

NIGERIA'S NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY 2019–2023

A GAP ANALYSIS AND FORWARD AGENDA



INTRODUCTION

THE POLICY THAT NIGERIA DESERVED BUT NEVER DELIVERED

The National Youth Policy 2019–2023 was, on paper, one of Nigeria’s most detailed youth governance documents. It set out a clear vision and was structured around five strategic thrusts, eleven thematic areas, and twenty-three policy objectives. It also included an implementation framework that assigned responsibilities across multiple ministries, departments, and agencies. The architects of the document knew what the problems were. They named the solutions. They built the architecture.

And then almost none of it happened.

This gap analysis does not rehearse the aspirations of the previous cycle of the NYP. It examines the distance between what was promised and what was delivered and makes the case that the next NYP will fail by exactly the same margin unless the structural reasons for that gap are confronted honestly and corrected by design.

The analysis draws on the NYP 2019–2023 document itself, current national data, and the evidence gathered through NGYouthSDGs' 2026 national multi-modal youth consultation. It is organised around six structural gaps, the fault lines along which the last policy fractured, followed by a forward agenda setting out what must be done differently.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM IN 2026

Before examining what the policy missed, it is important to understand the conditions it left behind. These are not abstract governance failures. They are measurable human costs.

On youth unemployment: The official youth unemployment rate stood at approximately 5% in 2024 under a revised NBS methodology a figure that has been widely contested. Under the previous methodology, youth unemployment in 2020 stood at 53.4% for 15–24 year olds and 37.2% for 25–34 year olds. More than 80 million Nigerian youth are without jobs, according to the State of the Nigerian Youth Report 2025, with approximately 1.7 million graduates leaving tertiary institutions every year into a shrinking job market. Nigeria ranks 172nd out of 183 countries in the 2023 Global Youth Development Index, placing second-to-last for youth employment and opportunity and third-to-last for equality and inclusion.

On brain drain: The number of Nigerian nurses, midwives, and nursing associates registered in the UK rose by 46.6% in the twelve months to March 2023.

There is now one doctor for every 5,000 patients in Nigeria, compared to one in 254 in developed countries. More than 75,000 nurses have left Nigeria since 2017. The 'Japa' phenomenon has expanded far beyond healthcare into education, technology, law, and engineering.

On informal employment: Informal employment accounts for 93% of total employment in Nigeria, with self-employment representing 85.6% of all jobs reflecting the near-total failure to build the formal, protected, productive employment base that the NYP promised.

These are the headline numbers. Behind them are the lived realities that young Nigerians described across a youth consultation we hosted, and that the NYP 2019–2023 failed to prevent.



SIX STRUCTURAL GAPS IN THE NYP 2019–2023

Gap 1: Aspirational Benchmarks Without Financing

The NYP 2019–2023 set ambitious targets. It committed to creating an average of 3.7 million jobs per year. It promised 500,000 mass literacy centres, entrepreneurship capacity development for 10,000 young entrepreneurs per state, and agricultural extension services reaching 1 in every 750 farmers by 2022. These were not cautious targets. They were bold ones.

What the policy did not provide was a financing architecture to make them real. The document itself acknowledged this with unusual candour, noting in its rationale section the problem of "poor funding of policy implementation" and posing the question: "How can the issue of funding be addressed, is it by creating a Youth Development Fund or a separate budget line?"

That question was never answered. The National Youth Development Fund referenced in the policy was proposed but never established with meaningful capitalisation or operational independence. Budget lines for youth were never ring-fenced. The result was a policy whose ambitions were entirely dependent on the annual appropriations process, and therefore entirely vulnerable to fiscal pressure, political priority changes, and the chronic under-allocation that Nigerian social sector programmes routinely experience.

What must change: The next NYP must contain an explicit, non-negotiable financing framework as a core structural component and not an aspiration. This means dedicated youth financing windows within existing development finance institutions, performance-based budget allocations tied to measurable outcomes, and an independent accountability mechanism to report on expenditure annually to the National Assembly.

Gap 2: Implementation Framework Without Accountability

The NYP 2019–2023 had one of the most detailed implementation frameworks of any Nigerian policy document. It named responsible ministries, departments, and agencies for every objective. It established roles for the National Youth Development Council, the National Youth Council of Nigeria, the Nigeria Youth Parliament, and a proposed Youth Development Technical Working Group at federal, state, and local government levels.

