

EMPOWERMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT

I wish to begin by thanking Mr. D N Sabarwal for his kind invitation to speak at this event. I should also congratulate NIIT on the occasion of its second anniversary in Nigeria. I was given the privilege of choosing the subject of my short talk, but that turned out to be much more of a challenge than a privilege, because I then had a dilemma in deciding on a suitable subject. I eventually settled for the theme Empowerment for development, in the hope that an event like this provides an opportunity to turn our minds to one of the burning issues of the day.

Nations have long realized the crucial role that people play in the process of advancement, and modern development is measured primarily in terms of the quality of life or Human Development Index, and not just in hard economic statistics. HDI is an aggregate of several dimensions including life expectancy, access to the basic needs of life, literacy, infant mortality rate, unemployment, and the extent to which the youths are actively engaged in productive endeavours. It is no surprise that we are living through a demographic transition driven by advances in medical science and with the consequence that communicable diseases have given way to non-communicable ones as primary health concerns.

In a macro sense, therefore, people must be at the heart of a nation's development strategy. I believe this is one fundamental area of error in the Nigerian development model over the years. We seem to have based our development solely on physical infrastructure and neglected the people. The result is that the people are patently unable to put those structures to the appropriate use, let alone maintain them. We can site

several examples when we observe how quickly some of the structures in our landscape get abused and in some cases destroyed.

Human Development Index for selected countries, 1998

(Source: UNDP)

	HDI	Life expectancy %	Infant mortality per 1'000	Adult literacy %	Get clean water %
Thailand	67	68.8	31	94.7	89
Indonesia	105	65.1	45	85.0	65
Botswana	122	47.4	39	74.4	70
Zimbabwe	130	44.1	53	90.9	77
Nigeria	146	50.1	112	59.9	50
Cote d'Ivoire.	154	46.7	90	42.6	72

This model also errs in that it creates the impression that government is the provider of all things. Unfortunately, it would appear that we are making the same error we made in the past, building things instead of building people. I believe that investing in people should be high priority. When we build people, they will in turn build things. Investment in

people means education, health and social security. These are drivers of quality of life and this is where the contribution of NIIT in the area of education is commendable

The youth dimension is a particularly critical one for our country because we have a very young population. 45% of our people are eighteen years old or less. But this also places a lot of responsibility on the youths themselves. The skill you have acquired confers on you the responsibility to make a difference in your generation.

The central role of the human capital in any nation or enterprise has never really been in doubt, and I am sure you have often heard it said that people are the most important of the assets available to any enterprise. People are the most important because the productivity of all other resources available to the enterprise is determined by the productivity of the people. This fact has become so important that today we live in the knowledge age where the only real competitive advantage for any firm is the people it employs and their knowledge they possess. Companies that really understand this will prosper. Those that don't will suffer tremendously.

Our world today is changing so rapidly, thanks to the new world system of globalisation, and the driving forces of technology and liberalisation. Technology has made many things possible, which were unattainable before. For example, you now don't need to construct a library building because you can have a virtual library on the Internet. Satellite technology now enables the monitoring of an individual corn plant anywhere on the globe, and the total crop of a nation can be predicted with amazing accuracy. We have seen missiles launched thousands of

miles away hit the intended target with striking precision. The change process has been made more complex by the democratisation of finance, information and technology – a process that has given momentum to the power of technological innovation in recent years. The force of globalisation helps create a new world economy with such energy and verve that is unstoppable. The new economy demands an ever-increasing degree of liberalisation, which generates tremendous growth in world trade on an annual basis. There is a big prize to be won by those who take advantage of the opportunities in the global market place, though there are often risks as well. For example the market place is a harsh competitive environment, and has no place for laggards.

This new world system has permanently replaced the previous one – the Cold War – which simply partitioned the planet into two. That globalisation force is creating significant advances in world trade, which is now galloping at 7% per annum, and the advances in turn have broadened the opportunities for growth and development. Much as debates in some places have sought to demonise globalisation, the realistic response is the famous acronym – TINA. Indeed there is no alternative path to prosperity in the new natural world than to position for the opportunities it presents. The opportunities abound at the individual, community, national and regional levels.

The changes in our world has not just been limited to the fancy bits of technology, which makes the transfer of capital possible at the click of a button, or which removes physical distances and eradicates age old geographical boundaries. The new world has become increasingly interconnected, with the ultimate melting pot in the World Wide Web. Associated with the web is a level of transparency of information that has never been seen before. The traditional barriers have crashed, and the

lowering of tariff barriers means that competition can come from any part of the globe. The competitive forces have driven innovation into high gear, and that is why the preparedness of the people resource can make the difference between success and failure. The digital revolution has been so strong as to split the world into three groups: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened.

