

## GOOD LEADERSHIP AS CATALYTIC AGENT TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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### Executive Summary

*Leadership greatly determines to which side a nation tilts. A nation is progressive if the leaders are foresighted and translates the policies into concretely positive action. In the same way, a nation is considered to be retrogressive if the leaders are bereft of ideas that could move the nation in the right direction or lack the capacity of translating good ideas into reality. Growth of nation is not measured merely by its procreative ability that is manifested in population boom; but by the economic growth founded on adequate employment of knowledge economy. Such growth is reflected in the production and export capacity of such a nation. It is such consistent advancement in production and not consumption that leads to development. However, sustainable development is seen as a pointer to how far all-round transformation is essential ingredient in the overall leadership of a nation. The African cultural heritage is rich with imitable leadership values that ought to be revived. Such values surely aid sustainable development. It goes to say that leadership bereft of sustainable development leaves nothing to be desired. In that vein, the researcher aims at unravelling the crucial role of leadership values in the development of any African nations particularly Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Leadership, Sustainability, sustainable development, environment

### Introduction

In Chemistry, catalyst refers to a substance that has the capacity of initiating a chemical reaction more quickly but at the same time remains unchanged. It has to be noted immediately that catalyst varies according to the work that is to be accomplished. Therefore, there are various forms of catalyst and each performs a specific reaction. One that functions in a particular situation may not be used to execute an action in another; otherwise, it may not effect any reaction. The variation in form notwithstanding, they perform the same function but each in its suitable context. A

catalytic agent is that which is able to accomplish such action. In the chemistry of socio-political engagement, a person or something that causes such speedy change *ipso facto* plays that role.

Every nation desirous of progress hungers and actually needs sustainable development in order to engender continual growth of such a nation. However, sustainable development is not a given that comes from the blues rather it is nurtured through visionary leadership. Foresightedness and reliability remain the badge of any leadership that is worthy of the name. There are necessary ingredients that promote sustainable development. Among them and crucial though is good leadership that is founded on the primacy of the culture of learning and critical thinking. When the splendour of knowledge is prioritized and translated into concrete life of the nation, surely all-improvement becomes assured.

Africa in general and Nigeria has a rich cultural heritage with regard to leadership. Leaders are chosen based on the record of good character and personal integrity evidenced in truthfulness, readiness to serve, honesty, disposition to give pride of place to welfare of the community to mention but a few. These values are the centrifugal force of any sustainable development in any African society. Unfortunately, these cultural values are speedily being eroded. Consequently, leadership in Africa is now in a comatose state. Nigeria for instance is currently experiencing a constant downturn in sustainable development. The reason is obvious; all the African cultural values that could have nourished such development are being constantly sacrificed at the altar of endemic corruption. Leadership is at its best an epitome of government by the worst (kakistocracy). The leaders represent the proverbial Nero that was playing fiddle while Rome was burning. The researcher aims at investigating on how good leadership found on durable African cultural values could be a panacea to the current state of affairs with regard to sustainable development in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

### **Understanding the concept of leadership**

Leadership is very crucial in government because it goes to give direction to the ship of the nation. Without a focused, visionary leader, a nation wanders like a rudderless ship. However, dreams must be translated into reality. Davis (1967:96-97) considers leadership as “the ability to persuade others to seek defined objectives enthusiastically. It is the human factor which binds a group together and motivates it towards goals”. In another context, leadership is viewed by Middlemist and Hitt (1981:384) as the “process of providing direction and influencing individuals or groups to achieve goals”. To a great extent, therefore, Fullan (2007:9) opines that leadership has a lot to do with leaders influencing their followers to act for certain goals that represent motivation, aspirations and expectations of both the leaders and followers. It is important to note

that leadership is not only about influencing others but it has also to do with co-ordination and giving a sense of direction in an organization. Obviously, when a nation, an organization, an institution is guided in the right direction, leadership creates a vision for the future.

Masango (2003) opines that “Africa has a rich heritage of leadership, but it is not uniform. Among African cultures, there are some similarities, but there are also differences from time to time, from place to place, from people to people. These differences in leadership were affected by the Christian and Muslim faiths as they were introduced into Africa.” We must not however forget the fact that in the rich African cultural heritage bears witness to the fact that “leadership skills can be taught but leadership is earned; it is earned by consistently demonstrating competency, compassion, a sense of justice and unity. The values that a leader carries with him/her demonstrate a legitimate sense of care for people coupled with accountability.” However, let us examine some styles of leadership.

