

IDEOLOGY IN CONTRADICTION: REASSESSING THE NYSC'S EFFICACY IN FOSTERING NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND UNITY IN NIGERIA (1973–2017)

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Abstract

The events that precipitated the devastating Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970) and its aftermath fostered deep-seated feelings of disunity, eroded national consciousness, marginalization, and despair among Nigerians, particularly the Igbo people. In an effort to reintegrate the country's diverse ethnic groups and foster national cohesion, General Yakubu Gowon introduced the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973, alongside other policy measures. However, the resurgence of separatist agitations in recent years—such as calls for the Arewa Republic, Oduduwa Republic, Republic of Biafra, and Niger Delta Republic by the Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern regions, respectively—has cast doubt on the scheme's efficacy in promoting national consciousness, integration, and unity. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of the NYSC scheme in Nigeria amid persistent ethnic and religious intolerance, marginalization, mutual distrust, and struggles for self-determination. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, the study relies on secondary data sources. Findings reveal that despite the mandatory one-year national service undertaken annually by thousands of Nigerian university and polytechnic graduates, the envisioned "unity in diversity" and peaceful coexistence as one nation remains elusive. The study recommends, among other measures, the sincere implementation of policies that promote inclusiveness, equity, and fairness across Nigeria.

Keywords: Effectiveness, National Youth Service Corps, National Consciousness, Integration, Unity, Nigeria.

Introduction

The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme was established through the promulgation of Decree No. 24 on May 22, 1973, by General Yakubu Gowon, three years after the conclusion of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1970. Although its inception was initially met with resistance—particularly from academic delegates who raised concerns about potential confusion, uncertainty regarding its success, and fears of economic unproductivity, as well as from Nigerian university students who perceived it as an imposition without prior consultation (*Daily Times*, February 16, 1973)—the scheme was ultimately implemented and widely embraced with considerable optimism.

Among its primary objectives, the NYSC was designed to foster reconciliation and mitigate the lingering trauma of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970). Specifically, it aimed to promote national consciousness, integration, and unity among Nigeria's diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. To date, the scheme has been credited with some success in addressing unemployment, particularly through the employment of dedicated corps members in their places of primary assignment (Ademowo, 2010). Additionally, studies indicate that the NYSC has contributed positively to instilling a work ethic (77.79%) and equipping corps members with self-employment skills (64.58%) in states such as Oyo and Lagos (Molokwu & Uchime, 2020). Furthermore, the program has been lauded for exposing young Nigerian graduates to different cultural contexts by deploying them to states and local governments outside their regions of origin or education.

However, within less than two decades of its operation, the NYSC's effectiveness in fulfilling its core mandate of fostering national consciousness, integration, and unity has been called into question by scholars, lawmakers, analysts, and opinion leaders, some of whom have advocated for its discontinuation. Skepticism regarding the scheme's viability, relevance, and sustainability in achieving political cohesion or "unity in diversity" has been exacerbated by the rise of separatist movements, including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) among the Ijaw, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) among the Yoruba, the Arewa People's Congress (APC) among the Hausa-Fulani, and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) among the Igbo. These groups have actively sought regional autonomy, further undermining national unity.

Compounding these challenges are persistent grievances of marginalization, particularly among the Igbo, and escalating religious intolerance, which has fuelled violent crises—some of which have claimed the lives of corps members, the very individuals symbolizing and advancing national unity. Notable incidents underscoring these dangers include the killing of ten corps members during the April 2011 general elections in Bauchi State; the disappearance of Anthonia Amarachi in Ilawe, Ekiti South-West, on December 19, 2008; the deaths of Akande Oluwaleke, Akinyobi Ibukun, and Odusote Adetola in Jos, Plateau State, on November 27, 2008; and the rape and subsequent murder of Grace Adei in Maiduguri, Borno State, on September 26 of the same year (Uchime, Molokwu, & Ewa, 2024).

Beyond the issues previously discussed, a critical examination of the historical antecedents that culminated in the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970)—whose aftermath precipitated the

establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme—may yield deeper insights into the remote causes of scepticism regarding the program’s efficacy in fulfilling its stated objectives. Prior to the formal declaration of the Nigeria-Biafra War on May 30, 1967, several unresolved national issues, either deliberately or negligently overlooked, had contributed to the outbreak of hostilities. These issues persisted even after the war ended in January 1970. Among them was the socio-cultural, ethnic, religious, and ethnographical discord engendered by the British colonial administration’s forcible amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. As Molokwu and Uchime (2020) noted, Lord Frederick Lugard’s imposition of a unified Nigeria entangled historically rival and culturally divergent ethnic groups that had coexisted—often contentiously—since the pre-colonial era.

