

YOUTH PRACTICES & FAMILY ETHICS: GENERATION GAP OR NEGLIGENCE

The Generation Next of is one group that mirrors the complexity and breath of dichotomies that define Nigeria today. This group includes at least five different categories of people who are critical to understand in order to determine how to reach, engage and galvanize them. I will attempt to define these distinct groups using broad, stereotypical descriptions of five individuals – Ikenna, Ukamaka, Sammy, Cynthia and Izu:

- **Ikenna - the over-achieving young man who lives in the Diaspora:** Ikenna excels in sports, the arts, sciences, and academics. He has recently graduated with first and second degrees from leading global universities. He works with a leading global IT company and he is performing above his peers. His parents pushed him to imbibe the values of excellence, hard work, and the value of a name. Ikenna is proud of his heritage, but has limited knowledge of his culture and language. He yearns for a connection to his culture, but struggles to build this given his distance from the homeland and competing interests.

Ikenna has only visited his homeland once in his lifetime. He will likely marry someone who is not from his region and will raise his children abroad.

- **Ukamaka - The semi-literate, relatively unskilled and under-employed lady who lives in the Southeast:** Ukamaka lives in a small town in Igboland. She has never completed secondary school, and has only benefited from limited vocational skills training programmes. She has not been able to find a steady source of income, but engages in part-time work for relatives. She has significant idle time, which makes her susceptible to a range of vices including robbery, 419, kidnapping, prostitution and drug and human trafficking.

Ukamaka knows her language, understands aspects of the culture, but embraces qualities of self preservation above anything else. Her values are reflective of the decay in the Nigerian society, but are often exaggerated among her category of youth.

Ukamaka is waiting for marriage to to give her some sense of security and a source of income.

- **Sammy - The micro/small business owner operating in a market in Abuja:** Sammy was educated only up to the primary school level. When he was only 11 years old, his parents sent him to live with a relative in the North, where he was engaged in an informal apprenticeship programme. After 10 years of service to his patron, he received seed money to start his own trading business. He has worked diligently to grow this business but struggles for survival, largely because he operates in the informal economy, with limited business training, and poor access to expansion capital and networks across the country. Sammy does not have a corporate bank account because he is worried about generating unwanted attention from the tax authorities.

Sammy knows his language and embraces his culture. He belongs to a social club, age grade and village association because he has a deep desire for a sense of belonging. However, like Ukamaka he embraces self preservation above anything else, sometimes cheating customers or adulterating his products to generate extra income.

- **Cynthia – a high-flying banker who lives and works in Lagos:** Cynthia is a focused, driven young woman who was born and raised in Lagos, by a working class family. She excelled in primary and secondary school, earned a degree in finance from the University of Lagos and secured a position with a new generation bank. She speaks Igbo and Yoruba fluently and identifies herself as a Nigerian first, before associating herself with any ethnic group. While she has visited her parent’s homeland multiple times during her childhood and has fond memories, she currently avoids the region out of fear of being kidnapped or robbed.

Unlike Ukamaka, Cynthia is focused on advancing her career and rising in corporate Nigeria and will likely postpone marriage until her early thirties.

- **Izu – a young politician who lives in the South east.** After three years of unsuccessfully trying to obtain admission into the university, Izu decided to join the political landscape in his town, as his gateway out of poverty. Starting with the role of “errand boy,” he quickly gained favor with the godfathers and older politicians and is currently being positioned to become a local government chairman or a senator.

Izu embraces aspects of his culture – depending on how it suits his political ambitions. He sees politics as his ticket out of poverty!

Ikenna, Ukamaka, Sammy, Cynthia and Izu are just five snapshots of the Generation NEXT. They are obviously not reflective of the full spectrum of realities of this generation, and there is no data to determine what percentage of the population falls into these classifications. However, these snapshots illustrate some of the key challenges facing this generation, as well as the opportunities that they have to transform the future of our land, if they are effectively galvanized.

In terms of challenges:

- **Education and employment:** Ukamaka and Eddy’s realities reinforce the need for high-quality education for all, at least up to the secondary school level. However, the country suffers from the same challenges facing the educational sector across Nigeria, but with even higher drop-out rates, especially among our boys. This limits their ability to gain meaningful formal employment, in the case of Ukamaka, or to grow their businesses, in the case of Eddy.

The state and local governments have an important role to play in providing high-quality education. Training and retraining of teachers, revamping the curriculum to ensure the provision of education for the 21st century, with a focus on relevant knowledge, skills and tools for life, and developing and enforcing clear measurement and evaluation tools for both public and private schools in the region, will transform the sector.

Beyond formal education through traditional academic institutions, both vocational and entrepreneurship education is critical for the development of our youth. Initiatives such as the Chike Okoli Center for Entrepreneurial Studies in Awka and Lift Saxum in Enugu, are working to fill the gap through business and entrepreneurial training. In addition, organizations such as LEAP Africa through its Employability Programme and Business

Leadership Programme are working to enable young people to obtain meaningful jobs and build more sustainable and successful companies in the region.

However, there is an urgent need to scale up these high-impact programmes and to promote the emergence of more targeted vocational skills training programmes that will ensure that our youth are equipped with marketable skills for growth sectors in the economy.