### **Leadership Styles: African Dimension**

Ordinarily, style refers to the way in which something is said or done. According to Johnson (2000:192) the style with which an action is taken carries messages as well as the substance of the action. On that note, style affects the legitimacy, credibility and believability of an action. In the context of leadership, Olagboye (2004:41) maintains that styles refer to the “various patterns of behaviour which leaders adopt in the process of guiding the efforts of their subordinates toward the attainment of organizational goals.” Therefore, each leadership style is associated with a particular type of behaviour.

In fact, one is considered to be an effective leader if he/she is able to identify the demands of the situation and the level of readiness of his/her followers. Consequently, the appropriate leadership style applied by a leader should vary according to the readiness level of the followers. Marzano (2005:18) in this regard opines that, “the effective leader realizes that no leadership style is appropriate for all followers and all situations and accurately discerns which styles are appropriate for which follower in which situations.” Olagboye (2004:49-50) thus affirms that a leadership style has to be dynamic and flexible, rather than rigid and static. To that effect, leadership depends very much on the style that is applied. If a proper style of leadership is employed definitely it will yield positive result, otherwise the result will be negative.

The main leadership styles to be examined include: democratic, autocratic and *laissez-faire*. That will lead us to the consideration of some African leadership styles.

### *Democratic style*

Leaders who apply this style set policies through group discussion and decision, encouraging and helping group members to interact, requesting the cooperation of others, being considerate of the members' feeling and needs. In this leadership style, every member of the group is accorded due respect, welfare of the group members is given adequate attention, group members are frequently involved in decision making, individual and group initiatives are encouraged. This is the style that is applicable in the collegial model of leadership in which there is involvement and participation of all the members. In this democratic style, the leader is not seen as the boss but *primus inter pares* (first among equals). He coordinates and directs affairs in order to yield positive result. For the leader to arrive at such positive result, he still has to be more broad-minded in his administration bearing in mind that proper leadership is not a one-man affair. Inasmuch as this style has many positive elements, it must not be forgotten that it could be corroded by unhealthy politicking among members with the aim of having their ideas dominate in the overall running of the school. Decisions could also be delayed especially in cases that need urgent attention. Such attitude does untold harm to the progress of this style of leadership. Consequent upon these negative factors, it becomes obvious that no single leadership style has all the ingredients necessary for the smooth-running of a nation.

### *Autocratic or Authoritarian style*

In this style, leaders dish out orders and determine all policy without involving group members in decision-making, and expect unquestionable obedience. Here according to Olagboye (2004:43) group members are denied due respect; their welfare is neglected and decisions are imposed on them, group and individual initiative and creativity are discouraged. There is really little or no allowance for cooperation or collaboration. The end result is that such leadership style directly or indirectly reduces job satisfaction and productivity. Therefore, an authoritarian leader tends to give greater prominence to the demands of his office, realization of task with little or no attention to the promotion and respect of the dignity of the citizenry.

### *Laissez-faire style*

According to Bass (2006:193), "*laissez-faire* leadership means that the autonomy of one's followers is obtained by default. The leader avoids providing direction and support, shows lack of caring for what the followers do, abdicates responsibilities by burying himself or herself in busy work, deflecting request for help, abdicating any responsibility for follower performance, absenting himself or herself from the scene physically or mentally." In this style of leadership, the leader does not participate in the

group's decision-making at all. He has neither a clear vision of the goals of his group or organization nor does he develop policies for it. The members of the group have the freedom to do as they wish and take their own decisions. In fact, in this style of leadership Avolio (1991:193) observes that leaders delay and appear indifferent to what is happening. They avoid taking stands on issues, don't emphasize results, refrain from intervening and fail to follow-up. Such leadership style will surely affect productivity and encourage non-committal attitude.

However, one cannot say with every certainty that one style is entirely productive in every situation. Under an autocratic leader, the followers will be more dependent on the leader because all power is centred on him and he does not encourage participative involvement. On account of an evident lack of freedom and dialogue, hostility is bound to increase. In his absence, every work grinds to a halt. Whereas when placed under a leader that uses democratic style of leadership, the same followers will definitely breathe a new administrative air, which will promote initiative, friendliness and responsibility. So, even in the absence of the leader, work goes on. Under a *laissez-faire* leader, the tendency is that of entire laxity, lack of control and commotion. Generally, the most effective leadership may be those who demonstrate concern for the well-being and contributions of group members and at the same time structure members' responsibilities.

The inability to adopt a leadership style that will engender positive progress and achieve excellent performance will be considered as poor leadership. At this juncture, it is important to note that some African leadership styles include community-oriented leadership, participative leadership and servant-leadership.