Further compounding these tensions were crises such as the contentious 1962/63 census, political instability, widespread insecurity, electoral malpractices, inequitable state creation, systemic corruption, and other unresolved grievances. Even more troubling is the fact that while these issues remain inadequately addressed, newer challenges have emerged in the post-NYSC era, exacerbating Nigeria’s socio-political fissures. Prominent among these are the failed implementation of the post-war Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation (3Rs) policy, toxic political rivalries, and an imbalanced revenue allocation formula that disproportionately favours the federal government (52.68%), state governments (26.72%), and local governments (20.60%). Additionally, Nigeria’s flawed federal structure—predicated on an uneven distribution of states and local governments—has entrenched a stark North-South dichotomy, with the North comprising 20 states (including the Federal Capital Territory) and 419 Local Government Areas. In comparison, the South has only 17 states and 355 local governments. This structural imbalance has fuelled perceptions of marginalization and intensified demands for resource control.

Arguably, the establishment of the NYSC scheme in 1973 by General Yakubu Gowon’s administration was conceived as a mechanism to mitigate Nigeria’s pre- and post-war divisions by fostering national consciousness, integration, and unity among its diverse ethnic groups (Abbas & Wakili, 2018, p. 10). However, given the persistent ethnic tensions in contemporary Nigeria, it is imperative to reassess the extent to which the NYSC has achieved its core mandate. This re-examination is particularly urgent in light of the 2017 ultimatum issued by certain factions in Northern Nigeria, demanding the departure of Igbo residents from the region before October 1 of that year (Molokwu, Uchime, et al., 2023; Eyeh, Molokwu, Uchime, et al., 2023). Such overt declarations underscore the depth of ethnic animosity and disunity that continue to undermine the nation’s cohesion, casting doubt on the NYSC’s capacity to bridge these enduring divides.

Conceptual Insight

Certain key concepts in this study—namely, *national consciousness*, *integration*, and *unity*—are often employed in varying contexts and can assume different meanings depending on usage. A clear understanding of these terms is essential to appreciate their relevance and application within the framework of this research. Although these concepts may appear synonymous and are sometimes erroneously used interchangeably, this section provides an in-depth clarification of each term, situating them within the specific context of the study.

National consciousness, as articulated by Hugh Seton-Watson, refers to a collective mental state in which members of a community—despite their diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds—believe themselves to constitute a single nation. Seton-Watson further explains that the development of national consciousness is a historical process, one that may unfold gradually and organically or occur rapidly through artificial means (Seton-Watson, 1981, p. 84). From this perspective, national consciousness can be understood as a shared drive or spirit for nation-building, born out of the common historical experiences of a country's diverse ethnic nationalities, and aimed at promoting co-existence and national development.

Beyond this, national consciousness encompasses a patriotic commitment, loyalty, and emotional attachment that inspire citizens to contribute to the growth and progress of their nation. It involves an awareness that elevates national interest above personal, ethnic, religious, or regional considerations. Crucially, national consciousness transcends mere recognition or display of national symbols. Rather, it embodies the patriotic ethos that promotes mutual accommodation and peaceful coexistence among the different ethnic groups within a pluralistic society.

In the context of Nigeria, national consciousness entails an inclusive understanding and acceptance of the country's cultural, social, religious, and economic diversity. These differences should not be perceived as sources of conflict or instruments of ethnic domination but rather as strengths that can be harnessed to build a more harmonious, united, and prosperous nation. This form of consciousness necessitates the collective pursuit of values such as tolerance, hospitality, interethnic marriage, human rights, and good governance. It simultaneously entails the rejection of divisive tendencies such as tribalism, intolerance, selfishness, corruption, religious extremism, and ignorance—all of which erode national consciousness. The absence or insufficiency of national consciousness is often reflected in the social fabric of a nation. The introduction of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) by the government of General Yakubu Gowon in 1973, following the Nigeria-Biafra war, underscores the perceived lack of national consciousness at the time and the urgent need to foster it among Nigerian youths.

National integration, on the other hand, is conceptualized by Obiorah and Okoye (2020) as the collective process of forging a cohesive federation out of Nigeria's loosely structured ethnic societies. It involves deliberate efforts to promote tolerance, cooperation, and harmony among the various political and ethnic groups, underpinned by a mutual and voluntary commitment to manage differences without recourse to violence, and always in the interest of national unity.

Within this framework, national integration can be further understood as a constitutionally supported political enterprise aimed at achieving unity in diversity. It recognizes Nigeria's multiethnic composition—characterized by deep-seated historical and cultural distinctions—yet seeks to foster a functional unity that does not require absolute conformity. Coleman and Rosberg, as cited in Onwere (1992, p. 111), argue that this process should result in a "progressive reduction of cultural and regional tensions and discontinuities." Onwere operationally defines national integration as the "willingness to accept other ethnic groups as fellow nationals and the creation of a sense of national identity" (1992, p. 111).

