

Young Lives Matter, I no go Japa

Thank you for joining us today as we embark on a remarkable journey of hope, empowerment, and transformation. We gather here with a shared vision, a vision for the youths to give Nigeria a second chance, to bring them out of despair and embrace a brighter future right here within our nation's borders.

Through their political activism, our youths today are sending the same message as did the founding fathers; Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, Sir Ahmadu Bello and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, we are reminded of their commitment to our great nation. They envisioned a Nigeria where the youth would stand at the forefront of progress, contributing to the growth and prosperity of our beloved country. Chief Obafemi Awolowo once said that those who desire to reach, and keep their places at the top in any calling must be prepared to do so the hard way.

Our youths believe that Nigeria's future should not be bound by division into states or tribes or religious groupings but should be bound in the unity of our purpose, the beauty of our collective vision and by burning our desire to create a viable playing field of opportunities for the greatness of all our youth, rich or poor.

The youths of Nigeria have never been so challenged, facing a bleak future with little hope as they are today. But may I say that if there is anyone out there who doubts that Nigeria remains a place where all things are possible; if there is any young person who wonders if the shining dream of those who fought and struggled for our nation's independence is still alive in our time or who stills questions the power of their vision and hopes, today I will provide you good news.

That we do need to provide an answer was proven by the persistence and resilience of the lines of our brilliant youths that stretched around polling booths in numbers that Nigeria had never seen; by the lines of youths who waited six to ten hours, many for the very first time in their lives to vote because they believed that the time had finally come for their voices not only to be seen but heard.

My personal journey is deeply intertwined with the meritocratic spirit of Nigeria's southwest region. Throughout my career spanning over 35 years, as a product of the private sector, I have been a success story having cut my teeth in banking for over 25 years, close to 10 years in Oil & Gas, and served in top executive positions across global brands such as Lafarge Cement Africa and Coca Cola Africa.

Much later, I obeyed a call to serve the Federal Government as Director General, Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) where I promoted and campaigned vigorously for domestic tourism to cherish what we have within. Subsequently, I was honoured to serve as Honourable Commissioner for Ministry of Petroleum Resources, Solid Minerals, Tertiary Education, Science, Innovation and ICT as well as Diaspora ministry before this Petroleum Ministry for Anambra State under Governor Willy Obiano's administration.

As a gesture of gratitude to the South-West, having spent my entire career there, twelve years ago, I quietly established an Education Trust Fund in the heart of Lagos at the Holy Cross Cathedral with the then Parish Priest; Monsignor Paschal Nwaezeapu where I began mentoring and leadership development programmes for the youths every Sunday. At this point to further serve the needs of the women and youths, I veered into entrepreneurship where I set up a micro- finance bank for the NGO and a tax audit firm working for Lagos State.

This experience helped me wholeheartedly dedicate my energy to their personal needs, which were mainly educational. I set aside a monthly allowance for the Youth of Lagos Island, covering 50 to 100 youth a month, for the past 12 years in addition to my coaching and mentoring programmes.

This initiative quickly extended beyond Lagos, reaching cities and communities across Nigeria. From my tenure as Director- General of NTDC at the Federal level, I began to support two schools in Benue State and later birthed a new school called Bonum International Academy followed by our work in Yola, Abuja, and other states, the foundation's reach expanded, touching the lives of countless young individuals.

Our efforts yielded much fruit in the form of two schools in Benue State, an IDP camp in Yola, and a high school in Kaduna, all of which have received my unwavering monthly support on behalf of the NGO up to date. We have collaborated with the Catholic Secretariat and two other youth focused- churches in Abuja for the less privileged youth, and right here in Lagos, where our story began, we have worked with over 50 active Youth Coaches whom we fund for the work they do with the youths on our behalf every month till date. We also support monthly the Dominican and Redemptorist Schools in Anambra, Lagos, Oyo, Kogi, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, Kaduna, Kwara, Benue, Edo and Delta State. Monasteries and Old People's home in Anambra is still part of our youth development projects as well as an IDP camp in Adamawa.

I am delighted to introduce Kelvin, one of the first Lagos Island youths who benefited from the foundation and a shining example of our commitment to education and empowerment. Kelvin, who pursued studies in Mauritius with my support, stands before you as a testament to what dedication and opportunity can achieve. He is now part of the foundation's effort to open the doors of opportunity to the disadvantage youths. Among others are youths sent to Germany.

I fully appreciate that our youth have waited long enough and cannot wait any longer. Our foundation has already begun the youth transformation since I am not immune from the enormity of the tasks that lies ahead.

So today, I call upon all the youths who are on the verge of japa-ing (leaving) Nigeria to perish that thought. You can still achieve your best dreams, shaping them to reflect your tastes, as you can still put your best hands on the tools of history and make a brighter future.

I believe that in today's Nigeria, there is a new energy to unleash and harness your potentials, new jobs and wealth to be created, new schools to be built by the strength and "can do spirit" of our resilient youths.

