

How to fix Nigeria? 7 key issues by Oluseun Onigbinde

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A secure nation

On a visit to Kigali, a lady extolled their army and why they have the respect of every citizen. Like every typical African, she could not reconcile how the world famous Nigerian military cannot take down Boko Haram. It is clear that we have underfunded our military in years past and recent revelations by Dasuki show that “security” was just a slush fund for politicians. For Nigeria to earn that respect as the “military powerhouse of Africa”, it needs to secure its borders and protect its people. We are moving towards a polarised world and Turkey’s recent skirmish with the United States despite being members of NATO and also the political engine powering Donald Trump, who is not sold to distributing freedom, threatens us all.

Let us even look within. Niger Delta Avengers rage in the Niger Delta. Armed militia spring up in different parts of the country weekly. Newspapers and blogs are filled with tales of kidnaps. Nigeria is neither secure inside or outside, there are enemies within and without. Nigeria needs to do more to protect itself and its citizens. It is unfortunate that President Buhari has been reticent on the Fulani herdsman crisis as he has neither honoured victims, nor used strong language on the marauders. Nigerians can’t go anywhere with such perception that looms large in citizens’ minds and international media.

A united nation

The perception of every recent Nigerian leader is that they have spread division. Remember the Goodluck Jonathan era, Asari Dokubo’s loud vituperations and how the state emboldened the likes of Tompolo through concession of state property? President Buhari with that [97%, 5% comment](#) gave warfare to his critics and also with recent appointments, he has reinforced that narrative of Northernisation. We need a united nation, forged in common belief with strong assurances from the leader. Most Nigerian leaders try hard to sell sectionalism and in end, we have not been able to organise ourselves around a national vision. Most of the work that should have started with the President filtered through the National Orientation Agency is clearly absent. We can decide to take the higher route, speak in a Pan-Nigerian sense, the kind of virtue Olusegun Obasanjo, despite his shortcomings, had in immense proportion.

A healthy nation

More Nigerians are killed, not exactly by infections, but by a comatose health care system. Nigeria’s health care system is sick; it needs to be cured. Right now, most of the government hospitals are on strike. The last time President Buhari got an ear infection, he travelled out of the country; what is the fate of the average Nigerian who neither owns an international passport nor can afford the luxury of travelling out to get better treatment? How will a sickly system cure the sick? One of the biggest components of Federal government budget is the allocation to the health but that data masks a reality that health infrastructure spending is less than 1% of the budget. We need all Nigerians to have access to quality healthcare. We can do this as a nation that cares. We need an health insurance plan, a sense of dedication and proper remuneration for our medical workforce with huge investment in health. Fixing our health system is part of the reason why we should just do few things well. Nigerians should not die because of lack of access to basic health care.

