

THE NIGERIAN YOUTH AND THE
WAR AGAINST CORRUPTION

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In order to fight corruption, you have to recognise it as a problem first [then] you must actively resolve not to indulge in corruption.

- *Ugoh Wilson Emenike, Transparency International Youth Writing Winner, 2013*

1. **Introduction:**The future is now and the future is you. The extent to which the future of our dreams comes to reality depends on what we lay as foundation today and what we build on that foundation as the days, years and decades go by. As the future races towards us, we have a duty to ask ourselves what we expect of it and what we have prepared for it. The merger of these two, often results in what becomes the reality of our dreams.
2. With over 70% of our population being the youth, no other group has the capacity to actualize the kind of future Nigeria deserves. The kind where corruption is an aberration, rather than a praise-worthy way of life. Your energy and commitment for a brighter tomorrow gives us hope that our future is redeemable. I personally believe that this passion, is in part driven by the suffering that the youth as pupils, students, workers, customers and citizens have had to endure because of corruption. It is also driven by the patriotism you have for Nigeria. It is this patriotism, rather than the suffering that I hope will endure in your resolve not to tolerate corruption; in youth and in old age.
3. Corruption has no globally accepted definition, except that we know it when we encounter it. Corruption, simply put, is abusing bestowed power, authority or position to acquire a personal benefit. This can

include malfeasance which is stealing of public funds, misfeasance which is the misuse of public funds and granting favours or denying access. Favouritism is placing an individual or group above others without merit while nepotism is favouring your family or friends as a public officer. Turning a blind eye to an act of corruption and celebrating wealth accumulation from the public purse through chieftaincy titles and other cultural 'certifications' complete this gloomy picture.

4. One can argue that all of the above, in one form or another, are present in the daily lives of Nigerians. We have also added a further layer; impunity. This is the wanton disregard for any moral, ethical, legal, cultural, economic and social repercussions of corrupt practices. Impunity has become our new normal. We have been dancing on the precipice of chaos and those tasked with helping us avoid the fall, have for too long beat the drums we were dangerously swinging to.
5. I am not here to lecture you on corruption and its damaging effects, as you all are, unfortunately recipients of its wicked and sometimes deadly outcomes. What I am rather here to do is reassure you that you can make a difference and play an active role in eradicating corruption in Nigeria. It is possible, if not in our lifetime, definitely in your lifetime.
6. Across the world the youth are not only dreaming of the future, but shaping it as well. We in Nigeria, have witnessed the power of youth in shaping our social and political thinking twice in the last five years. The more recent, being the vanguard of change that brought about

the first political opposition election victory in Nigeria. That wave cannot be allowed to die, nor the embers of change that have been lit, be doused with the mist of doubt. If credible political leadership is a vehicle for fighting corruption and the youth are the engines powering that vehicle, I am here to share the components of the fuel with which that vehicle will be powered.

7. **Culture Change and Change Culture:** The fight against corruption cannot be won until we adopt a different social, political, economic and religious path to living a life free of corruption. The failures of the older generation to instill the right morals and ethics must give way to new perspective on doing things. Corruption must be regarded for the evil that it is and the short term benefits it provides, rejected as toxic to the stability of Nigeria. There must be attitudinal overhaul to reject a culture where some kinds of corruption are acceptable and others are not.
8. Corruption is a choice of values, judgement and character. The moral, ethical and psychological readiness to make this choice is required in every individual. We must build resilience from a very young age and re-construct what is considered 'normal' in Nigeria, to mean doing the right thing at all times. You are calling us out on governance, transparency and justice. You are playing an active role through peaceful community organizing like what we witnessed during the 'Occupy' movement against subsidy removal.
9. At the same time, we must continue to innovate and re-invent our attitudes to fight against new forms of corruption and decadence that

creep into our psyche. Corruption is not static and corruption fights back. There are always individuals and groups who will try to breach the law and cut a corner. As the tools of corruption evolve, we must also evolve our defenses against corruption. The old tricks will give way to new ones, backed by new technologies and ideas that are better understood by the youth.

10. As our old ways of guarding against corruption weaken as new modalities of crushing them come to light, there is no better group armed to deal with the evolution than the youth. Many of the ways to breach laws, rules and guidelines originate from youthful and wandering minds. We must likewise build resistance making use of those youthful minds. As our nation looks towards retaining its youthful population for the next millennia, according to global estimates, harnessing this potential to our advantage will require building resilience to corruption through open minds, spurring innovation and paying attention to you, the youth. You are more open to change and have less obstacles in your way to defending change. We can sustain a corruption-intolerant culture only through your continuous and active rejection of wrong choices.

11. **Building Courage:** I shall not mince words, corruption is deadly. It requires bravery, comradery and survival skills to stand against it. It is of no surprise that these key elements, are in part common in the young women and men who stand against impunity and the wrong way of doing things. The fear of loss, as a result of corruption is often greater than the fear of loss, as a result of government crackdown in

young people. The commitment to change and the struggle for a brighter future drives the momentum among the young population. We must harness this to our nation's advantage in tackling corruption.

