

THE EFFECTIVE CHANGE THAT NIGERIA NEEDS¹

BY

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I am delighted and honoured to have been invited as a Guest Speaker at this symposium to mark the National Association of Philosophy Students' (NAPS) week. Whenever I can make the time, I always seize any opportunity to engage intellectually with our students and young persons, particularly as our future as a nation is in their hands. An event organised by Philosophy students to think about the Nigerian question will always be of particular interest to me. While many have people have offered opinions and comments about Change in Nigeria, it is unclear the extent to which those comments have been informed by deep intellectual reflection. The Motto of your Association: 'Man thinks to live, Man lives to think' is certainly interesting. While it is clear that Man has to think to live and survive, the assertion that 'Man lives to think', without the conjunction that Man thinks to live, is more contentious. Man cannot accomplish everything by thought alone. Action must follow reflection. Indeed, former President Olusegun Obasanjo recently called for "less think-tanks and more do-tanks." However, in order to shape our future, we need to apply our minds more rigorously to the issues and challenges we face.

3. Ladies and Gentlemen, anywhere you go, Nigerians with limited insights about how the country really works, and foreigners that do not Nigeria well enough, will tell you that our biggest problem is not Planning, but Implementation. I can tell you for free that there is no greater lie than that. It is also one of those lies that when repeated often enough by people who should know begins to sound like the truth. I can tell you that most plans that we produce are inherently un-implementable! They are not products of deep reflection and tend to give primacy to Resources for Personal Gain, rather than Resourcefulness for Societal Gain. If I draw up a "beautiful plan" (as they often call it) to pave all parts of this beautiful campus with gold, will it ever be implemented? As the producer of the plan, I will of course denounce its lack of implementation, particularly when I am denied a 15% mobilisation fee or millions of dollars for so-called "feasibility studies." I will, of course, repeat the mantra that our problem is not planning but a lack of implementation. Our plans often do not factor in economic reality, availability of resources, politics, human resource capacity, global factors like climate change or sharp drops in oil prices, risks, contingencies, implementation capacity, measurable results or tangible benefits to citizens. As the saying goes "Those that fail to plan, plan to fail." In many cases, we simply plan to fail. If we plan properly, we will plan our implementation and it will not be a problem. We will identify the risks to our

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success and plan mitigating actions well in advance. In short, we will give God less work to do. After all, Nigerians are not the only people God created, but I suspect that we keep him busier than many countries combined.

3. One of our main problems is, therefore, our inability to link deep reflection to the actions that will affect our national destiny. Ralph Waldo Emerson set out the link between thought and destiny quite clearly when he said: "Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny." We often miss out the link that action should flow from thought; that you often need to do an act over and over again to form a habit (good and bad); that your habits inform your character; and that your character as a person or a nation shapes your destiny. I crave your indulgence to quote from James Allen's seminal essay of 1903 titled "As A Man Thinketh". He says:

"Only by much searching and mining are gold and diamonds obtained, and man can find every truth connected with his being if he will dig deep into the mine of his soul. And that he is the maker of his character, the moulder of his life, and the builder of his destiny, he may unerringly prove: if he will watch, control, and alter his thoughts, tracing their effects upon himself, upon others, and upon his life and circumstances; if he will link cause and effect by patient practice and investigation, utilising his every experience, even to the most trivial, as a means of obtaining that knowledge of himself."

4. Emerson and Allen give the impression that Man can completely control his destiny through thought and action. Of course, there is another school of thought that our destiny is pre-ordained and that there is little that we can do to influence it. For very many years, the tension between the idea of preordination and freewill has occupied many notable philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mills, John Hume and Isaiah Berlin. Personally, I am persuaded by the opinion of Niccolo Machiavelli, whom I consider to be one of the finest political philosophers ever, who says:

"I believe it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves."

5. To respectfully take a different view from President Obasanjo's, I am not certain that we have sufficient think-tanks that can offer useful insights into topical problems, based on deep reflection, research and empirical evidence. On the other hand, we perhaps have too many 'do-tanks' that apply a fire brigade approach to every problem. That is not to say that action is not equally important. I guess what President Obasanjo was exasperated about is our notorious penchant to talk about the problems without offering any solutions whatsoever. In Nigeria, the answer to the question "So what do you suggest we do?" only ever gets the response "We don't know o. Only God can help us!" Think-tanks should offer potentially workable solutions. We currently do not

have enough of them that can do that. That is why I am pleased to be in an audience of thinkers today!

6. Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. Having spent the last few minutes reflecting on your Association's Motto, I will now start my lecture proper. I couldn't resist indulging myself with the foregoing reflections on Thought and Action since I am speaking to Philosophy students. However, I must now treat the topic that I have been asked to treat. I cannot promise that in treating the topic I will not take you into other philosophical side streets and corners, but I will try to do so only when it is necessary.

7. I have been asked to speak on "The Effective Change that Nigeria Needs." Given the plethora of challenges that Nigeria faces, particularly at this moment in our history, this is potentially a very wide topic. It could be argued that we need Change in every facet of our national life and my job this afternoon would simply have been to indulge in our national pastime, which is listing every single thing that is wrong with Nigeria, without offering any ideas about how to solve them. Of course, when we indulge in this pastime, we consciously choose to forget the positive attributes that we have as a nation and fail to analyse why, despite daunting challenges, some things still manage to work in Nigeria. We don't pay attention to the fact that the prevalence of fake pharmaceuticals has gone down from a national average of 41% (80% in Lagos) in the year 2000 to 6% in 2015; that we have what the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime has judged to be the most effective drug law enforcement regime in Africa and that our Federal Inland Revenue Service can hold its own against any revenue service in the world. May of us do not even realise the miracle that NIPOST performs every day, where you can put a stamp on a letter, without begging or bribing anyone, and it is delivered to your doorstep. If you haven't tried NIPOST recently, I suggest that you do. It is what public service should be: impersonal and predictable with little or no room for the application of discretion.

8. We conveniently forget that Nigeria has produced some of the best intellectual minds in virtually all academic disciplines; that despite a damaging civil war and constant threats of new wars, we have held together as a nation; that despite current challenges our economy is still by far the largest in Africa; that Nigerian literature, art, sculpture, drama and music can hold their own anywhere in the world; or that after many years of abandonment Manufacturing is gradually making a comeback and we now manufacture vehicles in Nigeria, including my own official car, an Innoson jeep that was made in Nnewi, Anambra State. I have heard D'Banj's "Oliver Twist in a fish market in Barbados. I have seen people dancing to Lil' Kesh's "Shoki" in a little village in India. I have had to reassure people in Holland that every Nigerian woman is not like Mama G! Nigerians are impossible to ignore anywhere they are. Even deluded Donald Trump recently had to bring the entrepreneurship and adventurous spirit of Nigerians into the American Presidential campaign debates.

9. Despite numerous challenges, for the first time in our history, we have recently been able to sustain democratic rule for 17 continuous years. By the time the current administration ends, we would have gone for 20 years with no

military coups. It is important not to underestimate the significance of this. The ability to freely choose our leaders in credible elections is a vitally important ingredient in our national development. The ability to vote out a ruling party, like we did in the 2015 elections, is perhaps the ultimate power that we have as citizens. It is a power we must guard jealously. Many of the problems that we have as a country, including institutionalised corruption, grand larceny and impunity, are traceable to the dark days of military rule. If we are to seek continuous improvement in our areas of strength, I believe that it is best to do so within a democratic setting.

10. Ladies and Gentlemen, in order to properly deconstruct the topic for today's discussion, it is important to start with definitions. I have been asked to discuss "The Effective Change that Nigeria Needs." What is Change? When is Change effective? When is Change needed? In this paper, I will simply define change as an altered state of affairs. Of course, Change can be for good or for bad, but we will focus on Change for the better. Something is Effective when it produces the desired result. So, Effective Change can be said to be an altered state of affairs that produces the desired result. Something is needed when it is seen as essential and necessary. This is to be differentiated from 'Want' which is merely a desire to possess something. As an example, the human being NEEDS to breathe to stay alive. She may WANT the latest Channel handbag or he may want the latest Mercedes G-Wagon, but their lives will not end if they do not have it, although it can sometimes feel that it would! So my understanding of the topic that I have been asked to address is: "The altered state of affairs that is essential to make Nigeria the country we desire." I hope that my interpretation of the topic accords with the aspirations of the organisers.

11. Given the myriad avenues, side streets and cul-de-sacs that one can travel down in dealing with a topic this broad, I have chosen to constrain the discussion into four broad areas of Change: Change of Values; Change of Institutions; Change of Structures; and Change of Systems. In addressing each of these broad constructs, I will briefly state what is wrong with our current situation. But I will not dwell too heavily on it because you can probably get richer analysis in any Nigerian market, motor park or beer parlour, from Balogun in Lagos, to Onitsha, to Kano. It is the bit that we do not do enough of, in my view, that is offering potentially viable solutions, that I will focus more on.