### **Community-oriented Leadership**

In the kind of leadership witnessed in Africa, primacy is given to development of the community. The role of a leader is to serve the community and work for the common good. Leaders are expected to be selfless, honest and humble. They must also be able to build consensus and unite people towards a common goal." (<https://hidayatrizvi.com/african-leadership-vs-western-leadership/>) In this way, a strong team spirit is created and based on that a durable sense of unity is engendered. It stresses on the value of interdependence as presented by Tutu (1989:71) thus, "in our African language we say, "a person is a person through other persons." I would not know how to be a human being at all except (that) I learned this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to complement each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental Law of our being. Not even the most powerful nation can be completely self-sufficient." This is central message of Ubuntu philosophy (*Umuntu*

*Ngumuntu Ngabantu* – a person is a person because of or through others). To that effect, it is difficult for the leader to think only of himself because he is consciously or unconsciously guided by the fact of “I am because we are,” or “I am related, therefore, I am” (Gathogo, 2001:21). And the Igbos have the philosophy of *Anyi bu ofu* (we are one), reflecting the spirit of unity. Since we are one nobody should think evil of the other; and to harm the other is to harm myself because the other is part of me and I am part of the other. As a corollary Mbiti (1969:102) adds: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” It is a communitarian style of leadership promotes participation. No one is left out.

### *Participative leadership*

Participative leadership has much to do with the degree of participation of subordinates in the process of decision-making. Hence, Williams affirms that ‘leaders usually consult with subordinates and integrate their suggestions into decisions, accommodating multidimensional communication with subordinates’. In this vein, the leader does not take unilateral decisions; on the contrary, he is open and willing to carry others along. It is not a passive participation but one that requires total commitment and shared responsibility for the realization of necessary goals. Therefore, participative leadership is a collaborative effort to achieve shared goals. Participative leaders understand better the necessity of involving those affected by the decisions. Participative leadership lays emphasis on the power the group has in the decision-making process. Consequently, unilateral decision is highly downplayed. Since it is a shared leadership, individual rights are respected and democratic principles are applied in the administrative process. No one is marginalized because each member has a legitimate force in the system.

### *Servant Leadership*

The concept of servant-leadership coined by Robert Greenleaf (2002) later became widespread. It “emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making”. In fact, the servant-leadership Spears (2003:16) affirms, manifests its outstanding difference in “the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants?” In fact, this servant-leadership concept reflects the African leadership style and as such stands as the turning point of every durable model of leadership. In Africa, a leader is seen as a servant of their tribe or community, so Africans treat a leader as an appointee to serve the people. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania stands tall as a good example of servant leadership. With his philosophy of Ujamaa he aimed at self-reliance in order to break away from the colonial dependence.

## Understanding Sustainable Development

According to Cassell's (1968) Latin dictionary the verb sustain derives from the verb *sustinere* meaning to hold up, sustain, support, among others. The noun form sustainable came to be included in the English dictionary in 1987 (Newton and Freyfogle, 2005). Further still, Carlowitz in his *Sylvicultura Oeconomica oder Anweisung zur wilden Baumzucht* (Chart 1), published in 1713 presented the novel idea of *nachhaltend* or *nachhaltig* (sustainable), pointing to the pillars of ecology-nature, of economic and of social ethics (Pisani, 2006). As such, the term sustainable can be conceptualized as a basis, as an umbrella term, that supports and includes the idea of sustainability and sustainable development, having the worry about future existence of natural resources to support the continuation of human life as its foundation (Feil and Schreiber 2017).

On the other hand, sustainability has different meaning in diverse areas of its application. For Cavalcanti (2003) sustainability "means the possibility of obtaining continuously conditions equal to or greater life for a group of people and their successors in given ecosystem." Sachs (1997) understands "sustainability as a dynamic concept that encompasses a process of change and the concept is subdivided into five dimensions: social, economic, ecological, geographical and cultural." Lester wrote that "a sustainable society is one that can meet their needs without compromising the chances of survival of future generations" (Brown, 1980; Andrade, 2004). From the foregoing, "a sustainable society is one that can meet their needs without compromising the chances of survival of future generations" (Brown, 1980).

'Development' is a concept which is contested both theoretically and politically, and is inherently both complex and ambiguous ... Recently [it] has taken on the limited meaning of the practice of development agencies, especially in aiming at reducing poverty and the Millennium Development Goals (Thomas, 2004: 1, 2). The term "development" has various meaning to different people and can be explained in different contexts. "Development should be seen as a progress towards complex goals such as the elimination of poverty, the provision of employment, the reduction of inequality and the guarantee of human rights." (Abuiyada 2018:115) In fact, development has diverse meanings and most often it is understood in terms of economic growth. Consequently, it is measured only in terms of annual increase in per-capita income or gross national product without paying attention to how it is distributed and the level people's participation in in effective growth (Mahmoud, 1991). According to Seers (1972) "development means the conditions for realization of the human personality. Its evaluation must therefore take into account three linked criteria: where there has been a reduction in (1) poverty, (2) unemployment, (3) inequality".

