

RE-BRANDING THE NIGERIAN PROJECTS IN A PERIOD OF GLOBAL ECONOMIC RECESSION: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Re-branding Nigerian campaign is the project of the administration of President, Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua championed through the Federal Ministry of Information and Communications under Prof. Dora Akunyili as the Hon. Minister and the Chief Campaigner to launder the image of the country among the comity of nations. The mind-boggling issue in this campaign is the claim by the government that this exercise will not be tasking "our' budget but that it would be using as a starting step the converted whooping sum of N150,000,000.00 meant for the defunct Heart of Africa Project whereas, the same government up till now cannot proactively provide stable power supply, good governance, employment, or eradicate poverty etc. This paper however, critically analyzed this programme against its challenges and prospects and suggested that the provision of good governance and other critical needs of the over 140 million Nigerians will be a better re-branding project without the government spending its resources.

Keywords: Re-branding, Nigeria projects, global , economic recession

INTRODUCTION

On March 17, 2009, the re-branding Nigeria Campaign was unveiled alongside the Logo and Slogan in Abuja. In her speech, "THE TIME IS NOW" delivered by the Honourable Minister of Information and Communications ProF Dora Akunyili at the launch of the re-branding Nigeria Campaign and unveiling of a new national slogan and logo stated amongst others, the following as the preamble and aim of the re-branding programme'

Today as a nation, we begin a new journey. We open a new chapter in our attempt as a people to take conscious steps at redefining our nation, re-examining our values and character and re-dedicating ourselves to the ideals of our founding father. In this renewed effort to improve our image, we aim at birthing new patriotic spirit and ensuring that our name and battered image as a people are restored. This is a journey we must undertake at this time as a nation and as a people. We are all gathered here to begin this journey today, powered by the desire to see this great nation shed its Toga of untrustworthy, unreliable and ungovernable people. This will no doubt be a journey like no other (Akunyili, 2009).

Quite alright, the Hon. Minister acknowledged that several attempts had been made in the past to correct this seemingly negative perception problem of Nigeria by other nationals but all failed but she was very much convinced that this time around, the project must succeed. In her words,

I know that we have tried in the past to correct the faulty perception about our country and to heal the very ills that have contributed to the assault on the reputation of the ordinary Nigerians. But we cannot be afraid to try again, even when we fail. We must not be afraid to embrace change and work for change. We know that history will have no pity on us if we fail to act courageously when it is right.

The philosophy behind this noble project hinged on these statements of the Honourable Minister as stated here below:

When I assumed office as Minister and Chief image maker for Nigeria, about three months ago, I busied my mind with thoughts on what can be done differently. Thereafter, I arrived at three considerations. Firstly, I found that the negative perception about Nigerians was largely because Nigerians allowed others to tell our story and it stuck, but more importantly because a few Nigerians through their activities gave

our country a bad name. Secondly, I recognized that despite our struggles, and not too good reputation, we must seize every opportunity to take a change. Though Nigeria is a country with problems, it is also on with countless opportunities. Nigeria has many brilliant minds and experts who can hold their own in virtually every field of endeavour. Thirdly, from my experiences in government, I was convinced that something can be done to make Nigerians believe in ourselves and in our country. I therefore arrived at a conclusion that a more systematic way of addressing these pressing issues is through a people oriented national re-branding campaign, backed by better information management and dissemination. That is why I have decided to take this journey, and invite people. If not now, then when? Because as long as this great country and her citizens continue to be put down and suffer discrimination and humiliation, the more difficult it becomes to rise up and challenge these stereotypes (Akunyili 2009).

Little (1973) defines brand as a maker's name or trademark, a variety or type (a special brand of human), an identifying mark, a sign of disgrace or shame, literally, to make a permanent impression on someone or to give someone a bad name or reputation (brand him a liar).

However, in the context of Re-branding Nigeria Campaign, Akunyili (2009) defined the National Re-branding as:

An attempt as a people to take conscious steps at redefining our nation, re-examining our values and character and rededicating ourselves to the ideals of our founding fathers.

In the words of President Yar'Adua Nigerians were urged to renew the national spirit and re-invigorate faith in the nation. This, he said, could only be achieved through collective resolve to do things right way. He explained that the re-branding campaign was designed to change the negative perception of Nigeria and Nigerians both locally and internationally. Yar'Adua added that it was meant to reorient Nigerians to believe in themselves and the country (The punch Newspaper, Wednesday, March 18, 2009 p.9).