The relationship between national consciousness and national integration is both complementary and interdependent. Aremu (2018, p. 281) posits that national integration is the practical manifestation of a shared national consciousness. When a common identity is internalized across the minds of citizens—particularly among political elites and the general populace—it can inspire the sustained efforts necessary to achieve integration. Further elaborating on this connection, S. Verba et al., as cited in Onwere (1992, p. 111), differentiate between vertical and horizontal forms of identification. Vertical identification refers to an individual's attachment to overarching national institutions and symbols, while horizontal identification pertains to the sense of solidarity and shared identity among members of the same political community.

While the preceding conceptualizations help elucidate national integration as a collective effort toward unification and the deliberate reduction of ethnic and regional tensions, Landecker (1951, p. 338) offers a more structured approach by outlining four paradigms for measuring national integration. He posits that national integration can be accessed through the extent of cultural integration, which refers to the pervasiveness of social norms and values across society. Additionally, he highlights normative, cultural, and functional integration, emphasizing the degree to which individual conduct aligns with cultural standards, the interconnectedness of group members through shared meanings, and the linkage of societal groups through the exchange of services.

Although closely related to national integration and national consciousness, national unity maintains a distinct conceptual identity. As defined by Eme-Uche (2014), national unity refers to a shared sense of purpose that promotes cohesion among people of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds. It involves achieving comprehensive solidarity among heterogeneous groups united by a shared objective. In this context, national unity shares certain attributes with both national consciousness and national integration, particularly as they pertain to mental disposition—namely, the willingness to recognize a common identity and to accept and tolerate other ethnic nationalities regardless of differences in culture, religion, or language.

Eme-Uche and Okonkwo (2020, p. 677) further describe national unity as “the process of integrating diverse segments of a society towards making it nonviolent based upon a collective order that the members regard as equitably harmonious.” The phrase “process of unifying” thus implies deliberate efforts to forge cohesion in the context of diversity, which constitutes the core focus of national integration. Through this process, individuals within the national entity cultivate attitudes of tolerance, commitment, and mutual respect, transcending ethnic, cultural, religious, geographic, and linguistic boundaries.

A key distinguishing feature of national unity is that it represents an advanced stage in the evolution of a multiethnic society, wherein national consciousness has become so entrenched that the emphasis shifts from the active pursuit of integration to the maintenance and reinforcement of previously achieved integration outcomes. In this sense, national unity stands as both the manifestation and affirmation of national consciousness and integration.

Nigeria's experience, particularly the civil war of 1967–1970, exemplifies the collapse of existing integrative bonds under the strain of historical turbulence. In the aftermath, the imperative to reconstitute national cohesion led to the creation of institutional mechanisms aimed at nation-building. One such initiative was the establishment of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973. Designed as an instrument for promoting national consciousness, integration, and unity, the NYSC emerged with clearly articulated visions and objectives aimed at healing post-war divisions and fostering a sense of collective national identity among Nigeria's diverse populace.

Visions and Objectives of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

In the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, the country was plagued by deep-seated disunity, mutual distrust, fear of domination, ethnic suspicion, and regional hostilities. In response to these divisions, the military administration led by General Yakubu Gowon initiated the establishment of a youth-cantered, detribalized, and reoriented national programme aimed at fostering national consciousness, unity, and integration among Nigeria's ethnically diverse and often antagonistic populations. The vision behind this initiative was motivated not only by the need to restore national unity but also to address broader issues such as economic instability, corruption, political disintegration, religious conflict, and ethnic chauvinism—factors that collectively contributed to the outbreak of the civil war (Edewor, Aluko, & Folarin, 2014, p. 74). In his official address on June 4, 1973, during the inauguration of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), General Gowon articulated the scheme's vision as the development of a structured, result-oriented organization capable of promoting national unity, youth empowerment, and equitable development. The scheme was envisioned as a platform for capacity-building focused on nation-building, national development, and the grooming of future leaders imbued with the values of nationalism, patriotism, loyalty, and accountability (Molokwu, Uchime, & Chukwudi, 2021).

To provide a legal framework for the programme, the NYSC Act was enacted in 1973 and later amended in 1983, 1993, 1999, and 2004. These legislative instruments codified the core aims and objectives of the NYSC, which include the following:

1. To inculcate discipline in Nigerian youths by instilling a tradition of industry and promoting patriotic and loyal service to the nation under all circumstances.
2. To elevate the moral standards of Nigerian youths by providing them opportunities to aspire toward higher ideals of national achievement, and social and cultural advancement.
3. To foster attitudes of mutual respect and national interest in young Nigerians through shared experiences and targeted training.
4. To promote self-reliance among youths by encouraging the development of entrepreneurial skills for self-employment.
5. To contribute to the accelerated growth and development of the national economy.
6. To forge bonds of unity among Nigerian youths and promote national integration.

