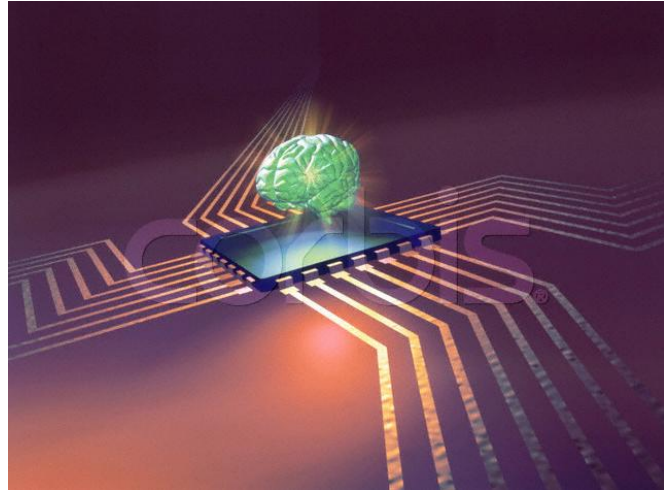


MATTERS ARISING:

Building the Foundation for an Information-Driven Society



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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria would most likely be a record holder when it comes to hosting events, drafting documents and launching reports. But what we need are events that make intellectual discourse possible, documents that guide proactive action and reports that truly evaluate our path to collective progress. I believe that this national convention of the Nigerian National Association of Computer Science Students would belong to the latter category.

Therefore, I consider it a privilege to be with you and to consider with you, important issues that bear largely on our existence and the assurance of a sustainable tomorrow. Many of us grew up with great ideas and possible groundbreaking dreams, but it is sad that many have lost hope in the nation we call ours. This presentation will consider the need for young people to take charge of their own lives and maximize available opportunities that Information and Communication Technologies provide.

In doing this, we would be able to benefit from tomorrow's promises, which unfortunately would not be equally distributed. Those who rise to the challenge will eat the fruit of the land... and for those who sit still, complaints, anger and possibly frustration would be words that dot their stories.

It is our individual and collective responsibility, therefore, to explore possible opportunities of developing ourselves, contributing to national development, participating in regional cooperation and playing a leading role in global processes. If we fail in the days of adversity, it would not be the fault of the nation or the type of education you had; it would be directly proportional to the strength of our present-day preparations.

Welcome to the world of opportunities. Join me as we explore the great need of building a strong foundation for today's youth in order to prepare Nigeria for the period of history that has many names, but described by the planning committee of this convention as the Information-Driven Society.

MATTERS ARISING: PEER ENERGY (“PNRG”)

Take a look around you in this hall, and ask if your neighbour is graduating within the next few months. If s/he will, then ask if s/he’s ready for the “after-school-life”. It is sad to note that by the time the ink will dry up on many of your final answer scripts, the profession you’re being trained for would have moved on and you would be left to join the rat race – trying to catch up through *emergency programs* of varying pedigree.

Today, many young people graduate as “still births” – dead on delivery, unable to cope with the expectations of the New Economy, and green horns joining the mass labour market (at the mercy of employers). Striving at the base of the pyramid, today’s youth stands the risk of being frustrated after years of training within the four walls of our tertiary institutions... but it should not be so! True, dynamic global precedence is not in conformity with the present level of preparation young Nigerians are exposed to but we need to take the bull by the horns and carve a path for ourselves within our chosen career sphere – and I assume most of us in this room are planning to work within the Information Society space.

There are tons of issues to consider but I will explore the possibility for today’s youth to take advantage of what I refer to as PNRG (pronounced “peer energy”). PNRG stands as acronym for **P**ersonal Development, **N**ation Building, **R**egional Cooperation and **G**lobal Participation. These four “matters arising” will help you build a strong foundation for an Information-Driven society.

1. Personal Development

Have you noticed that even in the midst of complaints and general sense of “hopelessness”, some people – from your class, and possibly in the same tutorial group with you – always go on to make the best of their lives. You read about them, hear of them, see them on TV, refer to them as your “very good friends”... maybe that explains why they say that success has many fathers and mothers – and classmates too.

