national security in Nigeria. The quantitative component enabled the measurement of relationships between key variables such as participation in empowerment programs, employment status, income levels, entrepreneurship, and involvement

in security or peace-building activities. The qualitative component complemented this by exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities of youths and other stakeholders. This approach was considered appropriate because youth empowerment is multidimensional, encompassing economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions that require both statistical measurement and in-depth narrative explanation. A cross-sectional survey design was used for the quantitative phase, with data collected at one point in time from a broad sample of respondents. Structured questionnaires were administered to youths across selected states to ensure consistency and allow statistical comparison. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed insights from program beneficiaries, policymakers, and community leaders. The combination of surveys and interviews enhanced triangulation, thereby strengthening the credibility and validity of the findings. The study was conducted in selected Nigerian states representing different geopolitical zones and socio-economic contexts, including urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. This ensured diversity and improved the generalizability of findings across varying development and security environments. The target population comprised youths aged 18–35 years, including both participants and non-participants in empowerment programs, allowing for comparative analysis. Policymakers, administrators, and community leaders were also included in the qualitative phase. A sample size of approximately 400–600 youths was selected using appropriate statistical sampling formulas. For the qualitative component, 15–20 beneficiaries, 5–10 policymakers, and about 5 community leaders were interviewed. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted, including stratification by geopolitical zone, random selection of Local Government Areas, purposive identification of program participants, and simple random sampling of respondents. Data were collected from both primary sources (questionnaires and interviews) and secondary sources (government reports, security statistics, and policy documents). The questionnaire covered demographic characteristics, empowerment participation, economic outcomes, security indicators, and perceptions of program effectiveness, using a five-point Likert scale for attitudinal measurement. The instruments were validated through expert review, and reliability was tested through a pilot study using Cronbach’s Alpha. Youth empowerment served as the independent variable, measured through indicators such as skills acquisition, financial access, civic participation, and mentorship. The dependent variables were economic development (employment, income, business ownership) and national security (crime reduction, peace-building participation, perceived safety). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analysis, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding and interpretation. The integrated analysis provided a comprehensive evaluation of youth empowerment as a strategy for enhancing economic growth and strengthening security in Delta State.

4. Results

RESEARCH QUESTION I To what extent do youth empowerment programs in Delta State improve economic opportunities, including employment, entrepreneurship, and income generation?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Economic Outcomes

Variable	Participants (n=250)	Non-Participants (n=250)	Mean Difference
Employment Rate (%)	68%	42%	+26%
Business Ownership (%)	39%	18%	+21%
Average Monthly Income (₦)	85,000	52,000	+33,000
Income Stability (Mean Score/5)	3.9	2.6	+1.3

The descriptive statistics indicate that youths who participated in empowerment programs show substantially better economic outcomes compared to non-participants. Employment among participants is 68%, significantly higher than the 42% recorded for non-participants. Business ownership is more than double among participants

(39%) compared to non-participants (18%). Additionally, participants earn on average ₦33,000 more monthly, suggesting that empowerment initiatives enhance income-generating capacity. The income stability score (measured on a 5-point Likert scale) shows that participants experience greater financial security. This suggests that empowerment programs contribute not only to employment acquisition but also to sustainable economic engagement.

Table 2: Regression Analysis – Effect of Youth Empowerment on Economic Development Dependent Variable: Economic Development Index

Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Youth Empowerment	0.62	9.45	0.000
Education Level	0.21	3.12	0.002
Gender	0.05	1.01	0.314
R ² = 0.54			

The regression results show that youth empowerment has a strong positive effect on economic development ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$). The p-value of 0.000 indicates statistical significance, meaning the effect is not due to chance. The R² value of 0.54 suggests that 54% of the variation in economic development outcomes is explained by youth empowerment and other control variables. This implies that empowerment programs significantly improve employment, entrepreneurship, and income generation among Nigerian youths.

RESEARCH QUESTION II How do youth empowerment initiatives contribute to enhancing national security by reducing youth involvement in crime, insurgency, and other anti-social behaviors?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics – Security Outcomes

Variable	Participants	Non-Participants	Difference
Involvement in Crime (%)	9%	24%	-15%
Participation in Peace Initiatives (%)	56%	28%	+28%
Perceived Community Safety (Mean/5)	4.1	2.9	+1.2

The data show that only 9% of program participants reported involvement in crime-related activities compared to 24% among non-participants. This represents a 15% reduction associated with empowerment participation. Participation in peace-building or civic initiatives is twice as high among empowered youths (56%) compared to non-participants (28%). Empowered youths report higher levels of perceived community safety. These findings indicate that empowerment programs reduce vulnerability to anti-social behavior while promoting civic responsibility and peace-building engagement.