7. To eliminate ethnic prejudices and ignorance by fostering direct interactions and emphasizing the shared identities among Nigerians of various backgrounds.
8. To nurture a sense of corporate existence and shared national destiny among all citizens (National Youth Service Corps Act, 2004).

While these objectives may appear distinct or overlapping in certain respects, they are all underpinned by the overarching aim of mending the fractured socio-political, ethnic, religious, and cultural fabric of pre-war Nigeria. More crucially, the NYSC was conceived as a mechanism for strengthening post-war national cohesion and creating a more harmonious society. The scheme was designed to subject Nigerian graduates to psychological, emotional, and physical reorientation—encouraging them to render selfless service in unfamiliar environments, often outside their regions of origin. This immersive experience was intended to nurture a renewed sense of national consciousness and civic responsibility.

By engaging with different cultures, traditions, and social settings, participants were expected to acquire practical skills that could lead to self-employment or enhance their employability, particularly in their host communities. It was anticipated that such exposure would not only diminish ethnic stereotypes and eliminate ignorance but also foster enduring inter-ethnic ties, encourage a shared sense of national identity, and contribute meaningfully to national integration. Furthermore, the productive engagement of young graduates was expected to enhance economic development through the effective utilization of human capital and youth empowerment.

However, several decades after its establishment, the effectiveness of the NYSC in achieving these objectives has come under scrutiny. In recent times, the country has witnessed a resurgence of ethnic tensions, religious crises, separatist agitations, political rivalry, and allegations of marginalization. These challenges persist despite the annual mobilization of approximately 25,000 to 300,000 graduates for national service (Arubayi, 2016, p. 60). This raises critical questions about the evolving relevance and impact of the NYSC in the context of Nigeria's contemporary socio-political realities.

NYSC Scheme as a Tool for National Consciousness, Integration, and Unity

The primary objective of establishing the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973 was to contribute to the healing of the wounds inflicted by the Nigerian Civil War. Implicit in this mandate was the need to address the root causes and consequences of the war through the patriotic service of Nigerian graduates. This paper, therefore, assesses the extent to which the NYSC has achieved its original goals, particularly in the context of persistent divisive challenges such as the proliferation of separatist movements, religious crises, ethnic violence, unhealthy political rivalries, and the recurring themes of ethnic domination and marginalization, even decades after the civil war.

To appreciate the rationale behind the introduction of the NYSC scheme, it is necessary to reflect on the major factors that culminated in the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967, as well as the post-war circumstances leading up to 1973. Nigeria attained political independence in 1960 with deep-seated, unresolved issues inherited from the British colonial administration. One of the foremost colonial legacies was the forceful amalgamation of the

Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 and the strategic creation of regions to serve British economic interests. This colonial reconfiguration laid the groundwork for enduring interethnic tensions.

Onwere (1992, p. 60) highlights the destabilizing impact of regional configuration, noting that "the splitting of the Southern Protectorate into Eastern and Western Regions, while the Northern Protectorate—which was both demographically and geographically larger—was left intact, erupted challenges for the future stability of the country." Consequently, population estimates and revenue allocations were skewed: 54% was allocated to the North, 23% to the East, 20% to the West, and 8% to the Midwest (the latter having been carved out of the Western Region in 1963) (Onwere, 1992, p. 68). These unequal regional arrangements, demographic fabrications, and inequitable fiscal allocations significantly undermined national unity.

Moreover, the British Indirect Rule system exacerbated interethnic, religious, and cultural tensions among Nigeria's already fragmented ethnic groups. As Ekpo (2016, p. 17) observed, rather than facilitate nation-building, the system pitted Native Authorities and regions against one another, encouraging ethnic nationalism and fostering a regional rather than national identity among the populace. Though the indirect rule was officially abolished at independence in 1960, the sentiments it engendered continued to frustrate efforts aimed at fostering national integration. The differential approach to education and political representation by the various regions further weakened the development of a collective national consciousness. The transition from a regional and unitary system to a state structure—and the politically charged and uneven creation of twelve states in 1967 amidst mounting political instability, ethnic crises, and military coups—deepened the nation's fragility and eroded what little national cohesion existed.

The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970) was marked by widespread human rights violations and genocidal violence, especially against the Igbo and other Easterners. The war left a devastating legacy of human, material, and industrial losses in the Eastern Region. It effectively dismantled the fragile sense of national unity and consciousness that existed prior to the conflict. However, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the administration of General Yakubu Gowon introduced a series of conciliatory policies aimed at national recovery—namely, the policy of Rehabilitation, Reconciliation, and Reconstruction (3Rs).

