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# Education and leadership: Indispensable for Nigeria's economic development

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# EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP: INDISPENSABLE FOR NIGERIA'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The former President of Nigeria (1999 to 2007), Olusegun Obasanjo, talks about the nation's evolving transformation in this interview with Philip Zerrillo.

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## **Africa is quite an unknown continent for many people. What are some of the historical legacies and issues that have made Africa what it is today?**

Africa is a young continent that has been independent for just over five decades. To understand Africa, you need to look back at its history. Africa was colonised by four main colonial powers: Britain, France, Portugal and Spain. The flurry of independence started with Sudan in 1956; and by 1960 almost all nations, including Nigeria, were independent. Some obtained independence through protestation, some through negotiation and some through conflict. But the political, economic and social situation of all these countries at that time was about the same. The countries that were called ‘moderates’ were those without radical leaders, and were known as the Monrovia Group, while the more radical ones were dubbed the Casablanca Group. That was the situation until they all met in 1963 to establish a formal, continent-wide organisation known as the Organisation for African Unity (OAU).

So if I have to say what is right with Africa, I think it would be the ability of our leaders to form a continent-wide organisation, in spite of their differences, and in spite of the push and pull of our former colonial masters. The OAU helped to protect the territorial integrity of its member states and keep as sacrosanct the boundaries we inherited from the colonial masters.

So that was on the political side. In terms of economic development, these were also the heydays of the capitalists and socialists. However the radical leaders saw no reason to continue with the economic heritage they had inherited from the colonial powers, especially when they had the choice. I personally don’t believe we were any better whichever way we went.

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## **What has happened since those early days of independence?**

We have had a spate of military coups. The feeling among the military elite was that the politicians were not doing well. And that was also our experience in Nigeria. But while the military were well meaning, they were also naïve. Moreover, their good intentions did not last too long before they too fell into the trappings of politics. But finally, whether it was a military or a one-party regime, we found out that sooner or later in countries that are very diverse in language, race, religion and economic disparity, democracy remains the best form of government to deal with inner contestations.

So when we came to the 21st century, we had four things going that were very important for Africa. One, for the first time, we were participating in a global UN-devised programme: the Millennium Development Goals, which set targets for various challenges such as the eradication of extreme poverty. Second, the African leaders came together and recognised the need to transform from the OAU to the African Union (AU). This was a markedly different constitutional act from the OAU charter, and was expected to accelerate unity and cooperation among the member states. Third, for the first time, the AU had a continental programme known as the New Partnership for Africa’s Development. This was a strategic framework for pan-African socio-economic development, and something we had never had before. There was also a fourth initiative, the African Peer Review Mechanism, which was a voluntary self-assessment tool, and meant that we could decide ourselves if what we are doing is right or wrong.

Ten years into the 21st century, the *Economist* magazine came out with a banner headline, ‘Africa Rising’. I do not think we are rising as much as, say, the Asian Tigers, but we have started waking up from our slumber. And what has made Africa get to where we are? The answer is the reform and transformations that have taken place in all our countries, particularly those that are related to pro-democracy and good governance. Some of our elections were disputed, but I believe a disputed election result is still better than no election at all. Social reform, healthcare reform and education reform, these are the things we are working on and have made improvements in what we do, where we are, and where we are going.

## **Coming specifically to Nigeria, what changes took place after independence?**

At independence in 1960, we had three political regions, which were very lopsided. We did not have any industry as such. The first thing we needed to do was something about those three regions, but we didn't. As our political parties were also regionally based, it made it all the more difficult for them to come together. The 1963 census, for example, was problematic because we couldn't even agree on the size of our population! Then in 1965, riots broke out and the military was called upon to end them. The nepotism, corruption and lack of good governance at the centre led to a coup in 1966, and that was no good for us. Until then we had an ongoing national economic development plan. But the series of coups and civil disturbance issues diverted our attention from the economy to focusing on security and holding the country together.

In 1970 we ended the civil war and started thinking of a second economic development plan. What was different in the 1971 plan was that it really took our socio-economic development far more seriously than the first plan. It was the first time we had spoken of free education nationwide. Then in 1975 there was another coup, and when that ended in 1979, we established democracy. But thereafter, once again, not much attention was paid to economic and social progress. Primary education and primary health were stopped. However, during this time, 36 states were created out of the four regions, and that prevented the political administration from becoming lopsided. But from 1983 to 1999, the year I was elected president, it was like playing political musical chairs. As a result no one had the time to look at the economic and social issues, which should have been the key occupation of the government.

