

## The challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria

By

**Professor Ayodele Olukoju**

**Fellow, Nigerian Academy of Letters**

**Vice-Chancellor, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos State**

### Abstract

Recently, the subject of sustainability has become a topical issue in the four corners of the world due to its emphasis on preservation of the environment and the resources within it for the use of the present and unborn generations. While the developed and industrialized countries are vigorously pursuing the sustainability agenda, many developing countries, including Nigeria are lagging behind in this very important global trend. This paper examined the challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper recognized that though the Nigerian economy has been growing, the growth has not translated into development, a condition of well being of the individual citizen and of the nation at large. The paper identified poor leadership, citizens' disconnect from the affairs of the state, lack of strong and viable institutions, poor structure and management of the economy and low standard of education (both formal and informal) as challenges plaguing sustainable development in the country. It was concluded that the quest for sustainable development in Nigeria should begin with a sincere acknowledgement that we have not arrived at a consensus of what development is and the type we want as a nation.

**Keywords:** Challenges, sustainable development, sustainability, economy, Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction

This paper, the challenge of sustainable development in Nigeria, though focused on Nigeria, is set in a comparative, essentially Global South, context. It takes a cue from two recent developments in Nigeria – the rebasing of the economy and the President's usage of certain indices to project his version or vision of development in Nigeria.

For the sake of those who might have forgotten, the rebasing of the Nigerian economy, using current indices, increased the country's Gross Domestic Product to \$510 billion such that we have now overtaken South Africa as the biggest economy in Africa (Ainofenokhai, 2014). Supporters of the President then went to town with the claim that this was proof of the success of his Transformation Agenda. As an aside, we now have a shadowy body called Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria (TAN), which has been spending huge sums of money in national television advertisements comparing our President to such greats as Martin Luther King, Lee Kuan Yew, Nelson Mandela and Barak Obama! An exercise in immodesty, irreverence and mendacity. Suffice to mention that the much touted revised GDP is equivalent to that of a single city – London – in the United Kingdom. This prompted a British MP, John Redwood, to interpret our rebased GDP, juxtaposed with a population of 170 million, compared to London's with a population of 8 million as evidence of our poverty and the need for foreign assistance to tackle it! (Eriye, 2014).

The second issue was the listing by the President of what he considered as indices of development in Nigeria – a Nigerian is listed among the world's richest billionaires, the country has one of the highest per capita rates of private jet ownership, and her citizens are among the most widely travelled in the world! Addressing a May Day rally, the President asserted that: If you talk about ownership of private jets, Nigeria will be among the first 10 countries, yet they are saying that Nigeria is among the five poorest countries. He added that: Nigeria is not a poor country. Nigerians are the most travelled people. There is no country you go that you will not see Nigerians. The GDP of Nigeria is over half a trillion dollars and the economy is growing at close to 7 per cent (Ailemen, 2014; Nwabulo, 2014). Another Nigerian reported, though with disapproval of implicit corruption in the act, that 70 percent of houses on

Edgerton Crescent, London, were owned by Nigerians. The prices of those houses ranged between £3m and £4m (Akasike, 2014).

## 2. Challenges of sustainable development

The critical issue, then, is what constitutes development and whether it is sustainable. The Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) captured the dilemma as follows. On the one hand, economic growth, measurable by the performance of the GDP had been positive over a fifteen year-period, averaging six per cent per annum. This is good compared to growth conditions in most economies around the world, it concluded. But, on the other hand, it acknowledged that the economy is still structurally defective as it is too dependent on the oil and gas sector for revenue, creating serious vulnerability risks. It attributed this to the lack of political will to reform the oil and gas sector (Abioye, 2014).

Herein lies the crux of this paper, the difference between growth and development; the imperative of structural change (Chenery, 1971); and how to make development sustainable. I examine the imperative of growth, development and the sustainability.

The concepts of development and underdevelopment have dominated much social science discourse since the middle of the twentieth century. While development (and modernisation) was held to be the goal of newly independent countries of Africa, critics of orthodoxy in political economy in Latin America also raised issues of underdevelopment, which was the reality that prevailed in much of the Global South. This was embedded in the Dependency Theory or the Development of Underdevelopment discourse associated with Andre Gunda Frank, Cardoso and Theotonio dos Santos, among other leading scholars of the period.

