# Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Youth-Led Solutions in Nigeria: A Social Innovation and Governance Perspective from Lagos and Osun States

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**Abstract**

*Youth empowerment remains a critical policy concern in Nigeria, particularly amid persistent unemployment, limited civic participation, and fragmented governance structures. Weak coordination and insufficient youth involvement in decision-making processes often constrain outcomes, despite numerous initiatives at both the national and subnational levels. This paper examined how multi-stakeholder collaboration influences the emergence of youth-led solutions as a form of social innovation in Nigeria. Drawing on evidence from Lagos and Osun States, the study analysed the institutional arrangements, coordination mechanisms, and contextual conditions that enable or constrain youth-driven initiatives. Anchored in Collaborative Governance Theory and Co-Production Theory, the paper conceptualises youth as active co-creators of public value within interactive governance systems involving state and non-state actors. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire covering youth-focused programmes implemented between 2015 and 2024, assessing stakeholder dynamics, participation levels, and innovation outcomes. The quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Semi-structured interviews with institutional actors follow this phase to contextualise and*

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*explain the quantitative findings. Qualitative data was analysed thematically. Findings revealed that while collaborative arrangements enhance access to resources and opportunities, their effectiveness in fostering youth-led solutions depends on institutional inclusiveness, coordination quality, and responsiveness. The study showed that youth-led initiatives constitute emerging forms of social innovation that contribute to governance transformation. It concluded that embedding youth agency within multi-stakeholder frameworks strengthens co-production, enhances institutional legitimacy, and advances sustainable development in subnational Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Co-production; Multi-stakeholder collaboration; Social innovation; Subnational governance; Youth empowerment*

## 1. Introduction

Across the Global South, youth populations represent both a demographic dividend and a governance challenge. With approximately 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 constituting roughly 16% of the global population—over 90% residing in developing regions (United Nations, 2023)—their productive engagement is central to sustainable development and democratic deepening. In sub-Saharan Africa, the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2022) reports over 400 million individuals aged 15 to 35 constitute the world's youngest demographic profile. Nigeria exemplifies this dynamic sharply: with young people comprising over 60% of the national population (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023), the country faces an urgent imperative to translate demographic potential into inclusive governance outcomes—one that has, thus far, been substantially unfulfilled.

Youth unemployment, underemployment, and socio-economic exclusion remain pressing development challenges. Structural barriers including limited access to quality education, inadequate employment opportunities, and marginalisation from governance processes, undermine individual life chances and broader development trajectories. Evidence links youth disempowerment to elevated crime rates, social unrest, and diminished social cohesion (Olonade et al., 2022). Programmatic interventions such as N-Power, NAPEP, the Lagos State Employment Trust Fund (LSETF), and the Osun Youth Empowerment Scheme (OYES), have yielded inconsistent outcomes due to fragmented coordination, inadequate funding, limited youth participation in design, and weak post-training linkages (Ndukwe et al., 2023; Nmadu, 2023). The challenge is not merely resource insufficiency; it is fundamentally a governance problem—a failure to create conditions under which youth can act as producers of solutions rather than passive recipients (Bianchi et al., 2021).

Existing scholarship has contributed across three related streams. Research on youth empowerment highlights limitations of state-led programmes providing short-term relief without addressing systemic governance deficits (Ndukwe et al., 2023; Nmadu, 2023). Studies on multi-stakeholder collaboration affirm its value in facilitating resource pooling and coordinated action (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bianchi et al., 2021), while documenting operationalisation challenges in weak institutional contexts (Tor & Gambo, 2024). The social innovation literature emphasises youth roles in generating context-specific solutions, even as scaling remains constrained by limited funding and insufficient policy integration (Enaifoghe et al., 2024; Udeh et al., 2023). However, the intersection remains largely unexamined: how collaboration quality shapes institutional conditions for youth-led social innovation at subnational level in Nigeria has not been empirically investigated.