Further still, development is also understood in the words of Pearson (1992) as “an improvement qualitative, quantitative or both - in the use of available resources”. It is most often viewed through the prism of economic, social and political improvement in the life of a nation made manifest in environmental and socio-political transformation. The indices of such transformation are evident in better health care, alleviation of poverty, food security, housing, education and eradication of gender inequality. Pearson also asserts that development does not refer to one particular perspective on social, political and economic betterment. Instead, it is a hybrid term for a myriad of strategies adopted for socio-economic and environment transformation from current states to desired ones. Sustainable development should ‘meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. This involves integrating three ‘pillars’ of sustainability: environmental, economic and social.

### **Sustaining Sustainable Development**

There are severally factors that aid sustainable development. But it is obvious that none these factors will yield much fruit if good leadership is lacking.

#### *i. Promotion of learning*

For any nation to boast of sustainable development, education must be given a primary position. It is obvious as confirmed by Abera (2023:69) that “the education of today is crucial to enhancing the ability of the leaders and citizens of tomorrow to create solutions and find new paths to a better, more sustainable future.” The training of the mind helps man to subdue the earth and make positive use of it. So the dividend of education is not usually immediate but all the same education is recognised as having one of the highest long-term returns on investment of all development goals. Education serves as an important means of implementation for sustainable human development due to the number of positive benefits it brings across the development goals. Undoubtedly, quality improvement in education will touch every facet of development, namely, economy, health care, eradication of poverty, employment, promotion of self-reliance to mention but a few. Summarily, quality education “is about what and how people learn, its relevance to today’s world and global challenges, and its influence on people’s choices. Many now agree, quality education for sustainable development reinforces people’s sense of responsibility as global citizens and better prepares them for the world they will inherit” (Buckler and Creech 2014: 28) “Education is key to the global integrated framework of sustainable development goals. Education is at the heart of our efforts both to adapt to change and to transform the world within which we live. A quality basic education is the necessary foundation for learning throughout life in a complex and rapidly changing world” (Irina Bokova, Director General of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in UNESCO

2015: 3). “Education is also an important means of implementation for sustainable development, and it provides an important construct where the perceived tensions between economic, social and environmental development can be harmonised and integrated into a single concept and pursuit of sustainable well-being for all.” (Didham R.J. – Ofei-Manu P., 2012:97) Sustainable development has education as its major driving force. It refers to “education practices that encourage changes in knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable a more sustainable and just society for humanity. It aims at empowering and equipping current and future generations to meet their needs using a balanced and integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_development)).

All in all, following the UN resolution it becomes necessary to “further reaffirm that full access to quality education at all levels is an essential condition for achieving sustainable development, poverty eradication, gender equality and women’s empowerment, as well as human development, for the attainment of the internationally agreed development goals.”(UN General Assembly, Resolution 66/288: The Future We Want (27 July 2012: para. 229). Further still, education systems are not only fundamental in development but Carneiro (1996) maintains that they remain “a source of human capital (Becker), cultural capital (Bourdieu), and social capital (Putnam). Instead of being ‘a wolf to his fellowman’ (*homo homini lupus*), man may thus become ‘a friend to man’ (*homo homini amicus*) through an education that has remained faithful to its community goals.”

#### *ii. Gender equality*

The equality of person regardless of the gender has to be given a primacy of place. Women and men, girls and boys should be given equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men and girls and boys are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups and that all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles. Gender equality is a matter of human rights and is considered a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.

(<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Genderglossarytermsandconcepts.pdf> accessed 21/4/2024)

*iii. Creation of human rights awareness*

“Knowledge is power” says Francis Bacon. It is knowledge that makes one know his right. If one does not know his/her rights, he/she will continuously wallow in the dark as far as those rights are concerned. Human rights awareness campaigns, in the words of Munir (2024) therefore “serve as catalysts for positive change, especially for vulnerable groups in our population. By educating, advocating, and promoting inclusivity, these campaigns contribute to the building of a society where everyone can enjoy the fundamental rights and freedoms they deserve. As we work towards a more just and equitable world, let us recognize the transformative power of human rights awareness in empowering the vulnerable and creating lasting societal change.”

It is when these rights are guaranteed and respected that development will be sustained; because each individual will aim at doing what is right for the good of the other and the entire nation.

