Reforming Nigeria’s Education System: Paradigm Shift.

Speech by
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Protocol

Introductory Remarks

• Ladies and gentlemen, we live in troubled times. The countries that used to lead the development of the globe can no longer do so. The Eurozone’s economy is set to contract this year by 0.3 percent as its debt crisis remains unresolved, while the USA will see a growth of only 2 percent this year. Other advanced countries will see their economies grow by half of their growth numbers in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Emerging markets like China and India have not been spared either, as they are set to grow at their slowest pace in up to a decade. As this economic downturn continues to unfold, unemployment rates are rising to unprecedented levels around the globe, with the EU being a good example with unemployment rates of 11.1 percent, and Spain and Greece with 24.6 percent and 21.9
percent respectively. Youth unemployment in these countries are above 50 percent.

- Africa and Nigeria are not doing too badly on the growth front, in view of the global economic uncertainty. With sub-Saharan Africa’s growth forecast at 5.4 percent in 2012, the region’s economic performance is set to better those of other regions, except Asia. Nigeria’s growth rate will slow down in 2012, but is projected at a healthy 6.5 percent. However, unemployment at about 24 percent and youth unemployment at about 37.5 percent remains a major challenge, more so as the number of new entrants into the labour force each year is projected to rise above 8 million by 2015.

- In light of these developments, the central question before us is “how do we buffer our economy in these uncertain times, and how do we diversify the economic base for long-term sustainable growth?” Certainly, we need to look inwards to find ways to become more self-reliant. We need to pursue an active program of economic diversification that focuses on sectors like agriculture, housing and construction, mining, to mention a few, like we are now doing under the Government’s transformation agenda.

- However, “our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education…”, as President J.F. Kennedy once said. So a more fundamental question is “do we have an education system that can support our economic transformation by supplying the right skills
needed? Or do we need a complete change – a paradigm shift in Education? This brings me to the main part of my talk today, which I will open by shedding light on the role that education can play in national development, moving on to discuss the state of Nigeria’s education system, and then touch briefly on what can be done to move our education system forward.

**The Role of Education in Development**

- Nelson Mandela said “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. I’m not surprised by these words. There is compelling evidence that education attainment – both in terms of years of schooling and cognitive skills – is positively linked to earnings and productivity. Recent research shows that in Nigeria, employees with primary education in incorporated private sector organizations were estimated to earn 16 to 20 percent more than those with no education; those with secondary education earn between 25 and 35 percent more than those with no education; and even higher for those with tertiary education qualifications. Korea, a country with few natural resources, rose from its level of development in the 1960s to become one of the top economies in the world by focusing on human capital development through education and training.
Beyond economic impacts, education also leads to better health, reduced fertility, improved resilience to economic shocks, and greater civic participation. In Nigeria, an analysis of the impact of expansion in education during the 1970s associated with the Universal Primary Education movement showed that for each one year increase in female education, there was a 26 percent reduction in early fertility.

Another important point to note about education is that it leads to an enhanced ability to adopt new technologies. According to the World Bank, education yields its greatest benefits in countries undergoing rapid technological and economic change because it can give workers the ability to continue acquiring skills throughout life, as well as the capacity to adapt new technology.

But to yield sustained benefits at the national level, research shows that education needs to be more about **learning outcomes and skills acquisition than just years of schooling**. So regardless of the number of years spent in the classroom, or the level of academic qualifications a nation’s workforce attain, if they lack the right technical and practical skills: in developing plant varieties and storage systems that can boost agricultural output; in building roads, dams, railways, and airports; in developing computer software that can support the business sector, in developing and delivering new drugs and equipment that can improve the quality of healthcare, and so on; the impact of such an education system on economic growth will be very limited.
• World Bank research on Nigeria’s economic growth potential identifies major areas with skills gaps that keep our economy from developing to its full potential. These include - a lack of technical skills in workers, and a shortage of highly skilled professionals of international standards. The evidence also indicates that there is substantial room for improving the foundational skills that students acquire during the basic education cycle. These are serious issues for our national development.

• So what is wrong? Why does a nation like ours with so much potential human capital fail to live up to expectations? This leads me to the next segment of my speech – the state of Nigeria’s education system.