CAUSES OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC RECESSION

Okonjo-Iweala (2009) identified four key origins of the global economic recession which include, first, the idea that an insufficiency of aggregate demand has enveloped the world: proponents of this view have pointed to

the massive shift of income and wealth towards the top quintile in the rich countries especially in the US but also in Western Europe and Japan since 1980. Rich people tend to save more than the less rich leading to a secular decline in aggregate demand. This was compounded by the fall in house prices in the US which began in the summer of 2006, leading eventually to the subprime crisis. The negative wealth impact led to a fall in consumption and aggregate demand as the US "consumer of last resort" was able to borrow less.

For the first time since 1970, the earliest year for which global GDP is expected to decline this year. It has become fashionable Nixon in 1971, as large fiscal stimulus packages as hastily being assembled in the US and other rich countries. But we know that the current recession was preceded by years of large current account deficits in the US, with private savings dropping to low levels and public savings being eroded by the Iraq war, among other factors. The second is that of global imbalances. The idea here is that no country, not even the US can pile world accounts deficits year-after-year financed by the rest of the world without a blow up at some point. One controversial proposal is that if China allowed its currency to sharply revalue, this would solve the problem: but retort is that if the Chinese revalue the renminbi, then the US would have run current account deficits in relation to other countries because the fundamental problem was that US households were simply spending too much.

Nevertheless, it is not out of place to cogitate going back to a regime of large US current account deficits once the crisis subsides, although there may be strong proclivity towards this in view of the third explanation put toward by Ricardo Caballero, an MIT economic Professor: that there is an insufficient supply of safe asset in the world. Global savings have risen as population age of countries like China and India ramp up savings in pursuit of higher investment and growth. Some of this spills over into current account surpluses. Similarly, commodity exporters need a place to park their savings. The US has much monopoly of safe, long term assets, US treasuries and so the savings tend to flow to the US lowering interest rate and fueling US aggregate demand. Hence addressing global imbalances in the shape of persistent current account deficits in the US may call for new forms of global insurance.

The fourth which is believed to be most favourable combined elements of the above but centers around the financial system. This would say that low global interest rates after 9/11 catalyzed a search for high returns, in the US, this led to a situation where risk was price too low, leading to a lowering of lending standards and sowing the seeds of the subprime mortgage crisis. This crisis is frightening in that it is a perfect storm caused by everything that could possibly go wrong with the modern-day financial system: credit rating agencies which did not do their job: executive compensation structures, including in the giant mortgage government sponsored entities, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which shortened horizons and encouraged excessive risk-taking; financial innovation and globalization, which enable originators to lay off the risk by securitizing the subprime loans they made and selling them, leading to a proliferation of toxic assets in the shape of asset-backed securities; outright fraud in the shape of teaser interest rates, complex high loan-to-value ratios and a relaxation of regulatory stringency in the mistaken belief that it was in the interest of the large financial institutions to self-regulate even as special investment vehicles contributes of opacity in financial dealings by taking risky transactions off-balance sheet.

CHALLENGES

The re-branding Nigeria project campaign since its launching in March, 2009 has been faced with a lot of challenges. Notably among them is the rationale behind financing the project with a whopping N150m set aside for Defunct Heart of Africa Project in the 2009 budget (Punch Newspaper, Thursday, March 5, 2009 p. 14) especially now that Nigeria's monthly revenue declines by N35.54b causing the nations revenue decline from N285.54b in January to N250b in February 2009 (The Punch Newspaper, Monday March, 16, 2009 p.17).

About 90 million Nigerians are without adequate food while Nigeria lost over 1,000 lives and \$23.7b to Niger Delta Crisis in 2008 with the lost continuing in 2009 (The Punch Newspaper, Friday April 10, 2009 pp. 2 and 15), (Newswatch Magazine, May 4, 2009 pp. 12-21). What manner of re-branding is Nigeria Campaigning for while malaria kills 300,000

Nigerians annually according to the former Minister of Health, Prof. Babatunde Osotimehin (The Punch Newspaper May, 8, 2009 p.8).

The Director-General of Rivers State sustainable Development Agency, Mr. Bolaji Ogunseye, on Monday 11th May, 2009, said that over 70 Million Nigerians were under-employed in a country of abundant tapped and untapped mineral resources but chose to re-brand herself, (The punch Newspaper, Tuesday May 12, 2009 p.12). The Punch Newspaper, Thursday, March 5, 2009 p. 14, five years after a hollow attempt by the Olusegun Obansajo administration to launder the nation's image through the Heart of Africa project, the government had plunged into the same futile project to market Nigeria to the outside world. The Minister of Information and Communications, Prof. Dora Akunyili, says the new re-branding project is aimed at correcting the perception of the international community about Nigeria and instilling the spirit of patriotism in the citizens.