There are two types of people your school will produce: those who make things happen, and others. Some of the “others” discuss what happened, some criticize and some are just indifferent – watching events as they unfold. But **you** cannot afford to join the camp of the “average” because that is exactly what they are, average. Never outstanding, not too happy, managing what is available for now... average.

I dare say here that those who study beyond class work are those preparing for a great life. Where exactly are you headed in life? When we say, “the whole world will stand aside for a man/woman who knows where s/he’s going”, we mean it. You need to sit down and ask yourself sincere questions about what your goals are; otherwise external factors (fuel price hike, student unrest, political

insensitivity and the many “isms” that plague Africa) will set your standards for you! I will continually advocate the need for a Personal Mission Statement (as originally presented by Steven R. Covey in his book, “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”). Fortunately, I just reviewed mine and would not shy away from sharing that example with you:

*“To **God**, I owe my ALL
That my life, walk and ways may please Him
An expression of Your image on the earth
Seeking to serve his generation”*

*“To the **Sesan’s** and the extended family
I owe the duty of a humble son and brother
Your ambassador outside the home
And a proud extension of the clan*

*“To my best friend and **twin**
The completion of my frame
And expression of beauty and grace
I owe you, as a true husband and helpmeet*

*“To my **son(s)** and **daughter(s)**
The true reflection of strength
Do I owe the duty of father, mentor and friend
That in you, greatness may be amplified*

*“To **friends**, met on the various walkways of life
I pledge to strive towards a true friend
Even in the institutions that helped shape me
That I may always have one extra shoulder – for you*

*“To also build an impacting and world-class **career**
Application of Information and Communication Technologies for Development
For individuals, organizations, nations, regions and international entities
That is my career call – yield, enjoy, fulfill... I must*

*“And at the **end** of my three days
Yesterday, today and tomorrow
That all stakeholders of my life may say –
He served God’s purpose in his generation!”*

These are not just words, they (will) guide me – now and in the future. They (will) help me in the face of frustrations that make others give up on dreams and high hopes they had in, for example, Nigeria and the opportunities that ICTs offer. My challenge to you is that you expose yourself to opportunities, events, books, people and networks that can take you where you’re headed. No one needs to tell you that you’re at the centre of the Information revolution that is changing the definition of rich and poor people, people groups, organizations, nations and regions. If you cannot maximize the various opportunities available for personal

development, especially on the Information Superhighway, I'm afraid you don't belong to the New Generation that will eat the "fruit of the land".

2. Nation Building

Present trends within Nigeria reveal that national development is a *sin qua non* for progress. Just as dots or lines come together from your printer to produce a fine picture or document, we all need to stand in our "spheres of influence" to build a New Nigeria, one that we can all be proud of. Fortunately, ICTs hold the last chance for Nigeria's development. Health, poverty, employment, and advanced issues all respond to 0s and 1s.

Nigeria's National Policy on IT, driven by NITDA, is to deliver (among other things) on the 500,000 IT Professionals promise next year but the US\$ 100 million and many other factors unknown to "outsiders" would keep us from attaining that goal. What then is the hope for this potential economic growth catalyst if there's no enabling environment? We need to simulate a youth-led revolution that will command the attention of the government of the day. Anyway, success has always had many fathers and mothers but now, we care less about who takes the glory but about what must be done. As carefully put by Philip Emeagwali, we are "*suffering from knowledge apartheid that forces ... children to eat the crumbs from the dinner table of the information-affluent nations*".

3. Regional Cooperation

Africa, in the last few years, has been seeking to understand why we sow and never reap – or for others to reap! The OAU gave way for the AU, African Renaissance became a popular phrase, NEPAD (that beautiful plan) was drafted... peer review mechanism, etc. In the last few weeks alone, attention has been shifting to what youth have to offer Africa. In the foreword of the fourth draft of the Strategic Framework for NEPAD Youth Program, Professor Wiseman Nkuhlu (Chairman NEPAD Steering Committee and Executive Head, NEPAD Secretariat) wrote,

"There have never been as many young Africans as there are now. The roughly 800 million young people in Africa represent an untapped potential, yet they also face significant challenges.