Despite the noble intentions of the 3Rs, their implementation was widely regarded as inadequate and, in many cases, punitive, particularly towards the Easterners. This perceived failure further entrenched divisions across ethnic and regional lines. For instance, through the Public Officers (Special Provisions) Decree No. 46 of 1970, many Easterners who had abandoned their jobs or fought on the Biafran side were denied rehabilitation. As Nwasumba, Molokwu, Uchime et al. (2020) note, these individuals—including dismissed public servants, wounded soldiers, and war returnees—were systematically excluded from reintegration efforts.

Obi-Ani (2009, p. 110) recounts that General Gowon visited reprisals on Biafran officers, ensuring their dismissal and barring them, by decree, from employment in any federal or state-affiliated corporation. This punitive posture lingered well into the post-war decades, as

demonstrated by President Olusegun Obasanjo's gesture in 2000—thirty years after the war—when he retroactively converted the dismissals of former Biafran officers into compulsory retirements and restored their ranks.

In this context, the introduction of the NYSC scheme in 1973 can be understood as a state-driven effort to rekindle national unity and consciousness through youth engagement and service. The scheme was designed to foster cross-cultural understanding and integration by deploying young graduates to regions outside their ethnic and linguistic zones. While the NYSC has recorded modest successes in promoting interethnic interaction and reducing parochial prejudices among the youth, the scheme continues to operate within a larger national framework, still grappling with historical injustices, structural inequality, and ethno-regional distrust.

Following the Nigerian Civil War, a number of legal and policy measures were introduced that ultimately undermined the stated goals of the post-war Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation (3Rs) programme. Rather than pursue the genuine reintegration of the Igbo into the Nigerian polity through meaningful structural, economic, and financial empowerment, the federal government under General Yakubu Gowon enacted policies that were widely perceived as punitive and exclusionary. Chief among these was the Abandoned Property Edict, which conferred usufructuary rights to indigenes of certain states over properties left behind by the Igbo during the war—properties that were subsequently acquired at grossly undervalued prices. Similarly, the Banking Obligation (Eastern States) Decree of 1970 nullified all bank deposits held in the former Eastern Region (with the exception of Calabar) between May 31, 1967, and January 12, 1970 (Obi-Ani, 2009). Although the policy was later reviewed to allow for a flat compensation of twenty pounds per account holder, regardless of the actual sums previously deposited, this restitution was poorly executed and benefited only a few Igbo depositors.

Further compounding the economic marginalization of the Igbo was the Indigenization Decree of 1972. This decree restructured the ownership and management of Nigerian enterprises, compelling foreign companies to divest equity shares to Nigerians at a time when the Igbo population, still reeling from the war's economic devastation, lacked the capital to participate meaningfully in the scheme (Molokwu, Uchime, et al., 2023). These policies, among others, exacerbated ethnic cleavages, heightening inter-ethnic rivalry, mutual distrust, religious intolerance, and widespread disillusionment with the Nigerian state.

It was in this deeply polarized national context that General Gowon launched the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in 1973, with the express mandate to promote national unity, integration, and civic consciousness among Nigerian youths. Since its inception, the NYSC has recorded both commendable achievements and notable shortcomings. One of its laudable successes lies in inculcating values of resilience, discipline, and self-reliance among corps members, thereby fostering a culture of productive engagement. The scheme has also played a vital role in addressing manpower shortages, especially in underserved rural areas, by deploying graduates to sectors such as education, healthcare, and public administration.

In some cases, the NYSC has facilitated immediate post-service employment opportunities for corps members who secured jobs in their places of primary assignment. However, given the

current unemployment rate among Nigerian graduates—estimated at 13.91%—the scheme has significantly underperformed in terms of long-term job creation and economic empowerment. Despite this, the NYSC remains a source of employment for thousands of individuals involved in its administration, including military officers, members of the Man O' War, trainers in vocational and entrepreneurial skills, medical personnel, cooks, sports officials, and state and local government coordinators.

Moreover, the scheme's Community Development Service (CDS) component has made meaningful contributions to grassroots development. As Uchime (2025) observes, corps members have implemented numerous socio-economic projects in their host communities, including the construction of bridges, market stalls, bus stops, and the organization of literacy campaigns. Notably, corps members have also been engaged in large-scale agricultural initiatives, cultivating no fewer than 100 hectares of land in each state and contributing to food security. These efforts have led to the establishment of agro-processing facilities such as rice mills in Enugu and Sokoto States, as well as feed mills, garri processing plants, and garment factories in Lagos, Kwara, and Niger States, respectively.

