

**THE HUMAN-RESOURCE DIMENSION OF POLITICAL,
SOCIAL, AND MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE NIGER DELTA**

by

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**Presented at The 2004 Boro Day Observance and 6th Annual INAA
Service And Devotion Award Ceremony**

Newark, New Jersey, U.S.A.

May 22, 2004

1. INTRODUCTION

I first prepared these notes almost four years ago for a slightly different purpose. Despite the fairly long lapse of time, I consider the ideas and argument still very current and relevant. I have had to use this material because of the short notice I received to appear on this panel. I have made changes here and there while retaining the thrust and intent of the earlier material.

My contention is that irrespective of the eventual resolution of the resource control challenge that Nigeria currently faces, the Ijaws, and indeed, all constituent ethnic units within the country, face a similar fundamental problem - that of fielding competent, conscientious, and community-minded individuals to effectively manage the resources within their neighborhood, and to credibly participate in national affairs at the center. Only widespread equitable and credible participation by all segments of the country in its running can engender lasting peace and harmony in the country. For the Ijaws who attained a measure of self-determination for the first time only very recently this challenge is even more imperative, since they must compete with the other ethnic units which generally have far larger and already more robust cadres of professionals.

1.1 A REPETITION OF HISTORY

The situation that confronts the Ijaws is very similar to the experience of several of the African countries which gained political independence from their colonial masters beginning from the late 1950's, including Nigeria. The movement for political independence had often been led by people whose education was mostly in the arts. While many of these African "founding fathers" had indeed distinguished themselves in the areas of literature, law, the arts, and medicine, in several of the best educational institutions in Europe and the Americas, there were comparatively only much smaller numbers of technical professionals. Political agitation was understandably, quite often dominated by the singular goal of securing independence. Consequently, little parallel attention was directed towards preparing for the practical side of actually running the new state once independence finally came.

We continue to witness a replay of this phenomenon several times over in some of the Ijaw states, and indeed, in Nigeria as a whole. The rapid dilapidation of many pre-independence public facilities and services, and the generally unsatisfactory management of most anything technical - electricity, water, oil refineries, air lines, flour mills, telephone systems, postal service, etc - all emanate predominantly from this acute scarcity of technical manpower. Not only has it retarded the pace of social and material development; it continues to severely impede the drive towards establishing good governance in our society. At an international conference seven years ago I had addressed this general challenge facing African countries [[Poweigha, 1997](#)].

1.2 THE NIGERIA EXPERIMENT

Another historical backdrop to our condition regards the very origins of the Nigerian body-politic. My view is that the creation in 1914 of the socio-political container that we call Nigeria was actually one of the more singular blessings that befell Africa after its prolonged odious experience of colonialism and the slave trade. I concede that this conception is diametrically opposite the preponderant viewpoint of many Nigerians, especially amongst those from the disaffected regions of the country.

These people consider the creation to have been a nefarious artifact of the colonialists, in which supposedly discordant and culturally irreconcilable human elements were peremptorily injected into an untenable political entity for their own malevolent ends.

In reality, we were handed, within this 650-mile north-to-south by 700-mile east-to-west piece of real estate, a veritable bounty of human, ecological, and mineral resources, only waiting for prudent and responsible exploitation. Of course, neither the colonialists nor our forefathers knew this at the time. And in the strictly political and ethnological sense, Black Africa was provided with a test-bed on a platter, complete with more than the critical mass of each of all the requisite ingredients for national sufficiency, to *prove* itself at this game of mega-self-direction. Here was a call, nay, a challenge, for Africans to abandon the physically and intellectually Lilliputian realm of the village, clan, and tribe, and venture into the big league of the modern-day geopolitical arena. Providentially, they were provided with a geographical domain that was neither too big, so that the task would not overwhelm them, nor, too small, thus according them some very significant technical benefits whilst also lending realism and credibility to the experiment.

1.3 QUO VADIS, NIGERIA?

Almost forty-four years after this experiment began Nigeria and Nigerians clearly still grapple with some fundamental problems, despite making significant gains in a number of areas. The resource control stalemate has been one such problem which many people quickly cite as a failure of our experiment in modern-day, large-scale self-management. If in response to the vociferous calls in the recent past by these misguided people, Nigeria were balkanized into so-called ethnic nationalities, no single unit could command such a propitious mix of resources. And even if it did, the very probably, mutually antagonistic and politically unstable ensuing environment amongst the different entities would rapidly lead to its demise.

