

Sustainable Agriculture: A Credible Alternative for National Development : A speech delivered by Dr. Orij Uzor Kalu (MON), former Governor of Abia State, Nigeria and Founder, Slok group at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Convocation Lecture of Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State on Thursday, December 1, 2016

Protocol

I must say sincerely that I feel deeply humbled standing before you today in this great institution. I am particularly pleased because this occasion, like many others, has given me another great opportunity to point out specifically where we have all got it wrong over the years. Today's gathering is not only timely considering the avowed commitment of the current administration to diversify the economy, with agriculture being topmost on the agenda, it is also very apt for me to state my mind on the need for our institutions to be less theoretical and become more practical especially now that the world is changing.

The time has come for us to move this great country forward, and to do this, there has to be an end to the blame game. Like I always tell people in the course of discussing issues concerning Nigeria, what is uppermost now in making this country great once again is for all to support genuine policies of any administration whether at federal, state or local government level.

Not too long ago, I reflected on the success stories of our leaders immediately after independence, and one thing I was able to identify that made them successful was the cooperation they received from both supporters and the opposition on issues that had to do with development.

Today, I make bold to say that all over the country, what we enjoy in terms of infrastructure are basically projects that were initiated and executed by the founding fathers of this great country.

I know you might be wondering within you how possible that can be since there had been several leaders after then. But the answer to that is very simple.

Just imagine if the resources we have earned from oil over the years had been committed into developing this country the same way the one earned from agriculture was deployed by past leaders, today, Nigeria would have been in the mode of Dubai and Saudi Arabia, if not better. However, all hope is not lost as agriculture, which gave us the pride of place in the past, is still available to be explored and exploited, and now is the time to do that, especially with the Federal Government's preparedness to support it at any level not just to ensure food sufficiency but also for national development.

Before going further, it is very important for us to reflect briefly on an important story everybody knows too well. The bittersweet memories story.

It is the success story of how agriculture built this country's infrastructure before crude oil was discovered. That success story was made possible through determination, sincerity of purpose, support from the people and some elements of sustainability not only by the government but all stakeholders. From the South West, South East up to the North, the founding fathers of this country had one major source of income, which was agriculture.

Through sheer commitment and determination, they did not only create jobs for their people from it, they also ensured their regions benefitted largely by providing the necessary social infrastructure as well as offering free education in some cases. The story of groundnut pyramid in the North, cocoa in the West, palm oil here in the East and rubber in the Midwest is today relayed with relish; but I wonder, if we so love the outcome of that endeavour, why then do we shy away from it.

The global food security index rates Nigeria the 80th and among the top countries that produce protein food crops. It is also the third in the production of groundnut after India and China but unfortunately, groundnut is not considered as a foreign exchange earner in any way. That began to happen the moment the popular pyramids disappeared on sighting crude oil. That success story is only reflective of the fact that agriculture is the way to go especially with what is happening all over the world; and thank God, the Federal Government is taking the bull by the horns by placing emphasis on it in its diversification mantra. One good thing is, because many people believe in this administration, they have also embraced the call by making agriculture their primary or secondary occupation. Corporate bodies, institutions, state governments and lot more are now scrambling to be identified with the production of specific crops. This is commendable, and even recently, some elders in this region commended the Federal Government for putting in place policies that are gradually encouraging urban rural remigration, if I am allowed to use that word.

Those who had abandoned agriculture and migrated to cities for greener pastures and now coming back for the greenest pastures and God-given opportunity they failed to acknowledge in the past.

For lack of vision, we relegated agriculture to the background. The most painful aspect of it was that while retired generals have been going back to land to cultivate, able-bodied men and women felt it was not their business to veer into food production. On recently, we had a little problem with the scarcity of tomatoes and everyone started screaming as if the world was coming to an end. That singular experience was enough to teach us a little lesson. But thank God we are moving forward from that past with good news emanating from all corners of the country. From personal observations in the last few months, things are definitely looking up. Before now, who would have thought that Lagos state would enter into an agreement with a state like Kebbi for the purpose of farming? But as I am standing

before you now, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on a large scale rice production was signed as far back as in March by the both states. So many other mega agric agreements are being signed across the country. These are all signs of good things to come.

The zeal to ensure that the agric project becomes an overwhelming appeal to the entire country is also evident in the approach being deployed by major economic drivers including the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Bank of Agriculture, Bank of Industry (BOI) and allied organizations, all in a bid to ensure food sufficiency and export. Apart from food sufficiency and export, the central bank governor disclosed recently that this government's agric project would generate about 500,000 employment opportunities in at least 12 states. That is the one that has been recorded or projected because I know there are so many farmers in villages that are not or will never be in that list. The list does not also contain the growing number of youths who work in my own farm at Ugwueke, Bende LGA of Abia State. I am sure some of you here don't even know that I am also a farmer and I get most of what I eat from my farm. So get it clear that if I come here to tell you about the beauty and benefit of agriculture to nation's development, I am doing so in my capacity as a farmer before any other thing. That is enough to convince you that soon, with agriculture, unemployment will be a thing of the past if we are committed to the opportunities in farming. It is good to see those youths that ran to the cities coming back to make use of idle lands to become self-reliant, produce food and even become employers of labour.