Despite the relative successes recorded by the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme, it is disheartening that, as of 2017, Nigeria remained deeply fragmented, with citizens exhibiting greater allegiance to their ethnic identities than to the nation. This phenomenon is evident in the proliferation of separatist organizations and ethnically driven movements. The intensifying ethnic agitations for autonomy are symptomatic of longstanding injustices faced by Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups, many of which are rooted in, or are consequences of, issues that either precipitated the Nigerian Civil War or emerged in its aftermath. Ironically, these are the very issues the NYSC was designed to remedy. Yet, the scheme appears largely ineffective in resolving these persistent fault lines and has thus struggled to foster sustained national integration, consciousness, and unity.

The NYSC was envisioned to promote inter-ethnic understanding and collaboration, with intermarriage among corps members expected to serve as a key indicator of successful integration. Onwere (1992, p. 143) suggests that inter-ethnic marriage reflects the extent to which diverse ethnic groups accept and tolerate one another's cultural differences. Peres and Shrift (1978, p. 440) similarly assert that intermarriage facilitates ethnic integration, potentially leading to the gradual erosion of ethnic boundaries. However, empirical evidence indicates that the NYSC has not significantly encouraged inter-ethnic marriages during or after the service year. Uchime (2025), in a study involving 460 respondents, found that while the scheme fostered minimal levels of toleration—such as modest acceptance of Igbo individuals by Muslim communities—it failed to yield substantial intermarital unions. In South-western states, though the scheme scored highly in inculcating a work ethic (77.79%) and promoting self-employment (64.58%), it underperformed in nurturing a sense of national unity (47.86%) among corps members (Udoh, 2020, p. 27).

Conversely, Obadare (2020) found that 56.7% of respondents from a sample of 90 former and serving corps members across the Southwest, North Central, and Northwest believed the NYSC promoted national integration, while 30% disagreed, and 13.3% were undecided. Further, Molokwu, Uchime, Chukwudi, et al. (2022) reported ratings of over 75% for the scheme's success in "developing common ties among Nigerian youths and promoting national unity,"

over 70% in "removing prejudices and confirming similarities among Nigerians," and over 65% in "fostering a sense of common destiny." Nonetheless, these promising statistics require contextualization: 71% of the respondents in this study were indigenes of South-Western Nigeria, and 66% had schooled in the same region (Molokwu & Uchime, 2025). This demographic bias undermines the study's representativeness and violates the NYSC Act's core principle of national deployment, rendering it an unreliable index for evaluating the scheme's true effectiveness.

A critical reflection on the unresolved issues that led to the scheme's establishment casts doubt not only on its effectiveness but also on its appropriateness for achieving the goals of national integration and unity. The deployment of university and polytechnic graduates under 30 to serve outside their regions of origin or schooling has not sufficiently addressed the enduring religious, ethnic, and political divisions that underpin Nigeria's historical and contemporary crises. Okunogbe (2018, p. 26) maintains that such interethnic exposure enhances participants' knowledge of other regions. However, this increased awareness has not translated into the resolution of the deep-seated tensions that culminated in the civil war or its lingering consequences.

Onwere (1992, p. 182) further argues that rural postings offer greater potential for cultural interaction and integration than urban postings. However, such potential is increasingly undermined by the widespread manipulation of deployment processes. The influence of socio-economic class and corruption often ensures that children of affluent families avoid rural postings, instead securing placements in urban centres like Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Warri. Those without influence often resort to bribery for favourable postings, while others either abandon their postings or appear only on paydays. A few, either by necessity or conviction, fulfil their obligations in full (Iroh, 2022).

The Community Development Service (CDS), a key component of the NYSC aimed at fostering grassroots development and host-community engagement, has also suffered from inadequate funding, poor idea generation, lack of awareness, absence of necessary facilities, insufficient motivation, and leadership challenges—particularly in the Southwest (Lamidi, Benson, & Adisa, 2018, p. 16). While corps members have been increasingly used as ad hoc staff during national and local elections to ensure transparency and credibility, many have faced life-threatening conditions, and some have lost their lives due to inadequate security measures. Broader issues such as electoral violence, ethno-religious strife, and regional grievances remain largely unaffected by the presence of NYSC members in these processes. Moreover, the contentious processes surrounding state and local government creation—often driven by political motives rather than national interest—continue to inflame ethnic tensions and remain unresolved through NYSC activities (Uchime, Molokwu, et al., 2021).

The foundational issues that fuelled Nigeria's civil war—including corruption, nepotism, indiscipline, and ethnic hostility—have persisted since the NYSC's inception in 1973. Although the scheme aims to inculcate values such as discipline, industry, and self-reliance among Nigerian graduates, the exclusionary nature of political leadership and the exorbitant cost of contesting for public office prevent many well-oriented young Nigerians from accessing

leadership positions. Consequently, the transformative potential of the NYSC remains largely unfulfilled.