On paper, this was impressive. In practice, it created a system in which everyone was responsible for everything and therefore no one was accountable for anything. The implementation framework listed over forty institutions and agencies with roles in youth policy delivery but did not establish a hierarchy of accountability, a consequence framework for non-performance, or a mandatory reporting mechanism. When the policy failed to deliver, no institution and no individual bore the cost of that failure.

The monitoring and evaluation section of the NYP 2019–2023 was particularly revealing. It identified the need for a monitoring framework and called for evaluation at the midpoint and end of the policy cycle. There is no public evidence that either evaluation was ever conducted. A policy cycle ended without a formal assessment of its own performance.

What must change: The next NYP must have a named lead accountable actor for each priority intervention and not a list of contributing institutions. It must establish a mandatory biannual performance reporting requirement, publicly accessible, with findings presented to both the FMYD and the relevant National Assembly committees. Non-performance by named institutions must carry defined consequences.



Gap 3: Governance Fragmentation Without Coordination

The NYP 2019–2023 recognised the multi-sectoral nature of youth development and attempted to address it through its partnership and collaboration strategic thrust. It proposed a multi-sectoral Youth Development Technical Working Group and called for coordination across twelve ministries and dozens of agencies.

The proposed coordination mechanism was never operationalised at a level capable of driving cross-ministerial delivery. Youth development continued to be treated primarily as the mandate of the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, an institution with significant advocacy responsibilities but limited authority over the policy levers that most directly shape youth outcomes: tax policy, agricultural financing, education budgets, industrial policy, healthcare infrastructure, and security architecture.

These remained in separate ministerial silos, each with its own priorities and none with a mandate to treat youth economic absorption as a cross-cutting KPI.

The consequence was predictable: the policy's most important commitments on employment creation, agricultural transformation, and entrepreneurship required coordinated action across ministries that were never formally aligned around youth outcomes. Coordination remained rhetorical. Delivery remained fragmented.

What must change: A high-level inter-ministerial coordination mechanism anchored at the presidential level and not the ministerial level must be established as a governance prerequisite for the next NYP, not a later aspiration. Nigeria's median age of 18 makes youth productivity an existential national economic question. It cannot be managed as a departmental function within a single ministry.





Gap 4: Age Bracket Revision Without Accompanying Policy Reform

One of the most consequential and least discussed changes in the NYP 2019–2023 was the revision of the youth age bracket from 18–35 years to 15–29 years. The rationale was legitimate: better alignment with international standards and more accurate targeting of youth interventions.

The problem was that narrowing the official youth definition to 29 years created a policy blind spot precisely where Nigeria's unemployment and underemployment crisis is most acute. The 30–35 age cohort, young adults with qualifications and experience, facing a labour market that cannot absorb them, fell outside the official youth policy framework. They were too young to benefit from adult employment programmes and too old to qualify for youth interventions. This demographic represents a significant share of Nigeria's 'Japa' cohort, skilled professionals who have spent years in a system that produced no viable domestic pathway and embraced migration as the rational response.

The age bracket issue is not merely definitional. It reflects a deeper design failure: the policy was designed around a demographic category rather than around the actual contours of Nigeria's youth economic crisis.

What must change: The next NYP must clarify its target population based on economic evidence, not international convention alone. The 15–35 age cohort reflects Nigeria's actual youth transition reality, and policy interventions should be designed accordingly. Where international definitions constrain programming, supplementary frameworks for the 30–35 cohort must be embedded within related economic and employment policy instruments.

Gap 5: Digital and AI Blindspot

The NYP 2019–2023 had a dedicated thematic area on Youth and ICT. Its benchmarks included building the capacity of at least one million youth in basic, mid-level, and advanced digital skills, and channelling funding to ICT entrepreneurs through accelerators and incubators. These were appropriate for 2019.

By 2023, they were inadequate. The rise of artificial intelligence as a transformative force in every sector of the economy, generating new employment categories and eliminating existing ones simultaneously, was not anticipated in the policy's design. The regulatory and governance dimensions of the digital economy, platform labour rights, algorithmic accountability, data privacy, online safety, misinformation and disinformation were entirely absent. The policy treated ICT as a skills domain rather than as a governance challenge with economic, social, and political dimensions.

Meanwhile, the digital economy became one of Nigeria's most significant actual youth employment sectors during the policy period, through fintech, creative tech, digital marketing, and remote work. Young Nigerians built economic lives in a sector the policy had reduced to a training objective.