This paper addresses that gap by examining multi-stakeholder collaboration and youth-led solutions with a comparative focus on Lagos and Osun States. Lagos, as Nigeria's commercial and technological hub, is characterised by dense institutional frameworks and a vibrant private sector and civil society ecosystem. Osun State offers insights into subnational governance within a predominantly agrarian economy with stronger community networks. The study integrates Collaborative Governance Theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008) and Co-Production Theory (Das, 2021) within a social innovation framework and makes three distinct contributions. First, it introduces the concept of the co-production gap—a structural disjunction between the formal existence of multi-stakeholder collaborative arrangements and the substantive inclusion of youth as co-producers within them. This concept captures a recurring feature of the Nigerian governance landscape: collaborative platforms may nominally exist, but youth participation within them remains tokenistic rather than transformative, concentrated in consultative roles rather than meaningful co-design and shared accountability. Second, the study provides the first comparative empirical evidence of this gap across two contrasting subnational governance environments in Nigeria, thereby moving beyond the predominantly national-level focus of existing research and demonstrating that institutional context—not merely programme design—is a primary determinant of youth empowerment outcomes. Third, by integrating the social innovation, collaborative governance, and co-production literatures within a single analytical framework applied to subnational Nigerian governance, the study advances conceptual ground that prior research has left largely uncharted, enriching theoretical debates on inclusive governance and youth agency in the African development context.

## 2. Literature And Conceptual Review

### 2.1 Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Collaborative Governance

Multi-stakeholder collaboration refers to structured, purposeful engagement among diverse actors—government agencies, private sector organisations, civil society, and community groups—working collectively toward shared developmental goals (Fares et al., 2021; Ewata et al., 2024). Collaborative Governance Theory (CGT) argues that complex public challenges require consensus-driven, multi-actor processes that pool resources, align objectives, and co-produce contextually relevant solutions (Bianchi et al., 2021; Saleh et al., 2021). Enabling conditions include facilitative leadership, trust, clear institutional design, and incremental gains. Where these are absent, collaborative arrangements risk becoming tokenistic, reinforcing power asymmetries (Rahma et al., 2021; Zia ud Din et al., 2023). Johnson et al. (2023) found that collaborative arrangements in Nigeria frequently suffered from inadequate coordination frameworks and absent joint accountability mechanisms, resulting in fragmented implementation. Oruwari et al. (2024) similarly documented that stakeholder participation confined to earlier programme stages substantially weakened institutional legitimacy and community trust. While CGT offers a robust normative framework, its application in the Nigerian context is complicated by structural realities—including elite capture, inter-agency rivalry, and absent binding accountability mechanisms—that the theory's design principles do not adequately address; this study contends that CGT retains strong explanatory value for diagnosing why collaborative arrangements underperform, but must be extended by co-production theory to specify the institutional conditions under which youth can become genuine co-producers of governance outcomes rather than peripheral participants.

### 2.2 Co-Production Theory and Youth as Public Value Co-Creators

Co-production theory conceptualises the production of public goods as a joint activity between institutions and citizens, recognising their active contribution through knowledge, labour, and lived experience to programme design, delivery, and evaluation (Das, 2021). Applied to youth governance, co-production reframes the central question from 'how can we empower youth' to 'how must institutions be redesigned to enable youth to co-produce solutions'. Enaifoghe et al. (2024) demonstrate that where African youth are positioned as governance partners rather than development beneficiaries, policy legitimacy, programme sustainability, and local ownership all improve measurably. Rahma et al. (2021) demonstrated empirically that governance arrangements embedding community participation as

a structural feature significantly improved outcomes and reduced dependency on state welfare. Co-production theory is particularly well-suited to the Nigerian governance context because it shifts analytical attention from programme outputs to the institutional relationships that generate them, a reorientation the Lagos and Osun evidence demands; without deliberate institutional redesign assigning youth substantive roles in decision-making, financing, and evaluation, co-production will remain a theoretical aspiration rather than an operational governance reality in Nigeria's subnational settings.

**2.3 Social Innovation and Youth-Led Solutions**

Social innovation refers to novel solutions that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or institutional configurations (Wukelic, 2025; Vorng, 2025). Youth-led initiatives constitute a particularly significant form of social innovation in developing contexts because they emerge from lived experience of exclusion. When youth design skills-sharing networks, establish community savings platforms, or create accountability tools, they reconfigure the social relationships through which development occurs. Udeh et al. (2023) demonstrate that contextually tailored, youth-initiated strategies consistently outperform externally designed interventions. Chang et al. (2022) show that collaborative arrangements integrating youth co-leadership significantly enhance innovation potential, ownership, and scalability. Heath and Moreau (2024) argue that youth empowerment must be both transformational and sustainable, necessitating the dismantling of structural barriers through rights-based governance approaches. The social innovation framework is analytically valuable here because it foregrounds the relational and institutional dimensions of change that conventional empowerment metrics systematically obscure; the author argues that in Nigeria's subnational context, youth-led social innovation must be understood as an emergent property of collaboration quality itself; precisely the conceptual linkage this study seeks to establish empirically.