Furthermore, the post-war policy of "Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation" (3Rs) failed due to poor implementation, giving rise to new waves of ethnic nationalism and separatist agitations that threaten Nigeria's unity. The existence of these unresolved grievances undermines the credibility and impact of the NYSC, turning it into a symbolic gesture rather than an effective instrument of nation-building.

Challenges of the NYSC

Colonial Heritage: Long before Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, British colonial policies had sown seeds of discord among the country's diverse ethnic groups. The 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, uneven socio-economic development, ethnic favouritism, and skewed regional structuring laid a volatile foundation. Upon independence, many of these issues were neither addressed nor ameliorated; instead, they were often perpetuated by post-colonial leadership. The coercive treaties, wars of conquest, and forced amalgamation ignored historical, cultural, and political distinctions, creating enduring animosities that complicate efforts toward national unity. These colonial legacies, which partly led to the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970), persist in exacerbated forms today despite the NYSC's creation in 1973. Questions surrounding the appropriate political structure, resource allocation, and governance systems continue to provoke intense debates and fuel disintegrationist tendencies (Eme-Uche & Okonkwo, 2020).

The continued rise in separatist movements, ethno-religious violence, and electoral crises all find their roots in Nigeria's colonial history. These issues weaken the NYSC's capacity to foster unity. British-engineered ethnicism, regionalism, and intolerance have become chronic problems, often erupting in violence that has, on numerous occasions, resulted in the deaths of corps members (Molokwu & Uchime, 2025).

Bad Governance: Compounding the legacy of colonialism is the persistent problem of bad governance. The unwillingness of Nigeria's political elite to pursue inclusive and effective governance remains a significant barrier to achieving national integration. Nigeria possesses both the human and material resources necessary to avert many of the crises that have plagued it—from the botched 1962 census and the 1965 Western Region election crisis to the 1966 coup and its bloody aftermath—yet these opportunities were squandered due to leadership failures.

Introducing the NYSC without first confronting entrenched corruption and systemic injustice amounted to setting a flawed example for the youth. Nnoli (1978) argues that no ethnic conflict-resolution initiative can succeed in Nigeria without genuine attitudinal change among leaders. The absence of such change has given rise to the "Nigerian factor"—a phrase that connotes the routine failure or underperformance of well-meaning initiatives due to entrenched ethno-religious, political, and socio-economic dysfunctions (Obadare, 1978).

Bad governance has also resulted in the underfunding of NYSC camps, leading to inadequate facilities such as water, power, and sanitation. These deficiencies demoralize corps members, eroding their enthusiasm and commitment even before deployment. The resultant apathy often translates into poor performance at Places of Primary Assignment, thus undermining the scheme's objectives. Furthermore, despite Chapter II, Article 15, Subsection 2 of the 1999 Constitution mandating the promotion of national integration and prohibition of ethnic discrimination, the provision remains largely unimplemented (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1999).

Another manifestation of bad governance is the ethnically skewed composition of Nigeria's leadership since independence. Continued domination by one ethnic group, even in the presence of capable individuals from other backgrounds, perpetuates feelings of marginalization and erodes trust in the NYSC's promise of unity.

Table 1: List of Heads of State by Region and States of Origin

S/N	NAMES	DATE	STATE	REGION
1	Tafawa Balewa	Oct 1, 1960-Jan 15 1966	Bauchi	North-East
2	J.T.U. Ironsi	2 Jan 15 1966-July 29, 1966	Abia	South-East
3	Yakubu Gowon	July 29, 1966-July 29, 1975	Plateau	North-Central
4	Murtala Mohammed	July 29, 1975-Feb 13, 1976	Kano	North-West
5	Olusegun Obasanjo	Feb 13, 1976-Oct 1, 1979	Ogun	South-West
6	Alh. Shehu Shagari	Oct. 1, 1979-Dec. 31, 1983	Sokoto	North-West
7	Muhammadu Buhari	Dec 31, 1983-Aug 27, 1985	Katsina	North-West
8	Ibrahim Babangida	Aug 27, 1985-Aug 26, 1993	Niger	North-Central
9	Ernest Shonekan	Aug 26, 1993-Nov. 17, 1993	Ogun	South-West
10	Sani Abacha	Nov. 17, 1993-June 8, 1998	Kano	North-West
11	Abdulsalam Abubakar	June 8, 1998-May 29, 1999	Niger	North-Central
12	Olusegun Obasanjo	May 29, 1999-May 29, 2007	Ogun	South-West
13	Umaru-Musa Yar'Adua	May 29, 2007-May 5, 2010	Katsina	North-West
14	Goodluck Jonathan	May 5, 2010 to 2013	Bayelsa	South-South
15	Muhammadu Buhari	May 29, 2015-May 29, 2023	Katsina	North-West