## **Your term in office was characterised by a commitment to economic and political reform. Nigeria's average economic growth rate doubled to six percent, and foreign reserves rose to US\$45 billion in 2007 from US\$3.7 billion in 1999. How has the country progressed since then?**

During my term as President, we were able to build up enough foreign exchange reserves to pay off US\$30 billion of debt, leaving the country almost debt-free. However from 2007 until the present, once again we have not progressed. Total reserves currently sits well below US\$28 billion. And now the rainy day has come, and we do not have any umbrella above

our head to protect us. Nevertheless we have been able to move politically from one regime to another peacefully and without any incident, and we have been able to sustain democracy and the rule of law.

## **What do you consider to be Nigeria's greatest concern today?**

Youth unemployment. The National Youth Service Corps is an organisation set up by the government to instil values in the country's graduates, and involve them in the development of the country. Despite the shortcomings of the Nigerian government and the frailty of public confidence in its institutions, the consensus among leadership is that youth are the primary drivers of Nigeria's reliability and competitiveness given the exigencies of the global economy. In fact I personally feel very strongly that our youth are not merely our successors, but assets that we must utilise, and without whom we will not be able to progress. But today youth unemployment is more than 50 percent. That's like sitting on a gunpowder keg. And if that is bad in a country of over 180 million, try to imagine how daunting it will be if we still have over 50 percent unemployed in 2050 when we are expected to touch 400 million?

On the eve of the 21st century, the World Bank published a report noting that while the political situation in Nigeria had improved, there was a need to improve on dimensions such as equitable distribution, inclusivity, fairness, justice and state security. I have three thoughts on what is required to realise this: any policy introduced must complement youth empowerment and employment, joint security operations, as well as democratise these processes and promote governance.

## **What does Africa, and Nigeria in particular, need to focus on today to build a better tomorrow?**

The AU needs to be stronger. We need leaders within the AU that can really stand on their own. But the AU needs to be strong, not only politically and military-wise, but also financially. Today the contributions of member states do not even cover the expenses of the head office.

We must also have economic integration in Africa, and that will result in its political integration. Africa has people and raw materials, so what it really needs for economic development are two things, education and leadership. If you have education, but poor leadership, you won't get far. And similarly, if you have good leadership, but the people are not educated and armed with skills, you won't get far either. Look at Singapore. What has made this country? It has no resources to speak of,

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but it does have education and leadership, which led to its success. And that is why I say the two must go together.

Nigeria is part of the Economic Community of West African States, which is a 15-member regional group that promotes economic integration. It is a single, large trading bloc with free movement of people and goods, making it easy for businesses in Nigeria to access almost 360 million West Africans.

If I look at what Nigeria needs today, there are some key building blocks: reducing unemployment, developing health and education, advancement of women, and getting rid of religious and cultural hindrances. Providing employment opportunities is very important, but women's education is also a must, otherwise 50 percent of our population is being excluded from the mainstream. There's a great saying, "When you educate a girl, you educate the whole family." Also, the best form of family planning is women's education. So that is something we must take very seriously and it doesn't take much to do. If you give every child, male and female, nine years of basic education, you would have achieved this.

As for health, basic healthcare is the easiest way to deal with this. If that is good, how many people will require specialists? I believe the provision of free medical services to all pregnant women and children under the age of five is a must. So if you deal with this as well as education, you will have a healthy and educated population of people who are already empowered to fend reasonably well for themselves. And if then you encourage domestic and foreign investment, particularly in the area of agribusiness, your job is done.

Nigeria has at least 350 tribes and two major religions. The first point a leader must understand and accept is that diversity by itself is natural. And the second thing is that if it is natural, then you must accommodate the interests of all of the diverse complements of people you are managing. And where to start is your own office. So in my office, you will find only one or two people out of ten from my tribe. It is thus a must to make every tribe feel that they have a stake, and feel important. It's no more than that, really.

**Olusegun Obasanjo**

*was the President of Nigeria from May 1999 to May 2007*

**Philip Zerrillo**

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