

Youth-Led Policy Advocacy for Substance Abuse Prevention and Community Drug Control in Nigeria

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Abstract

Substance abuse has become one of the greatest public health and social issues confronting young people in Nigeria. The use of psychoactive drugs, including cannabis and tramadol, codeine syrup, alcohol, cigarettes, shisha and other illegal drugs, is still a major concern for the health, productivity, security and socioeconomic well-being of the youth. Although the government and the communities are striving to tackle the issue of drug abuse, the role of the youth in policymaking, implementation and monitoring of prevention and rehabilitation programmes is seldom meaningful. The policy brief explores the importance of youth-led advocacy for effective substance abuse prevention and community drug control efforts in Nigeria. Based on the qualitative data collected from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with community and religious leaders, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with youth groups, and consultations with stakeholders in Taraba State, the study examines the extent of youth substance abuse, factors influencing the use of drugs, barriers to youth engagement, and potential areas for policy reform. The results show that the prevalence of substance abuse among youth is high, which is attributed to poverty, unemployment, peer pressure, poor law enforcement, lack of awareness and lack of access to rehabilitation facilities. The report suggests that youth participation should be institutionalised in drug control structures, preventative measures should be reinforced, rehabilitation facilities should be extended, and sustainable structures should be established to engage youth in advocacy and community work.

Keywords: Substance Abuse, Drug Control, Youth Advocacy, Public Health Policy, Rehabilitation, Prevention, Community Development

1. Introduction

Substance abuse is one of the greatest public health and social development problems facing Nigeria today. The use of psychoactive substances among young people and adolescents is a growing phenomenon which has caused a great deal of concern because of its long-term impact on health, education, productivity, security and well-being. There is evidence that the abuse of substances like cannabis, tramadol, codeine, alcohol, tobacco products and other illegal drugs is associated with a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, school dropout, lack of employment, criminal activity, violence and social instability (Degenhardt et al., 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). In many communities, substance abuse has become a social issue and is a major impediment to national development, and a problem that threatens the future of young people.

Youth in Nigeria make up a significant percentage of the population and are one of the populations most susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse and its effects. Adolescence and early adulthood are a time of intense development, including identity development, heightened social interactions, experimentation, and heightened peer influence (Sawyer et al., 2018). It has been demonstrated that economic disadvantage, unemployment, family disruptions, low levels of social support, adverse childhood events and proximity to peers who use drugs are all significant risk factors for

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drug initiation and regular use among youth (Adeniyi et al., 2019; Olawole-Isaac et al., 2018). The growing urbanisation in many Nigerian communities, the shifting social values and the increased accessibility of psychoactive substances have added to the vulnerability of youth in these communities.

Over several years, governments, educational institutions, health care professionals, civil society institutions and community leaders have tried to reduce drug and alcohol abuse and increase healthy living with different interventions. The interventions are public awareness campaigns, school-based prevention programmes, law enforcement, rehabilitation services, counselling services, and community sensitisation (Amoo et al., 2020; Obot, 2020). These measures have helped to raise awareness about the risks of drug abuse. However, there are still significant gaps in drug prevention and early intervention, access to treatment, and community engagement, as evidenced by the high prevalence of substance use among young people (UNODC, 2023; Degenhardt et al., 2018). Substance abuse continues to be a problem of concern, and innovation, sustainability, and inclusiveness efforts to engage those most affected by the problem directly are needed.

There is growing evidence that youth involvement can have a significant impact on public health interventions and outcomes. Youth-led advocacy understands that youth bring unique knowledge and understanding of the social factors, pressures and environmental factors related to substance use in their communities and values their perspectives on these issues (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015; Patton et al., 2016). Youth are an important source of influence on the attitudes, behaviours and norms of their peers, which can in turn influence attitudes, behaviours and norms that foster drug use. They can contribute to the effectiveness, acceptability, and sustainability of substance abuse prevention programmes (Oliver et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2022) through their roles in prevention activities, awareness creation, community surveillance, rehabilitation support, peer education and policy advocacy.