Change of Values

12. Let me start by looking at the first construct: the Change of Values. I make no apologies for asserting that decades of military rule, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s destroyed our values as a people. Cheating people became normal; stealing from the public purse became a duty placed on every public official; and the boundaries between right and wrong, between good and bad, were deliberately blurred. Our people participated in "million-man" marches to perpetuate evil dictators in power. Democracy activists and human rights campaigners were denounced, by those they were fighting for, as hungry noise-makers who were too radical and extreme in their views. Anyone who preached discipline was seen as "too rigid" and was simply asked "how much do we need

to settle you?” Civil servants are not as crude. They will offer to “carry you along”, but the effect is the same: to buy your silence. Morality gave way to Money, and Excellence and Hard Work gave way to “Connections.” We gladly sacrificed Merit at the altar of Representation, except that even that so-called Representation was really only representative of our immediate family and friends and, in reality, not of our local government, state, geopolitical zone, religion or tribe.

13. These erosion of values from the military era is still very much with us today. Parents are still writing examinations for their children; some university students are still buying grades for cash (a practice called ‘sorting’) and there is still a high prevalence of sexual harassment of female students. People are still seeking to influence NYSC postings; and the indolent still demands money from the hardworking with a tone of entitlement. An EFCC suspect is celebrated by the young as having “hammered”, and the overriding sentiment of our youth can sometimes be: “God, please don’t let them finish chopping all the money before I get there!” Our religious institutions have become places of devilish rituals where the worship of Mammon has long been chosen over the worship of God. Fake miracles are sold to the most vulnerable and even some Philosophy students have started to believe in the powers of a “magic pen” that can make them pass their exams without studying. By the time we receive you into the public service, most of you are morally, ethically and psychologically damaged, brought up with warped values that are virtually irredeemable.

14. So what should we do about this? One thing we know doesn’t work is spending millions of Naira on jingles and adverts that preach a change in values, without doing more. We need to be clear-eyed about sanctioning and punishing wrongdoing. Weak defences, such as: “my trial is a political witch-hunt”; “it’s a North/South thing”; “I’m not the only one that stole”, and so on, are untenable. If people are punished for the wrongs that they do, it will be easier to persuade others to do the right things. I know Professors in other countries whose PhD degrees were taken away for plagiarism after 30 years of having it and during which time other Fellows got their PhDs using a Professor’s fake data. Kicking them out in disgrace in this way will encourage the values of hard work and proper research. To properly sanction bad behaviour, we need to eschew in our own minds the usual sentiments of “soft landing” and “human face”. We need to make clear that retiring someone for wrongdoing, with his or her full benefits, is no punishment at all. If their crimes are eventually proved in court, it would be obvious that the people who are alleged to have diverted monies meant for fighting Boko Haram had no “human face” at all and did not give the poor soldiers that died in the North East a “soft landing.” So, the question is: why should we give them a soft landing or show them a human face?

Change of Institutions

15. Ladies and Gentlemen, let us now go to the second construct: the Change of Institutions. There is virtually universal agreement that we need to change our institutions. However, not everyone really knows what they mean when they

make this assertion. The word “Institution” is often used interchangeably with the word “Organisation.” I will be using the word “Institution” to mean the way that things are done in a society; different from the word “Organisation” which is a group of people intentionally organised to achieve a set purpose. Among academics, the most commonly accepted definition of the word ‘Institution’ is perhaps that of Nobel Laureate Douglas North who says that institutions are the rules of the game in a society, together with their enforcement arrangements. They are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. They structure incentives in human exchange and shape the way that societies evolve over time. For institutions to survive, these rules of the game (formal and informal) need to be shared and accepted by members of society, enforced for compliance, and passed on to new members of society through socialisation and education.

16. Therefore, when I say that our Institutions need to change, I mean that our way of doing things need to change; our rules of the game needs to change; our enforcement arrangements need to change; the constraints that shape our human interactions need to change; the incentives in our human exchanges need to change; and we need to change the way in which we pass on the rules of the game to the younger generation through socialisation and education.

17. In my own field of Public Service Reforms, there are various areas in which we are changing the rules of the game. There is a need to re-orientate our public services to ensure that public service exists to serve the public, rather than the public servant! An appointment letter into public office can no longer be seen as a master key with which public servants are EXPECTED by citizens to loot our commonwealth. There is a need for us to change the rules of the game in terms of the culture of accepting poor quality service or even outright negligence, such as when a doctor negligently kills your child and asks you to “leave everything to God.” There is a need for us to punish impunity and criminality and expose Pastors, Imams and Traditional Rulers who come to beg for “soft landing” and “human face” following the commission of a crime against fellow citizens and the State. There is a need for our judicial system to be impersonal, predictable and swift. There should be clear sentencing guidelines, such that intending criminals can, by themselves, do a self-assessment and know what sentence they can expect to get if found guilty.