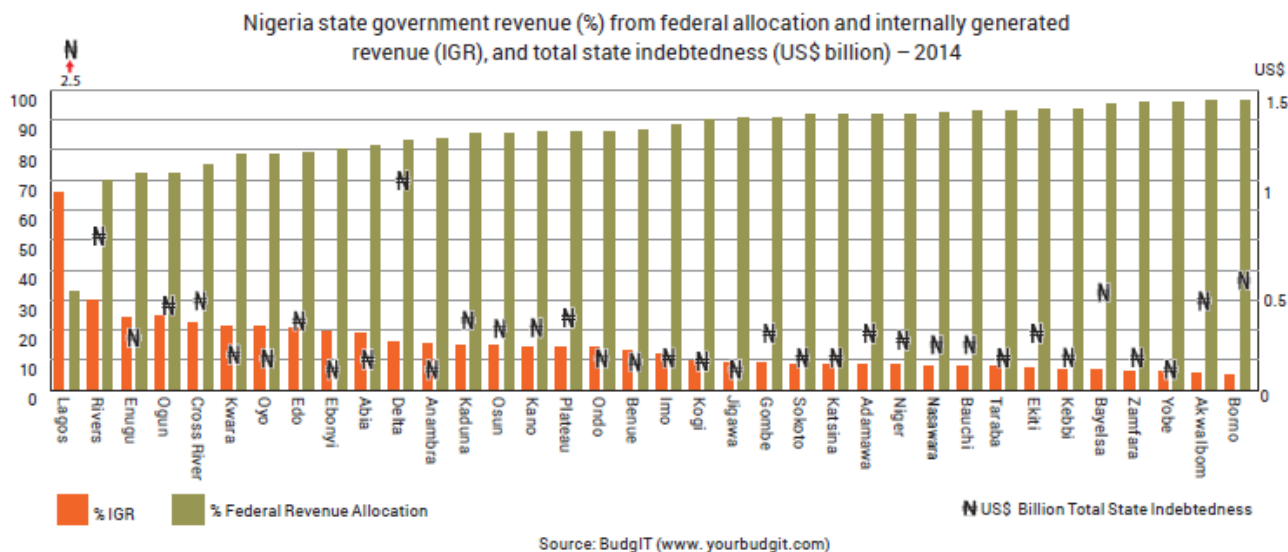
Competitiveness and growth

Nigeria needs to diversify from oil. That is a time-worn narrative but we need to see it happen. We need to diversify because this is our biggest vehicle to raise national income, distribute wealth and also strengthen tax payments to the states. This is where Nigeria needs to do a competitive profiling of our resources and ensure we are taking our best rent from them. Why are we a multi-billion cement country, yet government royalties from limestone is less than N500m according to Nigerian Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative. What do states whose granite is being mined to fill Eko Atlantic earn from such mining? Nasarawa has a name plate of “Home of Solid Minerals”, [why can't it pay salaries](#)? Nigeria currently is not pricing its solid minerals rightly and needs to overhaul it by taking it beyond the primary levels. New growth poles in agriculture, ICT, business outsourcing and services must be a deliberate government policy.

We need to be competitive and I am happy the current government sees it. What is our plan to diversify our energy mix since it seems Niger Delta militants are taking gas plants hostage? Where are our port reforms and how to we expand this across the country? Do we think any nation progresses with loans offered at 22%? What are we doing to repatriate our intellectual capital from the diaspora to advance our education, already in tatters? Do we think we can scale through this knowledge economy when our capital spend for each University is less than N1bn? Revamping our education system is not just a way to protect our future, it is a key competitive lever. Societies have been recently shown to advance when they put a priority on knowledge. The Abuja-Kaduna standard railway gauge technology that we borrowed \$500m from China is powered with technology built in 1850s. Did the Chinese know how to build this railway 30 years ago? I seriously doubt. This is why we fool ourselves if we don't understand knowledge is a critical competitive lever in human civilization.

We have to be deliberate about this: choose specific industries that we want to be competitive in; focus on them and support them for the next few years. What is the sense in having timber and importing paper? Or being blessed with good soil and importing toothpicks? An honest review of our foreign exchange use is enough to build insight into what local industry are low-hanging fruits for us. These are the roads ahead if we want to take them.

Finding the money



Nigeria has a revenue challenge. I can understand a lot of waste is evident at all levels of government but it does not resolve the fact that our tax-to-GDP is less than 6%, worse than even some war-torn states. For every N100 we have, Nigeria spends almost N40 to service debt. We need to find the money to run this country. Oil price decline has finally nailed us but where our solution actually lies is in taxation. We have to strive to expand Nigeria's formal market, develop an accurate profiling of Nigerians and their businesses and see how to build taxes in our consumption. Why do we leave nearly our entire agricultural chain, the largest component of our GDP, untaxed? Why don't we explore direct taxes on basic consumption such as fuel, phone calls and items sold in organised

markets. The huge grey area for Nigeria is the lack of data and inability to tax businesses in informal market. This is why we have few Nigerians in tax net and our *Bureau de Change* keeps serving them with dollars. Going ahead from here is to formalise these businesses and take rents from them.

Putting people to work

When the unemployment figures in this country are thrown around, my mind cannot fathom it. The best way to understand it is to look at the newspaper stands every morning, look at the associations of free readers. Look at the way universities churn out graduates yearly or just take a look at the yearly National Youth Service Corps programme and you will know that there is gross unemployment in the land. Trust me, these hands will find things to stay occupied. Don't ask me what.

The Buhari administration has promised to [continue the YOUWIN programme](#); I don't understand the delay in a programme that needs not more than N20bn to continue. There are other projects in the offing, the [N-Power Project](#) for instance. Beyond building fancy websites that crash under the burden of applications, another testament to the huge unemployment, these projects must reach those who truly need them. How will this website reach the young men in my village with limited internet access?

Here is something else. Our infrastructure gap is our biggest opportunity to put people to work. Rather than doling out N5,000 to citizens or any of those social schemes, why not tar every single road in this country, unleashing a massive public works programme funded by the Central Bank as a fiscal intervention support? In the time of Great Depression, the US expanded liquidity through this approach. The resources—cement, sand, bitumen, men and equipment—to build great roads are not lacking. Why wait to monetise the sale of a barrel of oil or borrow from China before we can put a road down? Why are we not expanding our sports programmes, Nollywood industry and other employment drivers? Why is there no haste in us?

Accountability in governance

Finally, we will keep coming short with our resources if we don't institutionalise transparency and accountability in governance. No amount of money or ideas will work in Nigeria with short-termism and wasteful expenditures by the Nigerian ruling class. We need selfless leaders who are ready to take bold ideas and understand where we need to go. As long as we have leaders with big egos interested in erecting big houses around the world and travelling with large convoys, we are not going anywhere. We also need what I call graduated federalism, a system where states have more control for resources within their perimeter on a gradual scale. This is also part of the way we can incentivise states to think beyond FAAC allocation when they accept that no matter the price of oil, their share of its allocation is shrinking.

How to fix Nigeria

Nigeria will only move forward as a nation forged in unity, by optimising every single public resource and making the health, safety and the prosperity of its people an urgent concern. There are no shortcuts; fixing Nigeria requires a consistent long-term approach not those constantly watching four-year elections, like a “dieter watching the scale every half-hour”.

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