Ordinarily, as a nation with enormous potentials and sound national and international achievements, Nigeria should be one of the easiest nations to sell to the world. Arguably the giant of Africa, the nation has a population of over 140 million and it is the world's 10th most populous nation. It is estimated that one out of six Africans is a Nigerian. The nation is blessed with tremendous human and natural resources. Nigeria is the fifth largest oil producer in the world and it is reckoned that each of its 36 states has no less than 10 untapped mineral resources in commercial quantity. It parades some of the brightest minds and international award winners in sports, arts, medicine and science and international diplomacy, among others. Nigeria also have a Nobel laureate in Literature.

But all these have been dimmed by endemic corruption and weak governance introduced by military rulers and perpetuated by their civilian collaborators. Political elite fan the ember of ethnic and religious sentiments for selfish gains. How will the minister market a nation where nobody had been punished for the various ethno-religious disturbances that claim hundreds of lives and property worth billions of naira annually?

What is she going to tell the International Community about the rampant criminality and lawlessness in the Niger Delta region? It is estimated that over 200 expatriates and a lot of Nigerians have been

kidnapped in the last three years, thereby making the nation a risky destination for investors. A recent international report listed Nigeria as the 18th most unstable country in the world, a position it shares with a war-ravaged Lebanon. The nation's image is also being daily blighted by the activities of a growing army of unemployed youths who engage in internet scam or advance fee fraud. The World Bank reckons that 40 million of the nation's youth aged 15-24 are unemployed. Thousands of Nigerians are behind bars across the world for drug offences and currency trafficking among other heinous crimes.

With epileptic power supply, moribund railway, double digit inflation and interest rate, persuading the global community that the nation is an investment haven is certainly going to be a Herculean task. The teacher's social service is also difficult to market. The teachers are always on strike, 10 million kids are always out of school, education is ailing. The nation's appalling health statistics indicate poor access to clean water, absence of sanitation, and lack of basic health facilities. Is it possible to hide from the global community the outbreak of lassa fever and meningitis currently ravaging the country? What about the official neglect that allows many children to be killed by my pikin - a toxic teething mixtures?

Does the pervasive atmosphere of impunity make the image laundering project easy? While other countries have punished their nationals for fleecing Nigeria of huge sums of money in the Siemens, Halliburton and Wilbros scandals, the Yar'Adua government is dithering on bringing Nigerian culprits to justice, sending signals that the nation condones corruption. How is the minister going to convince the international community that the billions of dollars stashed away in foreign banks by public officials are not looted?

The starting point for laundering the nation's image is to repackage Nigeria through national re-engineering, social reconstruction, national re-orientation and rebirth. A good product sells itself. To embark on re-branding without refining the product is to put the cart before the horse. In a global village where information about one part is readily available to other parts, it is futile to re-brand without improving the quantity of the product.

Also, Akpan (2009) says; "I feel sorry for Professor Dora Akunyili, Minister of Information and Communications. She is not finding it easy to

persuade a cynical public to key into her pet programme of rebranding Nigeria projects. The public's cynicism is understandable. Burnishing Nigeria's external image by whatever name it was called by the government in power had never been a pleasant story to tell. Today, cynics find it difficult to believe how Akunyili programme would be different from others in the past. Experiences had shown that even though government's image laundering projects in the past have never achieved the set objectives, they created opportunities for public officers involved in them to feed fat in public funds.

For example, some public officers who were involved in laundering Nigeria's image during the regime of Late General Sani Abacha became instant millionaires and billionaires through the project. Abacha himself used the project as a pretext to siphon several billions of Naira in foreign currencies from the public treasury. Just as the nation was battling to overcome the effects of such mindless looting of public funds in the name of image laundering project, former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2004 took Nigeria Image Project, later renamed "Heart of Africa" project. Like the one before it, the Heart of Africa also failed after several billions of Naira had been spent on it. Akunyili admitted the failure of that project in a recent interview with Newswatch. She said:

"The Heart of Africa Project has a multiplicity of problems. The first was that it was launched overseas and so it was disconnected from Nigerians. The coinage "Heart of Africa" was first used by Malawi and some other countries in Africa have been laying claims to being the heart of Africa. So, it had the problem of acceptance. There were complaints from Nigerians that the Heart of Africa Project did gulp a lot of money. Although the Federal government is not forthcoming on how much was wasted on the project reports, it is safe to presume that several billions of Naira had gone down the drain.

