

**Keynote Address Delivered To Nigerians in the Diaspora
Calgary, Alberta, Canada, On the Occasion Of The
Inauguration Of The Nigerians in the Diaspora Organization
(NIDO), Canada, Calgary Chapter**

**By Ambassador Joe Keshi, OON,
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Mr. Chairman
President of NIDO, Calgary Chapter
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I wish to thank you most sincerely for your very kind and thoughtful invitation to the Inauguration of the Nigerians in the Diaspora (NIDO), Canada, Calgary, Chapter and to congratulate you all for this initiative which is most commendable. Your action here today gives some ray of hope that despite the difficulties that NIDO has had and continues to encounter; it is surviving and also growing. The last NIDO conference organized by the New Jersey chapter, less than four weeks ago, the forthcoming NIDO conference in Ottawa in a week's time as well as the proposed London NIDO meeting in June/July are clear indications of renewed efforts on the part of NIDO to live up to expectations and meet the aspirations of its founding fathers.

2 In congratulating you all for this worthy endeavour, we must not forget those who have been in the trenches, those who have received hard knocks over the years but have remained undaunted and steadfast in their belief and commitment to what NIDO stands for and for what it

represents. I salute and commend them and urge them to keep fighting on and not to abandon a good cause in the face of adversaries.

3 It is no longer news that the federal government under President Olusegun Obasanjo supported and encouraged the establishment of NIDO, to among others, serve as the platform for the Nigerian Diaspora engagement with the Nigerian State. You are all familiar with the arguments behind government's decision to build a mutually beneficial relationship with its nationals abroad and why, from inception the emphasis was on those with the requisite skills, and expertise as well as those who can make very meaningful contributions to the development of our beloved country. Suffice it to note that a major reason behind its establishment was the fact that a couple of countries, notably India and China had successfully tapped into the huge reservoir of knowledge, skills and expertise of their Diaspora to transform their countries.

4 The Indian Diaspora for example, was to some significant extent instrumental to India becoming an incredible ICT power house. The issue of out sourcing of which India is now well known aside; India soft ware export is reported to be in the neighborhood of \$40 billion. This, it is acknowledged, became possible among others, because of the contributions made by the Indian Diaspora to the creation of the software industry in India. The Chinese Diaspora major contribution apart from investment was in the provision of managerial experience to

China in that country's strives to become the largest economy in the world. Another country, whose Diaspora has contributed so much especially to its survival is the State of Israel. Even if you have not heard of the Jewish Public Affairs Committee, you must certainly be quite familiar with the activities of the powerful and influential Jewish lobby. Its influence in the United States is so strong that despite the good intentions of any USA president, America regrettably cannot be an honest broker in the efforts to end the many years of hatred and bloodshed in the Middle East, especially in the long running and intractable Israel- Palestine conflict.

5 Some years ago, I had expressed the hope that NIDO would grow to become, if not as powerful and influential as the Jewish lobby ,but strong enough to defend and protect Nigeria's interest abroad or be as focused as the Silicon Valley Indian Professionals Association of California which galvanized and mobilized both resources and technology to support India's nuclear and technological advancement. Indeed my expectation was and remains that NIDO would grow so big, so powerful and strong enough to drive the transformation of Nigeria.

6 That hope, which I still harbor was based on history, on the historic fact that it was the vision, aspiration and energy of Nigerians abroad in the 1940s that propelled this country to

independence. That hope was also based on my recognition of the pool of talents that abound within the Nigerian Diaspora community, especially in the United States and the impact they could make in the transformation of Nigeria. This was why I pointed out, at the PDP Policy Retreat for Newly Elected Public Office Holders in May 2007:

“That the Nigerian Diaspora constitute a large pool of skilled, experienced and well trained human capital not just the creative mind but the critical mass required for our advancement in the 21 century, a century being driven by information technology and knowledge.”

7 When therefore, you reflect on what has transpired since 2000 when the journey began in Atlanta, with the historic Presidential Dialogue between the then President and the Nigerian Diaspora, there is the tendency to feel disappointed that NIDO, ten years is still struggling to crawl. Apart from its internal cleavages and self inflicted leadership crisis which regrettably is still smoldering, NIDO has suffered from a deliberate and well orchestrated campaign of calumny by those whom NIDO was created to serve and those who stand to benefit from NIDO.