The State of Nigeria’s Education System

• First, the existing framework for administering education is unclear, as the roles of the various tiers of government within the education system, are not clearly laid out. The fact that education is on the Concurrent List of the 1999 constitution makes its administration complex. Take basic education for example. The recent Steve Oronsaye Committee Report observed that operations of the Universal Basic Education Commission from the federal level are devoid of sufficient input from the schools in the states and local governments where they are expected to maintain good presence
and make the most impact. The regulatory system in the sector is largely ineffective, and this reflects on the curriculum, especially in many private schools of foreign origin. Pupils in many of these schools are taught little or nothing on Nigeria.

• Take also the duplication we see in the administration of Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE). Why should there be two parallel examination bodies – the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) – conducting the same type of examinations for the same level of students within the same academic session, making it difficult to maintain standards at the same level? Surely, there is need for a rethink here.

• Second, **there is stagnation and inequality in access to primary and secondary education.** Although the government has made basic education through junior secondary school free and compulsory, Nigeria has not seen the increase in enrolment rates found in many countries. The national primary net enrolment rate which stood at 64 percent in 1999, was only 58 percent in 2010. The primary completion rate (the indicator used to monitor MDG progress) remained at about 75 percent between 2003 and 2010, whereas in Ghana and Tanzania, the rate rose sharply from 69.7 percent to around 88 percent, and from around 55 percent to 90 percent respectively within the same period.
Furthermore, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) database, which collects information from a large sample of nationally representative households in Nigeria, shows that there are extremely large within-country inequalities in school completion: for example while 95 percent of children from the richest households had completed grade 6 in 2008; only 31 percent of children from the poorest quintile had done so. Similarly, gender inequality in grade completion remains likewise large especially among the poorer groups of the population. For example, at least 60 percent of male children from the poorest quintile complete grades 1 to 4, compared to about 45 percent of female children.

In a nutshell, fewer than 30 percent of Nigerian children are in formal education before primary school. At the same time, only 35 percent of children of junior secondary school age are enrolled in this level, and less than 15 percent of those who finish junior secondary continue on to senior secondary level.

Third, the quality of our education system and associated leaning outcomes are poor. As Nigeria does not participate in internationally benchmarking learning assessments such as Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) or the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), it is hard to evaluate the level of learning against international standards using any recent data. Nevertheless, there is some information, which though not recent, is quite worrisome.
• Nigerian students in grades four and six performed worst out of 22 African countries that participated in UNESCO’s effort at measuring learning outcomes—the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) assessment—in 1996, behind countries like Niger, Togo, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Mali, and other LICs in Africa. But the alarming finding is that Nigeria’s position did not improve when the test was taken again in 2003. Among 4th graders, only 25% (in 1996) and 35% (in 2003) of answers that were provided on the test were correct; only 32% (in 1996) and 34% (in 2003) answers in the mathematics test were correct. In national examinations of Primary School students in four main subjects in 2001 and 2003, only 20 percent of fifth grade students could correctly answer over 30 percent of the test, and less than one percent could correctly answer over half of the test questions.

• We see mass failures in Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) conducted by WAEC and the National Examinations Council (NECO) year in - year out. For instance only 5.75 percent of the 803,360 private candidates that sat the WASSCE exams in May/June 2010 received 5 Credit and above (including English Language), while only 10 percent received 5 Credit and above (including Mathematics).

• Several universities are producing graduates that lack the right skills needed to perform tasks required in their chosen fields, making it
difficult for them to get employment. If you look hard enough, you may even find graduates who have never used a computer before. Academic infrastructure in many of our premier institutions is dilapidated. Nigerian universities are no longer the citadels of learning we once knew them to be. They have lost their place in global rankings. Look, for example, at the Times Higher Education Top 400 Universities in the World Rankings. No single university in Nigeria was featured, yet there were representatives for South Africa and Egypt. Even in Africa, you will not find a Nigerian university in the top 20 – yet you will find universities in Ethiopia, Sudan, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda on this list. This is very embarrassing for the “giant of Africa”. Now in fact, Nigerian parents are sending their children to other African countries like Ghana and South Africa to study, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in tuition fees alone, not to talk of those that send their wards to the USA or the UK, at significant costs. Imagine the benefits of investing these in our own university system. Surely, there’s an urgent need for reform.