So the singular challenge remains one of participation and management. Preparing for participation rests squarely with the Ijaws as on the other ethnic units. Creating a sensible, prudent, and fair-minded environment for

credible and equitable management of the totality of these bounteous resources, rests with the center. A center which is arrogant, and inflexible, and disregards common sense, history, and fair-play stands the risk of driving the disaffected to hasty and unproductive action. Conversely, a climate in which the leading authorities of our land are caused to take weighty decisions about the nation's future only under duress and the threat of violence is also clearly undesirable. That could set a dangerous precedent and potentially, rapidly escalate out of control. Either way, the Ijaws must prepare to effectively manage their neighborhood. That is why I consider the human-resource problem to be paramount.

1.3 THE TASK BEFORE IJAW GOVERNMENTS

Ijaw organizations in the diaspora can at best play an indirect role in this regard by influencing the direction of the governments back home, without interfering in their operation, or, attempting to assume the status of a pseudo-government. For good or ill, those governments are democratically elected and so must be allowed to exercise their mandate. However, a cooperative and mutually supportive environment should be established between the two, whereby useful information exchanges occur. The effectiveness of such an environment is, of course, wholly contingent upon the receptivity at the government end, where all the instruments of power reside.

The Ijaw diaspora with its collective potential expertise in a multiplicity of professional disciplines, can develop concrete plans to guide the leaders and government officials back home without regard to their political affiliation, clan, or community (town). The government on the other hand, must be the entity to actually:

- 1. Produce effective low-, mid-, and high-level manpower in a hurry, who can analyze, plan, design, implement, and maintain the various governmental and societal systems and institutions.***

We all know that individual Ijaws, from the beginnings of the Nigerian Republic, have, every now and then, been invited to play significant roles at the very highest levels in the affairs of the country. Just as a tree does not make a forest, we need many more trees at every level to

complement and amplify the impact of those few select Ijaw sons and daughters. We need a large manpower pool for:

- Running the government, and directing the social and material development of the area at the village, clan, state and local government levels, and
- Credible participation in the national arena, at all levels, and in all seasons, in all of its possible ramifications.

My idea of effective manpower goes beyond the mere acquisition of diplomas, certificates, and citations, though significant and admirable they are. By it, I mean a collection of individuals who are transparently, confidently proficient in their self-chosen disciplines, and can be counted upon to consistently deliver, if necessary, even under duress. This would apply to teachers, technicians, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and every other conceivable professional.

2. *Effectively dovetail our identity and culture into our march into the twenty-first century, alongside our fellow Nigerians.*

I am here not talking about a rabid and self-destructive descent into narrow-minded tribal jingoism, wherein everything Ijaw is good, whilst everything else is demonic, or, anyone who waves the Ijaw banner is automatically in the right and so is free of all evil. We must never abandon the capacity to dispassionately evaluate the conduct of our own people in-house, as uncomfortable as that may sometimes be. Thus, what I mean is a climate which allows us to be part of the Nigerian whole without the loss of our ability to filter our interaction with others through the lense of our collective cultural memory and identity.

2. CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

2.1 THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD HOLDS THE KEY

While the desired goal of rapidly producing a large manpower pool is clear, several factors stand in the way of its realization. The biggest challenge is that engineers, doctors, and other professionals cannot be produced by decree, or by merely wishing. Firstly, an individual child must make the decision to eventually become that expert. Secondly, having taken the decision, the child or young person must stay the course over the usually long years that are required to grow the particular professional. Consequently, the overall rate of the manpower pool production will be determined by the collective individual choices and tenacity of our young men and women. This in turn will be reflected by what I would like to call the *Educational Completion Efficiency (ECE)* for our society.

This quantity, a number lying between zero and one, is the fraction of a cohort of say, one hundred six-year olds, who eventually, successfully complete their chosen field of study. As an example, an ECE of one would mean that each child successfully completed his or her self-chosen track of educational pursuit. For a reasonable rate of progress, any society requires ECE's greater than a half. Rapid rates of progress would call for even higher ECE's, close to one.

I would posit that societies with high completion efficiencies correlate strongly with high levels of material well-being and generally good governance. Conversely, those human groups within ethnically or racially pluralist societies like Nigeria which record relatively low educational completion efficiencies face the risk of eternal marginalization and socio-economic and political irrelevance. It is for this reason that Ijaws must strive for the highest possible completion efficiency if they are to avoid relegation to the status of incidental passengers on the Nigerian ship.