*iv. Food security*

It is when the basic needs, food, shelter etc are taken care of that their potentials can be profitable harnessed. Food security, as defined by the World Food Summit in 1996, is “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. (Food and Agriculture Organization (2001). Food insecurity, on the other hand, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a situation of “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” Food security is the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. The availability of food for people of any class, gender or religion is another element of food security. Similarly, household food security is considered to exist when all the members of a family, at all times, have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food\\_security](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_security) accessed 2/6/2024)

Food security is sustained when there is reasonable constancy regarding availability, access, utilization, and stability. (Food and Agriculture Organization 2009) These four pillars could be fundamentally realized through giving primacy to agriculture, respecting ecology, avoiding environmental degradation that could lead to severe climate change. Otherwise, there could be a relapse into food insecurity and famine will become the order of the day.

## **Factors that hinder sustainable development**

There are several factors that hinder sustainable development but we concentrate on the major ones

### *i. Poor leadership*

It is pertinent to commence our examination of poor leadership through the interrogative stance of Kellerman (2004:xv-xvi). “What does poor leadership mean? Is it synonymous with bad leadership? Does it mean leadership that is immoral, unethical? Or does it mean leadership that is corrupt, incompetent, grossly entangled in mismanagement and squandermania, visionless, lost in wonder of the enormity of his authority, uncertain of aims and objective of leadership, ignorant of the inner and outer logic of governance, ineffective? ... what is to be done to maximize good leadership and minimize bad leadership.”

Poor leadership used synonymously with ineffective leadership, is in the words of Helms (2012:5) is “leadership that fails to achieve its self-set goals chiefly because of the incompetence, the ignorance, the rigidity or intemperateness of the leader...” Other similar forms of poor leadership are inefficient leadership that invests too many resources – human and material – and incurs unreasonably high costs in the process of achieving its goals. Another branch of poor leadership is that which is characteristically devoid of concrete agenda and lacks substantive and clearly defined goals. There is also another form of poor leadership which has to do with leadership characterized by leaders that have minimal idea of what to do with their power.

### *ii. Lack of attention to education*

Education rules the world. Education propels any sustainable development programme. It is used to safeguard health, environment, and general well-being of the society. So the lack of it does untold harm to sustainable development. It is therefore the primary duty of any good leadership to prioritize education. In fact, Nevin (2008:49) maintains that “education for sustainable development (ESD) promotes the development of the knowledge, skills, understanding, values and actions required to create a sustainable world, which ensures environmental protection and conservation, promotes social equity and encourages economic sustainability.” In the words of Socrates “there is only one good, knowledge, and only one evil, ignorance.” When proper attention is not given to education its resultant negative effects are not only colossal but spiral in nature because it touches every aspect of life. By so doing, sustainable development is hampered.

### *iii. Environmental degradation*

Undoubtedly environmental degradation is deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources which includes all the biotic and abiotic element that form our surrounding that is air, water, soil, plant, animals, and all other living and non-living element of the planet of earth. (Bourque et al. 2005). This environmental degradation has both human and natural causes. The human causes are mainly from urbanization, deforestation, overpopulation, industrialization. All these elements in the long run generate a loss of biodiversity. The natural causes like drought, hurricane, earthquake, typhoon etc do untold harm to the environment.

To that effect, Diop (2015) affirms that “environment degradation exacerbates poverty particularly in the rural areas as the poor rely on the ecological system for their livelihoods (food, energy and medicine). Because women and girls bear the brunt of food, water and energy provision to their families, water shortages and deforestation mean that women and girls have to walk longer distances to fetch water and collect firewood.” When the environment becomes so vulnerable, investing in agriculture becomes difficult and by extension hunger assumes the centre stage. The ripples of its negative effects are reflected in the harm they do to sustainable development.

## **Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that good leadership is the fulcrum of any sustainable development. Such leadership is founded on the use of critical reasoning process. It demands an evaluative process which the leader employs in decision making. Good leadership no doubt is always visionary in attitude and painstaking in churning out and execution of developmental principles and broadminded in the translation of ideas into concrete reality evidenced in the spreading of sustainable projects anchored on production. In fact, no sustainable development principles will see the light of the day when kakistocratic government (government by the worst) is in place. In the same vein, bad leadership which most of the African countries are experiencing has become the undoing of the continent. Consequently, development has remained at its lowest ebb, looting is done with reckless abandon and proliferation of injustice is wantonly celebrated. In order to be liberated from the quagmire of bad leadership, the rich African cultural heritage of leadership values founded on integrity, truthfulness, respect for the other, promotion of communal life have to be revived in order to promote a viable development in Africa.

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