In all that I have said so far, the time has come to discuss the all-important issue that has brought us together. And that is Sustainability and development. This is one word that has been lacking in a lot of things we do in this country. If you look back to pre-independence era up to this moment, you would discover that successive leaders in this country have never been bereft of ideas.

From the ones we inherited from colonial masters and those acquired through formal education and even native intelligence, they all have been noble enough to see us through life. We have seen good results emanate from some of these ideas. However, one of the biggest tragedies that have followed up is the inability to sustain what has been put in place.

We are very good at conceiving ideas and also very smart at implementing them but deeply lacking in sustainability. This goes with the common saying, 'Nigeria lacks maintenance culture.'

It is not as if we don't know the value of agriculture. We have known that from time, but as important as it is to our lives and economy, the only thing we have done about it over the years is to pay lip service, both at individual and government level.

For a brief reference, let us understudy the Chinese mode of agric development since China has become our mentor in everything. The Chinese approach in

developing agriculture has been described as very pragmatic with methodology tacitly hinged on a policy of “giving more and taking less”. In 1978, the government gave considerable emphasis to land reforms and subsidies in an effort to assist farmers and give agriculture the priority it deserves.

By 2002, it introduced subsidy policies for grain production, superior crop varieties, purchase of agro-machinery and tools, in addition to granting general subsidies for agricultural insurance premiums, among others. By 2013, significant outcomes and accomplishments had started to manifest, as China’s grain output grew for the tenth consecutive year and exceeded 600 million tons, while the outputs of cotton, oil plants, sugar plants, meat, eggs milk and fruit peaked at 6.31 million tons, 35.31 million tons, 137.59 million tons, 85.36 million tons, 28.76 million tons, 35.31 million tons and 61.72 million tons respectively.

Acknowledging the seriousness of the Federal Government, the Chinese government recently declared a package of \$15 million to assist in developing the nation’s agric sector. This and other partnership with other agencies and the governments are commendable steps for the country.

And again, the Federal Government is also following on the path of vision with the recent launch of an agric roadmap, “The Green Alternative: Agriculture Promotion Policy, 2016-2020.” This also is a step in the right direction.

In appreciating all of its efforts, I do hope the less than N40 billion budgeted for agriculture will be enough for all the ambitious projects.

We have seen administrations campaign seriously about encouraging agriculture. But the question is...what followed this campaign, virtually nothing. Merely coming out on television and radio compelling youth, whose vision has become larger than rural life, to go back to land is not enough without incentive.

Not too long ago, we had an administration in this country that encouraged farmers to go into cassava farming. They were given assurance that their produce would be acquired and exported while more would be used by local bakers; but what happened thereafter? People, farmers and non-farmers alike heeded the call, but after churning out tons and tons of cassava, there was no one to guide them through export, and bakers simply turned their backs on them. There was cassava glut. People lost money and became highly discouraged. Those who left the cities and relocated to the villages for that reason became highly disappointed. They gave up on the project and never looked back.

The only reason for that failure was that although the project was well embraced, the government did not follow up with a sustained campaign as well helping to ensure that what came out of the farms were acquired and paid for. The lesson from that experience is that that the government must be prepared to ensure what comes out is not wasted.

This is where the nation’s agric insurance has to also come alive.

In my reckoning, I believe it is not enough to begin with this momentum and slow down or out rightly apply the brakes later. Even the Bible admonishes us in the book of Luke 9: 62 that “No one who puts his hands on the fork and looks back is fit for the kingdom”. Therefore, the government, individuals, corporate organizations and stakeholders should never give up in this campaign and subsequent implementation.

Even if by 2017 and beyond, we have enough to feed ourselves and more than enough for export, I will still implore all to sustain the campaign and also ensure that those who have towed the path of humility by going back to the farm are encouraged financially, morally and otherwise. Moreover, our appetite for consuming foreign food items should be highly discouraged just as all tiers of the government should put policies in place to ensure farmers don't work in vain.

While I am about to conclude my speech, I will at this juncture direct my advice to the authorities of this institution and every other agric institution and even those with just a department of agriculture. I would let you know once again that the world is changing fast, so imparting knowledge has gone beyond chalk and blackboard. This is the time to become more practical in whatever we do. We have come a long way turning out students, who graduate but forgetting what they learnt in school. The fault may not be theirs. It is probably because they have not been adequately taught the value of their profession.

I am here today as your guest lecturer and like I said earlier, I feel humbled to be invited. But I must not leave this venue without advising you on a very important thing we have left undone for a long time.

I would love a situation whereby this time next year and subsequently, if Jesus tarries, your convocation should be more in the mode of agric product exhibition. Let the visitors who will be here see bags of rice branded in the name of your school, bags of beans branded and named after those you wish to honour, tubers of yams and cassava laid out, all grown and harvested by your students 100 per cent.

The best thing for now, apart from teaching, is to begin a research into how you can go into commercial agriculture even if it is to start on a small scale.

Nothing stops you from being ambitious, nothing stops you from aspiring to produce the rice that can feed this community, feed this state, feed this nation and even feed the world. If you have a good and workable proposal in this regard I believe any responsive government would make land and funds available for you to realise it.

I thank you for listening.