18. There is a need to make remuneration fair. It cannot be right that you can have two people doing identical jobs in two different public sector organisations, with one person earning 5 times what the other is earning. It cannot be right that there is no link between competence and career advancement. It cannot be right that promotion is treated as a right that EVERYBODY enjoys every three to four years. It cannot be right that we have no credible means of assessing the performance of public servants or holding them to account for their actions. It cannot be right that we develop annual budgets that bear no relevance to national plans. It cannot be right that agencies generate billions of Naira, spend most of it as they like, and give Government some change only when the spirit moves them. A lot of our current rules of the game are just not right.

19. It is for all these reasons and more that my Bureau has developed a National Strategy for Public Service Reforms. This 10-year strategy seeks to change the rules of the game to ensure that, by 2025, most of the things of old would have passed away. President Buhari is actually accelerating these changes to the rules of the game. The full application of the Treasury Single Account is putting an immediate end to the impunity of the parastatals and putting our money in the public treasury where it belongs. The merger of the Budget Office of the Federation with the National Planning Commission to form the Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning means that the appropriation of funds in the budget can flow from national development priorities. The introduction of the Zero-Base Budgeting system means that every planned item of expenditure must be fully justified before it can be included in the budget. Additionally, our anticorruption bodies have regained their vibrancy and vitality and many more people are now aware of Kuje Prisons that they were before. There is a need to strengthen and accelerate the reforms of our judicial system so that it can keep pace with the changes to the rules of the game in other parts of our national life.

Change of Structures

20. Ladies and Gentlemen, the third construct that I want to discuss is what I will refer to as the Change of Structures. Bearing in mind that I had said that Institutions are the way things are done in a society, it is clear that social, political, historical and cultural institutions set the context for individual and group behaviour. How people behave is shaped in large part by the societal structures in which they find themselves. For instance, our over-reliance on oil has greatly shaped the way we have behaved over the last few decades. It has virtually led to the death of manufacturing and has severely constrained innovation and enterprise. However, the rules of the game in this area are changing. Given current realities, it would appear that Oil is over! Like anyone that abuses substances, we will have painful withdrawal symptoms and it will take us quite a while to wean ourselves of our dependence on oil as a substance. When we eventually do, we will be better for it.

21. At 5%, Nigeria has one of the lowest VAT rates in the world. The standard rate of VAT in the UK is 20% but there is actually no need to travel that far to compare our VAT rates with those of others. Closer to home in Africa, standard VAT rates are: Cameroon 19%, Cape Verde 15%, Chad 18%, Congo 18%, Cote d'Ivoire 18%; Equatorial Guinea 15%, Ghana 15%, Kenya 16%, Madagascar 20%, Morocco 20% and South Africa 14%. Even oil-rich Angola has a VAT rate of 10% and diamond-rich Botswana has a rate of 12%. What is worse is that the VAT coverage in Nigeria is only 20%. The rules of the game in this regard need to change at some point soon. Even without considering a rise in VAT rates, there is an urgent need to widen the tax coverage. As Africa's biggest economy, raising the VAT coverage to even 60% will have a dramatic effect on government revenues, even at the current 5% VAT rate. I have only picked out the issue of VAT to demonstrate the point that some of the structural issues that have conditioned our behaviour over the years need to change.

22. We need to enforce the collection of existing taxes. In some countries, people pay road tax, buy television and radio licences to enjoy their own televisions and radios, pay taxes to Local Government Councils on pain of imprisonment, and pay much higher rates of income tax than we do. Government's recent decision to enforce the Stamp Duties Act of 2004 is an example of how the rules of the game are gradually beginning to change. Even the last government considered the idea of a Luxury Tax. These days, I see many private jets that appear to have been parked at the airport covered in dust, without any signs of recent movement. It will remain to be seen for how long we can sustain our lavish parties that flow with pink champagne, convoys of jeeps for even the lowliest Local Government official, and private schools that charge their fees in Pound Sterling and U.S. Dollars.

