

Conference on Just Governance: The Nigerian Biosafety Act and Genetically Modified Organisms Implications for Nigerians and Africa

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MISSION STATEMENT

The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

Opening Remarks

by

**Rev. Aniedi Okure, OP, Executive Director,
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Introduction

With all protocol observed, I want to first thank all of you for taking the time to be here, for your willingness to contribute to solving a basic problem that besets Nigeria and the rest of Africa. You would notice that al-though we are going to focus on Nigerian Biosafety Act and genetically modified plants and the implications for the health, the economy and the future generations, the theme of this gathering is preceded by two very important words – *Just governance*.

Problem of Governance

The fundamental problem that stands in the way of Nigeria achieving its greatness and indeed in the way of Africa's development is the problem of governance. It is the fundamental moral duty of those entrusted with governing to work tirelessly for the common good, for the welfare of their people and the state, and to ensure equitable distribution of the resources of the state. Leaders must seek the good for all their citizens in formulating policies and applying laws. Both laws and leaders must be transparent and accountable and enable healthy civil society participation in the governing process. Leaders must uphold the principles of subsidiarity, that is, they must not arrogate to themselves the functions of a lower body, more especially when the lower body is performing that function well.

Nigeria would have been a beacon of light on the African hill but it is where it is today because those entrusted with governance have failed in working for the common good of its people and the welfare of the state. There are facts to back this up: Nigeria's collective wealth far surpasses that of Britain. But how is Britain compared to Nigeria, where do many Nigerians go to enjoy vacation and the good life, or siphon the resources of the nation to buy homes and put in banks? In last month's issue of *Africa Renewal* (April 2016 p. 8), a quarterly publication of the United Nations Department of Public Information, Kingsley Ighobor quoting the *Economist* notes that Lagos state produces "about \$90 billion a year in goods and services, making its economy bigger than that of most

African countries, including Ghana and Kenya.” But as you know, thousands of Nigerian students are lining up seeking higher education in Ghana because of the failures of those entrusted with governance in Nigeria. I could go on and on.

Late last month, I was here in Abuja checking out the location of our gathering. I came with a colleague who is from Burkina Faso. The spectacle in this town, Nigeria’s Federal Capital City, was mind boggling. The cues for petrol that stretched for kilometers as far as the eye can see, made me both angry at the waste of time and frustration of the people who queued for hours, and ashamed on behalf of Nigerians – a major world exporter of oil. The shame and anger was further exacerbated when my colleague remarked that no such thing ever happened in Burkina Faso and then added, “Nigeria can do much better.” And indeed it can.

African Bishops on Governance

In 2013, African Catholic Bishops - SECAM, analyzing the challenges facing Africa in their joint pastoral letter *Governance, the Common Good and Democratic Transitions in Africa* (a masterpiece and must read), examined the issue of governance, the lack of space for civil society engagements, the distance between the government and the people, and de-scribed bad governance and corruption as “a cancer that stands in the way of Africa’s development.” They are right on target. In the next two days, we will be tackling an aspect of governance that ignores the common good and the welfare of the people; the issue of literally selling out the basis of livelihood of the community, and giving a foreign corporation monopoly over people’s basic right to life. As we listen to presentations, discussions and actual cases of “help” from abroad, please pay close attention. Pay attention to our brothers and sisters from Burkina Faso who were promised a rosy heaven, economic boom and development, convinced them that this was the way to economic salvation, but now find themselves in economic purgatory.

Corporate Greed

Business corporations generally do not come to help you without having already calculated the profit they are going to make from you. Let me repeat that. No business corporation comes to help you without having calculated a good profit they are going to make from the deal. They might build a continental secretariat and donate it to you for free, but do not be naïve to think it is truly free. Business Corporations, land developers, those in extractive industries, and those promising you abundant food and a better life do not come to “help” you for your sake. They come because they have already seen ahead. What they see is good for them.

Some built into the contract an undue advantage for themselves and a great disadvantage for the local community. A case in point: An agribusiness company, Herakles Farms went to Ghana’s Volta Region preaching development, increased food production, employment and improved living standards; the price, a takeover of farmlands from the local community. A clause in the contract AFJN found out, reads in parts that if there is any dispute to this agreement in the future, the case will have to be settled in a court in Paris. Think for a moment. Local farmers who do not have a passport, who do not speak French, who have already lost their farmlands and their source of livelihood, will have to find their way to the French embassy for a visa with all the hassle that comes with it, hire a team of lawyers, pay for plane ticket for themselves and their lawyers, book a hotel in Paris for however long the litigation lasts, contribute to supporting French economy and cuisine, etc. to seek justice for their heritage taken over by a stranger! How is that a help to the community!

In July 2014, Jubilee USA reported that “two hedge funds successfully sued the Democratic Re-

public of Congo for repayment of \$68 million on loans dating back to the early 1980's." The problem is not about repaying the loan but the interest on the loan which was roughly \$50 million. To think that \$68 million 'owed' to a lender includes \$50 million - 73.53% as interest makes lenders look like scavengers without conscience and stands repugnant to all that is decent in the free market enterprise. So if I come across as painting all businesses with the same brush, please pardon me, there are decent business corporations but cases like this, which are many, make me profoundly skeptical about business "helpers".