What must change: The next NYP must treat the digital economy as a governance domain, not merely a skills category. This means explicit AI governance frameworks, platform economy regulations that protect youth workers, digital infrastructure investment targets treated as public goods rather than market outcomes, and online safety and misinformation governance with enforcement mechanisms.

Gap 6: Inclusion as Aspiration, Not Architecture

The NYP 2019–2023 committed to the inclusion of marginalised youth, persons with disabilities, young women, internally displaced persons, and youth in conflict-affected communities across multiple thematic areas. It called for the enforcement of the 10% employment inclusion requirement for persons with disabilities, the promotion of gender-sensitive laws, and the expansion of special schools and inclusive education.

By every available measure, these commitments were not delivered. The 10% employment inclusion requirement for persons with disabilities remained unenforced at the end of the policy cycle. Gender disaggregated data on youth programme outcomes was not systematically collected or published. Young women continued to face structural barriers to political participation, economic access, and educational completion that the policy identified but did not structurally address. The inclusion framework was built on advocacy and aspiration rather than on enforcement, data, and consequence.

Critically, the policy had no mechanism to measure its own inclusivity performance. Without disaggregated outcome data, it was impossible, and remains impossible to assess whether any youth programme delivered equitably across gender, disability status, geographic zone, or income level. Inclusion cannot be evaluated without being measured.

What must change: The next NYP must require mandatory disaggregated outcome reporting, by gender, disability status, geographic zone, and income level for every programme. Inclusion compliance must be tied to programme funding: institutions that cannot demonstrate equitable reach lose entitlement to continued resourcing. The 10% disability employment requirement must be enforced with a named institutional actor, a reporting mechanism, and a consequence for non-compliance.

THE FORWARD AGENDA: WHAT MUST BE DIFFERENT

Taken together, the six gaps above describe not a policy that failed but a policy design that made failure structurally inevitable. The aspirations were sound. The architecture was not. The next NYP will produce the same outcome unless it is designed differently from the ground up.

The following forward agenda does not repeat the thematic priorities documented in the consultation report. It addresses the systemic design requirements without which no thematic priority can be delivered.

1. Design for implementation, not aspiration. Every commitment in the next NYP must have three attached components at the point of drafting: a named accountable institution, a ring-fenced or identified funding source, and a measurable outcome indicator with a baseline. Commitments that cannot meet these three criteria should not be included in the policy.

2. Establish the financing architecture before launching the policy. The National Youth Development Fund referenced in the 2019–2023 NYP was proposed and not delivered. The next NYP must begin with a completed financing architecture, dedicated youth financing windows within the Bank of Industry and the Development Bank of Nigeria, performance-based budgeting protocols, and an independent audit mechanism operational before the policy launches, not promised within it.

3. Anchor coordination at the presidency. A policy whose implementation requires coordinated action across twelve ministries cannot be coordinated by a single ministry. The next NYP must be backed by a presidential-level inter-ministerial mechanism with a defined mandate, a meeting schedule, and reporting obligations to the National Assembly.

4. Build accountability into the design, not the aspiration. The monitoring and evaluation section of the next NYP must be an operational framework, with named evaluators, public reporting timelines, mandatory mid-cycle review, and defined consequences for institutional non-performance and not a list of intentions.

5. Treat youth data infrastructure as a policy prerequisite. It is not possible to govern what cannot be measured. The National Bureau of Statistics must be engaged as a formal implementation partner from the policy's inception, with a mandate to produce annual, disaggregated youth outcome data across employment, education, health, and civic participation dimensions. This data must be publicly accessible, not administratively held.

6. Reflect the world young Nigerians are actually living in. The next NYP must be designed for 2026 and beyond. It must address AI governance, platform economy regulation, the structural drivers of migration, the informal economy as Nigeria's actual primary employer, and the mental health crisis that is the downstream consequence of cumulative policy failure. A policy that does not speak to young Nigerians' actual lives will not earn their trust or their ownership.

Get in Touch with Us

For any questions or concerns about this document, kindly reach out to us. Also, feel free to stay connected to us for more exciting opportunities and updates on our work via any of the following means:

- ✉ Email: programs@nigerianyouthsdgs.org
- 📘 Facebook: [Nigeria Youth SDGs Network](#)
- 🌐 LinkedIn: [Nigeria Youth SDGs Network](#)
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