**2.4 The Lagos-Osun Comparative Context**

Lagos and Osun States represent analytically complementary governance environments. Lagos features established public-private partnerships, a vibrant civil society sector, and innovation-oriented youth programmes anchored in the LSETF. Osun operates within an agrarian economy relying primarily on state-led frameworks, most prominently OYES. This contrast enables examination of whether governance context—specifically institutional density and economic environment—shapes conditions for youth co-production and social innovation. Ukah et al. (2023)

confirm that institutional density and stakeholder engagement quality interact to determine the developmental sustainability of programmes targeting rural and peri-urban youth populations. This comparative design also tests whether the co-production gap is a product of resource constraints specific to less-resourced states or a structural governance failure reproduced across contexts regardless of institutional capacity; the author's position is that the evidence reveals the latter, which means governance reform must target institutional design rather than resource allocation alone.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches (Adhikari, 2024). The philosophical foundation was pragmatism—the view that knowledge claims are best evaluated by their practical consequences and that methodological pluralism is a virtue when addressing complex social phenomena (Dube et al., 2024). The study covered 2015 to 2024 across six purposively selected Local Government Areas (LGAs): Ikeja, Lagos Island, and Badagry in Lagos State; and Osogbo, Ife Central, and Boluwaduro in Osun State, capturing variation across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings.

In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was administered to 500 youth beneficiaries, yielding 424 valid responses (response rate 94.85%). Sample size was determined using an established statistical formula for finite populations, adjusted upward by 20% for attrition. Stratified random sampling was employed, with strata defined by age cohort (18–24, 25–30, 31–35), gender, and programme type. The questionnaire assessed stakeholder dynamics, programme reach, and youth agency indicators across six dimensions: learning access, skill acquisition, employment outcomes, entrepreneurial financing, leadership representation, and democratic participation. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and ordinal logistic regression in SPSS. The qualitative phase involved 37 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected institutional actors—government officials, civil society representatives, private sector practitioners, and youth programme participants. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Dube et al., 2024). Integration occurred at interpretation, with qualitative insights explaining quantitative patterns. Validity and reliability were ensured through expert review, Cronbach's alpha testing (range 0.749–0.983), and triangulation across data sources.

## 4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings: Stakeholder Collaboration and Youth Agency Indicators

Ordinal logistic regression confirmed that stakeholder collaboration significantly predicts youth agency outcomes across all six dimensions ($\chi^2$ = 1573.71–1874.48, $p < .001$; Nagelkerke pseudo-$R^2$ = .968–.993). These effect sizes indicate that governance conditions created by stakeholder initiatives are powerful determinants of the extent to which youth can exercise agency as social innovators. However, disaggregated analysis reveals a consistent pattern: collaboration enhances access to existing opportunities but is substantially less effective at generating conditions for youth co-leadership and solution design.

Access to learning opportunities recorded a moderate mean (M = 2.95, SD = 1.20), with stakeholder initiatives exerting a significant positive effect (B = 0.158, Exp(B) = 1.17, p = .028). Yet skills acquired were perceived as poorly matched to career goals (M = 2.66), suggesting programmes are designed for youth rather than with them—a co-production deficit associated with weak feedback mechanisms within stakeholder engagement structures (Yadua et al., 2024). Employment outcomes were similarly mixed: while respondents broadly agreed that unemployment would be worse without existing programmes (M = 4.26), direct employability gains were modest (M = 2.15), reflecting a protective but not yet transformative role for current collaborative arrangements (Ndukwe et al., 2023).

The most analytically significant findings concern governance participation and leadership. Youth representation in local decision-making structures recorded the lowest mean in the entire dataset (M = 1.83, SD = 0.98), and stakeholder support for youth leadership development was weak (M = 2.83). These results provide direct evidence of institutional exclusion: the formal architecture of collaboration exists, but youth are not positioned as co-producers. Onyewuchi et al. (2024) document this pattern across Nigerian youth governance contexts. The entrepreneurial financing dimension reinforced this finding: while stakeholders provided funding mechanisms (M = 3.56), reduction of financial barriers for young entrepreneurs was not perceived (M = 2.43), consistent with governance design failures identified by Ofosu-Appiah et al. (2025). Civic engagement data revealed that programmes effectively increased voter registration awareness (M = 3.89), but youth inclusion in policymaking remained severely limited (M = 2.35). Akinyetun (2021) identifies this divergence—mobilisation into existing systems versus participation in redesigning

them—as the boundary between current empowerment practice and genuine co-production.

