

## In Search of a Nigerian Dream

(A response to Radio 4's Today Programme on Nigeria and the MINT Economies)

By Nisha Thomas

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"Nigeria is a country which is easy to get excited about. It is maddening, but it is exhilarating. It is the key to a continent whose time has come"- the Economist, Jim O' Neill cheered, at times a bit too enthusiastically on Radio 4 in his talk on the upcoming economic super performers, the MINT economies (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey). When it is awe and intrigue with a touch of cautiousness with China, and a confused and critical enlightenment with India, Nigeria and to an extent Africa as a whole, has always attracted a ubiquitous exhilaration and excitement from economists, social scientists, and tourists alike. Africa has been rising over and over again on the cover pages of leading magazines, for at least the past two decades.

There is no doubt that Nigeria is witnessing a sharp rise in its economic growth and performance. It may very well be the next economic superpower when it comes to sustained economic growth within a decade or two, as predicted by Jim O' Neill. I am not an economist and hence cannot comment authoritatively on this, yet the tell-tale signs are all there to see, particularly in the cities of Abuja and Lagos. High rise buildings – commercial and residential, shopping malls crammed full with the booming middle class shoppers, cafes, bars and cinemas jam-packed with infectiously enthusiastic and energetic Nigerian youth...the list goes on. Yet it is also quite evident behind the facade of the riches and prosperity of these booming cities, the real challenges of Nigeria that if not mitigated, can pose a serious threat to its growth and development.

Jim O' Neill did acknowledge some of these challenges in his talk; poverty, corruption, power crisis, natural resource theft, over population, etc. and wondered how easy the solutions are to some of these challenges. I wish I could share his optimism. I have found, albeit from my two short research trips to Nigeria, but also talking to a lot of Nigerians in Nigeria and in its diaspora abroad, that nothing is ever easy in Nigeria. At least not to the ordinary Nigerians to whom I talked and interacted with during my various research trips which looked at the 'international volunteering' that Nigerians based in the UK do when they go 'home'. While those in the upper echelons of society engage in intellectual debates of good governance and economic growth, and apparently share and aspire to a 'Nigerian dream', I find that this dream is quite elusive to the majority of ordinary Nigerians.

Admittedly, I didn't travel across the length and breadth of Nigeria, it is a huge country. But one of the reasons why I couldn't travel to certain places in Nigeria that I really wanted to visit, such as Kano or the Niger Delta was because as a UK University student, I was not insured to travel to areas that are categorised as 'high risk' in security terms by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. And security is something that I have found to be one of Nigeria's biggest challenges.

Real or perceived security issues and challenges have crippled regions of Nigeria for decades; they still do, especially in Northern Nigeria. One of my research participants, an international NGO manager talked about their difficulty in recruiting and placing volunteers, both national and international, in Northern Nigeria where resident NGOs and civil society organisations themselves are deserting states like Kano and Kaduna to move down south where it is 'safer'. Nigerians in the diaspora have told me how that they have been discouraged by their own families and friends in Nigeria from visiting the country due to security concerns. I had to try hard and convince the parents of my Yoruba speaking liaison officer from Lagos to let her accompany me to Kaduna. The fact that I was visiting one of the largest universities, if not the largest, in Sub Saharan Africa, and the Chief Medical Director of the University have arranged accommodation for us in their University Guest House, did not really matter to them nor did it give them any real comfort.

I would be naive to assume that there are no real security threats in parts of Nigeria, and disregard the concerns of people, especially those who have had personal experiences of trauma and suffering as a result of the violent and long civil war and various internal conflicts that Nigeria had faced. Yet the accounts about Nigeria in the West and the picture that is portrayed by the media abroad are so unhelpful that even its own diaspora are reluctant to engage with their homeland. Be it for trade, investment, development, or even tourism, even if such activities are more concentrated in the glossy areas of Lagos and Abuja, the security challenges that Nigeria as a country pose can be a great detriment for those who want to engage with activities there.

This is not just an image problem. Nigeria has one of the worst statistics when it comes to Human Development; high rates of maternal and infant mortality, high rates of HIV/AIDS, poor education status, high rates of unemployment, etc. I went to Zaria in Kaduna State (which was only medium risk according to FCO), to meet with a group of traditional birth attendants, doctors and nurses who have received a neo-natal life support training programme from a group of Nigerian diaspora volunteer doctors from the UK. Some of the problems they identified for high rates of neo-natal mortality are the cutting away of the uvula in the new born babies in the assumption that it would obstruct their breathing, umbilical cord care that involves the usage of cow dung, ash, etc; naming ceremonies on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of birth that involves a tribal scarification on the babies' faces (a tribal mark for identification), etc. The communities in the region have so many cultural and traditional practices that have been carried on from generations to generations and hence deemed unalterable. Solutions might seem simple for an external eye - like building a hospital or a health clinic in a rural community, or appointing or training more health care professionals. But it is not likely to solve these issues, as few would use the facility unless the mother or baby were in an extremely critical, emergency situation, and by then it would be too late to do anything.

This is a Nigerian problem, and the solutions must come from within Nigeria. Nigeria cannot model itself on South Korea or India or even South Africa. It must look at its own people and resources and find its own solutions ensuring that they respect community beliefs, practices and structures. But even for its own people, Nigeria is a challenge. With a government that is engulfed in accusations of rent seeking and preferential treatments, a bureaucracy that is so complex, obstructive and intimidating, a financial system that is inaccessible and unhelpful for the majority of ordinary Nigerians, it is no wonder that even its own diaspora is more willing to engage with other African countries than with Nigeria. As some of my participants said "after a while you just give up in disgust and you go to South Africa or you go to Malawi or Ghana...because Nigeria is so hard" or "of course

you will say get lost and go somewhere else". Nigeria makes all the right noises when it comes to diaspora engagement, but the fact that it has not yet had any uniform platform or policy at the federal level that engages with its diaspora is disappointing.

Pro-growth policies may generate wealth and new economic opportunities for people to be part of and experience this so-called Nigerian dream, but it will take a long time to trickle down and reach ordinary communities like those I have visited in Northern Nigeria. For Nigeria to develop, not just in economic terms, but also in social and human aspects, and become yet again the giant of Africa, there is a lot more work to be done. And for that, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala or Lamido Sanusi cannot rest on their laurels and take comfort in the fact that there is corruption in India and China as well. To sustain the level of economic growth rate they have achieved, unlike India where the growth rate has started to come down (declining from 9.5% to about 5%, Nigeria should first and foremost invest in its people – in-country and in the diaspora. For that, there should be a governance reform at both the federal and state levels, an inclusive economic strategy that invests in people, infrastructure and institutions, a federal diaspora strategy and policy that encourages investment and involvement from its diaspora, and an enabling environment where civil society can function without fearing for their own security. The time has come for Nigeria to stop looking outside for solutions and models, and instead, to get its act sorted and tap into its own resources and solutions. The Nigerian dream should not just be about creating more Dangotes, but ensuring that the so-called economic growth and advancements are also reaching its bottom millions.

(Nisha Susan Thomas is a final year PhD student based working collaboratively with Professor Matt Baillie Smith (Northumbria University), Professor Nina Laurie (Newcastle University) and VSO (the UK's leading international volunteering NGO).