

TEXT OF AN ADDRESS BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL/CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE INDUSTRIAL TRAINING FUND (ITF), SIR JOSEPH N. ARI, KSM, KSS, AT HIS ASSUMPTION TO OFFICE FOR SECOND TENURE ON TUESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER, 2020, AT THE ITF HEADQUARTERS COMPLEX, JOS.

It was the 26th day of September 2016, that we commenced this arduous journey; with uncertain, diffident initial steps that over time became confident and giant strides that reverberated across the country.

When I accepted this appointment four years ago, I was in no illusions as to the magnitude of task that awaited us. I was aware that the organisation that I had served in several capacities was in shambles. I was equally conscious that the ITF family that I had known was a thing of the past, as competing and divergent interests and opportunistic elements had torn apart its renowned togetherness. Its unity of purpose, singleness of aims and clarity of objectives had equally eroded, giving way to a work environment that was toxic, unfriendly and unhealthy. It was little wonder that our stakeholders expressed great dissatisfaction with our services.

It was against this backdrop that on assumption I promised to do two things: to work as unto God in order to transform the ITF, and to heal wounds. I am gratified that with your individual and collective support, I can confidently say that we not only achieved and performed remarkably on both counts but indeed outstripped all expectations given the conditions we inherited.

Ladies and gentlemen, using the ITF Reviewed Vision: Strategies for Mandate Actualisation, which Management unveiled on assumption, we trained here over 500,000 Nigerians that are today using the skills acquired to earn sustainable livelihoods. We also expanded our training infrastructure by completing and commissioning several projects namely; the Mechatronics Workshop and Administrative Block at the Industrial Skills Training Centre (ISTC) Kano, Katsina Area Office Complex with an Administrative and Vocational Wing, Lagos Island Area Office Complex, e-Library Complex and Stores in the Headquarters and Classroom Blocks at the ITF Staff School. It is noteworthy that most of these projects had been abandoned for decades. Together with the establishment of six new Area Offices in Lafia, Gwagwalada, Badagry, Owerri Rumoukwuta, and Abakaliki, access to our services was made much easier leading to an exponential increase in the number of Nigerians that are trained by us.

In addition, in order to ensure more efficient and effective service delivery and to promptly respond to the needs of Nigerians and our clients particularly, we automated most of our processes including training services, financial transactions, remittance of training contributions and the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) and reimbursement activities. Today most of our activities are paperless as they are seamlessly performed digitally, and in real time.

Although the foregoing are just a few of the numerous achievements that we recorded, it is clear that what we did was viewed favourably by Nigerians. As a mark of Government's appreciation, in 2018 and 2019, the Council for

the Development of the Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which is headed by Vice President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, GCON, rewarded us with the prestigious Award of Excellence as Outstanding MSMEs Clinic Partner and the Award for outstanding contribution to the development of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Nigeria respectively, even as other individual and corporate awards poured in torrents from all corners of the country. As further indication of the appreciation of the Federal Government for our contributions particularly to the development of the MSMEs sector, the ITF was recently included in the Federal Government Steering Committee to drive the implementation of the various support schemes for MSMEs in the country as part of the National response to COVID-19. This initiative, which is part of Government's Economic Sustainability Plan, has brought to the doorsteps of Nigerians two stimulus programmes; the Survival Fund and the Guaranteed Offtake Stimulus Scheme, which are meant to empower MSMEs and cushion the effects of the Pandemic. But far more significantly, our strides got the endorsement and validation of President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, who graciously approved the renewal of my appointment.

At this juncture, I wish to express my profound appreciation to President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, for first appointing me as Director-General/CE, and for giving me another opportunity to further contribute my quota to the development of our dear country by reappointing me for another four years.

Similarly, I wish to extend my gratitude to our supervising Ministers in the Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, Otunba Richard Adeniyi Adebayo, OON, and his

counterpart, Ambassador Maryam Yalwaji Katagum, who recommended me for reappointment and gave us wings to fly by generating policies that provided the needed impetus for us to achieve not only our targets but also thrive and excel. Their wise counsel and sound advice since appointment as ministers was in large part, also responsible for all that we achieved. We cannot thank them enough.

Ladies and gentlemen, I must also express my deepest gratitude to you – the ITF workforce - for this achievement. Without your hard work, sacrifice and support, we could not have achieved what we did. I am, therefore, saddened that we are unable to celebrate this achievement as elaborately as it deserves for obvious reasons. Having said this, I need not remind you that we are still in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic that has ravaged economies across the world. In our dear country Nigeria, as a result of the pandemic, unemployment has risen just as many Nigerians lost their jobs. We are, indeed, in a national emergency that requires every Nigerian to join hands and work together. It demands of us, therefore, as the leading capacity development institution in Nigeria to urgently and significantly contribute to assist our stakeholders and the economy to overcome this challenge.

In this regard, Management was conscious of the expectations even before the announcement of my reappointment, and therefore unveiled the **2nd phase of the ITF Reviewed Vision: Strategies for Mandate Actualisation**. The plan, which implementation has already commenced and will terminate in 2024, is targeted at rectifying the pitfalls that were observed in the implementation of the first phase, build on the achievements thereof, and directly address emergent

challenges of our stakeholders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Plan has nine focus areas namely: Direct Training Services, Revenue Generation and Sustainable Funding, Resource Utilisation, Special Intervention Programmes, Human Capital Development, Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), Research and Development, Automation of Business Processes and other Programmes and Services. These focus areas will guide us going forward.

