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# Nigeria's Human Capital and State Education Initiatives: the View from Imo State

**Speaker: HE Owelle Rochas Okorochoa**

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Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for International Development (2002–03)

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## Introduction

Imo State, in Nigeria's southeast, provides free education up to the university level. The state's human capital development initiatives are, however, hampered by a number of economic and social challenges including high levels of debt and low productivity in the agricultural sector, upon which most residents rely.

At this meeting, governor of Imo State, HE Owelle Rochas Okorocha, discussed the importance of developing Nigeria's human capital and how this might be done, as well as his administration's strategies for addressing social challenges and the role external partners can constructively play in assisting Nigeria in human capital development.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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## HE Owelle Rochas Okorocha

Nigeria allows freedom of speech and freedom of expression, and the speaker expressed that he would like to meet with Biafra independence protestors at the end of the event.

Human capital is the basis for all development. Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa with a population of 189 million, 60 per cent of whom are energetic youngsters, has huge human potential, if it can be successfully harnessed.

Nations that have utilized their human and natural resources are called developed nations. Developing nations are those that are yet to utilize their human capital. In these terms, Africa is the most resource-rich continent on Earth; the question is how to unleash that human and natural potential? A country cannot be politically independent without becoming economically independent; Nigeria is suffering under neo-colonialism because it cannot harness its human capital. The speaker expressed his gratitude to President Buhari for taking a stand against the devaluation of the naira.

In Nigeria, there are 16 million children in school and more than 1 million Nigerians graduate from university every year; however, there is the situation that people who have qualified as lawyers are now street traders. One of the main problems with the education system is that schooling is conducted in English, and this is a barrier for those who do not speak it. English has enabled Nigeria to communicate easily with the rest of the world, but it reduces the number of potential graduates. A predominantly native-language education system has not held back China or Japan. These countries have been able to stimulate production and increase economic activity, which led to their development.

Nigeria must focus on the need for vocational skills training. The speaker noted that he founded the Imo College of Advanced Vocational Study for this purpose, which offers courses in practical skills, from engineering to farming. In Imo State, many young people do not see the point in completing their education because there are no jobs to go into at the end of it. Education at primary, secondary and university level is now free in Imo State, and the state is building more schools to meet demand. If the school environment is considered better than an environment of poverty, children will want to come to school.

Imo State is also changing governance of its structures. Community councils should be more involved in local governance; the governor stated that he is trying to set up a committee in every factory. This should reflect Nigerian culture which, unlike Western culture, emphasizes strong family bonds over nation states. Corruption in Nigeria exists because federal money is seen to belong to no one; nobody would steal committee money because of a collective sense of ownership. It is hoped that the establishment of these committees will lead to the creation of 100 jobs in every community, or 100,000 across the entire state.

Imo State has 7.8 cubic kilometres of gas, the largest in the world, but it lacks a consistent power supply; it needs partners who can help develop the gas supply to provide power for the whole state. An example of the nation's lack of self-sufficiency can be seen in its confectionary. In order for a Nigerian to eat chocolate, Nigerian cocoa needs to be sent to Europe to be processed before it can be brought back to Nigeria to be consumed. Nigeria is dependent on other nations for survival; it needs to change its system of human capital development so that it can become a great nation.

## Summary of question and answer session

### Questions

The Nigerian education curriculum is not evidence-based or targeted at the problems in Nigeria. How can a more evidence-based curriculum be developed?

How can more employment opportunities for young people in Imo State, and across Nigeria, be created?

Can the speaker shed more light on the community government project?

Was financial support promised to university students in Imo State, and if so why has this not been forthcoming?

Is it true that the speaker is under investigation by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)?

### HE Owelle Rochas Okorocho

The EFCC is the body that was set up to monitor corruption in Nigeria, and it has the right to investigate any allegation of corruption against any person, regardless of their standing. The speaker has now been cleared of all of the accusations made against him. Accusations against political figures are normal in Nigeria, and often stem from political opponents.

Students in Imo State were not promised bursaries; rather they were promised free education in all state-owned institutions, including universities. Recent World Bank figures show that Imo State has moved from a 57 per cent poverty rate in 2011; before the governor took office, to the current rate of 19 per cent. This dramatic decrease is largely due to the introduction of free education. Not having to pay for education means more money is available to support families.

Community government is an alternative form of government based on culture, and has a key role to play in the developmental strategy. Government in Nigeria has become too westernized, and traditional cultures have been forgotten. Community governments allow people in rural areas to feel involved. It also helps to counter crime, as criminals are known at the community level. As a consequence, the crime rate in Imo State has decreased.

Young people should not have to rely on government jobs for employment. A program called 'Youth Must Work' has been launched in Imo State, which encourages young people to become involved in agriculture. The neglected agricultural sector must be given greater attention as it will create more employment.

It is important to produce an education system that supports the development of the land, and not just careers like engineering or medicine. In order to find people with the right skills, it is currently necessary to import individuals from outside Nigeria. Instead, Nigerians need to be trained in the appropriate skills for the job market.

### Questions

What policies are the government pursuing to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and to expand the economy and employment levels in the state?

How is universal free education being funded, and what is the impact of this on other public services in the state?

The content of education being delivered in Nigeria is very poor, as are graduate skills and knowledge levels. The world now revolves around technology, yet there is very little emphasis in the Nigerian education system on technology. What would the speaker suggest to improve this situation?

How are the new schools and free education in Imo State being paid for, and is there a budget and funding plan that can be shared?

How will the quality of education in new institutions be assessed, and are teachers being well paid and well rewarded?

In addition to the increased use of Igbo in education, should local languages such as Nsibidi also be promoted?

Would Imo State welcome members of the diaspora returning to train young people in post-education skills such as interview preparation?

What measures are being put in place to ensure that the improvements made in education are sustainable?

Will technological skills like coding be included in the Nigerian curriculum?

How can it be ensured that the right people are employed in the right jobs in Nigeria?

Nigerian children are either taught the Nigerian national curriculum, which is not fit for purpose, or the British curriculum, which is also inappropriate. When will an appropriate curriculum be developed for Nigeria?

### HE Owelle Rochas Okorochoa

The current Nigerian national curriculum is a western curriculum, and is not well suited to Nigeria's needs. The curriculum needs a greater focus on skills acquisition, and should be designed to suit Nigeria's current needs. Nigerian state curriculums are guided by the national curriculum; the speaker stated that therefore he is unable to make changes to the school curriculum in Imo State.

It is difficult to ensure that the right people are in the right jobs. For instance, often those entering politics have failed in other careers and are solely seeking employment rather than wanting to improve society. Nigerians in the diaspora should be encouraged to return and to bring their skills and knowledge to Nigeria. The entire education system needs to be changed in order to be more practical, as opposed to theoretical.

Technology and coding is another example of topics being explained in a language that the people of Imo State do not understand. If such topics were taught in Igbo, they would become more widespread and more people would understand them.

Contrary to false online reports, workers in Imo State are not owed pensions or salaries. It is important for government agencies to make profits, even though some claim that, as social services, they should not make profits. Out of the total income of Imo State, 70 per cent is spent on workers' salaries.

If corruption in Nigeria was reduced, there would be enough money for free education across Nigeria, as Nigeria is not a poor nation.