It can be said that development is a slippery concept used loosely in everyday conversation to mean progress, growth, change and the like. In the sense of national economic and social development, it is better described than defined, or used to indicate what it is not. For example, it is not the same as economic growth, which can be measured statistically. Unlike growth, it has certain intangible elements, such as the quality of life, equity and

satisfaction. Indeed, it has been contrasted with structural change (Hollis, 1971), which is fundamental to sustainability.

In the context of this paper, development has both physical or tangible aspects and the intangible dimensions, such as quality of life and human capacity. The former may be called the brick-and-mortar dimension – physical infrastructure of competitive international standards, such as monumental public buildings, electric power stations, military hardware, a national network of railways and well-paved highways, dams, bridges, health care facilities and educational institutions. The intangibles include: the quality of the workforce, the competitiveness of service delivery, the strength and depth of the institutions, the degree of civic engagement, national character/brand and work ethic. In short, development refers to a condition of well being of the individual citizen and of the nation at large, with most or all of the following features: responsive and responsible leadership a stable and growing economy sustained rates of economic growth measurable by the country's GDP even social and spatial distribution of wealth and amenities the resilience and fairness of institutions transparency and inclusiveness of the political system a high and an increasing standard of living a strong middle class, rule of law security of life and property, and the leading role of internal dynamics in the economic fortunes of the country.

It is clear that not all countries would attain the same high grades on all or even most of these parameters. Hence, some nations are more developed than others. In addition, development has both objective and subjective dimensions – the former being what we can all agree to be common to all developed countries while the latter are those peculiarities of development in different national settings. That is, each nation prioritizes what type of development it desires, and at what pace and price. But beyond attainment of development, each country strives to sustain that level and to increase it. In all, development is both a process and an attainment, and it has both objective and subjective dimensions to it.

Relating the above to Nigeria's rebased GDP, it is true that the size of the economy has increased over a fifteen-year period, amounting to macroeconomic growth. But this masks the nature of the growth, which is lopsided in favor of a dominant sector, and the

distribution of the benefits, which is reflected in the microeconomic reality of widespread poverty. In effect, a country can post huge macroeconomic gains, which are unevenly distributed, leading to SAP (Suffering Amidst Plenty). This is the fate of certain crude oil-exporting countries, notably Nigeria and Angola, where a tiny elite owns the bulk of the nation's wealth, which is warehoused in foreign countries, supposedly stable and safer economies with higher returns. But, we know, as we have indicated earlier, that much of this is stolen wealth frittered away in conspicuous consumption – private jets, yachts, non-income yielding real estate, especially, palatial estates that are unoccupied for much of the year, lavish parties, especially for wedding and birthday celebrations, the latest models of expensive cars, expensive jewellery and cosmetic surgery, etc.

Compare this with Qatar, which diversified its oil-based economy and made strategic offshore investments devoid of the villainy and treasonable act of capital flight through the looting of public treasury and money laundering. It can be argued that a rebased economy based upon a debased political economy such as ours is not sustainable.

What can be learnt from successful countries of the Global South is the optimal development of their human and material resources in a sustainable manner. Sustainable development has been defined in many ways but a definition that has enjoyed widespread usage is the one proposed in *Our Common Future*, better known as the Brundtland Report, published in 1987: development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition highlights the interdependence of peoples and nations of the world, and the need to accommodate the needs of the common people while recognizing the constraining influence of, or limitations imposed by, technology, environment/nature and social organizations. It underscores the need for inclusiveness and sensitivity to the plight of the vulnerable members of the community.

Accordingly, sustainable development, properly speaking, rests on the three pillars of economic growth, environmental stewardship and social inclusion.

The question is to be done? The fundamental question is the political question. We cannot develop or restructure our politics, economy and society in a political vacuum. We

must get right the political structure in which all other things operate. The critical issues are those of regional autonomy and initiative, community involvement in and ownership of the development process, integrated or holistic development plans, with workable implementation plans and timelines; quality control and standardisation, and transparency in the handling of public affairs.