The focus of this policy brief is to examine the opportunities for involving youth in Nigeria's substance abuse prevention and community drug control strategies. Based on the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders and young people, it explores prevailing issues, policy and practice gaps and recommends practical policy changes to make meaningful youth participation institutionalised in national and community-based drug control systems. Increasing youth participation in substance abuse prevention can have a positive impact on public health, drug-related harms, community resilience, and safer and healthier societies.

2. Problem Statement

The problems of substance abuse among the youths remain a threat to the health, educational development, social stability and economic development of Nigeria. Substance use is common and is becoming more normalised in some communities, leaving youth vulnerable to a myriad of health and social hazards, according to the study findings. There are a few reasons why substance abuse continues to be a problem for youth. Conditions can include poverty, unemployment, depression, peer pressure, family influences, a lack of parental supervision, and the acceptance of some substances in a culture, as well as inadequate law enforcement. Many substances are readily accessible and inexpensive, making them even more accessible for vulnerable groups.

3. Methodology

The information for this policy brief came from qualitative data obtained from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and consultations with community leaders, religious leaders, youth groups, students, community stakeholders, and substance abuse prevention and community development stakeholders in Taraba State, Nigeria. Participants were selected through purposive sampling for their knowledge and experiences related to substance abuse, adolescent development, community mobilisation, and public health interventions. The participants were selected for participation because of their involvement in programmes for youth, their community leadership and/or advocacy activities, or their involvement in substance abuse prevention activities.

Tools and methods employed included semi-structured interview and discussion guides that elicited information on patterns of substance abuse, factors that influence substance use, knowledge of existing policies, and barriers to youth participation, rehabilitation challenges and opportunities for enhancing youth participation in prevention and policy advocacy. The discussions took place in a way that facilitated easy expression of experiences, perceptions and recommendations. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data gathered. Responses were read, coded and clustered into broad themes such as the prevalence of substance abuse, risk factors, policy awareness, youth involvement, challenges to engagement, rehabilitation challenges, and policy reform priorities. The results of the various groups were analysed and combined to look for commonalities and areas of agreement. Existing literature, national drug control policies, public health policies and international best practices in youth participation in substance abuse prevention and rehabilitation programmes were also consulted to gain further insights. The evidence that is created is the foundation for policy recommendations included in this report.

4. Policy Reform Priorities and Strategic Recommendations

The results strongly highlight the importance of policies to change the perception of youth as consumers of substance abuse prevention programs and policies and consider them as key stakeholders in the process of policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. There was a general desire for institutionalisation of youth participation in the systems of substance abuse prevention and community drug control across all categories of respondents. The participants pointed out that youth understand the social conditions, peer pressure and the influence of the environment that lead to drug use and abuse and have first-hand experience to offer some practical and contextually relevant ideas and answers. One key policy recommendation is to formally involve youth representatives at the national, state, local and community levels in drug control committees. Stakeholders called for youth engagement to be more than symbolic; rather, it should be a truly meaningful engagement of youth in decision-making, programme design, planning for implementation and in policy review mechanisms. Incorporation would guarantee that prevention strategies are grounded in reality and needed by youth and lead to greater ownership of interventions by youth.

Participants also noted the importance of a national plan for youth involvement in substance abuse prevention and community drug control. Such a system should provide a clear definition of the roles, responsibilities and rights of youth advocates, as well as procedures for recruitment, training, mentorship, certification and ongoing involvement. The structure should include principles for inter-institutional and inter-sectoral cooperation in the field of coordinated prevention measures by all actors, including government organisations, schools, community groups, religious institutions, civil society organisations and youth organisations. A key recommendation is to enhance the capacities of youth through continued training and mentorship initiatives. There was an agreement among respondents that strong youth advocacy requires good knowledge, leadership, communication, and technical skills on substance abuse prevention. Institutions of government, educational institutions, development partners and civil society organisations should therefore invest in regular capacity-building programmes that will build young people's capacities in peer education, community mobilisation, policy advocacy and behavioural change communication.