Local Collaborators

Unfortunately, time and time again, we find local insiders who are the chief collaborators with these corporations, who serve as the doorway to the exploitation of the community, and who defend the foreign business as the best thing for the community. It is mind boggling how Nigerian and African leaders readily mortgage the heritage of their people for a bowl of soup. When these corporations dangle a few dollars or Euros in their faces, and give them a few incentives, something strange happens: their rational, logical reasoning and foresight, their ability to see beyond the immediate gratification seems completely annulled, totally overcome by the prospects of pecuniary rewards. Just labeling such as greed does not explain it for me. It is something much deeper. What a tragedy!

Yes, it is true that the business world will engage in exploiting the weak and making profit at the backs of Africans, but the big culprits are the people within who readily sell out their heritage for pennies. These corporations know the weakness our leaders have for money and praise, and exploit it to the max. Often they hire those of us with academic titles, those with certain expertise or those of us in high positions in government to be their go-between "dollar-evangelist", business-missionaries who preach economic salvation and better life cleverly couched in the local language of the people to easily convince the local community of the supposed benefits of the deals. These are the real enemies of the communities, of Nigeria and of Africa.

Impact of Government to Government Foreign Aid

A close analysis of government foreign aid to Africa reveals that it has done more harm than good. Besides helping to perpetuate a corrupt elite, it is a major cause of stifling the development of local initiatives. Rather than supporting local initiatives, leaders eagerly import and embrace readymade solutions from abroad and impose on the communities. The result is a systematic strangling and destruction of development initiatives and the economy. As an analogy, we compare this practice to a child learning to walk. Imagine that each time the child tries to take baby steps from point "A" to "B", the parents, aunts and uncles rush in to "help" by carrying the child to the desired destination. That child will not learn to walk; rather the child will develop a dependent mentality on the helpers for movement. Imagine too that fifty years later, those "helpers" stop helping. Guess what? You have a lame adult, no longer cute and adorable to be carried, and unable to walk as an adult. This is the story Nigeria and Africa in the context of foreign aid.

Problem of Toxic Dumping

A further disturbing trend is the dumping of toxic waste in Africa. This is not fiction. In 2006 Trafigura, a Dutch company dumped toxic waste in the suburb of Abidjan. As a result, dozens have died, women are having miscarriages and the community is struck with all kinds of skin diseases never known to them. Toxic dumping is happening across Africa with known cases in Benin, Congo Brazzaville, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Togo and Somalia. Nigeria has had her share. We recall a businessman who collaborated with an Italian company to dump 8,000 tons of toxic waste in Koko, Delta State for \$100 a month, resulting in skin burns and

death for the community. And studies have shown that it takes about one thousand years for the milder forms of radioactive waste to wear off.

It is time that Nigerians and Africans develop what the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche described as the art of mistrust, at least as an intellectual disposition in business engagements with others. When it comes to business dealings, do not take what is offered to you in its face value. Read between the lines. When it sounds too good for you, look and think again because what you think it is; is most likely not what it is.

Our Mission

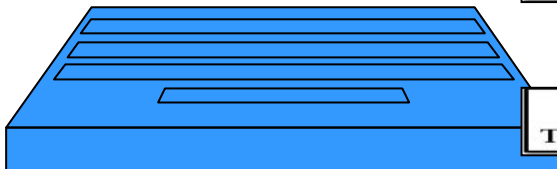
In the next two days, we will bring together our collective experience to tackle the issue of governance with a focus on Biosafety Act. We will listen to those with expertise in the area, people who care about your health and about the future of the earth, “our common home” as Pope Francis puts it in the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, people who care about the future of generations to come. We have to be cautious about researches that insist there is “no conclusive evidence” that GMOs or such and such are harmful and therefore good for you. History has shown that often, when business-sponsored researchers say “there is no conclusive evidence” that such and such is harmful, it is usually the research grant speaking not scientific evidence. So we need to be careful about inconclusive evidence. This is an area where it is wise to err on the side of caution.

The test of your participation in this gathering will come after Thursday; when you stand up for the truth and act on behalf of the truth, for the good of your community, for the common good, for the good of generations to come. The saying is true that “All that it takes for evil to thrive is that good people do nothing.” So we thank all you good people gathered here, for your determination to do something to change and erase this shame from Nigeria, and from the continent.

Conclusion

So sisters and brothers, please wake up; wake up from slumber. Wake up and see what is at stake and take action for the good of the future, wake up and stand up for the truth and act on behalf of the truth. Remember that a handful of people can, and have brought about great changes in the world. History bears testimony to that. If nothing historical readily comes to mind, learn from the wisdom of African ancestors: “If you think one is too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a room with one mosquito in it.” We, gathered here, are anything but too small to make a difference. Again, thank you for taking the time to be here and for your commitment to work for a better future.

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