

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO CHANGE NIGERIA?

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One of the fundamental problems facing Nigeria today is that the leaders do not have a clear understanding about how to affect the desired change in the society. Most of those involved in the change program think it is a question of designing beautiful logos and fanciful slogans, and gathering some sycophants and 'big names in politics' to launch programs with fanfare. Thus, there has been so much superficiality and failure of change programs in the society.

Recently, a colleague of this writer engaged him with some probing questions about the on-going re-branding campaign in Nigeria, which he reportedly read on the *Nigerian Village Square* website. He started by narrating some of the stories he has heard and read about Nigeria and asked: "What is it that Nigeria is re-branding? Is the name of the country going to be changed? What will Nigeria do about the corrupt police and leaders, and the e-mail scam writers? Why is it so difficult to change Nigeria? He asked other questions not too good to be repeated here.

"Why is it so difficult to change Nigeria?" This question reminds this writer again of the mountain of reform and restructuring programs enthusiastically advanced by the leaders, as solutions to the nation's myriad ills: the NEEDS, the Heart of Africa project, and the Poverty Alleviation programs. In fact, Nigeria has tried a hundred things without positive results. Since the reprise of civilian rule in 1999, the National Assembly has been talking of amending the Constitution, fixing the spotty electricity supply, and the dilapidated refineries, the pot-holed roads and passing the Freedom of Information Bill. There has been a lot of noise about reforming the educational system, the electoral system and the police, and about tackling corruption and the National Identity project, etc. But much remains the same despite all the claims that the reforms are working.

It seems Nigeria is yet to learn from its history; or has it failed to implement what it has learned? Despite the failure of the previous programs, the Yar'Adua administration has introduced some new ones - Seven-Point Agenda and the controversial re-branding campaign-with great fanfare. As a nation, Nigeria is not a bad society, but the actions of the unscrupulous leaders make the society appear

to be so. Their corrupt mentality and insensitivity to the plights of the citizens are the root causes of Nigeria's socio-economic and political predicaments. As Achebe (1984) has clearly stated, "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air..." but leadership.

Leadership comes with responsibility. Good leaders manage and solve problems. But the majority of Nigeria's leaders are without responsibility, causing Nigeria's problems to remain perpetually unresolved. Yar'Adua recently lamented the exclusion of Nigeria from the G20 Summit in London. "Today is a sad day for me and it should be to all Nigerians, when 20 leaders are meeting to find solution to the economic meltdown and Nigeria is not there" (*BusinessDay*, April 3, 2009). But was he expecting to be invited to the august summit? What could he have contributed - to teach them how to create mass unemployment, rig election or to breed corruption? Inviting him to the meeting could have created a false impression that Nigeria is making some progress. He should reflect on

why Nigeria was excluded from the summit and do the right thing. Yar'Adua does not seem to know that the world is watching what he is doing. He does not seem to understand that there is a fundamental difference between espousing fanciful slogans and changing one's attitude and behaviour. Experts in human behaviours believe that personal and social changes involve change in mode of thinking, beliefs and values (Senge 1990) and thus, new and better approach of doing things.

One of the main reasons the reform efforts have failed to yield positive results is because the leaders implement new strategies from the point of their internalised regressive mental model or orientation. As Keidel (1995) has noted, 'we make decisions based on the way we frame life.' And because the society has been managed by leaders without a moral purpose, there are always lethal obstacles to achieving even a modest change in the society. In fact, most of the efforts toward social transformation have actually reinforced the forces that make change impossible.

Was the society designed to resist change? Another problem with Nigeria and its reform efforts seems to lie in the people's willingness to allow the unscrupulous politicians to control the nation's policies. Thus, unreasoned policies and the disruptive internal dynamics are hindering the growth and development of the economy; and the on-going global economic and financial crisis has worsened the situation.

Many Nigerians are poverty-stricken and stressed to the brim, because nothing works. Those

involved in the reform programs have often neglected the human side of reform. They should be made to understand that the welfare of the citizens should come first in any reform program. The recent removal of petroleum products subsidies in the name of deregulation at a time other nations are bailing out their organisations and citizens, is expected to worsen the already ailing economy. High cost of petroleum products has negative distributive consequences on the economy, because oil is used in the manufacturing and distribution of other goods and services.

Nigeria has failed to develop economically, socially and politically because it lacks the preconditions for meaningful economic and political activities. It cannot be over emphasised why the reforms are failing. According to Fullan and Miles (1992), "reform often fails because politics often favours symbol over substance." A mere democratic form of government, it has been argued, is not a prerequisite for economic growth and development. The people should try to distinguish between politics and real restructuring programs.

The leaders are not doing enough to 'overcome the barriers' to effective social reforms (McGonagill 1992). Genuine growth requires mental change. But there are always forces to maintain the *status quo*. To progress, Nigerians must first change their mindset (a revolution of the mind) and tame political corruption, which is "a daunting obstacle to sustainable development." Also, it must create effective structures to sustain the system. A pile of evidence shows that the nation's image would not

improve if the entrenched anti-development activities are not jettisoned. Worse still, the nation could disintegrate because there is a point beyond which a society cannot function.

Attitude matters! Change must be visible in the people's attitude before it occurs in the society. Our 'mental models drive what we do' (Keidel 1995). A change in value and belief could move the society from the current edge of impossibility, bathed in uncertainty, to "the edge of possibility" (Caine and Caine, 1997). No rhetoric or fanciful slogan would stop the leaders from stealing public funds, rig elections, or kill political opponents to acquire or remain in power. Nigeria's leaders should adopt a new way of life, live within their means, and operate within the law. Without removing the obstacles that are holding Nigeria, the re-branding will amount to 'a bridge to nowhere.'

Nigeria has huge, but underused potentials. Critics have noted that investment in human capital is a critical area Nigeria has neglected for too long. No nation would make any meaningful socio-economic stride without viable educational institutions. As this writer has noted elsewhere, the re-branding campaign should have started with re-branding the education sector and other commanding heights of the economy. Economic growth and development require changes in human skills, attitudes and values. And monetary and fiscal (budgetary) policies, which are governmental activities relevant to economic stability, also require mentality adjustment. National budgets, political and economic reforms are potent tools to strengthen the

economy and improve the people's living conditions. But in Nigeria, the masses only read about the nation's budget on the newspaper or listen to it on the radio, but don't feel it.

Respect for the rule of law and human and civil rights should be a part of any reform program. But the masses lack political and economic freedom, and their rights are always violated by the officials who should protect them. Any individual deprived of the basic wherewithal could not participate effectively in a democratic political process. Improved economic freedom could lead to greater economic growth because the freer the people (economically and politically), the better off the economy and the people. As Sen

(1999) observed "expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value, not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volition and interacting with-and influencing-the world in which we live."

Defining achievable goal and purpose are intrinsic to effective social transformation and development. Nigeria has embarked on a daunting task of restructuring a diverse society. Balkanization of the nation (state of the origin requirement for employment) and religious extremism hinder social mobility and development. Some groups perceive a particular set of religious teaching as the absolute truth without any

questions asked; and this denies the citizens the right and opportunity to explore alternative answers to their problems. The society may not progress beyond its current level, if it does not change the way it conducts its affairs.

Mentality change has been noted as the vehicle for personal and social transformation. To get the reforms right, the leaders should know 'what works, and what doesn't', and do the right thing. They should discard the mentality that makes it so difficult to change Nigeria. It is not good enough to copy other 'great nations' without understanding or doing what it takes to be great. The heat is on! Nigeria must change with the rest of the world or perish ^{epi}.

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