Another dimension to our analysis of sustainability is its character – whether it is exogenous or endogenous. While no economy can thrive in isolation, internal dynamics are key to economic survival and resilience. Otherwise, the economy becomes hostage to external interests and are vulnerable to the vagaries of exogenous factors. Hence, as much as possible, growth and development must be driven by internal forces and aimed at satisfying domestic constituencies in the first instance.

The driver of the process is leadership. Without belaboring a point that has been well made by many commentators, including this me, leadership of the right quality is indispensable to national development. A nation rises and falls on this overriding issue: great nations have suffered a decline in power under mediocre, rash, irrational or megalomaniacal leadership. Conversely, visionary, patriotic, sacrificial, well-informed and courageous leadership has altered the fortunes of otherwise vulnerable countries. Think of Theodore Roosevelt in Depression-era United States, Winston Churchill in World War II Britain, Mao Ze Dong in China, Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Mahathir Muhammed of Malaysia, Nelson Mandela of post-Apartheid South Africa and Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani of Qatar.

These men (and women, such as Indira Gandhi of India, Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom and Corazin Aquino of the Phillipines) displayed sterling leadership qualities – sacrificial love of country, integrity, vision, sagacity, staying power and mental strength. They put their respective countries above their personal interests. While one does not subscribe to a big man or strongman view of leadership, examples abound of the influence of inspirational leadership on the turn of events in national life. The defiance of Nazi Germany by Great Britain was personified by Winston Churchill; the resolve of Muscovites to defend their city and nation in the face of the Nazi onslaught was exemplified by Josef Stalin's decision to

stay and fight, rather than cut and run to safety. A young Nigerian entrepreneur lamented the country's leadership deficit as follows:

The problem with Nigeria is neither that of resources nor intelligence. We have what it takes to be a great nation. What we need right now in this country is focused and dynamic leadership. The leadership of this country should learn to emulate what is good from other countries. (Nwokolo, 2014: 22)

However, beyond charisma and courage, we should highlight breadth and depth of knowledge. The limits and limitations of a ruler directly affect the progress of the country. Mere literacy without proper education will not do. A leader in this era of globalization cannot afford to be ignorant or provincial. When a particular Nigerian leader was challenged on an alleged missing sum of \$20 billion, he replied that since the said sum of money was denominated in the US dollar, which he said was American money, the Americans would have known if it was truly missing and raised the alarm! This is symptomatic of the pedestrian thinking of the mediocre leadership that the country is saddled with. Nigeria needs leaders that are rational in decision making and decisive in action. For too long our leaders have been too beholden to vested interests, which facilitated their ascent to power. Pandering to such interests means that most public policies are tailored to suit a powerful minority, which lives above the law. This has created a leadership culture of impunity, intolerance, arrogance, insensitivity and alienation from the people.

Brute force, intimidation by other means, including attack on the livelihoods of opponents, and bribery have been used to cow or buy persons holding contrary, but otherwise rational, views. Nigerian leaders have consistently abused their enormous powers by using state agencies to assault their political opponents. A striking example is the way that federal aviation authorities grounded the Rivers State-owned aircraft in April 2013, about six months after it was acquired, allegedly on the grounds of irregularities in its registration papers. The House of Representatives investigation into the matter exonerated the Rivers State government. Aviation authorities finally released the jet in June, 2014 without any explanation (Ebiri, 2014).

**Olukoju (2014)**

The aircraft had suffered depreciation during its year-long grounding while its owners were denied its use.

For the first time in Nigerian history, aircraft and helicopters owned or flown by opposition governors were grounded on flimsy grounds. Such brazen injustice cannot elicit love for the country, implicit obedience to its laws and respect for its leaders. Yet, no nation can develop under a leadership that lacks self-confidence, capacity for reflection and self-development, and healthy tolerance for dissent, and disdain for superior ideas or, at least, alternative viewpoints. Muscle flexing has since replaced civilized discourse and stunted societal progress. This point has been articulated by Rashidi Ladoja, former Governor of Oyo State, in a recent interview. He said that Governor Rotimi Amaechi has only been battling for survival since the crisis in the state started. And we are talking about development. How can we develop under this kind of political climate? (Atoyebi, 2014).

While we extol the necessity of inspiring and focused leadership, we need to emphasize the role of the citizenry and the community. While top-down policies and plans may thrive in situations of war and other emergencies, and under Stalinist or fascist governments, the bottom-up approach is the bedrock of sustainable development.