The road to the success of the youth of our nation has often been painful and arduous. So we know we may not accomplish all our targets in one year, or even four, but I have never been hopeful than I am today that the hard working but undeserved youth of Nigeria will succeed beyond measure.

There may be setbacks and false starts. And there are many who won't agree with every decision or policy that our foundation makes, for we know that no foundation can solve every problem. But we also know the challenges that our youth currently face. We will listen to the youth and above all, we will ask all of you to join in this patriotic work of remaking our nation, the only way it has been done in other successful nations, a step by step with determination, courage and hard work- no instant gratification but delayed gratification, work now and play later. There is no other way. This is the sustainable path.

The change of fortunes for our youth is not the only change we seek- but that is the major change and the chance we are pursuing is here for us to make that change. But that cannot happen without you.

We must seize the moment!

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in, work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other.

Let us remember that if the present economic crisis facing our beloved country has taught us anything, it is that we cannot have a safe and healthy middle class, if the poor are suffering. In this country, we all rise and fall as one nation- as one people.

Our traditions mean that our youths have had the values of self- reliance, hard work and national unity taught to them. Those are values that all Nigerians share and while we are highlighting our foundation's work, we do so with a measure of humility and grit.

Our past achievements are singular, but woven with a common thread. To our youths whose hope are shattered, we will restore your hope. To our youths who long for peace, stability and job security in an increasingly unpredictable world: we will support you in achieving your goals. And to all those who profess that the dreams of our founding fathers have burnt out, we assure you that the flames can be rekindled.

For that is the true measure of the greatness of our youth, their capacity for change.

And the change they have already achieved gives us hope for what they can and must achieve tomorrow.

I want us to remember a time of struggle for independence and survival, a time when Nigerian youth could not aspire to greatness due to our colonized state, it was a time of heartaches and hope; of forward struggle and backward progress; the times the youth of the time were told as “natives” that “they could not” and the people who pressed on with that Nigerian Creed; we believe and we will.

This was a time when the “natives” had only silence for a voice and their hopes were dismissed. Our founding fathers in their youth stood up, spoke out, and reached for the stars. We believe and we will.

When there was despair and hopelessness across the nation, our fathers united their efforts to see a new nation emerge into real independence with a new sense of common purpose. We believe and we will.

This nation once had a thriving industrial economy which needs to be rebuilt, we once had oceans of Palm Oil and Pyramids of Groundnuts. We believe and we will.

Dear Youths of Nigeria, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So today, let us ask ourselves: If today's youth should live to see the next century; if for example, my own son and daughter should be so lucky to live as long as our founding fathers did, what changes would they likely see? What progress would they have hoped we made?

I truly believe that this is our chance to answer the youths call, and that this is their very moment. This is their very time- we must seek ways to put our youths into gainful work and open the doors of opportunity for every young person in our country; to restore prosperity to our nation and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the Nigerian Dream and remember that out of many nations, we are one Nigerian Nation, and that while we may breathe, and where we are met with cynicism and doubt by those who tell us that we cannot breathe, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the winning spirit of our youths. In unity, we move.

We believe and we will.

I sincerely want the Nigeria Youths to know this simple truth that I will never forget who this foundation truly belongs to- it belongs to YOU. Just as the bright future of Nigeria also belongs to you.

In Lagos, our support has extended to areas like Mafoluku and Akowonjo where the Dominican priests lead youth development initiatives. St. Mary's Private School is one of our cherished beneficiaries, fostering growth and learning. Cana Mercy Mission, another beacon of hope, has also received my unwavering support on behalf of the foundation.

I humbly stand here today, as a proud product of the organized private sector, to unite us with the vision of a brighter future for the Nigeria's youth. I call upon all sectors, be it corporate, public, or private, to join hands in this selfless endeavour. Together, we can catalyse a movement that not only prevents the brain drain from our nation but also ignites a resurgence of hope within our borders.

The journey ahead will not be easy, but with your support and collective determination, we can turn the tide of despair and hopelessness into waves of prosperity and progress. Let us move forward, hand in hand, as we usher in a new era of empowerment, innovation, and unparalleled impact.

Having said all these, it may be worthy to note that every project has been and is still being funded every month unfailingly for over twelve years from my personal resources without any contribution from anyone.

Our youth empowerment initiatives have been in the form of scholarships, assistance to widows, or support for indigent centres, hence our commitment has remained steadfast.

This is why since 2007 when the foundation was launched, it is only now after I have proven my worth having spent an average of 5M- 7M every month since 2011 to date, I am now calling on my private sector colleagues to increase their corporate social responsibility (CSR) to the Nigeria youths.

This is a wakeup call to walk the talk.

Thank you, and may our shared dedication lighten the path to a brighter Nigeria for all its youth.

Amen.

Mrs. Sally Mbanefo (Nee Uwechue)

Founder, The Sally Mbanefo Foundation (TSM).