Our expectation is that in the next four years, the ITF will further escalate and amplify its activities especially with regard to skills acquisition and empowerment of the youths and indigent segments of the society as well as strengthen the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises sector through need-based training in view of the vital importance of the sector to national growth and development, especially in the light of the economic diversification agenda of the Federal Government.

The Fund will also continue to invest in expanding its infrastructure in order to create opportunities and open up our services to all Nigerians desirous of acquiring skills. Presently, we have completed eight projects, which are awaiting commissioning. They include the Gusau Area Office Complex and Vocational Wing, Minna Area Office Complex and Vocational Wing, Aba Area Office Complex and Vocational Wing, Awka Area Office Complex and Vocational Wing, the Headquarters Conference Centre, Auditorium and Gymnasium, as well as the Multipurpose Building in Maitama, Abuja. It is our commitment to persist with this pace of infrastructural development despite financial challenges until we are convinced that the Fund has enough facilities to effectively

accommodate as many Nigerians as possible that are desirous of acquiring technical skills.

It is in furtherance of this that the Fund recently completed the purchase of Jossy Royal Hotel, which is adjacent our Centre for Excellence in Bukuru, following the approval of the Federal Executive Council (FEC) earlier in the year. The facility, which has 59 rooms, a conference hall, an annex, a kitchen and restaurant as well as a laundry section and workshops, will be used to train Nigerians along the hospitality value chain. Already, Management has constituted a committee to restructure the Centre.

To further deepen and expand the scope of our operations, we have created two new Area Offices at Gombe state and Ikorodu in Lagos state, which will start operations immediately.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Coronavirus pandemic has shown that the development of physical infrastructure alone is not enough. We will, therefore, aggressively invest in the development of our Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities for deployment of our training activities. From our summation, the online training we recently conducted for free for our clients in the areas of Re-engineering the Workplace in Challenging Times, Digital Marketing for Profitability, and Workplace Health and Safety Programme to augment the efforts of employers of labour in raising the productive capacities of their workforce at a time like this may become a real alternative to classroom type training that we have been conducting even after COVID-19. Management is committed to ensuring that we take a leading role in this regard.

MY CHARGE TO STAFF

Before I delve into Management's expectations of the workforce, permit me to once again, congratulate and commend all of us on my reappointment. As stated earlier, we will not be celebrating today without your individual and collective efforts. Indeed your commitment, hard work and sacrifice ensured that my reappointment by Mr President was a mere formality, instead of the difficult process it might have been.

Having said this, I wish to, however note that from the targets we have set for ourselves and from the economic distortions as a result of COVID-19, the next few years will be challenging for us in very many ways.

Firstly, as a result of COVID, many organisations have either rationalised their workforce or even closed shop because of the very difficult operational environment. This will no doubt have negative implications on the revenue generation of the Fund. It also means that we will need to be parsimonious in the application of the meagre resources available to us. By implication, we will have to cultivate a culture of doing more with less.

Secondly, in times of economic difficulties such as we are passing through, the first option of most managers is to cut expenses on human capital development. This will no doubt impact the number of people we train and the revenue generated therefrom. What this calls for, is to be more creative and innovative, and above all develop the spirit of persistence and resilience in the marketing of our services. It also means that everyone from the DG to clerk will become a marketer,

otherwise we will fail and the consequences of such failure are only best imagined.

In addition, because of layoffs, the onus will be on us as the leading human capital development institution to provide as many Nigerians as possible with the necessary technical skills for them to set up on their own. In the absence of white-collar jobs, skills acquisition is the only sustainable solution to effectively tackle the problems of poverty and unemployment and the attendant implications on our society. Government expects this of us and we cannot afford to fail. As I say this, I am conscious of the words of late U.S President, John Kennedy, who said: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but live by them." We all are appreciative that we have been given another chance by Mr. President to continue doing what we have been doing in the last four years and on no account must we fail.

From the picture I have painted, it should be clear to us what lies in wait for us as staff of the Fund. We must resolve to embrace today's obstacles to reach our next stage of achievement.

Therefore, we need to be more effective, creative, resilient and work with greater intensity as unto God. In essence, every staff of the Fund must from today resolve to justify their place in the new ITF.

I must appreciate that discipline in the Fund has improved tremendously as staff are more punctual and regular at work, but punctuality and regularity are no longer enough. The tendency for a segment of the workforce, to standby, inert and

unwilling to contribute to the development of the Fund will no longer be tolerated. Management has resolved to completely stamp out through appropriate sanctions all negative tendencies that are obstacles to the wheels of our progress even as it is equally committed to ensuring that the entire workforce is carried along and is empowered to effectively perform its duties optimally.

I therefore urge supervisors and responsible officers not to hesitate to apply all necessary and appropriate sanctions to rid our system of indolence, truancy, harmful gossip and other such abhorrent attitudes, as they have no place in our dear institution. All hands must be on deck in moving the ITF to the next level.

As your DG, my doors will always be open for new and innovative ideas that will drive the ITF forward, as I believe that if creativity is given a free rein, we will together build the Agency that our forebears envisioned.

As I close, ladies and gentlemen, I would want you to join me to recite once again the ITF anthem as an expression of our commitment to the new ITF.

On this note, I wish us a memorable celebration and may God continue to bless our collective efforts.