The citizenry and the community must be part of the decision making process to make it truly democratic and inclusive. Citizens too must assume some responsibilities – work ethic, civic responsibilities, respect for national monuments and public property, obedience to laws, conventions and legitimate authority and holding leaders to account. The culture of pervasive docility, obsequiousness, acquiescence in wrongdoing, fawning adulation of the rich and powerful, and celebration of mediocrity must be jettisoned for critical followership that is law abiding and vigilant.

Another dimension to the attainment of sustainable development is the building and sustenance of viable institutions. No nation can develop without strong institutions. While strong, patriotic and visionary leadership is required to drive the process, the absence of strong institutions means that the nation or system being built will not outlive the strong leader. The Nigerian tragedy is two-fold – no systematic attempt is being made to build

strong institutions, which might curtail the excesses of the privileged and powerful; and where such institutions existed, every effort has been made to subordinate them to the whims of temporary wielders of power. To cite a contemporary example, one may compare the current state of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to what it was under the Obasanjo Presidency. In addition to the dubious innovation of plea bargaining, no single case has been prosecuted to conviction. The fate of the EFCC seems to also apply to the judiciary. In a well known case, a particular governor was discharged and acquitted by a Nigerian Federal High Court of a 170-count charge of corrupt practices only to be jailed on similar counts by a British court! So, unless we build and sustain watchdog organizations – the military, police, judiciary, etc – and insulate them from the corrosive influence of politics and self-interest, we cannot attain real development, much less sustain it.

What flows from the above is national character, which gives a common behavioral identity to citizens of the same country. The issue is the ennobling defining trait of the country. The Germans and Japanese are known for precision, efficiency, hardwork and quest for perfection. We associate the French with style, finesse and panache in tastes and values; the Americans with grandeur of vision, enduring institutions and an unsurpassed capacity to improvise, innovate and manage diversity; the Singaporeans with strong work ethic, neatness and discipline; and the British with preservation of heritage and tradition, and with tact and diplomacy. These traits are displayed in the running of the respective countries and the external projection of their power, and they have largely accounted for the staying power of these countries. So, what are the positive attributes of Nigeria, Nigerians and their leaders, which we project virtually effortlessly?

Vital to the sustainability of development is the structure and management of the economy. The issues to ponder here are the extent of the diversification of the economy; involvement of the State as regulator or participant; job creation and youth employment; capital flight compared with FDI; the enabling environment for attracting FDI, including the cost of doing business, equitable taxation, infrastructure, etc. Since Nigeria has never been an imperial power, it cannot simply replicate the developmental path travelled by the UK, US,

France or Japan, which had colonies at one time or another. Again, the model of the Asian Tigers is problematic in this age of globalization. So, there must be a vision of how the country can break the shackles of underdevelopment through the judicious use of state power, including certain commercial and fiscal policies. Nigeria is far behind its Global South peers in diversifying and indigenizing its oil and gas sector, harnessing resources for optimal electricity supply and enabling the manufacturing sector to fulfil its potential in the domestic and West African contexts.

A critical plank is the education sector: it is not sheer population size that matters but the quality of the workforce. The literacy rate in Nigeria is relatively low, and lopsided; the education sector has faced serious challenges since the 1980s; there have been debates over the content and direction of the curricula; and the quality of the products of the sector. Various stakeholders – government, parents, teachers and, even, the students – have lamented the crises occasioned by underfunding, inadequate and obsolete facilities, equipment and infrastructure and the gap between institutions and the labour market. Most commentators seem to have reached a broad consensus that the education sector requires sustained and increasing funding; that basic education, the bedrock of the entire system, needs significant improvement; that distance learning is an underdeveloped complement to formal education; that the curriculum of formal institutions needs a strong element of skills acquisition and vocational training; that access to education should be expanded to protect the interest of vulnerable groups, especially, the girl-child, social and cultural minorities, and indigent students; and that civic education coupled with cultural grounding are indispensable elements of the curriculum that we need to make education the fulcrum of our national development.

