

“Will we end up just like the generations before us – unprepared, hypocritical and ineffectual?”

Speech Title: What if we are not the Turning Point Generation?

(Being Text of the Opening Address by Chude Jideonwo, Executive Director of The Future Project, at the Nigeria Symposium for Young & Emerging Leaders 2012, held on March 19, 2012 at the Shell Hall, Muson Centre, Lagos)

Let me first thank those who have made today possible. Our co-presenter First Bank, our co-organisers EnoughisEnough Nigeria, the International Republican Institute and Channels Television; as well as our funders and partners the Ministry of Youth Development, the World Bank, the Nigeria LNG, Paradigm Initiative Nigeria as well as our media partners Beat FM, FAB, NigeriaNewsDesk CpAfrica.com, BellaNaija.com and Y! (www.ynaija.com) .

In April last year, I learnt – perhaps the hard way – an enduring lesson about leadership. I had been invited as one of 6 young people to speak to President Goodluck Jonathan about specific issues concerning the youth at the President’s pre-inauguration meeting with youth. It was a well-received speech at the venue. My speech asked Mr. President to take responsibility for the corruption in his government and emphasized that anything but a bold departure from the past would lead to failure. In a

prophecy partially fulfilled through the historic #FuelSubsidyRemoval protests in January this year, I warned that “We are watching you.”

Unfortunately, that otherwise productive event was tainted by stories of money changing hands after myself and many others had left – and in the aftermath, SaharaReporters.com published a false, and rather dodgy story, that I was one of the brains behind both the event and the subsequent ‘Naira rain’. The disappointed responses were visceral – many young people thought their trust, their faith had been abused.

I was livid. Penning a rejoinder to the site, and taking to social media, I set about defending the “small integrity” that I had. I remember that I spoke to Mrs. Obiageli Ezekwesili, our headline speaker, and she described it succinctly as my leadership ‘baptism of fire’.

Op-eds were written that I found terribly unfair. But from one such article, much of which I still disagree with, was a paragraph that stood out: “There is a reason why Nigeria is the way it is today and we all know it. To get results that will give us some level of satisfaction, we must do differently when we get the chance to do so not act like our parents can be expected to act.”

Suddenly, I realised: This wasn’t about me; it wasn’t about my integrity and my desire to defend myself against a terribly false accusation - it was about a disillusioned generation that had decided to hold its primary representatives to a higher standard; and our mutual duty

to each other to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of those before us.

And that is the real tragedy; that you can look at the young people around you – those in government, those in the opposition, those who are critics - and sadly not see much difference from the past. We see our friends who get into government and become just like the rest of them, members of the opposition whose principled disagreements cease soon as they are given a seat at the table; we see critics who choose sensation over sense, bombast over engagement, and insults over nation-building. Essentially, by observation and interaction, we have become like those fathers.

That scares me. Are we set as a generation to prove the cynics right? Those who think that all the passion for country and hunger for change are just part of a cycle of Nigerian leaders who are only concerned about their pockets? Those who are convinced that Nigeria can never change, that everyone is just looking for a piece of the pie and so they will not waste their time occupying anywhere?

As anyone who has read Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria* knows – every generation has sworn to be better, but has colossally failed. Will we end up just like the generations before us – unprepared, hypocritical and ineffectual? Starting out burning with passion, praised for skills, reaching great personal heights but ultimately changing nothing? Will we become the examples that the next generation will point to in a vicious cycle of failure?

No. No, no, no, no, no; we cannot afford to provide to prove them right. We are supposed to be the Turning Point Generation – we are supposed to be the generation where everything changed. It doesn't mean that we will be angels or that we will not stumble amid the pressure now and then; it means our hearts must be in the right place; and we are prepared to do the work to be different.

The truth is, we are not intrinsically better than those that came before us. As my friend Tolu Ogunlesi wrote on the YNaija Frontpage two weeks ago, *“The above and more have conspired to convince us that the answer to our problems is to cut down on the numbers of ‘oldies’ with access to power, and allow the youth to have a shot. I hear it all the time, those who insist that until everyone above a certain cut-off age is put to death by firing squad, Nigeria will not progress.*

“But really, does the novelty and exuberance that youth offers guarantee change by itself? Should we continue making the mistake of assuming that by themselves Nigerian youth will change their country, and succeed in accomplishing what all those ageing leaders failed at?”

“I suspect it's high time we cured ourselves of a certain blind optimism in the power of the ‘youth’. The young have it in them to be as clueless and as corrupt and as close-minded as the old. Our social media savvy and general openness to technology will not by itself save us.”

What arrogance to think that we are better than those presently in leadership just because we were born in a different generation!

See, it is difficult to see Nigeria's problems from the rooftop of the Transcorp Hilton! It's about crying fire and brimstone on Twitter – it's about what happens when you see the kind of money, for instance, that you have never been seen, to do something that you had sworn never to. That's why "good people" get into the lavish lifestyle of Aso Rock and other centers of power and become unrecognisable. In the past year, as a deliberate student of power and governance, I have been shocked by a lot of things; including the amount of money – cash! – that circulates in the public sector and its incestuous relationship with the private sector.

Ah, ladies and gentlemen, it is not just to say "I will not be corrupt!" Passion alone cannot withstand corruption. When you enter government for instance, you have to navigate a dysfunctional civil service, an entrenched patronage-and-sycophancy system, a systemic disregard for honour, ample opportunities for corruption, the ethnic and parochial fault-lines. You have to have be prepared.

Lee Kuan Yew, Lula Da Silva, Nelson Mandela, Paul Kagame – individuals who have transformed their countries – did that, not by blind passion, but by determined strategy. Being better comes from doing better, from learning better, from strength of character built over time, and solidified by practice.

That is why we are here. That is why we have here gathered young leaders from across the breadth of the country. We have to build our capacity to do better, before we get sucked in – under the pressure; the pull between career

and passion, between advocacy and income; before needs and wants pull us in places we swore never to go.

It is in our own interest – it is enlightened self-interest. If not, any of us here who are leaders will become the citizen ducks when the inevitable mass revolt occurs and heads roll. You will be leaders in a country that is ungovernable and where your own children cannot live in. I don't want that. You don't need that.

At The Future Project we always say: don't work to change Nigeria because you are patriotic; don't work to change Nigeria because it is the right thing to do; don't work to change Nigeria because it is a duty – let's work to change Nigeria, because we have no choice.

So let us have a frank conversation. For our own sakes, let today be the start of something sustainable. Let us drill and grill the Lead-In speakers and not let them go until we have interrogated thoroughly. This is not a time for dead clichés. Not here, not today. After all, this is not a gathering of politicians gaming for a piece of the pie; this is a hall pulsating with energy. Let us talk sincerely to ourselves about our own challenges, let us start a discussion that will not end.

“Young Nigerians ought to start toning down that “Na we turn, give the youth a chance!” noise. It won't save us from driving Nigeria deeper into a hole, when the buck begins to stop at our tables. The noise we should be making, instead, should be around this question: “What can we do NOW, to

increase our chances of making Nigeria work, when the time comes?”

Today, we must answer that question.

God keep us all, and God bless Nigeria.