23. The social structure of our society also needs to change. We can no longer have the situation where our society is largely made up a few that are extremely rich and a majority that are extremely poor, with a virtual absence of the middle class. The middle class in most countries refers to those who can own a decent 3-bedroom house with a long-term mortgage, buy a decent car on hire purchase, build up a decent pension pot that can look after them in old age, get decent healthcare, and be able to send their children to decent schools. The middle class is often not rich and is often not able to build huge hoards of cash in savings accounts. However, they are often able to lead a decent life and enjoy the benefits of hard work.

24. However, not everybody is physically able to work, or can even find work if they have the strength to be able to do it. In the Nigeria of today, poverty has stripped many citizens of their dignity as human beings. It is for this reason that the current government is emphasising social safety nets for the most vulnerable to ensure that they can at least meet their basic human needs of food, clothing and shelter. While there may be divergent ideological opinions about how best to tackle poverty, there is consensus that it needs to be tackled and that the most vulnerable in any society must be protected. The wide gulf between the rich and the poor is simply unsustainable and is an area of structural change that needs to happen. As someone once said, unless you tackle poverty, one day, the poor will have nothing to eat but the rich!

Change of Systems

25. Ladies and Gentlemen, the final lens through which I will attempt to look at the question of 'The Effective Change That Nigeria Needs' is that of a change of systems and processes. There is consensus in the literature that inefficient institutions are both contributors and net effects of inefficient systems. The use of Technology eases processes and tackles corruption. However, many things that can be done electronically are still done manually in Nigeria, making it easy for corruption to be perpetrated on a massive scale. Even when we have computerised systems and processes, these are not joined up in any coherent way. It has therefore been possible in the past for a company to claim to have billions of Naira in turnover when bidding for government work but to declare only thousands of Naira to the Federal Inland Revenue Service for Tax purposes.

26. Manual payroll systems make it easy to create and sustain ghost workers. The Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) that my Bureau put in place is actually one of the largest IT systems in the world. To date, it has weeded out more than 65,000 ghost workers and saved government nearly N200 billion. Mr President has recently directed that the system should be extended to the entire public service immediately. The Federal Ministry of Finance has also started the process of linking Bank Verification Numbers to IPPIS records.

27. There is a clear need to link the various standalone databases that Government has. I was very pleased when I sent my driver to cash a cheque in the bank and the bank checked his driver's licence against the database of the Federal Road Safety Corps. Unknown to me, my kids were being driven around by someone with a fake driver's licence. The linkage of the FRSC database to the banks also forced him to go for a driving test before he could get a genuine licence. Of course, government received revenue from the test, just one of the many benefits of joined-up working.

28. Ladies and Gentlemen, I spoke earlier about widening our tax base. One way to do that would be to link the database of the Corporate Affairs Commission with that of the Federal Inland Revenue Service. In addition to improving revenue collection, it is my view that corporate corruption will also reduce. We will be able to "lift the veil" to see who is behind several companies by linking the BVN numbers of Directors to their company and personal income tax records with FIRS.

29. We need to accelerate our National Identity Management System. If INEC could put in place Permanent Voters Cards in under 2 years and the banking system was able to put in the BVN system in about one year, it is rather difficult to understand why most Nigerians still do not have national identity cards. A robust national identity management system coupled with a credible property identification system will eventually reduce the need for expensive and contentious censuses every 10 years. A link between personal identification and property identification will reduce corruption, reduce crime and aid national security.

Conclusion

30. In conclusion, the effective change that Nigeria needs can be viewed from very many lenses. I have chosen to examine it from four main constructs: changes in Values, Institutions, Structures and Systems. I admit that my choice of the constructs and the conceptual elements within them are not the only ones through which the topic could be addressed. I also accept that I may have missed out on other important elements. However, my overriding propositions are that Nigeria can indeed obtain the effective change that it needs; that that change will come from deep reflection followed by brave action; and that there is an urgent need to change our values, institutions, structures and systems.

31. Many years of failed promises and unfulfilled potential have turned us into a cynical and doubting nation. Even when it is apparent that something will certainly happen, we do not believe it even after it has happened. So, is this change that we preach really possible? Will it ever happen or will it be smothered by the “Nigerian Factor”, as usual? Our two main religious texts are instructive about Change. The Holy Bible’s definition of change could be taken from the book of Ephesians. It describes the process of change as:

“To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

- *Ephesians 4:22-24*

In order to achieve this, the Glorious Quran says:

“Surely ALLAH does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves.”

- *Surah 13(Ar R’ad):11*

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is clear from these sacred texts that the Change we seek must start from within us. If we remember not the former things nor consider the things of old, if we can change what is within us as a people, I have no doubt that the Lord will do a new thing in Nigeria!!

God bless Nigeria and thank you for your attention.