For those of us in tertiary education institutions, the relevant questions to answer at this juncture are: Should tertiary institutions provide general knowledge or specialist training? How relevant are we to the current needs of the economy and society? What should we - universities, polytechnics and colleges of education - be doing? To what extent do we maintain academic standards and remain globally competitive? I wish to suggest that a holistic curriculum is required at this stage of our national development. We need to produce

**Olukoju (2014)**

graduates of tertiary institutions who can work with their hands and think on their feet. Something must be done to reverse our poor reading culture and our disconnect from our cultural moorings. Ultimately, we should make our education sector more directly relevant to the needs of the economy and society (Otti, 2014). Entrepreneurship education and vocational training should form the backbone of the curricula. The quality of our products has often been questioned though it may be argued that tertiary institutions have between three and five years to reform or transform those who had been moulded by lower-tier institutions for the formative years, ages one to eighteen, of their lives. If the products from the earlier institutions are weak or grossly inadequate, there is little that can be done to transform them overnight into world beaters. Which is why a good number of such persons graduate with poor grades.

At the other end of the spectrum, that is, informal education, the decline in quality of artisanal training and apprenticeship system is evident in the performance of automobile mechanics and electricians, plumbers, masons and carpenters. We now have those called roadside mechanics, who are readily available but offer services of dubious quality. From my experience, no challenge is greater than the poor quality of plumbing in this country, with most buildings bearing tell-tale signs of water leakage from poor plumbing. Little wonder that we now import masons from Togo and Ghana, countries which have maintained a culture of precision, dedication, quality control and pride in artisanal skills that we used to take for granted in Nigeria.

After all is said and done, two telling indications of the underdevelopment of Nigeria are the failure to indigenize education, science and technology, and the unwillingness to set and maintain high standards. This is most striking in the area of public works, where till date we still import engineering firms to construct and maintain our highways, and construct our rail lines, stadia and major public buildings. While we take pride in this, we may learn from the experience of Japan in the nineteenth century. The country had initially relied on Dutch technology in Nobiru port construction with unsatisfactory results given the difference in sea conditions in the respective countries. The Japanese then decided to develop indigenous

port engineering that suited local conditions (Olukoju, 1996). What the Japanese achieved by the end of the nineteenth century has not even been contemplated in Nigeria more than a century later.

With regard to quality control - without which we cannot compete internationally - the setting of minimum benchmarks and the strict enforcement of standards are urgent imperatives. A good illustration of this is the quality of academic publications that must conform to certain standards to meet minimum international standards. An easy way to attain this is to submit one's work to a second opinion through peer review. If there are peer review mechanisms to raise the standard of governance in Africa, we cannot evade assessment by our peers. For example, my paper in a high-impact journal domiciled in the London School of Economics and Political Science (Olukoju, 2009), underwent three stages of assessment – a sniff test by the two editors, who sent their comments; formal assessment by two experts, who submitted reports; and final assessment by two experts, one of whom was involved in the second stage. I had to revise three times in addition to answering queries raised by the editors on some details.

I wonder how many scholars have the stamina for this type of rigorous peer review. I welcomed it because I wanted the paper improved to the point of getting into that world-class, high-impact journal, the leader in the field. It was only after my paper was accepted that others presented at a previous workshop in which I took part were made to pass through the same process before successful papers were published in a special issue of the journal. The moral here is that ability to meet high standards without cutting corners will both improve the quality of one's paper and get it into reputable journals. Sadly, many Nigerian scholars dread or disdain peer review out of pride, ignorance or pettiness. But there is no alternative to excellence if one wants to be relevant and compete globally. As it is for higher education, so it is for industry and other sectors of the polity, economy and society.

If we could describe Nigeria as a developing economy – some will rather paint a picture of retrogression – educational institutions should, naturally, supply its human resource needs. However, it is not clear that current policies were designed to achieve that aim. I am

referring particularly to the seeming romance with paper qualifications at the expense of practical skills, illustrated by the attempt by some polytechnics and colleges of education to run degree programs. My position may not sit well with vested interests but I am entitled to it. But for the obsession with paper qualifications and warped thinking of supposedly educated Nigerians, I see no merit in any institution offering degree programmes when at least half of its teaching staff do not possess the PhD degree. My second objection is that turning polytechnics into universities is shortsighted and ignorant of the evolution of education and the needs of the economy. It amounts to obliterating a major landmark on the education sector landscape. My third objection is practical – I would rather employ a competent product of a polytechnic than a half-baked degree holder. The former can upgrade his skills and education but the latter is a damaged product that can hardly be remedied.