- **Identity, Culture and Language:** Generation NEXT are facing a serious crises of identity. Confronted by competing identities and cultures, their understanding and appreciation of their culture and language is being eroded. Youth in the Diaspora such as Ikenna romanticize the language and culture of their parents, but struggle to embrace it. While Cynthia and her counterparts believe that their rise in the ranks is predicated on their ability to assimilate into the dominant culture.

There is an urgent need for our leaders to invest in restoring the pride and confidence in this younger generation. One of the primary objectives of the *Ola Ndi Igbo* initiative which was launched in 2013 by a group of credible, young Igbo professionals was rooted in our desire to “foster a community of individuals of Igbo descent who are proud of their heritage and are committed to working collaboratively to promote the social and economic development of the Igbo people.”

Beyond initiatives such as *Ola Ndi Igbo*, parents have to make a concerted effort to teach their children positive values, as well as the language and culture. In addition, schools, community groups and associations at home and abroad, should prioritize exposure to language and culture through formal programmes. The days of penalizing children for speaking “vernacular” are long gone. Instead we must invest in our language and ensure that it evolves to incorporate new words for the 21st century.

- **Values:** The image of young men and women as fraudulent entrepreneurs, armed robbers, rootless politicians, kidnappers, prostitutes and drug and human traffickers directly contradicts the values of integrity, hard work, discipline and innovation which are bedrocks of our culture. Sadly, the former is becoming the norm, largely due to the challenges of unemployment and underemployment identified above. In addition, this value of self preservation without regard for the implications that it has on others continues to push the Generation NEXT to indulge in abominable acts, which are beginning to be accepted as the norm, simply because they generate wealth for the perpetrator and his or her immediate family.

In order to restore the values that are critical for the advancement of families, faith-based organizations, traditional rulers, community organizations, and age-grades all have a vital role to play in leading by example. This leadership should be based on authenticity and integrity, and a willingness to sanction, ostracize and punish youth who betray our values and bring shame to our people.

- **Leadership:** Nigeria and indeed Africa is facing a crisis of leadership. Sadly, youth like Izu are increasingly engaging in politics, not as a platform for public service, but as a gateway out of poverty! Many of them are used as political thugs and “errand boys.” The sad reality is that

these youth have limited skills and knowledge and when given the opportunity to assume positions of authority cannot effectively lead. This has a devastating effect on our land, fosters the misappropriation of public funds and results in increased poverty and poor human development indicators across our region.

Clearly, there is an urgent need to change mindsets among the youth about leadership and public service. It is also imperative that civil society organizations work collaboratively to prepare a new generation of youth who are credible, dynamic, ethical and innovative and that the society support these youth in their efforts to assume positions of authority.

The leadership transformation requires broad based awareness among the voting public about their rights and responsibilities, a redefinition of the criteria for public service and a “cleansing” of the political landscape.

In terms of opportunities

- ***Driving Inclusive Growth:*** Globally, we are recognized for their entrepreneurial spirit, ingenuity, creativity, and work ethic. Given the attention and resources being channeled towards the African Continent, and the recognition of this region as the next frontier for growth, we are well positioned to capitalize on the inflow of foreign direct investment, and local financing to start and grow sustainable institutions. However, this will require that individuals such as Sammy obtain entrepreneurial training, and move their businesses from the informal to the formal economy. It will also require local and state governments to actively create and sustain an enabling and secure environment for many to invest in the region. The public sector will also have to create incentives to attract investments into key labor intensive sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, ICT and the creative industry (including Nollywood and the music industry), which will in turn create employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for our unemployed and underemployed youth. Inclusive growth will also attract people from across the country and the Diaspora and compel those who already live in the rural communities and towns to remain in their communities.
- ***Leveraging the Diaspora:*** The majority of the Next Generation in the Diaspora have surpassed the accomplishments of their parents and continue to raise the bar in terms of accomplishments in the sports, media, the arts, sciences, ICT, and academia. The rest have the unique opportunity to galvanize this group, and develop strategic approaches of re-engaging them in development initiatives back home. Mirroring the examples of Israel, Ireland and India, these successful 2nd and 3rd generation populations could be invited to engage in high-impact initiatives through which they can commit their time and resources, and gain significant credibility and personal fulfillment in return. It is important to note that some Generation Next athletes and physicians have already launched sports camps and medical missions, respectively. However, many of these one-off initiatives have been frustrated by corruption, inefficiencies and bureaucracy. As a result, in order to attract and sustain their support at home have to invest in developing the systems and structures to effectively engage these well meaning youth.

Conclusion

Imagine the impact on our land if:

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- Ikenna decides to fund summer camps for Diaspora children to learn culture in Aba every summer
- Cynthia compels her employer to launch a special loan programme for women which she champions
- Ukamaka gains ICT skills and through an entrepreneurial training programme opens a lucrative business center
- Sammy grows his business from a small to a medium-sized enterprise and employs 50 people in Abuja
- Izu completes a leadership, civics and ethics training programme, takes evening classes to gain a university education and becomes an employee of a civil society organization in Enugu, as a stepping stone to true public service.

These five individuals could clearly change the mindsets of other Generation NEXT about what is possible, increase our collectively pride in what it means to be Nigerian and inspire the children in our communities. Indeed, galvanizing these young people can only be achieved through collective effort – starting with our families, religious organizations, community groups, and hinged on the commitment and engagement of the public, private and nonprofit sectors!

Our youth are leaders of today and tomorrow – it is imperative that we reach, engage and galvanize them to transform our land, and ensure a brighter future for their children and future generations.

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