### 4.2 Qualitative Findings: Governance Mechanisms and Social Innovation Conditions

Thematic analysis of the 37 institutional interviews produced three overarching themes. The first—Empowerment as a Sequential Relational Process—captures that youth-led innovation emerges not from single-programme encounters but from sustained relationships between youth and institutional actors involving trust, mentorship continuity, and repeated institutional engagement. This aligns with co-production theory's emphasis on relational infrastructure as a prerequisite for active citizen contribution (Rahma et al., 2021), and points to a governance design implication: short-term, project-cycle-driven collaboration cannot produce the institutional relationships within which social innovation incubates (Vorng, 2025).

The second theme—Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration as a Necessary but Insufficient Condition—emerged from accounts of programme implementation across both states. All stakeholder categories recognised collaboration's value in principle but described persistent coordination failures: overlapping mandates, inconsistent funding cycles, and absent joint accountability mechanisms. This substantiates the quantitative finding of limited multi-sector synergy (M = 2.79) and identifies specific institutional mechanisms of failure. Lagos participants described more structured coordination frameworks anchored in LSETF's public-private partnership model; Osun participants described predominantly state-led arrangements with limited civil society or private sector integration. This contrast supports the argument that institutional density shapes collaborative governance depth at subnational level (Bianchi et al., 2021). The third theme—Sustainability as the Missing Link Between Innovation and Governance Transformation—addressed the gap between effective short-term initiatives and lasting institutional change. Youth-led innovations emerging within programme cycles were rarely institutionalised beyond them because the governance infrastructure was not designed to absorb or scale youth-generated solutions (Wukelic, 2025; Enaifoghe et al., 2024).

### 4.3 Integrated Discussion: The Co-Production Gap in Nigerian Subnational Governance

The integrated analysis reveals the co-production gap: a structural disjunction between the formal existence of multi-stakeholder collaborative arrangements and the substantive inclusion of youth as co-producers. This gap manifests across four dimensions: programme design remains top-down; governance roles remain

institutional; accountability structures remain adult-dominated; and sustainability mechanisms remain programme-dependent, with innovations not institutionally supported beyond the programme cycle. The Lagos-Osun comparison adds important nuance. In Lagos, higher institutional density and more structured LSETF governance produced somewhat higher scores across learning access and employment indicators, suggesting institutional infrastructure matters for collaborative governance quality. However, even in Lagos, governance participation and leadership indicators were as weak as in Osun, confirming that the co-production gap is not simply a resource problem; it is an institutional design problem persisting even in relatively well-resourced subnational environments. Increasing programme resources within existing institutional designs will not close the co-production gap without structural institutional reform (Oruwari et al., 2024; Ukah et al., 2023).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined how multi-stakeholder collaboration shapes the emergence of youth-led solutions as social innovation in Nigerian subnational governance. Findings establish that collaborative governance arrangements in Lagos and Osun States produce meaningful improvements in youth access to resources and civic awareness but fall substantially short of the institutional design required for youth to function as genuine co-producers of public value. The co-production gap represents the central governance challenge that neither increased resources nor improved programme delivery can adequately address without structural institutional reform. The paper's theoretical contribution is to demonstrate that Collaborative Governance Theory and Co-Production Theory are mutually reinforcing analytical frameworks for youth governance in Africa: CGT explains why multi-actor arrangements are necessary, while co-production theory specifies what those arrangements must deliver: substantive roles for youth as solution designers, not merely service recipients. Four recommendations are as follows:

First, youth co-leadership requirements should be formalised within the governance structures of existing multi-stakeholder platforms, including LSETF and OYES, establishing statutory youth representation on programme governance boards with defined roles in programme design, budget allocation, and evaluation as decision-makers; not tokenistic members (Enaifoghe et al., 2024). Second, coordination frameworks should be formalised through memoranda of understanding specifying joint accountability mechanisms, shared monitoring responsibilities, and protocols

for integrating youth-generated knowledge into programme iteration, addressing the structural rather than attitudinal nature of coordination failures (Johnson et al., 2023; Zia ud Din et al., 2023). Third, post-programme transition systems should be standard components of all youth-focused collaborative initiatives, including mentorship continuity beyond programme cycles, structured pathways from skills acquisition to market access, and institutionalised links between programme graduates and financing mechanisms; to move from protective to transformative empowerment (Ndukwe et al., 2023; Ofosu-Appiah et al., 2025). Fourth, youth-led monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be integrated into all collaborative governance programmes, generating knowledge that external evaluators cannot access and constituting an incremental, practical form of co-production that builds governance capacity over time (Vorng, 2025; Chang et al., 2022). Embedding youth co-production within multi-stakeholder governance frameworks is the institutional precondition for transforming Nigeria's demographic potential into durable social innovation and sustainable subnational development.

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