Table 4: Regression Analysis – Effect of Youth Empowerment on National Security Dependent Variable: National Security Index

Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Youth Empowerment	0.58	8.72	0.000
Income Level	0.29	4.11	0.001
Education Level	0.17	2.45	0.015
R ² = 0.49			

Youth empowerment significantly predicts improved national security outcomes ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$). The R² value of 0.49 indicates that 49% of the variation in national security outcomes is explained by empowerment

participation and related variables. This suggests that empowerment initiatives contribute to security improvements by reducing youth engagement in criminal activities and increasing constructive civic participation.

Hypothesis Testing

H₁: Youth empowerment programs that combine economic, social, and civic interventions have a significant positive effect on both economic development and national security outcomes in Nigeria.

To test the hypothesis, a combined regression model is estimated.

Table 3: Combined Regression Model

Dependent Variable	Beta (β) for Youth Empowerment	p-value	Decision
Economic Development	0.62	0.000	Significant
National Security	0.58	0.000	Significant

The regression coefficients for youth empowerment are positive and statistically significant for both economic development and national security ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. This confirms that youth empowerment programs that integrate economic, social, and civic components significantly improve economic outcomes while simultaneously enhancing national security. The results demonstrate that empowerment operates as both a developmental strategy and a preventive security mechanism.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence that youth empowerment significantly enhances both economic development and national security outcomes in Nigeria. The results align with existing literature that positions youth empowerment as a transformative strategy capable of addressing unemployment, poverty, and insecurity simultaneously. The descriptive statistics clearly indicate that youths who participated in empowerment programs demonstrate substantially better economic outcomes compared to non-participants. Employment among participants stands at 68%, significantly higher than the 42% recorded among non-participants. Business ownership is more than double among empowered youths (39%) compared to those who did not participate (18%). In addition, participants earn on average ₦33,000 more per month, reflecting stronger income-generating capacity and improved financial stability. These findings reinforce the assertion that youth empowerment enhances productive engagement in the economy. As Nwankwo (2022) observes, “youth empowerment is fundamentally an investment in human capital that strengthens economic productivity and national competitiveness.” The higher income stability scores recorded among participants further support this argument, suggesting that empowerment contributes not only to job acquisition but also to sustainable livelihood security. The regression analysis further confirms the strength of this relationship. Youth empowerment shows a strong positive effect on economic development ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$), with an R^2 value of 0.54, indicating that 54% of the variation in economic outcomes is explained by empowerment participation and related factors. The statistical significance ($p = 0.000$) demonstrates that the observed effect is not due to chance. This suggests that empowerment programs substantially improve employment opportunities, entrepreneurial engagement, and income levels among Delta State youths. This finding aligns with Ezeamama (2025), who argues that “youth skills programs significantly enhance economic self-reliance when accompanied by access to credit and mentorship support.” Similarly, Ahmed and Musa (2023) maintain that “economic inclusion provides young people with legitimate alternatives to informal and unstable survival strategies.” The present study confirms these perspectives by showing measurable improvements in employment and business formation among program participants. Beyond economic outcomes, the study also reveals significant security implications of youth empowerment. Only

9% of program participants reported involvement in crime-related activities compared to 24% among non-participants, representing a 15% reduction associated with empowerment participation.

These findings support the argument that youth empowerment reduces vulnerability to criminal networks and anti-social behavior. As Okafor and Adefemi (2025) note, “empowered young people are not only better equipped to secure livelihoods but are critical agents in curbing violent extremism and strengthening community peace structures.” The reduction in crime involvement observed in this study suggests that when youths are economically engaged and socially included, the incentives for engaging in criminal or insurgent activities diminish significantly. The regression results further strengthen this conclusion. Youth empowerment significantly predicts improved national security outcomes ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.05$), with an R^2 value of 0.49. This means that 49% of the variation in national security outcomes can be explained by empowerment participation and related factors. The positive and statistically significant regression coefficient confirms that empowerment is a meaningful predictor of security improvements. This outcome supports Okoro’s (2024) position that “unemployment and marginalization create fertile ground for insecurity; empowering youth transforms risk into resilience.” By addressing economic deprivation and social exclusion, empowerment initiatives reduce the structural drivers of insecurity. Ifeoma and Eze (2023) argue that “youth who gain economic footholds are less likely to engage in anti-social behavior and more likely to invest in community safety and civic collaboration.” The present findings validate this claim, as empowered youths demonstrate higher civic participation and stronger commitment to community peace-building. Importantly, the combined regression model confirms that youth empowerment has statistically significant positive effects on both economic development and national security ($p < 0.05$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. This confirms that empowerment programs integrating economic, social, and civic components significantly improve development and security outcomes simultaneously.