Based on my experience and observations growing up, both in the country side and cities of Nigeria, and from what we all hear and see in our communities, the current completion efficiency for Ijaw society needs significant elevation. I cannot cite a source to support this conclusion simply because I know of no data out there. Unlike the more developed and mature

societies around the world, Nigeria and Nigerians, in general, are yet to appreciate the importance of data that document a people's existence and experience. Several botched national censuses, wilful destruction of national records, and irregularities at several elections are all examples of this pervasive ignorance and nonchalance.

2.2 DESTRUCTIVE INDIVIDUALISM

While the ECE that I propose as the key factor for the youth is a rather futuristic concept, we must of course also consider the current adult population. An expression that was used to motivate students in elementary physics in my secondary school days was that *Nature abhors a vacuum*. From my observation of the social dynamics of the world around us and my little understanding of history, I would translate that physical concept into the human sphere as: *Human beings abhor equality*.

Thus, most of the interactions between and amongst people are driven by individual and family interests. Each person wants to be considered the number one in looks, brains, money, power and influence, even in spite of conspicuous contradictions. They want their family to be the biggest shot in town, so that they can, with impunity, make and bend the rules, to ensure that all members of the family are powerful. They would want to freely engineer every situation and event so as to place every family member within the ranks of the most successful and the right and righteous.

They want their village to be the number one in the clan, or their tribe to be presented to the outside world as the country. They present the culture and practices of their ethnic group to the world as Africa's culture.

These observations need to be taken in a statistical sense of course. While they are fairly prevalent, I am not suggesting that everyone is in it. We are all unique individuals of course, and this distinctness has driven many people to excel in several different pursuits. The watch word simply should be reasonable moderation.

As applied to our Ijaw communities this overriding individualism and pervasive mentality of me-only, my town, clan, or district only, has manifested itself in several ways that have been amply reported. These have

included frequent deadly inter-community clashes, election violence, less than optimal government policies, and the rise of violent criminal activity by our own youth against our own people within our area. Though a people who supposedly had suffered marginalization by outsiders for a long time, and so should immediately eradicate this condition from its community, we unfortunately find marginalization still very much alive and well within our society, being inflicted by our own people on our own people.

2.3 ETHNO-CULTURAL DILUTION

Finally, the most insidious and potentially most poignant manifestation of this phenomenon has been in the cultural area. With the rise of rapid modern transportation systems, and the free flow of professional manpower between the continents, coupled with the virtually instantaneous worldwide communications by radio, television, and now the Internet, the world community is more widely being biologically and culturally inter-mixed. Even within Nigeria, inter-ethnic mixing has skyrocketed from the early 1970's. This one factor alone should cause those who clamor for the voluntary balkanization of Nigeria into so-called ethnic nationalities to really think hard.

Couple this inter-mixing with unbridled individualism which many amongst our newly educated classes seem to have fully imbibed from the outside, and we find a rapid erosion and dilution of our cultural identity. More and more of our people are beginning to lose our language and dialects, even amongst those who have grown up in our native environment. More and more, we can no longer directly identify our kith and kin from their names alone, because they are abandoning indigenous names for foreign ones. Common cultural practices which, only a few generations ago, automatically elicited a uniform resonance from just about every Ijaw person, are barely even recognized and understood today. Philosophically, and intellectually, more and more of our people have become so highly hybridized or emaciated that they can no longer perceive our problems from a balanced indigenous perspective.

I am not suggesting that we should strive for strict ethnic homogeneity. That would clearly be an impossible task. Neither is it desirable in these times, although uncontrolled ethno-cultural dilution could conceivably lead to

our disappearance as a distinct people, and reduce us to mere denizens of just another geographical area. But I believe that *cultural consistency* is a worthwhile goal that should be pursued. This would mean that irrespective of the extent of our inter-mixing with other ethnic groups and races, large segments of our population would retain and continue to hand on to our children, our language and its dialects, our food, our mythology, and other aspects of our collective culture.

3. ACTION - ALL HANDS ON DECK!

Now that I have identified some of the areas that most challenge us, you may ask what can be done. Before I answer that question, I should point out that the Ijaws, and indeed, the whole of Nigeria, have recorded some very commendable successes in their relatively short national experience. The call therefore, is for us to strive to attain even loftier heights, for, there is ample room for improvement. For the Ijaws, especially, it is a call to remember and act on the almost prophetic words of one of its earliest musical giants from the early 1950's, James Iti, who in his evocative tune, *Izon Otu O Seri*, enjoined them to wake up.

