THE NYS SAGA: Get your public money back

Established in 1964 – one year after independence – the National Youth Service was originally meant to serve in part as a nation-building initiative and partly as a security exercise. Nation-building in the sense that it would bring together young Kenyans from across the country who might otherwise not encountered one another in their daily lives. And security in the sense that it also provided paramilitary training – providing a security service reserve in the event of urgent national need.

Until the late 1980s, attending the NYS was mandatory for anybody admitted to a public university in Kenya. The idea was to ensure that young Kenyans of different class, income and ethnic backgrounds interacted, enhancing a respect for their own uniqueness as Kenyans as well as their ability to appreciate and embrace the same diversity in others. This would prepare them for mobilisation in the event of any internal/external threat.

So far, so good.

But the NYS fell into relative obscurity through the 1990s after the university training programme ended – no doubt aided by the fact Kenya’s political and economic elites ere resistant to the notion of their precious offspring being subjected to the same dictates as everybody else. Helped too by the fact that, at the height of the post-Kenyatta I dictatorship, nobody with any choice or option would voluntarily graft themselves into an outfit designed to serve the Moi dictatorship.

Fast forward to the political NARC ‘transition’ of 2002 and its grand plans for revival. Stalled by the fallout of the infamous ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ which came to a head during the first constitutional referendum and then the 2007 General Elections. Revived in the political settlement reached to end the post-election violence and placing Kenya back onto a ‘transition’ trajectory. And voila – the grand plans were dusted off and given a new lease of life. Including the problem of youth un(der)employment.

The rolling out of some of these grand plans extended into the post-2013 General Elections Jubilee administration. This included the Youth Fund, intended as a source of development financing for youth organisations seeking to capitalise on the requirement that a 30 percent share of all government procurement be reserved for youth (together with women and persons with disabilities – women’s organisations eventually got their own fund).

Conscription into the NYS became voluntary, through ‘open’ recruitment processes for its yearly cohorts. The paramilitary training became a route into the Kenya Defence Force while technical training – in agriculture, engineering and hospitality became a benefit of conscription. NYS cohorts became involved in agricultural projects, construction (including in public works in low-income areas upgrading), even disease and traffic control, as well as public security provisioning.

The NYS, Version 2.0, thus became the Jubilee administration’s largest and most-touted solution to the problem of youth un(der)employment. The NYS, Version 2.0, kicked in in earnest in 2014, 50 years after its formation. Justifying – in theory at least – the sudden rise in its public budgeting fortunes. From about Ksh.2.5 billion in 2015 to ten times the amount, Ksh.25 billion, in last year’s budget.

As they say, never let a fairly good public solution to a public problem go to waste.

The first problem: Were these public solutions really addressing the public problems for which they were created?

We have some data on the Youth Fund (now rolled up with the women’s fund into the Uwezo Fund). The number of beneficiaries, total expenditure towards them and so on. Even this year’s Economic Survey tentatively attributes the rise in self-employed households over the last year – from 132,500 to 139,400 – to those who’ve benefitted from the Uwezo Fund.

But what about those for the NYS, Version 2.0? The figures must exist somewhere, for those with the energy and time to cross-reference a number of public data sources and which public reports are actually made publicly available. A cursory search finds absolutely no figures on the numbers of each of the NYS cohorts taken in since 2014. Neither is there an answer to roughly what vocational training routes they’ve followed; how many have ended up in the KDF and how many in other, relevant parts of the public service. Actually, the cursory search, going through the website of the Ministry of Public Service, ends up in an alarming alert about malware in the section of the website intended for the NYS. In short, we have information on the public solution itself – but nothing to assess its efficacy over time in addressing the public problem for which it was ostensibly reengineered.

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But given the revelations over the last couple of weeks, this is probably unsurprising. As it turns out, the NYS, Version 2.0, has served more as a channel for public money to senior politicians for electoral and other private purposes through supposed supplier companies owned by family members and proxies. We all know the story by now. How much still being in dispute – Ksh.9 billion became Ksh.900 million became the Ksh.121 million which the Department of Criminal Investigations (DCI) is focused on. But how it was stolen not being in dispute – through the insertion of fraudulent and inflated payment claims through the Supply Branch at the Ministry of Lands and Housing to the Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS). Claims which were made good on in lightning speed (considering how long most lowly government suppliers have to wait for payment) by companies proven to be incompletely registered (if registered at all) and operating newly owned bank accounts. The swift and inordinately large payments which were either not reported by the commercial banks in question; Or, if they were, were not acted on promptly by the Financial Reporting Centre in the Central Bank of Kenya.

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A typical smash and grab operation. Not even cleverly done. How, for instance, did those behind the company that received Ksh.100 million against a claim for the supply ten (ten!) tyres really think they'd get away with it? Or as Kenyans on Twitter have extrapolated, how was the Ksh.1.1 billion shillings reportedly spent on meat every year to feed 45,000 NYS recruits actually spent? This figure is Ksh.2.7 million per day. With an estimated value of Ksh.40,000 per cow, that comes to 68,000 cows daily. This means the 45,000 recruits eat one and a half cows *each* daily.

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Kenyans are furious. But those who should be the most furious – the young Kenyans for whom the NYS, Version 2.0, was meant to work – need to express that fury. The NYS, Version 2.0, was meant to be a public solution to their public problem. They need to demand that this sort of plunder not be done in their name. They need to demand that it not be done at all. They need to demand their public money back.