This is where we come back to the vital imperative of preparing the human capital to empower and fortify them against the fierce environment in which they must compete. I congratulate the crop of the alumni of NIIT present here today who I am sure will take their place and be counted in this revolution. Your newly acquired skill is meant to prepare you for the new world, and to participate in the opportunities that abound to lift our nation. However please note that your certificate now only qualifies you to serve, and not to be served. It is important for you to bear this truth in mind, because, as you know very well, the rules for success have changed. While technology is the main catalyst for change, technology is also a victim of its own success. The life cycle of any innovation today is extremely short, and I am sure you have been told that in the arena of computing, the power of computers doubles every twelve months, and the cost halves in the same period. This rapid development in the computing field means that education for you must become a life-long endeavour. In effect you have only just begun the learning process, and your new skill is your passport to continuous learning.

But what does all this mean for us as a nation, for our businesses, and as individuals?

First let me share a few general thoughts:

1. The currency of today's world is not the dollar, sterling or yen. The currency of the world is information. Those who will rule the world and wield the greatest influence are those who can assemble, process and use information.
2. In the new world, there is no place for number 2, and yet there is only room for one at the top. That means you either win or you are down and out. If you do not believe me, I challenge anyone in this gathering to remind us who came second in the last Olympics!! You just don't remember.
3. It is true that the world only associates with success, but increasingly, success will only be recognised if it has integrity with it. In other words you can command respect by the outstanding quality of your personality and the standards that you are identified with, but you cannot demand respect.
4. Competition has become a constant, and success is determined by competitiveness – how much better you can be than the other guy in whatever measures or criteria are important to the situation on hand. For example the capacity of nations to attract investment is a function of their competitiveness in providing suitable environment to the investor.

Let us look first at the implications for us as a nation.

Our capacity to generate and process data, and deploy the resultant information for planning purposes has not been strong. We have also tended to pay only casual attention to details. Where we have the information, it is doubtful if we deploy them for our development ambitions. For example, we know that at least three million children will be born this year if we translate our population growth rate as the net of new births and deaths. That means that fresh school entrants in 6 years

time will be three million roughly. If we aim for an ideal situation of thirty children per classroom, it means we must have 100000 classrooms available for only the fresh intake in 2006. This excludes, of course, the needed classrooms for all the older children in higher classes. By extension, we can determine the number of classrooms we need nationwide, and phase the construction to meet the target we have set. Technology enables us to plot the ideal location of schools for maximum learning around the residential concentrations, and to spread out for purposes of avoiding over-concentration of development, as well as deploy very efficient building systems. Our development paradigm has to take on a new thrust and you represent a corps of new talent that must change that within a very short time. It is not productive for you to keep blaming the leadership of the past. You now have tools in your hands, and you must deploy it otherwise the generation after you will blame you too.

Of course you do not have the capacity to change everything that needs to be changed. For example in order to enhance our competitiveness, we need to diversify and deregulate our economy as well as reduce the cost of doing business through tariff reform and major improvement in the standard and efficiency of infrastructure. However, my challenge to you is to concentrate on your circle of influence.

Implications for business

Business enterprises need to benchmark their operating efficiencies and product quality against international standards. This ensures that we attain quality standards that match those of other countries we see as successful. Strategy development has become a dominant success factor, and the role of IT has changed to that of an enabler in the firm, rather than a service function. Many of the alumni members here today will hope to work in an

IT department, but companies in the future no longer require the MIS or IT department that is common today. In our company, IT is incorporated in the business development role, and is not headed by an IT specialist. This means that as IT specialists you should see yourself more in the context of business, rather than software application development.

Implications for individuals

You live in an interconnected world, and must compete in a knowledge environment. This demands that you must be the best you can be in your field, and you will achieve this only if you commit yourself to life-long education

Secondly, you must become active change agents. Gandhi said many years ago that we must be the change we wish to see in the world.

Thirdly, your attitude is everything. Your attitude determines your altitude. For a start you need to understand that your certificate has prepared you for service, and not to be served. Remember that there is no place any more for Number 2.

Fourthly, the world may be a harsh place, but there is also an increasing demand for integrity, accountability and openness. Be careful how you choose your role models, and ensure that you apply yourself to the age-long principles of hard work. Seek improvement in all you do on a daily basis.

Bunmi Oni

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