This was the psychological disposition of millions of Nigerians when Akunliyi came up with the rebranding project. Those who reacted negatively to the rebranding idea rightly felt that the minister was taking Nigeria back to the era of wasteful expenditure designed to benefit public officers; of which they may be right. The Rebranding Nigeria project campaign is a project launched in hastily. From all indications, it is a reincarnation of the failed Heart of Africa project and therefore, not a product of deep thinking

and careful planning. It has neither a framework of its own nor a budget. For a start, it depended on the N150million shoe-strings.

Allocations provided for the Heart of Africa project in the 2009 budget. All those point to the fact that no serious preparations were made before the project was launched. All we did was to change the name from Heart of Africa to "Rebranding Nigeria Project Campaign". The issue of rebranding Nigeria is not acceptable. There is nothing wrong with Nigeria as a nation but all is wrong with Nigerians as a people. Therefore, it is obvious to rebrand Nigerian projects such as the Nigerian Police Force, Power Holding Company of Nigeria, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, etc.

How much the campaign will cost Nigeria is not yet determined. The federal government is not forthcoming on this issue. According to Akunyili, a lot of speculations are made on the amount this programme will cost us. Surprisingly, however, we have never ever mentioned any amount of money. But we know that spending on the programme is going to be minimal. Based on the foregoing, it is reasonable to provide: How minimal is minimal spending? If public funds are to be used in executing the project, why is she secretive about its cost? There must be a reason for such guarded secrecy.

As Nigerians continue to speculate on the project cost, one should philosophise if Nigeria really needs rebranding. Akunyili argues that "we need to re brand Nigeria so that we as Nigerians will appreciate ourselves and our country which will put us in a position to present ourselves positively to the outside world... This rebranding is about our collective interest, our image as a country, as a people in the present and the future. It is to make Nigeria a good product that can sell. But is there anything to sell in Nigeria: Good people, Great Nation? The Heart of Africa's theme had earlier failed to sell Nigeria as "A strong nation, a strong Nigeria a country of excellent people ...a leader in Africa, a dynamic economy, a modern nation with a skilled workforce." What is clear from this failure is that slogans, no matter how beautifully coined cannot sell a country positively to the outside world. Only positive developments can do that.

Nigeria does not need any rebranding because it is already a strong brand. As contained in the Heart of African's slogan, Nigeria is a natural

leader in Africa. What this means is that Nigeria should be a role model, a reference point for African countries and the black race. They should look up to Nigeria on all issues such as good governance and the management of human and natural resources. That is what leadership entails. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case now. We failed in our obligation to Africa and the black race not because Nigeria is in short supply of committed, charismatic and visionary leaders but because our electoral system has made it almost impossible for such leaders to emerge at the various levels of government.

Consequently, we are saddled with political leaders who get into public offices without any vision but whose mission in government is to accumulate personal wealth. These are the people who benefit from the inefficiency of government and would want the situation to remain so. They are not bothered if Nigeria is categorized as a failed state by the international community. These are the people who work against Nigerian's aspiration to be a great nation with great people. They should be the focus of Akunyili's campaign. They are the products that need rebranding not Nigeria.

THE PROSPECTS

There are a lot of prospects if the government at all levels (especially the federal government) look inward and do the right thing now. The rebranding campaign/projects must be anchored on tackling insecurity, unemployment, abject poverty, illiteracy, corruption, infrastructural underdevelopment, technological backwardness, political stability, poor health facilities and dependence on oil. This paper agrees with the opinion of Ekpu in *Newswatch Magazine* (2009, April 27 p.7, May 4 p.5, and May 18, p.5) who believes to offer good remedy to the problems of this nation than the rebranding project.

For every action, there is a reaction. Like woman who has been neglected by a husband on whom she had lavished her love and attention, the soil kicked back like a horse as hunger was threatening us in the face. We woke up 20 years later to start Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) in 1976. Some cynics said that it was, by its lackluster implementation, a joke and so they called the programme Operation Fool the Nation. When Alhaji

Shehu Shagari stepped in as president 1979 to 1983, he apparently thought the problem was with the name. So, he changed the name to Green Revolution. The programme never had the attributes of greenness or of a revolution, and Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka, decided not just to write about his abysmal failure but to wax a record on it that became an instant hit. President Ibrahim Babangida came on board 1985 to 1993 with an integrated programme by setting up a Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI). It chalked up a few successes but was largely corruption-ridden. There were stores of DFRRI signboards placed on roads that had already been made by local projects before it, ended in a disaster. Since then, not much attention had been paid to agriculture until President Olusegun Obasanjo who has a big farm in Otta and some other part of the country started the cassava export programme at his reincarnation in 1999. All these point to the fact that there is nothing wrong with Nigeria as a name of the nation, but with Nigerians as people.