- Fourth, the dearth of qualified teachers is a major issue affecting the quality of our education system. The teaching profession is no longer held in high esteem – a major departure from my school days – and teachers’ pay are considerably low, so relatively low-achieving students often enter Colleges of Education, according to our Federal Ministry of Education. Overall, an estimated 57 percent of primary
school teachers are not fully qualified, according to a recent World Bank report.

- To better illustrate this issue, let me discuss some of the findings from a 2008 assessment of teacher competencies in Nigeria, which in a case study, tested over 19,000 primary and secondary school teachers in Kwara state. The findings were alarming:

  - Only 0.4 percent of teachers achieved the minimum threshold standard, which means that only 75 teachers out of the 19,000 plus teachers tested can be defined competent.
  - 29% of teachers fell into the lowest “band” identified in the study—with teachers at this level described as “falling a long way short of the minimum knowledge and competency threshold. Some improvement may be possible through professional development support but redeployment might be considered.”
  - Teacher qualification did not affect the scores, with graduate teachers performing no better than teachers with lesser qualifications;
  - Subject-specific tests are equally worrying:
    - Only 32 percent of teachers had the minimum knowledge necessary to teach primary mathematics to children up to the age of 10 years old.
    - Nearly 29 percent of teachers were unable to perform simple arithmetical and other mathematical operations.
o Only 1.2 percent of teachers had basic literacy competencies that would allow them to teach English to 10 year old students.

o Nearly 60 percent of teachers could not read “for information”, or use the information in preparing a simple lesson.

• Fifth, corruption and the decay in moral values are decimating the integrity of our education system. Let me preface my remarks here by first acknowledging the many dedicated teachers and professors in our primary, secondary, and tertiary education institutions. They do exist and my uncles, aunts, and cousins are among them. As you know, I come from a family of dedicated academicians with both my parents being retired professors. But these dedicated people are often times laborers in a vineyard of moral turpitude.

• Cheating on a massive scale is rife at our education assessment centers. We see all sorts of examination malpractices from elementary schools to tertiary institutions, including bringing notes and textbooks into exam halls; leakage of exam papers traceable to the printing press or other persons associated with custody of the papers; impersonation - that is hiring people to write exams for candidates often in collusion with invigilators. These days, we see some university lecturers selling inferior textual materials called “handouts”, which many students are compelled to buy for large sums of money. Cultism is now a norm in many universities, with the
associated violence resulting in the deaths of several students on campus. An NGO estimates that 15,790 young lives were lost to cultism-related violence in tertiary institutions between 2006 and 2010. These are the results of loss of moral values in our education system. I cannot fathom a situation in which a parent pays for someone to sit their child’s exams, but it happens in our society. I cannot fathom a situation in which a student offers a professor sexual favors in exchange for good marks or the professor demands it, but it happens every day in our society. Only in Nigeria will invigilators know that there are substitute exam takers in the hall and do nothing about it. This, my friends, has to change.

- Sixth, it is obvious that **substantial inefficiency persists in the use of education resources**. Federal government allocations to the education sector have averaged nearly 8 percent of the total budget between 2004 and 2012. The 2012 education budget is N409.5 billion. There is also the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TEFT) – a 2 percent tax on the assessable profits of all registered companies in Nigeria to improve the quality of education in the country. TEFT raised N130.75 billion in 2011. There is also UBEC’s allocation of N63.12 billion. Yet, the standard of education is not commensurate with this financial outlay. According to a World Bank study in 2008, federal and state governments aggregate spending on education, as a percent of GDP, is higher than the average of sub-Saharan countries, but on par with South Africa and Kenya. Yet learning outcomes in
Nigeria are weaker than in these two countries, as I mentioned earlier. Much of this inefficiency is the result of weak budget management and accountability, which leave room for corruption and mismanagement. A World Bank survey of Nigerian schools found that funds ostensibly disbursed to schools for construction were found to have gone to schools that were not in local registries and could not be found by the survey team, and also to schools in which no construction was taking place. In some states, about 50 percent of schools which should have received funding for construction have nothing to show for the funds. This is quite sad indeed.

