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‘We Aim to Inspire a New Breed of Leaders’

By CONSTANCE IKOKWU

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Why she is in Lagos I am the chair of the Council of African studies and I'm also a professor of anthropology and a research scientist of the Yale Law School. I am here with Professor Leslye Obiora (Nigeria's former Minister of Solid Minerals) for the LEAD initiative and we are discussing various prospects with stakeholders and potential collaborators. I am representing Yale in this initiative.

The initiative's goals

It is a leadership concept where we are interested in bringing a range of stakeholders to the table to execute the magic of the project, as it were. It is not accidental that LEAD is the acronym of the project – Let Africa Lead. Even though this project will involve Yale as a central partner and Harvard as another partner, we also see it as being Africa-wide; having its root and spirit in a range of African countries. In many ways, we see leadership and governance as the key and we are interested in engaging in not only high level courses for executives and leaders, but also to partner with local organizations to engage in public sector trainings and skill building initiatives. This involves engaging students, graduate students, and those in the professional schools and engaged in 'civil society' projects. We are thinking of how to converge with or how to help enable transition-related takeovers. From one office or position to the other, or to think about transition from one public sector position to another, we want to explore prospects that will contribute to African development.

The components

One of the components in the African context involves what we call "Yale in Africa". That is primarily setting up executive and leadership training and partnering with African universities and institutions/organizations to set up public sector training. We will also work with those across the continent who are already working in this regard. At the moment, we are here to think through where we can locate this partnership and with whom. These are the logistics that are yet to be sorted out but we will have an African presence. Nigeria is one of the countries we are working in and it is certainly the key to this project. In terms of visualization, conceptualization and implementation, Nigeria is among the first countries we are beginning our efforts but many more will follow.

Why Nigeria?

Nigeria is the giant of the continent. In this sense, Nigeria is a key to the success of this project. If Nigeria isn't on board, how do we talk about the kind of transformation we are thinking about?

Planning details

This year is the planning year, so we have a year-long agenda. This is the year to implement, visualize and conceptualize, etc. We are in the early stages of setting the ground work but we are hopeful of its success.

Response so far

Terrific. There has been overwhelming support from every sector, it's excellent because the project has been three years of pulling people together and having conversations on the key components and this is the moment we are ready to talk about the next step and put it into practice. This is the right time to harvest the idea, and reflecting on the significance of the World Cup that has just ended in South Africa, in many ways points us to another moment of saying to the world that we are here. This is significant, especially because there are those who said this couldn't be done competently. Look at the show they have put on with the World Cup. It is a cultural, social, economic and political success! Leadership is a part of that and is one of the components that can make any project reach its potential, which is also our goal. So this is the time, this is the right time

Roots of the initiative

A lot of conversations over time gave birth to this moment. Of course Professor Obiora provided the impetus behind the initiative but it is also being supported by the Yale Center for Transnational Cultural Analysis and the Yale Council on African Studies. We are also working closely with Edwin Kaye in Hong Kong and Jacob Olupona at Harvard. It is collaborative in its origins and manifestations but certainly, Prof. Obiora is central to its success and its ideals.

Yale's commitment

They will be fully involved. Yale is fully committed to the success of this project and we are certainly working collaboratively with a team of people who are empowered by the leadership of this initiative. Our students, our faculties will be involved to some extent, but that will be through collaboration; meaning that Yale will drive the design, the implementation and the evaluation of all the activities drawing from the resources including strategy partners. The goal is to get a lot of activities conducted throughout Africa, however.

On if this is another think-tank

I wouldn't simply say it is a think-tank. It is informed by series of engagements, comparative work, political thinking, etc, and for the success of it, we need the intelligence to be part of the conceptualization. It is certainly going to involve people strategising but it's far more than a think-tank. In many ways, it represents intellectual agenda to put in place processes of implementation. We are certainly engaged in the implementation of on-the-ground training, so it goes beyond that. It's invigorated by thinkers, scholars, strategists and policy makers.

