Jonathan’s Transformation Agenda (2)

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There is abundant evidence that President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan is not comfortable with the current poor state of education in Nigeria going by his statements and comments at various fora. Last year, he reacted to the persistent mass failure in the Senior School Certificate Examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council, WAEC, and the National Examinations Council, NECO, by describing the trend as unacceptable and “a national embarrassment” that must not be allowed to continue. For this reason, he promised to do something about it. Again, in his national day broadcast on October 1, last year, the president reaffirmed his determination to arrest the rot in the education sector and immediately announced the decision of the the federal government to convene a two-day summit on education, otherwise known as “Presidential Stakeholders’ Summit on Reclamation, Restoration and Sustenance of Quality and Ethics on Education.” At the end of that summit which held in October last year, a task force on education was set up to oversee the implementation of a proposed national action plan on education. The task force was to complete its assignment in one year. But on May 18, this year, the presidential task force submitted its report and recommendations to President Jonathan in Abuja. The report spelt out the necessary steps that must be taken by the incoming Jonathan administration to move education forward in Nigeria. Expectedly, the president used the occasion to restate his earlier promise to reposition the education sector in the next four years. He let out some of his planned reforms in the sector to include improved funding of education and total overhaul of the education ministry. The overhaul, according to him, would involve redesigning the job schedules for three ministers who would be assigned to the ministry. From his speeches and remarks, it is very clear that the president has realised how critical education is to the success of his transformation agenda and the attainment of the objectives of Vision 20-2020. In that regard, it is expected that he will make sure that those he appoints as ministers in the ministry of education will be people who are committed to his vision and who also have a proven capacity to translate a vision into reality. That is why he must look out for people in the mould of Obiageli Ezekwesili who was appointed minister of education by former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2006. Within the short period she served in the ministry, her impact in the education sector was so overwhelming that many Nigerians started to wonder whether there had ever been a minister of education before her. If she had stayed longer in the ministry, perhaps, the radical reforms she initiated might have taken roots. Unfortunately, they were overturned by her successors. Ezekwesili was able to redesign a new direction for Nigeria’s education because she took time to study and fully understood the problems in the sector and the appropriate medication they needed. President Jonathan needs ministers in that mould who will help him lay a solid foundation for the development of a strong public education system with in the next four years. Nigeria stands to gain a lot if it succeeds like Singapore in building a strong public education system which will translate into high standards in teaching and learning. There is no reason why Nigeria should not earn hard currencies by exporting its textbooks to other countries of the world especially in Africa, Singapore is earning a lot of foreign currencies through this source. As at today, Singapore’s textbooks are used in schools in many countries including the United States of America, USA, Finland and Israel. Like Singapore, a strong public education system will attract many foreign students to Nigeria. That will reverse the current trend whereby Nigerian students leave the country in large numbers to other countries including Ghana in search of quality education. On the contrary, Singapore earns a lot of hard currencies from the influx of foreign students to that country every year. Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 100,000 foreign students from more than 120 countries studying in Singapore’s higher institutions. The Singapore Economic Development Board and the Services Division of the Singapore Tourism Board are targeting to attract not less than 150,000 foreign students into Singapore’s higher institutions by 2015. The high standards in Singapore’s higher institutions have attracted more than 20 world-class universities from the USA and Europe to set up programmes in collaboration with Singaporean higher institutions. That is what Nigeria stands to gain if President Jonathan steps up funding to public higher institutions to enable them meet world-class benchmark for ranking. At present, no Nigerian university is ranked among the best 1000 in the world. Apart from the presence of world-class universities, more than 7000 multi-national corporations and 60 international organisations have found Singapore a suitable mature education market where they recruit the skilled manpower needed for their operations. Invariably, Singapore has joined the USA, Britain and Australia who are the big players in the mature education market said to be worth US$2.2 trillion. With the attraction which high quality education in Singapore offers, the education sector is said to be contributing not less than 1.9 percent yearly to the country’s gross domestic product, GDP, unlike the situation in Nigeria but the country can be a big player in the mature education market if the president starts now to lay a solid foundation for the growth of education as a prime minister Lee Kuan Yew did in Singapore. He can do that if he assembles a good team That is why the president must regard Yew’s book as his transformation Bible. Concluded. SMS: 08023880068