The study also highlights the need to address the socioeconomic factors that contribute to young people's substance abuse. Poverty, lack of jobs, idleness and lack of economic opportunities were cited repeatedly as significant factors in drug use. Youth empowerment measures including vocational training, entrepreneurship development, job creation and educational support programmes were emphasised as part of the prevention policies. Considering these underlying factors would help mitigate risks of substance use and foster social and economic inclusion. Participants also highlighted the importance of improvement of rehabilitation and reintegration services. Current rehab services were reported as not being adequate, accessible or responsive to young people's needs. Policy changes should therefore be aimed at expanding youth-friendly rehabilitation centres, community-based counselling services, psychosocial support programmes and reintegration programmes to help rehabilitated people lead productive lives without stigma or discrimination.

Another key policy issue was community engagement. It was recommended that there should be greater collaboration between traditional leaders, religious leaders, parents, schools, community development associations and youth groups. These collaborations would help to raise awareness, encourage positive social norms, boost community surveillance, and support vulnerable youth. Community-based interventions were perceived as critical, as the development and maintenance of substance abuse frequently occur in social settings with high family and community factors. The study also points to the increasing role digital and social media play in substance abuse prevention efforts. The internet and digital communication channels are increasingly influence on young people. Respondents thus called for increased funding of social media and online awareness-building programmes, digital advocacy and technology-based communication to engage young audiences with reliable information and behavioural messages.

Finally, stakeholders highlighted the importance of better policy enforcement and accountability measures. The current legislation and policies are important for substance abuse prevention but are not always being enforced properly. They recommended better tracking of drug distribution, harsher penalties for violations of controlled substance laws, closer law enforcement/community ties and visibility regarding policies for controlled substances. Concurrently, prevention, education, rehabilitation and youth empowerment strategies should be adopted and implemented to achieve sustainable results in enforcement. The overall findings suggest that a comprehensive policy approach is needed for effective drug abuse prevention and drug control in the community in Nigeria, one which will involve participation, empowerment, prevention, rehabilitation, community engagement, and institutional support, focusing on youth. These changes would not only minimise youth substance use but also improve their abilities to make a valuable contribution to the country's development and health promotion efforts.

5. The implementation framework, the monitoring and evaluation framework, the conclusion and the policy recommendations are the remaining components of this report.

Implementation Framework

The effective implementation of youth-led advocacy on drug control and substance abuse in Nigeria requires a multi-sectoral approach by government institutions, youth groups, educational institutions, community structures, civil society organisations, religious institutions, traditional institutions, development partners and law enforcement agencies. A clear national framework should be used as a roadmap for effective implementation, involving young people as strategic partners in prevention, awareness creation, rehabilitation support and policy advocacy. Relevant ministries, departments and agencies at the national level, especially the health, youth development, education, social welfare and drug control ministries, should put in place a system of involving youth representatives in the policy development and implementation process. Include the participation of youth in programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes in national policies. There should also be specific funding windows for youth-led substance abuse prevention programs and advocacy programs.

Youth advisory committees and community drug control platforms should be created at the state and local government levels to ensure that youth are involved in local prevention efforts. These should give opportunities to young people to take part in programme design, community sensitisation, monitoring and policy review discussions. Local governments need to engage community leaders, schools, religious bodies and youth groups to build on grassroots implementation. Prevention activities should be important on educational platforms. It is recommended that schools, colleges and universities have drug-free clubs, peer education programmes, counselling services and awareness programmes to encourage a healthy lifestyle and discourage the use of substances. Youth leaders should be equipped to lead discussions, arrange advocacy events and to provide counselling and referral to other youth members in need.

Community and faith-based organisations must be actively involved in prevention activities including awareness creation campaigns, mentoring, youth empowerment and rehabilitation support. The role of traditional leaders, religious leaders, parents and community leaders in supporting youth-led interventions and contributing to drug-free environments should be encouraged. Government responsibility should be complemented with the provision of technical assistance, capacity building, financial assistance, advocacy training, research and programme monitoring services by development partners and civil society organisations. By participating, they can support fostering sustainability, innovation, and accountability in youth-led prevention efforts.

Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

A detailed monitoring and evaluation programme is vital to the effectiveness of youth involvement in substance abuse prevention and community drug control programmes. Programme outcomes and quality of youth participation in policy implementation processes should be monitored. The number of young people involved in drug control committees, the number of youth-led awareness campaigns, public awareness about the dangers of substance abuse, participation in youth prevention programmes, use of counselling and rehabilitation services, and changes in the prevalence of substance use among the youth should all be used as key indicators. Other indicators are needed that look at training opportunities, funding support, mentorship programmes, and institutional structures that support youth participation.