Apart from oil which has made most Nigerians lazy, the major drawback in the pursuit of agriculture and food security in the rebranding project is corruption. The study states that for the rebranding project to gain momentum, for a start, Nigerians need to go back to the farm settlement scheme of the 50s and 60s where large scale farming was made possible through an integration of work and living. Many of those farm houses are still standing today. The Zimbabwean white farmers operating in Kwara State have made a significant difference in the state. Besides, we need to look back at the National Accelerated Food Production Scheme launched in 1973 which was aimed at targeting high yielding species of crops for special attention. This scheme has been successful in such countries as Malaysia, South Korea, India and Mexico. Barring the so-called Nigerian factor, there is no reason why it cannot bear palatable fruits in Nigeria, than to insinuate rebranding Nigeria projects.

Besides, Nigerians should join in researching hard through biotechnology into bio-fuel, the so-called green fuel. As a solution to global warming nations of the world are striving to produce bio-fuel from some food items and this will enable in two ways: lead to a reduction of their demand for our oil as well as increase food shortage.

The National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS) document lists solid minerals as one of the six priority areas that are crucial for the diversification of Nigeria's economy. It states that if properly harnessed, the sector could possibly bring in more income, fetch us more foreign exchange and offer our people more jobs than oil and gas combined. At the time the NEEDS document was prepared, oil was still riding high. Its price was heading skywards, so there was really no pressure to look in the direction of solid minerals or in any other direction. And even now that oil price is taking a severe beating, there doesn't appear to be any renewed energy in the direction of actualizing the NEEDS mandate in the solid minerals sector.

No serious country in the world does business the way we do it. To buttress the fact, there are at least 34 different mineral types spread all over 450 locations in all the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, yet Nigeria complains about the high price of cement and the need to import tones of cement where there is limestone in abundance. In Adamawa, Abia, Cross River, Edo, Ekiti, Gombe, Imo, Jigawa, Kebbi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Osun, Oyo, Sokoto, Ogun and Bauchi States, limestone is found in abundance, yet no cement in sight (ECM, 2009). Another mineral is iron ore whose reserve is estimated to be about five billion metric tons as found in Kogi, Enugu, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Benue, Kebbi, Borno and Anambra States (ECM, 2009). The Ajaokuta Steel complex was to produce billets that would be converted to various steel products in the four steel rolling mills at Jos, Oshogbo, Kastina and Aladja, but politics and corruption have killed the dream and all the huge expenses have gone down the drain.

In Ondo and other parts of the South-West states, an estimated 42 billion tones of bitumen (ECM, 2009), almost twice as much as the crude oil reserve, sitting virtually untapped. And Nigerians are daily complaining about our bone-breaking roads because we do not have bitumen with which to fix these roads (a case of the man who lives on the bank or river and washes his hands with spittle). Presently, because of the rebranding Nigeria campaign gold is a big deal with Nigerian women when they deck out to functions, they are all festooned with gold, people may misrepresent them

for gold miners. Nigeria needs to exploit this craze instead of allowing them to troop out to Dubai and Saudi Arabia in search of gold when there is large proven reserves of alluvial and primary deposits of gold in Borno, Cross River, Kaduna, Kano, Zamfara, Niger, Ondo and Osun states which are being extracted by small miners and artisans with no public revenue source. And there are a lot of other minerals dripping with money that no one is interested in. For example, granite, uranium, marble, copper, gemstone, talc, columbite and much more that can fetch Nigeria the ability to rebrand the economic standard of her citizens.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Nigeria has the potentials to lead Africa and realize her vision 20:2020 which in fact rebrands Nigeria without spending extra kobo on any propaganda package. Good leaders world over are remembered by their achievements attested to through sound and sustainable economy. Our leaders need the political-will to be able to face the challenges affecting the nation in this global economic recession. Once the solutions above were given adequate attention and prudence applied in the management of the national affairs, the world must definitely recognize Nigeria and accord respect to her citizens.

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