

How Nigerian Government Under Develop Engineering

In fulfilling his mission of proffering solutions to myriad engineering challenges facing the nation, the Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE) led by its President, Otis Anyaeji, paid a courtesy visit to Mr. Babatunde Fashola the minister that holds the prestigious engineering components ministry of Power, Works, and Housing in his office last week. The visit turned out to be a scorecard handing event with a dismal rating of the Nigerian engineers by the honourable minister. After going through the news report, I have to agree with him that he spoke the truth in a mire of ignorance. It took a square peg in a round hole as a minister to awaken our sense of reality. The engineering family is still grappling with what hits it so hard.

The Minister respectfully took the Nigerian engineer to the cleaner, hangs him on the line to dry and holds a mirror before him for honest self-evaluation. He explains why the government does not patronize local contractors. According to him, “Unless we honestly stand up and accept that there is a vacuum, we look in the mirror and tell ourselves that we honestly do not like what we see, it will not change”. In other words, the Nigerian engineers are not fit for such contract jobs because there is a vacuum either in training or in practice.

Mr. Fashola went on to share his experience, “I can tell you from experience that when I was a State Governor, when I advertised for a rail project, no Nigerian firm bid for it,” he revealed. He alerts the Nigerian engineers on what is to come by warning that “Government will not stop the development of the country if local Engineers are not ready”. He capped his sermon by advising that “Nigerian Engineers should accept their deficiencies”.

His assertion has given many engineers food for thought and some are in a state of indignation over words chosen by the minister.

Engineering profession in Nigeria is facing very insidious challenges that might have created this “vacuum” Mr. Fashola sees as “deficiencies”. These deficiencies are exacerbated by the government itself who have continued to frustrate engineering practice by destroying every attempt to develop indigenous technology for the nation. Without our own technology, Mr. Fashola will continue to give foreign firms jobs because they will always offer competitive bids that leave us out of the game.

Basic engineering project has three components; skill, equipment and funds and I will make an attempt to share with us on how the government is under developing engineering even with her desire to develop it thereby frustrating the practice and growth of engineering profession.

Skill: Over the years we have struggled as a nation to develop engineering skills and manpower by building universities, polytechnics and technical colleges that are poorly funded. The labs and workshops are usually stuffed with antiquated equipment where they are available yet these schools have produced resilient graduates who can still manage to compete with the world. This is always government best attempt in her efforts to develop the nation technologically. Once the skill is acquired, the challenge of having a place to ply the skill and to be retrained becomes a major task because through government policies, actions or inaction, manufacturing, production, construction and engineering firms are not springing up as they should, rather they are closing shops.

Equipment: I am yet to know of any nation termed as advance whose technology was not the basis for such nomenclature. Nigeria earnestly needs to move to this level if it must take hold of her economy and handle these major projects successfully. If a local firm bids for a road contract with JB or CCECC such a firm is bound to lose at cost level (not technical) because it has no supporting equipment barring other factors. JB, CCECC, RCC and others will source their Earth Moving Equipment from their country of origin at lower cost and at zero or near zero interest rate. The local firm will procure such equipment at market price at higher interest rate. Thus, the firm is perpetually ruled out from major road construction contract. If the local firm seeks a foreign partnership to overcome this challenge, it is only helping the foreign partner to make an inroad into our economy while our engineering practice still remains same because we lack the technology in term of equipment to address the challenge.

Funds: we all will agree that only a man on a suicide mission will seek for a loan to execute any government project where the interest rate is unsustainable, naira is unstable, project duration is uncertain, funding is erratic and the project may be abandoned or scrapped by succeeding regime. I guess these are the deficiencies Mr. Fashola might also look at. The environment that the Nigerian engineers operate is repugnant and unsupported and is often marred with “political economics” that leads not only to poor quality delivery of jobs but in some cases fail projects.

In April this year, despite government Auto Policy, the Nigerian Senate ordered for 108 Toyota Land cruiser SUV in disregard for the challenge of Forex and the need to support our local industries. Not after long, the only Nigerian indigenous brand, Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing Company announced the sacking of some of its staff and planned shutdown of operations due to low patronage and lack of Forex. This is a typical example of how Nigerian government deliberately destroys private initiative, kills technology and mute engineering growth. We are all conversant with Ajaokuta Steel, Steel Rolling Mills, Aluminum Smelting Plant, Eleme Petrochemical stories; some of the mainstay of our technological growth that are moribund. Government policies are always at variance with her will to implement it.

In 2009, at the time Mr. Fashola was searching for a Nigerian company to bid for Lagos monorail project, the media was awash with the news of a Nigerian engineer, Jude Igwemezie, who won a \$500 million contract to build a monorail network in Iraq. The contract was to construct what is described as “a viable rail transportation network” for the city of Najaf.

Mr. Igwemezie, who has shown interest to build a standard gauge railway system from Lagos to Calabar, believes with Nigeria, the project will be “profitable and successful because of its size and population and because we have a demography similar to that in Europe”. He, however, said, the bane of the railway in Nigeria is that “we have brought the wrong people to help us”.

Mr. Igwemezie heads TransGlobim International, the engineering company that won the bid and he lives in Canada.

Mr. Fashola words of “vacuum” and “deficiencies” call for reflection. The struggle to move our technology forward will be championed by those who are passionate about Nigeria coming out of its technological doldrums. Our political leaders should look far and near because there are Nigerian engineers maximizing great opportunities in saner environments to showcase their abilities and those at home will continue to put in their best in spite of obvious challenges.

Author: Akan Michael