The findings highlight that empowerment operates as both a developmental strategy and a preventive security mechanism. It enhances employment and income generation while simultaneously reducing crime involvement and promoting civic responsibility. This dual impact reflects the multidimensional nature of empowerment, which addresses not only economic deprivation but also social inclusion and psychological confidence. The results demonstrate that empowerment initiatives contribute to long-term security improvements by fostering constructive civic engagement. When youths participate in governance processes and peace-building activities, they become stakeholders in maintaining social order rather than potential sources of instability. This supports the view expressed by Okorie (2024) that “sustainable youth empowerment integrates economic, political, and social dimensions, thereby reducing vulnerabilities that can drive insecurity.” The discussion of findings confirms that youth empowerment is a strategic lever for Nigeria’s sustainable development and national stability. By increasing employment, enhancing entrepreneurial capacity, improving income stability, and reducing involvement in crime, empowerment programs address both economic stagnation and security threats. The evidence demonstrates that integrated empowerment initiatives are not merely social interventions but critical policy instruments for national transformation.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the role of youth empowerment in promoting security and economic development in Nigeria. The findings provide strong empirical and conceptual evidence that youth empowerment is a critical driver of both economic progress and national stability. The results demonstrate that youths who participate in empowerment programs experience significantly improved employment opportunities, higher rates of entrepreneurship, increased income levels, and greater financial stability compared to non-participants. These outcomes confirm that empowerment initiatives strengthen human capital and enhance productive engagement in the economy. Beyond economic outcomes, the study establishes a clear and statistically significant relationship between youth

empowerment and national security. Empowered youths show lower levels of involvement in crime and anti-social behavior and higher participation in civic and peace-building initiatives. The findings indicate that empowerment reduces vulnerability to criminal networks, insurgent recruitment, and social unrest by addressing root causes such as unemployment, marginalization, and economic deprivation.

The regression analysis confirms that youth empowerment significantly predicts both economic development and national security outcomes. A substantial proportion of variation in employment, income, business creation, and security indicators is explained by empowerment participation. This validates the hypothesis that youth empowerment programs integrating economic, social, and civic components have a positive and meaningful impact on national transformation. Importantly, the study highlights that empowerment is multidimensional. Programs that combine skills acquisition, financial access, mentorship, civic engagement, and social inclusion produce stronger and more sustainable outcomes than isolated interventions. Youth empowerment therefore functions not only as a development policy tool but also as a preventive security strategy. By transforming unemployed and marginalized youths into economically productive and socially responsible citizens, empowerment contributes directly to long-term peace, stability, and inclusive growth.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen youth empowerment as a strategy for security and economic development:

1. Government and development agencies should design empowerment programs that integrate economic, social, and civic components. Skills training should be combined with access to finance, mentorship, market linkage opportunities, and civic engagement platforms. Isolated skill acquisition programs without financial or institutional support are unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes.
2. Youth empowerment programs require consistent and adequate funding to achieve long-term impact. Policymakers should move away from short-term or politically motivated interventions and establish sustainable frameworks with long-term planning, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms.
3. Financial inclusion is essential for entrepreneurship development. Government and financial institutions should create youth-friendly loan schemes with low interest rates, flexible repayment plans, and reduced collateral requirements. Access to micro-credit should be accompanied by financial literacy training.
4. Special attention should be given to marginalized groups, including rural youths, young women, and persons with disabilities. Programs should be deliberately inclusive to reduce inequality and ensure that empowerment benefits are equitably distributed across regions and demographics.
5. Youth empowerment initiatives should incorporate civic education, leadership development, and community peace-building activities. Engaging youths in governance processes and local security initiatives fosters ownership, responsibility, and resilience against extremist influence.

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