### 3. Conclusion

The quest for sustainable development in Nigeria begins with a sincere acknowledgement that we have not arrived at a consensus of what development is and the type we want as a nation. We should also admit that our leadership has not caught a vision of the type of development that Global South countries, such as Malaysia, Qatar and Singapore, achieved within a generation during the second half of the twentieth century under purposeful leadership. Yet, as important as leadership is to the structural change that we desire, the mass of the people need to be well informed and properly mobilized. It has been suggested, for instance, that education is required to stem the tide of insurgency in the country. Civic education from the cradle is required to inculcate values and build national character, as we have seen in the advanced countries of the world. It makes for easy mobilization and informed followership critical to national development.

No nation can develop without a disciplined and dedicated workforce, the backbone of all the leading countries of the world. Nigeria needs to ensure that workers' skills improve to the standard of the 1960s and 1970s, when there was dignity of labour and pride in one's ability. This calls for self-development and acquisition of cutting-edge knowledge in formal

and informal educational settings. We need skill and character in our workforce to make them efficient, adaptable and relevant to societal needs.

In the final analysis, we can conclude that Nigeria is not a developing country; it is a nation space that has been *underdeveloped* by its leadership and people. Hence, the salvation of Nigeria lies in the hands of all Nigerians. To *develop* and sustain the tempo, the country needs to harness endogenous dynamics, impetus and effort. Development is not a gift from abroad; there must be a local awareness of its necessity and burning desire for it. Once achieved, its sustenance cannot be outsourced to external forces. Central to this enterprise are a focused, visionary and sacrificial leadership and a mobilized, well-informed and galvanized citizenry. Enough time has been wasted on majoring in minor things; it is time for Nigeria to achieve its true potential. But the task is everybody's business – there is no room and time for buck-passing. It is now or never.

## References

- Abioye, O. (2014, June 2). Nigeria's economy still fragile – LCCI. *The Punch*, p. 40.
- Ailemen, T. (2014, May 2). Nigeria among top 10 private jet owners in the world -Jonathan ...Says distribution of wealth, not poverty, is our problem. *The Union*, accessed at <http://theunion.com.ng/nigeria-among-top-10-private-jet-owners-in-the-world-jonathan-says-distribution-of-wealth-not-poverty-is-our-problem/>, 7 August 2014.
- Ainofenokhai, J. (2014, April 13). Rebased GDP, world bank and Nigeria's realities. *The Vanguard*, accessed at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/04/rebased-gdp-world-bank-nigerias-realities/>, 7 August 2014.
- Akasike, C. (2014, June 2). Nigerians own most houses on London's expensive street. *The Punch*, p. 36.
- Atoyebi, O. (2014, August 5). Impeachment: PDP, APC are the same, says Ladoja. *The Punch*, p. 22.
- Hollis, C. B. (1971). Growth and structural change. *Finance and Development*, 8(3), 16-27.
- Ebiri, K. (2014, June 6). Rivers govt plane might have lost engine warranty. *The Guardian*, p. 67.
- Eriye, F. (2014, June 1). Rebasing revisited. *The Nation on Sunday*, p. 18.

**Olukoju (2014)**

- Nwabulo, F. (2014, May 1). Jonathan: Private jets show Nigeria is not poor. *The Cable*, accessed at <http://www.thecable.ng/nlc-president-asks-jonathan-to-get-his-men-out-of-abuja>, 7 August 2014.
- Nwokolo, N. (2014, June 6). Saheed Kekere-Ekun: Entrepreneurship is germane to national development. *The Guardian*, p. 22.
- Olukoju, A. (1996). *Maritime trade, port development and administration: The Japanese experience and lessons for Nigeria*. Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies.
- Olukoju, A. (2009). The United Kingdom and the political economy of the global oils and fats business during the 1930s. *Journal of Global History*, 4,(1), 105-125.
- Otti, A. (2014, July 16). Fixing the Nation's educational system. *The Guardian*, pp 70-71.