Consultations with stakeholders should take place regularly to share progress with implementation, to review problems that may arise, and to capture lessons learnt. Every year, policy reviews should be used to evaluate the progress being made towards the aims of involving youth, and to make recommendations for change if needed. Community feedback mechanisms should also be developed to make sure prevention strategies continue to be responsive to local needs and realities. Youth-led interventions should be supported by research institutions and academic organisations to periodically review the impact of such interventions and develop evidence for future policy improvements based on best practices. Information collected through monitoring and evaluation should be used to guide the planning of programmes, allocation of resources and policymaking at all levels.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that drug abuse is a serious public health and social problem among the youths in the communities in Nigeria. The participants recognised that cannabis, tramadol, codeine syrup, alcohol, cigarettes, shisha, and other psychoactive substances were commonly abused substances among youth. This continued burden of substance abuse among youth is due to other factors, including poverty, unemployment, peer pressure, family influences, lack of awareness, and weak law enforcement, among others, that hinder youths from engaging in activities that would benefit them. Nevertheless, the study identifies significant opportunities to better incorporate meaningful youth engagement with prevention. Young people can bring a different perspective to community issues of substance use and are able to help shape positive behavioural changes within their community. The importance of young-led advocacy, peer education, awareness creation, community mobilisation and engagement in policy for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of substance abuse prevention programmes was consistently highlighted.

But the current level of youth involvement is not sufficient given the barriers such as lack of funding, training opportunities, mentorship, institutional support, stigma, and youth involvement in policymaking processes. These are all opportunities that must be intentionally addressed through policy change that recognises youth as partners in substance abuse prevention and community drug control initiatives. A comprehensive youth-centered policy approach incorporating a combination of prevention, education, empowerment, rehabilitation, community engagement and meaningful participation will have a significant impact on minimising drug and alcohol use among young people, building resilience and enhancing public health outcomes. Investing in youth leadership and advocacy is, therefore, an investment in sustainable national development and not just a tool for substance abuse prevention.

7. Policy Recommendations

This paper recommends the following:

1. The Federal Government of Nigeria should develop a national framework which will institutionalise youth in substance abuse prevention and rehabilitation, as well as in creating awareness on drugs and establishing community drug control. This framework must be clear on youth roles and responsibilities, and provide for representation at national, state, local and community levels.
2. Health, youth development, education and drug control agencies should establish formal means to involve youth representatives on advisory committees, policymaking bodies, drug control implementation bodies, and monitoring bodies for drug control.
3. Mechanisms for dedicated support of youth-led advocacy programmes, community sensitisation campaigns, peer education, digital awareness platforms, and innovative and youth-led prevention projects should be developed.
4. Schools should better reinforce drug prevention education through school-based awareness programmes, peer education clubs, counselling services, and through life-skills training which encourage healthy decision-making and resilience, and to counter drug abuse.
5. National and sub-national governments should scale up youth empowerment initiatives such as vocational training, entrepreneurship support, job creation programmes, and education programmes aiming to tackle socioeconomic factors contributing to substance abuse.
6. Community leaders, religious institutions, parents, civil society organisations and youth groups need to work together to build awareness, combat stigma, and provide support to those impacted by drug use in the community.
7. Government should further scale up rehabilitation and reintegration services to provide more access to counselling centres for youth, treatment centres, psychosocial support programmes and community-based rehabilitation services.
8. There should be a greater focus on the enforcement of existing drug control legislation and a greater collaboration between the communities and youth groups to ensure that drug surveillance, reporting and prevention are also enhanced.
9. Young people should be supported through ongoing training, mentorship and leadership development programs to build their capacity to effectively advocate, engage in policy dialogue, mobilise communities and implement programmes.
10. The activities of monitoring, evaluation and research should be institutionalised to strengthen and evaluate the effectiveness of Nigeria's youth participation programmes and ensure evidence-based policy and programme improvements in substance abuse prevention in Nigeria.

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