From all this, it is clear that the issues confronting our education system are really not primarily about funding but about outright theft of funds, inefficiency, and lack of accountability. Before we pour more money down the hole, let’s plug the hole first. I have total respect for the Ministry of Education who agreed with me last budget not to increase allocations to education till they improve on strategy, execution, and accountability. So what’s the way forward?

**Addressing the Challenges and the Way Forward.**

- It is obvious that we need a paradigm shift, and the way forward is to **educate to the needs of the economy**. We need to educate our workforce to have the right skills and competencies in agriculture, in mining, and other sectors critical to our economic transformation. We need to equip our workers with technical and
vocational skills needed in the country. This is what Korea did to transform their economy. Korea developed a program of “education for economic growth” in 1948, focused on the supply of technical manpower, as needed for economic development. In the 1960s, the Koreans expanded elementary and secondary education through a six-year compulsory education plan and the abolition of entrance examinations into their junior schools to supply the labour intensive light manufacturing sector with workers. Between the 1970s and 80s, they gave policy priority to technical and vocational education, expanded and upgraded technical and vocational training infrastructure by developing vocational high schools, junior technical colleges, and technical universities, to develop technical manpower to support the capital intensive heavy chemical industry. And since the 1980s, they have focused on expanding higher education focused at electronics and other high-tech knowledge industry. We are capable of doing this in Nigeria and we need to work jointly with the private sector to put together the curriculum.

- We need another paradigm shift in gender education. Research has proven that when comparing potential productivity and economic contributions, women are the third largest “emerging market” in the world, after China and India. Increasing women’s productivity through the right education can have a very dramatic impact on our economies. For example, analysis shows that if the potential of
women in the Asia-Pacific were maximized, per capita income of the region will grow by at least 14 percent within 8 years.

- **We need to focus on those geographical zones in our country that are still educationally disadvantaged. We know that in the Southeast we have to work hard to reduce the dropout rate for boys and in the north support increased enrolment and retention for girls.**

- We need a paradigm shift in the way we fund education in this country. I believe that the allocation of resources to schools should be closely linked to performance to improve learning outcomes, as is the case with the World-Bank assisted Lagos Eko Secondary School Program, which achieved dramatic breakthroughs in the first 3 years of operation. Professor Chukwuka Okonjo, who happens to be my father, has written extensively on how we can double or triple our intake in universities using practically the same resources and infrastructure just by changing our teaching modules and approach to learning in the universities. Hello! is anyone listening? The Ghanaians listened in the 1990s and tried out his model. I have a personal example of a different approach in the African University of Science and Technology, Abuja, where a group of Africans in the diaspora set up a university that is a center of excellence in Africa but attracts the best professors in science and technology worldwide, through a modular approach.
• More importantly, we need a paradigm shift in our values and morals. We need to stem the moral decadence in our education system, and parents and guardians need to play an active role in this. We need to teach our wards the difference between right and wrong; we need to instill in them the will for self-development as the only path to success, so that they will not rely on others to take exams for them.

• I know that the Federal Ministry of Education, led by the Honourable Minister Prof. Ruqayyah Rufa’i, has put together a 4-year strategic plan aimed at solving some of the key issues I had mentioned earlier that is – access and equity, quality of the education system and teachers, and inefficient use of education funding. This strategic plan is a step in the right direction. Let me also commend the Honorable Minister of Education for working closely with the states on the implementation of the strategic plan. But we need to work with her to turn these plans into strategic paradigm shifts.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, changing our education system and engendering a paradigm shift is not the work of the education ministry or even the government alone – it involves every one of us – industrialists, parents, teachers, pupils, and interested Nigerians. It is not good enough for you and me to bail out and send our children to private school in and out of the country. The issue is we must think of the millions of children in our public schools who do not have that luxury or opportunity. If we do
not come together to properly educate them, all of us will suffer the consequences of unenlightened leadership and retarded and blighted development. Leave this hall ladies and gentlemen, asking yourselves, what can I do to personally make a difference?

Let me conclude with a Chinese proverb that says, “if you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people”.

Thank you.