8 This has resulted in some confusion abroad and at home over the nature and existence of the organisation, its essence and scope. The resultant effect was that NIDO has not been able to grow into a national organization representing all Nigerians abroad as rival organizations were set up with some,

proclaiming to be the authentic representatives of the Nigerian Diaspora community. Professional Associations that would have been NIDO's best friends remain aloof to NIDO and only relate when it suits them. State and Regional Associations, community and ethnic organizations see NIDO as an anathema to their existence while religious organizations with large number of Nigerians abroad prefer to concentrate on finding the kingdom of God on earth.

9 The cumulative effect of all these was the loss of focus of the impact a well organized national Nigerian Diaspora organization consisting of knowledgeable and experienced professionals can make in the transformation of Nigeria. Equally, government itself did not move fast enough to match rhetoric's with commitment, thus creating doubts and confusion that now characterize its Diaspora policy. Let me illustrate with two examples.

10 First, in 2003, the Obasanjo Administration sent a Bill for the establishment of the Nigerian National Volunteer Service (NNVS), a government parastatal or a commission of a sort to among others; serve as the fulcrum in the Nigerian state's engagement with its Diaspora. The Bill was passed by the Nnamani Senate but failed to pass through the House for what could at best be ascribed to the House inability to comprehend the Federal Government's desire to engage its Diaspora. In

2004, I was appointed the National Coordinator of the NNVS and between 2004 and 2008, with the support of President Obasanjo, Obong Ufot Ekeatte and some members of the Cabinet and later President Musa Yar Adua, the NNVS created immense national awareness on the need to mobilize, engage and involve the Nigerian Diaspora in Nigeria's development process.

11 Such was the success of our efforts that by 2007 the Nigerian Diaspora became part of the Nigerian lexicon. In 2005, the NNVS initiated the Science Conference involving Nigerian Scientists abroad and their counterparts at home. It was at the first conference on July 25, 2005 that President Obasanjo declared July 25th Nigerian Diaspora Day. The Science conference was motivated by the desire to create a platform for dialogue, interaction, collaboration and cooperation as well as establish synergies and partnerships between the nation and her Diaspora scientists, for the technological development of the country. The Nigerian Diaspora Day on the other hand was proclaimed and dedicated to recognize and celebrate both the individual and collective success of Nigerians abroad as well as their contributions to nation building. After three successful outings in Abuja, the 2008 conference was held in Calabar in collaboration with the Cross River State Government.

12 For the NNVS, the Calabar conference was a major accomplishment in its efforts to involve the States in the federal government's Diaspora project. Part of that accomplishment is the fact that most states now have NNVS offices at State levels, some of which are now actively in direct contact with the Diaspora from their States. In addition, the NNVS through my personal effort canvassed for the establishment of a Committee in the House, which I had hoped would convince the Diaspora of the seriousness of the country's desire to engage them as partners in the development of the country.

13 In the same vein, the issue of engaging the Nigerian Diaspora was at various times brought to the attention of the Federal Executive Council as well as the National Economic Council made up of State Governors, Governor of the Central Bank, Ministers of Finance and National Planning and chaired by the Vice President. On the International scene, whether in Paris, France, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia or Johannesburg, South Africa, at meetings organized by the African Union, a number of Africa countries applauded Nigeria for the establishment of the NNVS which they saw as a move worthy of emulation especially in the drive to galvanize the African Diaspora in the continent's development. I received a few inquiries from countries that wanted to replicate the NNVS with the same aim and objectives.

14 You can therefore appreciate my amazement, when towards the end of 2009 the House Committee on the Diaspora which had spent precious legislative time on aimless travels round the globe began advocating the establishment of A Diaspora Commission, to do exactly what the NNVS has been doing for the last six years. What is more interesting is that with the exception of a few clauses, the so called Bill for the Establishment of the Nigerian Diaspora Commission is in no way different from the NNVS Bill which the House failed to pass a few years back. I find the whole thing misguided and would strongly posit that at the stage where we are now with the Diaspora issue, we do not need a new commission or structure, we also do not need or should we spent endless time and waste public fund in “reinventing the wheel”.

15 As a nation, as policy makers, legislative or executive, we must resist the temptation of consistently changing policies or program before their full implementation and the penchant of every Administration wanting to start something new without taking stock of what is on the ground should be stopped. Policy inconsistency has hurt Nigeria in so many ways. This is a major contributory factor to our continuous under development Let me therefore appeal to the Abike Dabiri–Erewa led House Committee on the Diaspora to reconsider its position on the Bill. Ten years after the initiative was launch, including the establishment of NIDO, six years after the establishment of the

NNVS, a commission is neither the priority nor what we need to drive the initiative to its logical conclusion.