How this would impact society in practical terms

Actually, that is the key (implementing and impacting the society). When one thinks about leadership and the importance of training and putting in place systems, one thinks about the systemic circulation of values, but when people don't buy in, then the initiative can easily fail. Invariably that is the key here. I do some comparative work and when we think politically about all the regions in the world and leaders who have in many ways spearheaded revolutionary change and the people didn't follow, we saw dismal failure. There are very good examples of places where the leaders were far ahead of their time and the people were not ready for the type of reform that was necessary to move them to the same level. An example of that is the Jamaican administration of democratic socialism with Michael Manley. Its failure was because of the unwillingness of the people to follow and buy into the aspiration and what it took to sacrifice material things for the larger post-colonial state. In the same sense throughout Africa, there has to be a buy-in and a commitment to the values of change. There needs to be communication between leaders and everyday people - what is going on, what is the aspiration? Is there any worthy sacrifice? Do we understand and recognize that? Part of this involves communication, the role of the media and those in key positions to communicate some of the aspirations and the needs of the people. But most of all, people need the social and economic tools in order to exhibit the leadership necessary to succeed in the world economy. We are also interested in thinking about what types of trainings are critical for the development of the emotional intelligence to LEAD. There is no particular standard across the continent. What happens and works in South Africa because of the personalities in their leadership may not work at all in Nigeria. It might work in the North and not work in the South. So the peculiarities of the cultural norms and values, the history of the people might affect their 'buy-in.'

Criteria for being part of the institute

The key here is the making of a community of learners. This we hope will range from outgoing leaders to up and coming leaders, to high-end and mid-level public sector leaders. The Yale in Africa piece involves internships with Yale and Harvard students; placing African students as well as students from elsewhere in the diaspora in key sectors and giving them the experience, the training and mentoring. So, there are so many ways that people can be involved and benefit from the various sectors and expansion of this initiative. The institute is going to be in a number of places in the cities across the continent. We are also discussing with some universities on collaborative possibilities but it's yet to be defined because we have not made decision on the universities, regions, etc.

Funding

We are in conversation with prospective donors about funding. It's on top of our list and we have people who are interested in endowing positions named after them. Certainly, it is a priority which we are working on and we have significant commitment at this stage.

Getting wealthy Nigerians on board

Philanthropy is a key to this. Developing and generating the spirit and culture around philanthropy is one thing that Professor Obiora has been thinking and writing about and doing research over the years. Philanthropy is an important component of the sociality of leadership. Africa needs to also LEAD in this regard. So you 'hit the nail right on the head' in identifying the wealth of Nigerians as well as bringing in people who are potential philanthropists and have a lot to offer our coming generations. Philanthropy can be instrumental to recognizing that a particular personality should not only be celebrated but that we should use those philanthropic donor funds to encourage the growth and development of future leaders. We also have a growing team of people who are working and when we leave, that group will continue with what we are doing.

Physical point of contact

The bedrock driving this initiative is spotted at Yale and in collaboration with Harvard - we already have infrastructure for that. So we have our offices and staff in the USA but in the next few years we will eventually have offices in various African cities where we will be easily identifiable. A lot of the decisions will be made consultatively with our partners.

How she got involved in the initiative

On a personal note, I decided to get involved because I was inspired by the passion and commitment of my colleague, Prof. Obiora. And seeing the kind of self sacrifice that she has made which in many ways is contagious, I want to be a part of something that will hit the ground running, that would make a difference; this is important to me and it's time for Yale to step up to the plate and be part of this collaboration in Africa. This is my 11th year at Yale. I think this is big and also has the potential to make the difference for little kids running in the streets to the making of important leaders. We have the potential to revolutionize the way we understand leadership. It is about people who are committed in coming together and figuring what is necessary for the 21st century. Can Africa claim the 21st Century? Yes, it can!

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