In the next three sections, I have proposed three courses of action. The first action will ensure that governments in charge of the Ijaw areas can immediately tap the cumulative expertise of its sons and daughters. As the saying goes, *Charity begins at home*. It is clearly good sense to fully utilize our in-house expertise. Secondly, I address the case of our youth, and finally, our current adult generation. The case of the youth is very important because they are the future. What they become will determine whether or not all current struggles have been in vain.

3.1 DOCUMENT OUR MANPOWER POOL

The first thing that Ijaw governments back home should do is to document the current manpower pool of its sons and daughters, wherever they may be. I am not suggesting that government thereby should use only Ijaw personnel. I am also not suggesting that this data be used in a Machiavellian sort of way, whereby only cronies of highly placed officials get into position. Government should know what manpower is available in-house, while still being free to utilize expertise and personnel in a prudent way.

This is a task that can start immediately, and be accomplished entirely by Ijaw sons and daughters, from both within the country and the diaspora.

3.2 DEVELOP AND DIRECT OUR YOUTH

On account of the supreme importance of manpower in our development, I contend that decisions about education and schooling should be completely removed from individual families and their children, and transferred *in toto* to the community. This is especially critical at the primary school level and all through the secondary school years. No child will thereafter miss the opportunity of schooling simply because its parents lacked the pecuniary means. And no child should be allowed to simply decide to drop out of school or pursue interests that collide with the collective good of the community. We will encourage, persuade, and if necessary, outrightly coerce, our youth to fully utilize the resources that the community provides them. The community will collectively resolve and work in unison to raise the educational completion efficiency of our society to the highest possible level, by providing the resources uniformly to every child to enable it to rise to the highest level that his or her innate talents, drive, and potential can support.

Furthermore, this will allow us to spawn and develop the new citizenry that we desperately need to banish the toxic effects of epidemic tribalism and sectionalism that we currently witness all over Nigeria. We will collectively teach our youth to practise leadership, service to community, and accountability, from a very early age, so that these qualities are deeply ingrained by the time they attain early adulthood.

Implementation of this idea does not require complete originality. From history's attic of vanished regimes, kingdoms, and empires, we can very readily concoct a menu of appropriate and effective programs. The hardest part is for enough people to understand and appreciate the urgency for such a path.

3.3 SHIFT TO A COLLECTIVE PARADIGM

In the case of the current adult population, we must shift our operative social paradigm from narrow-minded individualism and overriding family interests to a collective mentality. No one family can provide all of its doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals. No single town or community can provide for all its needs.

We are indeed like passengers on a nearly overloaded boat drifting in barracuda-infested waters. If we refuse to elevate our collective safety and wellbeing above all personal and individual interests, and foolishly allow or cause the boat to capsize, then we will all be dinner for the man-eating barracuda.

The emphasis should be to develop the individual. In all our civic, public, and governmental work environments, we must plan to raise the effectiveness of the individual. We will mitigate the ills that plague our society only to the extent that we transform the largest number of individuals to begin to act appropriately. I am not here talking about employing religion or some other arcane system of mind development. I am talking about applying unrelenting, draconian, spartan discipline, consistently, and uniformly. A secular environment requires such secular methods.

In order to successfully transform the me-only mentality to the collective paradigm, we must develop in a hurry, systems and structures that will develop:

1. Discipline - for everyone, from five-year olds to adults, and absolutely no exceptions under any circumstances.
2. Leadership - develop according to demonstrated individual ability and promise, from age ten years and beyond.
3. Dedication and Service - everyone, from children through adults.
4. Unity - state, regional, and national levels, etc.

5. Accountability, with recognition for commendable service, and severe sanctions for inexcusable failures, in public affairs - government, community, and other public officials.
6. Individual contribution and responsibility to the overall development goals of the state, local government, and communities, from children through adults.
7. Collective self-reliance and common sense in harnessing our environment for our sustenance - through individual entrepreneurship, private/public companies, and government.

Again, as I indicated earlier in Section 3.2, we can easily design systems to accomplish these objectives if the will is forthcoming. Thank you.

REFERENCES

- Poweigha, T. (1997) *Translating Science Into Technology: The Challenge For African Countries*, Presented At The 29th Annual Liberian Studies Association Conference, Texas A & M University, Prairie View Campus, April 4