16 There are two things that are urgently needed now. One is, the proper articulation of a policy framework that clearly and unambiguously defines how we engage the Diaspora and that compels government Ministries, Agencies and Departments, especially those in the health, education and science and technology sectors to factor the Diaspora, in particular those with expertise into their work, projects and programs. At a time in which we complain of weak institutions and lack of capacity, finding a way of involving the Nigerian Diaspora in the activities of the MDAs would help the country to strengthen its institutions as well as close or bridge the capacity gap. The NNVS had in fact begun drafting such a policy when I was deployed to the Cabinet Secretariat as a Permanent Secretary. The second thing we need to do is to strengthen the NNVS and that would require the National Assembly passing the NNVS Bill

17 The second illustration which makes the policy framework and strengthening of the NNVS imperative, is that a handful of Nigerians in the Diaspora who have responded to the clarion call to explore job and investment opportunities in Nigeria are beginning to suffer some frustrations and financial losses as a result of officialdom and the difficulties of doing business in Nigeria. Although most of the complaints are at the State level

where obligations entered into are not honored, in some cases access to decision makers are unnecessarily delayed, or denied. Securing land or its Certificate of Occupancy takes ages, a stark characteristic of the unfriendly business environment prevalent in Nigeria. The nation as a whole must show some seriousness in its desire to engage the Diaspora and match rhetoric's with commitments. Under my leadership of the NNVS, the NNVS encouraged or assisted quite a number of Diaspora Nigerians either returning to the country or just coming to explore opportunities. This makes the case for the NNVS to be properly nurtured and strengthened more compelling instead of pretending that it does not exist or discarding it for no just reasons.

18 AS this Calgary chapter of NIDO is launched here today, it must strive to avoid all the shortcomings or mistakes that have hindered the steady growth and development of NIDO into a national organization that is focused on contributing to nation building. As you gather here today, it is ten years since the Diaspora initiative was launched, ten good years since NIDO was established and time enough for the Nigerian Diaspora impact to be felt in Nigeria and for NIDO to achieve its manifest destiny. I had said many times before, NIDO was not established for the few who are members of NIDO but for the hundreds of thousands of Nigerians living abroad who have not been reached especially professionals and many others in a

position to contribute positively to the development of the country. Your doors must therefore be opened always to welcome all Nigerians or Nigerian organizations/associations, big or small. You must work with them, individually and collectively to accomplish the laudable objectives of NIDO which in a nutshell could be summarized as follows;

- 1 promotion of unity and patriotism among Nigerians living abroad
- 2 Enhancement of the image of Nigeria abroad and the promotion of Nigeria as an investment destination.
- 3 Participate in the development process and contribute to nation building

19 I have no doubt in my mind of the ability and capacity of Nigerians abroad to contribute meaningfully to the country's development. My only problem with them is that like those of us at home, they are often distracted and easily lose sight of the bigger picture which is the transformation of Nigeria into a modern state, into an industrialized nation with the capacity to protect its citizens as well as provide them with the basic things of life. In this regard and with reference to 3 above, the national desire to be one of the twenty largest economies by 2020, challenging as it would appear, offers each and every one of you the opportunity to contribute your quota to the country's growth and development. This is where I hope NIDO

will provide the leadership in mobilizing Nigerians in the Diaspora to be involved in the implementation of Vision 2020. Equally, mobilization of resources, especially capital and capacity are areas you all can help the country meet its aspiration.

20 In this regards, the most important thing I believe the Nigerian Diaspora needs to do, is to create its own niche by focusing on areas where they have comparative advantage and where their impact can be significantly felt. With the large number of Nigerians in the health, education and science and technology services, around the globe, I believe these are the sectors the Nigerian Diaspora under NIDO's leadership should concentrate on. Can you imagine the impact on our educational or health system or on the expansion of internet penetration in this country, if annually hundreds of Nigerian Diaspora professionals are involved in sharing knowledge, improving skills and generally contributing to development in this country? In terms of opportunities, I strongly would recommend services, tourism and housing where the focus is still on individual private homes rather than mass housing for our teeming population.

21 let me therefore conclude by urging you all to encourage yourselves to see the challenges we face at home as opportunities for your involvement in the imperatives of

development at home. I also urge the Nigerian Diaspora as well as the Nigerian state to recognize and appreciate that there are derivable mutual benefits from engaging one another or partnering for the development of the country. This makes it important that every effort must be made by both parties to sustain the relationship, recognizing that our common objective is the development of Nigeria, the creation of a fair, just and equitable society in which everyone can exploit his or her God given talents.

THANK YOU