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Human Capital Development for Economic Growth and Poverty Alleviation in the Niger Delta Creating a New Generation of Nigerians and Niger Delta Youth

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Human Capital is defined as the combination of skills, competencies, knowledge and personality attributes embodied in the ability to perform tasks and assignments which produce economic value. It is a combination of attributes gained through education, training, experience, learning and development. It is the primary resource that is critical to the success of the best businesses and nations today.

The Niger Delta region can indeed be termed the goose that lays the golden egg of Nigeria. Over 80% of Nigeria's GDP, 95% of its national budget, and 90% of foreign exchange earnings come from this area. The Niger Delta is spread across six Nigerian states namely Ondo, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom States. Its people are primarily Ijaw with other tribes such as Itsekiri, Ilaje, Urhobo, Isoko, Edo, Ibibio, Ogoni, Ekpeye, and Ikwerre belonging therein. There are over 200 communities and 40 clans in this territory and diverse mechanisms of culture, rulership, and resource control. .

Since oil and gas were discovered in Oloibiri in 1956, the bulk of Nigeria's income has been generated from the export of primarily crude petroleum products from this region. Regrettably, there has been very little high level participation from the Niger Delta indigenes in the exploration, exploitation, or production of oil and gas which is being depleted on a daily basis before their very own eyes. Processing and refining has remained at its lowest average since Nigeria's three refineries were commissioned.

Historically, the Niger Delta communities were farmers and fishermen but today few of them are pursuing these previously lucrative occupations because the land and waters have been polluted and the environment degraded. Youth restiveness has thus become a means of venting their resentment towards the degradation of their environment and depletion of oil and gas resources without their active engagement or any sustainable development to show for the depletion. The Niger Delta today is plagued with restive youths who are yearning to become true beneficiaries of the wealth that is being generated in their immediate environment.

With Youth Restiveness being the bane of the Nigerian society, particularly in the Niger Delta and its environs, it is a basic requirement to have Economic Growth and Poverty Alleviation as the focus of the federal government of Nigeria. Nigeria's economic growth and well being is hinged on improved and qualitative education, empowerment, and enlightenment programs. Nigeria needs to develop its own people so that they are most knowledgeable to work through processes and systems that create value to its own economy foremost as well as the most promising markets. Optimization of Nigeria's natural resources and processing with a view to transform them into finished products is dependent on people development.

Nigeria has a record of very large gaps in the well-being of its people which leaves room for huge socio-economic divisions amongst its citizenry. In the UNDP, Human

Development Report 2009, the HDI recorded in 2007 for Nigeria is 0.511, which gives the country a rank of 158 out of 182 countries with available data.

The federal government is not compliant with its own policy thrust for education in the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, which is supposed to:

- Provide unhindered access to compulsory universal basic education to all citizens as a bridge to the future socioeconomic transformation of Nigerian society, and
- Establish and maintain enhanced quality and standards through relevant, competency-based curricula and effective quality control at all levels.

To achieve Vision 2020: 20, an urgent national policy trust and statement are required to stimulate Private-Public Sector partnership that would result in world-class human capacity, institutions, and infrastructure development programs. The oil and gas industry must develop people towards provision of quality goods and services that are relevant to the Nigerian and global oil and gas industry. Linkages with other sectors of the Nigerian economy must result from its activities. There is a need to refocus the government's attention to quality education and human capital development in a holistic manner within the framework of a national development plan.

Wealth Creation

Wealth can only be created and sustained by individuals, teams, groups and organizations that share a common mission and a vision, coupled with the fact that goals are set up to ensure that capacity, capabilities, and the right competencies to manage and optimize resources are available in huge quantity. The need for youth training and empowerment in the Niger Delta so that Nigeria becomes a top 20 country by the year 2020 with skilled Nigerians engaged in the rehabilitation and development of the Niger Delta can not be over emphasized.

Foreign Direct Investment

Investment in Human Capital translates in the medium to long-term into socio-economic development which in turn attracts Foreign Direct Investment. Foreign Direct Investment will always gravitate towards where there are vast consumer markets, highly skilled labor, lower cost of labor, and maturing industry clusters. A young workforce with a passion for learning in Science, Engineering and Technology is key to the future of any emerging economy.

The Nigerian government needs to allocate more money to education, skill development, vocational, technical, professional, leadership and entrepreneurial training. Public sector-Private sector partnerships should be embarked upon to nurture skills sets which are relevant and critical to the key sectors of our economy. Gap analysis should be undertaken with the intent to close the gap and resources made available to achieve increased productivity and enhanced performance.