"NEPAD acknowledges that young women and men in Africa are resourceful and valuable assets for Africa. Young people are not a sectoral concern; neither are they an object tailed at the end of programmes of regional revival and socio-economic integration. Instead, young people are integral to the process of development across all sectors and fields of interest.

"It is for this reason that the African Union, through NEPAD, is taking the initiative to establish a Strategic Framework for the NEPAD Youth Programme. The framework provides a coordinated continental approach to youth empowerment, encouraging the creation of an environment that is conducive to young people's empowerment and development, while drawing on the support

of academics, development partners, and Africans living both in Africa and outside the continent.”

The average African Youth does not place too much *premium* on his continent, but this must come to an end if we must create an enviable tomorrow for the next generation, and possibly ourselves. He has been affected by wars, famine, diseases, and of course poverty. One way or another, now – and not later – we must raise Africa’s hope for accelerated development by employing the opportunities that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer. This, as has been described by many, may just be Africa’s last chance: the unique opportunity created by her youth and ICTs, bringing energy and synergy!

If we must not repeat the trend of *meetings-declarations-meetings*, we must join forces in charting a path out of this state to our desired place. My challenge is to the youth of Africa. Young people must decide to ensure sustainable development because we are the *bridge* between today and tomorrow.

4. Global Participation

Before now, nations could boast about what they had below the earth surface, but present trends reveal that history is no longer on the side of lazy nations. Globalization and complex forces of *global maturity* are taking the world in new economic directions. The New Economy responds more to human capital than land, labour or capital. In fact, the twin factors of production are now technology and knowledge. A yawning gap presently exists between nations, and this gap will determine who has a fair share of the “global cake”. Fortunately, there have been recent efforts geared towards bridging this digital divide.

The United Nations designed the World Summit on the Information Society as a political process in two phases. We are now in the second phase, leading to a major event in Tunis, Tunisia in November 2005. **WSIS brings together world political, business and civil society leaders to create a shared vision for the information society**, and implement an Action Plan to ensure equitable access to technology, and harness ICTs for development - in areas such as education, the environment, health, and sustainable livelihoods.

Nigeria is presently (unfortunately) on the very bad side of the digital divide. Even though things are not the way they used to be, we still have a lot of work to do. Yes, the ITU said Nigeria’s telecoms penetration (based on many indices, especially the number of telephone lines available for the population) and this is very true, it appears that we still very much remain a consumer nation. Research, innovation and global best practices appear to be the exception and not the norm. It seems to me that we have only two choices: to leave things the way they are, or to decide for change.

The need to secure Nigeria’s future through appropriate and strategic positioning within the sphere of the Information Society has informed the need to host a

decentralized (but appropriately networked) **WSIS Youth Consultations in different states of the federation** tagged, “WSIS Youth (Nigeria) Policy Train II” and led by youth who are “champions” of ICT for Development (ICT4D) efforts.

This is one of many ongoing youth-led efforts across the nation but these youth leaders will be updated on present developments, informed of the process’ progress and empowered with the possibility of active participation – either by getting more involved online/offline, or by taking action in their local communities in line with the WSIS Plan of Action. For the purpose of this train and continued Information Society efforts among Nigeria’s youth, we will utilize the existing eNigeria mailing list as presently moderated by Paradigm Initiative Nigeria – www.yahogroups.com/group/enigeria. For further questions on this Policy Train, please contact pin@gbengasesan.com.

Nigeria’s youth (and *NACOSSites* must take this to heart) can no longer afford to live the vicious cycle of *cram-pass-forget-write tests-get a job-change jobs-lose track of career!* We need to weave a fine ICT industry but what we do in the next few years will only be built on today’s many efforts. We can contribute to global processes, and can successfully maximize the opportunities that “peer energy” produce – personal development, nation building, regional cooperation and global participation.

Once again, let me thank you for this opportunity and also remind you of the need to take action from now. Welcome to the New Nigeria...

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