Source: Aluko, O. and Usman, S., Visiting the hippopotamus: National integration issues in Nigeria, 2016, p.682

The emergence and growing activities of various ethnic self-determination movements in Nigeria, such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Arewa People's Congress (APC), and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), among others, reflect a broader indictment of the systemic failure of governance in Nigeria (Obi-Ani, 2009). These movements, by virtue of their operations and the ethnically and religiously charged doctrines they propagate, have arguably stirred ethnic consciousness, loyalty, and identity politics at a rate that surpasses the influence of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). Their proliferation underscores a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the Nigerian

state's failure to provide inclusive, just, and equitable governance to all its constituent ethnic nationalities.

Insecurity: The prevailing insecurity in Nigeria is rooted in the state's long-standing inability to provide effective and inclusive governance. Both past and present administrations have failed, whether by design or default, to address the grievances and structural imbalances that have persisted since independence. The outcome of this failure has manifested in violent ethno-religious and socio-political crises, often targeting NYSC members serving outside their regions of origin. These attacks are sometimes acts of reprisal by aggrieved ethnic communities. This hostile atmosphere, fuelled by both real and perceived historical injustices, is beyond the capacity of the NYSC scheme to resolve in isolation. Without genuine, pragmatic efforts by the government to implement policies grounded in equity, justice, and inclusiveness, the NYSC cannot fulfil its mandate of national integration.

Moreover, the worsening insecurity has significantly impeded the smooth operation of the scheme. Certain geopolitical zones, especially the North East, North West, and North Central have become highly volatile due to insurgency and banditry. As reported by the NYSC Directorate in 2015, corps member postings to the North East have become optional due to the persistent threat of Boko Haram attacks (National Youth Service Corps, 2015). The implications of this are profound: corps members, trained and deployed to foster national unity, are increasingly absent from these zones. As a result, the local populations, already steeped in ethnocentric sentiments, are denied opportunities for intercultural interaction, thereby deepening existing prejudices and exacerbating the fragmentation of national unity.

Unemployment and Poverty: Despite inheriting a divisive colonial legacy and enduring a brutal civil war, Nigeria attempted to promote unity through the establishment of the NYSC scheme in 1973. The scheme has since played a vital role in retraining and reorienting thousands of graduates, producing a cadre of disciplined citizens imbued with moral values and national consciousness. However, these 'refined' graduates have found themselves stifled by a socio-economic environment marred by massive unemployment and poverty. The opportunities for them to assume leadership roles and implement the ideals instilled by the NYSC are severely limited.

As of 2017, about 35% of Nigerians lived in extreme poverty, while approximately 54% were relatively poor, with the majority subsisting on less than one dollar a day (Uchime, Molokwu, & Ewa, 2024). This economic hardship has rendered many youths unable to participate in politics—a domain often monopolized by the wealthy, thereby preventing the emergence of value-driven leadership. The economic pressures have also distorted the original objectives of the NYSC scheme. It has increasingly become a transactional platform for those with connections, who exploit their influence to manipulate postings for personal gain. Practices such as bribery for favourable deployment, preferential treatment of the elite, and fraudulent arrangements with officials have become alarmingly common (Raimi & Alao, 2011).

Given the meager stipends corps members receive, many are compelled to engage in additional economic activities to sustain themselves during the service year. Some go as far as making appearances at orientation camps merely to satisfy formal requirements, after which they abscond in collusion with officials at their place of primary assignment. These corrupt practices

ultimately culminate in the issuance of discharge certificates to individuals who made no meaningful contributions to the scheme's national objectives.

Conclusion

An assessment of the historical antecedents of the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970), the post-war policy of Reconciliation, Reconstruction, and Rehabilitation (3Rs), and the subsequent establishment of the NYSC scheme in 1973 reveals that the dream of forging national unity remains largely unfulfilled. The persistent emergence of separatist movements, the cries of marginalization, religious intolerance, ethnic conflicts, and political insecurity all point to the scheme's limited success in healing the deep scars of the civil war.

Had Nigeria's leaders sincerely implemented the 3Rs with equity and fairness at the core, the NYSC would have had a stronger foundation upon which to build national integration. Instead, the prevailing conditions have weakened its potential, allowing the growth of movements such as MEND, MOSOP, OPC, MASSOB, IPOB, and AREWA. Unless the multifaceted challenges identified—ranging from insecurity to corruption, unemployment, and systemic injustice—are addressed through committed leadership and policy reforms, the goals of national consciousness, integration, and unity will remain elusive. The NYSC scheme, no matter how noble in intent, cannot function effectively in the absence of good governance, political will, and inclusive development.

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