Nigerian Content Development in the Oil and Gas Sector

Nigerian Content is defined as the quantum of composite value added or created in the Nigerian economy through the utilization of Nigerian human and material resources for the provision of goods and services to the petroleum industry within acceptable quality, health, and safety and environmental standards in order to stimulate the development of indigenous capabilities. A target of 45% by 2006 and 70% by 2010 was set when this

definition was given. However, in 2010, quite unfortunately we are yet to achieve the 2006 target.

In the last three years, the Nigerian Content vision to transform the oil and gas industry into the economic engine for job creation and national growth by developing in-country capacity and indigenous capabilities has become more widely acceptable as “value addition.” Human Capital development has also become the most probable means and major consideration that presents itself as a low hanging fruit for achieving any major recordable success. There are many Nigerians who have excelled in various industries and countries: Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Dr. Phillip Emeagwali, Prof. Wole Soyinka, Prof. Chinu Achebe, Dr.Obi Ezekwesili, and Dr. Rilwanu Lukman to mention just a very few. Given the opportunity and enabling environment, Nigerians possess the ability to excel in a chosen career.

The United Nations acknowledges that to achieve appreciable development and halve poverty by 2015, education is key. Therefore, investment in the delivery of qualitative education, training, and technology acquisition in institutions of learning is fundamental. The Nigerian vote towards education in its 2010 budget is 6.1% which is a far cry from the stipulated 26% that is advised by UNESCO. This huge gap will impact adversely on its economic growth. To alleviate poverty and increase the value of its human capital Nigeria must embark upon value-adding activities such as:

- Increasing the national budget on education from 6.1% to 26%;
- Infrastructure development and development of youth friendly schools;
- Teacher training, learning and development;
- Upgrade of science laboratories;
- Upgrade of curriculum to stimulate experimental know-how and applied knowledge;
- Career counselling, role modelling, mentoring and coaching;
- Promotion of merit-based certification;
- Implementation of international certification and accreditation of programs;
- Motivation through the award of prizes and recognition for the brightest and best students, teachers and lecturers; and
- Promotion of industry and government sponsored entrepreneurship and leadership programs.

The federal government of Nigeria should promote merit, excellence, creativity, and innovation amongst its teachers and career counsellors such that it impacts positively on its youth. Incentives are required to stimulate excellence and increased productivity. A framework that will produce the right caliber of world-class professionals, vocationals, and entrepreneurs who will transform Nigeria from a consumer oriented nation is urgently required.

With a focus on the delivery of value adding, quality goods and services, Nigeria can develop its own John. D. Rockefeller’s, Andrew Carnegie’s, William Vanderbilt’s, Andrew Mellon’s, Henry Ford’s, Sam Walton’s, Bill Gates’, Paul Getty’s, Howard Hughes’. The need to create environments and the right stimulus for entrepreneurs and SME’s to evolve can not be over emphasized. Partnership between the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), private sector companies and educational institutions must evolve to make education more relevant and exciting to the Niger Delta youths.

Nigeria needs to develop and aggressively utilize the best teachers and career counsellors who can transform, nurture and develop the leaders, strategic thinkers, and planners of a greater Nigeria. Public-Private sector partnership should focus on Technology Transfer, Skills Acquisition, Capacity, Capability and Competence Development with the involvement of NGO's in some regions. These programs will include projects that enhance educational and training institutions, health facilities, adult functional literacy, vocational and skills acquisition, information and communication technologies (ICT) as well as in research and development which are all tailored to the national socio-economic requirements.

To stimulate poverty alleviation through human capital development, the SMEDAN, private sector and educational partnership activities in the Niger Delta should focus on promoting the following:

- Leapfrogging. From the agrarian age (forestry, tree planting, growing of cash crops for processing) to the ideas age (process technology, information technology and high tech industrialization and manufacturing of raw and crude resources);
- Night Schooling and Day time Entrepreneurship; and
- Investment in incubation centers, innovation centers, and technology/knowledge clusters.

The leaders and rulers of these diverse people must cater for the spiritual, emotional and psychological well being of Nigeria's youth if vices such as kidnapping and other forms of violence are to be eradicated. The healing process should involve:

- Environmental remediation and promotion of agro-based projects;
- Resuscitation of mothers unions and faith-based programs in churches;
- Promoting love and unity in families, clans, communities and the region; and
- Career counselling, mentoring, coaching and role modelling.

The spate of kidnapping, youth restiveness and violence in the Niger Delta area, which sometimes manifest in intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts can be curbed and totally stopped if the government, multinational oil companies, and the people of the Niger Delta can see human capital development as the key to economic growth and poverty alleviation.

About the Author

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