12. The change brought about by the youth movements in the twilight of the Soviet Union, the struggle against Apartheid, the Tiananmen Square stand-off and very recently, the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movements, represent youthful courage. Across these events, one common factor is noticeable; the unrelenting yearn for change from the multitudes of young women and men, against environmental, physical and mental obstacles. There is no change that is associated with cowardice.
13. The resistance of dictatorship and successful re-birth of democracy in 1999 had at its core, several young minds who readily went up against the machinery of state oppression. This was carried over into the democratic dispensation as the energy was channeled into citizen journalism. Traditional media, which were not doing enough suddenly faced competition from online outlets that dared to fully exploit the right to free speech.
14. In addition to building and nurturing courageous youth, we must also ensure that there are tools that can balance the odds and give change crusaders a chance to succeed. I am indeed happy, that it is a little easier to be a brave young mind again in Nigeria. The Freedom of Information Act, Whistleblowing Act, among other legislation and policy statements, are there to be utilized in eradicating corruption in

Nigeria. Citizen journalism should receive a more ethical and moral boost to ensure that the wrong messages are filtered out for a more credible stance against wrong doing.

15. These and other methodologies provide platforms of support so that you do not have to fight alone. The best approach to institutionalizing change is to organize similar minds and build a coalition that can withstand the barrage of obstacles from the defenders of the status-quo. The speed and effectiveness with which young people build coalitions around issues of concern has always been a thorny side for people in positions of authority. The success of likeminded youths is as good as the bond among them.
16. **Networking for Social Actions:** It is imperative that extensive networking be cultivated to build resilient coalitions against corruption. Such coalitions can only survive if they are built on robust foundations that remain focused on the original goal. The traditional circle of friends, which drove the protest movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in Africa, Europe and the Americas gave a new definition to community organizing, from which the various social issue movements were propelled to global recognition.
17. This is something we have not practiced very well in contemporary Nigeria. Causes have often fizzled out shortly after an initial retreat by organizers. It is difficult to sustain the fight against corruption without a steady supply of energy and focus from you. As I have alluded to earlier, you have the most to lose from corruption.

18. Youth organizations championing various issues have sprung up all over the nation and even spilled into our political party system. However, what these organizations stand for is not clearly defined, neither do they show the kind of issue-based resilience that is the hallmark of successful movements. The involvement of many individuals in these causes have been short term and some are led by people who hardly qualify as youth. This is hijacking that you must resist if you are to ensure the sanctity of your fight against corruption.
19. Movements survive on decades of lessons learnt and ensuring that leadership remains youthful. Indeed many have moved unto University campuses and in some cases, High Schools to keep issues burning in young minds and sustaining youthful struggle for the causes they represent. How many causes have the backing of active student bodies, organizations and associations in our schools? How many pupils and students are actively aware of their rights and are conscious of what corruption is? How many are capable of telling a corrupt act apart from a noble one? How many are morally ready to make the right decision not to support an act of corruption?
20. Movements are built on ideas, person-by-person and from community to community. We must ensure that such energy does not just dissipate but is channeled into sustained pressure on government to do the right thing. Such energy is not placed on shelves, simply to be picked up again when oppression looks us straight in the eye, for we

may not be able to recover it. Organizing is continuous, it takes on a life of its own and it is sustained by youthful involvement.

21. **Use of Technology:** In some ways, the best thing that has happened to the youth is the proliferation of technology. It is of no surprise that the youth is at the forefront of this phenomenon. Technology, has also been the most potent tool for the fight against corruption, not just in our country but across the world. There are many examples of situations where technology has been responsible for successes in tackling corruption and impunity. From websites, to mobile applications that allow you to report incidences of corruption anonymously, you have continued to outmaneuver the obstacles against removal of corruption.
22. The citizens' engagement recorded in the run-up and during the process of the last National Elections is second to none in the history of our country. We also made history in that process. The use of technology for citizens reporting from the beginning of the campaign period to the inauguration of the new government, and which is still ongoing is truly a scare for the corrupt mind. It is no more business as usual. When news breaks, it is everywhere; sometimes even before it breaks. Some have said the fear of the twitter nation is the beginning of wisdom for an African politician.
23. The Social Media campaigns of various youth led initiatives such as the #OpenNass and #OpenBudget on twitter have galvanized Nigerian youths to participate more in our democracy. The support generated by these campaigns has given political leaders second

thought about the need to ensure transparency and accountability in government business. This has even prompted the use of technology across various government services, including the social media itself.

24. As the Comptroller-General of the Nigeria Customs Service, I am a champion of the use of technology in fighting corruption within the Service. It is only through such medium that we can ensure that corruption has no hiding place. The youthful nature of the Service makes this an easier endeavour as the leadership can rely on their fast fingers and active thinking to find innovative solutions to the issues of corruption within the Service. This is a commitment that I am making to the young Officers of the Service.
25. This is a phenomenon that I hope will be replicated across the entire Public Service. We must ensure the active participation of young public servants in the fight against corruption. The better future we hope to leave, belongs to you and it is only right that you play an active role in shaping it. This will however, not come automatically to you. You must seize the opportunity and make the best out of it. As corruption seeks to destroy the very fabric of our existence, there is a need for clear leadership and rigorous debate about youth participation in the shaping of our future.
26. It is you, whose education has been bastardized. It is you whose healthcare is in the hands of sub-qualified mates. It is you, who are more challenged everyday by the poor infrastructural state of our nation. It is you who cannot bring your entrepreneurship idea to life because the financial system is not in your favour. It is you, whose