**Keynote Remarks at the Nigeria Governors’ Forum Induction Gala Event**

Protocols

Let me start by expressing best wishes to all Your Excellencies for the next phase of your leadership journeys as Executive Governors.

The exercise of leadership, in the ways that you are now positioned, is no easy task. But it is probably one of the most significant life-time opportunities you have to make great difference to society.

Amidst all the pomp and glamour, there is a reality out there, for which you have responsibility to shape in a positive direction in your States.

There are high expectations from your citizens, voters, party, and your families and friends.

You will be confronted with multiple competing priorities, some immediate, others longer term

You will be faced with choices of your immediate policy and implementation teams, and how to manage stakeholders and appropriate losses, i.e., who gets and who loses.

To paraphrase New York’s Governor Mario Cuomo, while you campaigned in poetry, now you are expected to govern in prose, to fulfil your numerous promises to the people.

You will do all of these in the face of a turbulent global economic and political context; regional and domestic conflicts; tough macroeconomic circumstances; and

a backlog of challenging issues such as mass poverty, youth unemployment, and widespread health and education deprivations, to mention a few.

So, in this situation, why do you prioritize health, and especially primary health care and immunization?

First, access to health is a fundamental human right. Every one of your citizens deserves to survive and thrive, free of preventable diseases, and to have access to basic health care when in need.

Second, health is fundamental to building the grey matter infrastructure and accumulation of human capital. I doubt many in this room would be as successful as they are now if they had repeated ill health from infectious diseases and malnutrition in their childhood.

From maternal health during gestation, to birth, early childhood, and transitions through school years and adulthood, good health and nutrition ensures that the grey matter or brain is well developed, and individual human capital is accumulated overtime to be successful adults.

Third, and related to the above, investing in health, especially vaccination, improves educational attainment, learning outcomes, life-time income, social mobility, and by extending financial risk protection reduce poverty from health spending by families. Those who are reached by vaccinations can be reached with other essential services.

Fourth, there is also a value chain in the health sector, whose development can contribute to economic growth.

Health is not only a by-product of economic development, rather it is a key driver for inclusive economic growth and development.

Fifth, investing in health is linked closely with national and economic security. As we saw with disease outbreaks like Ebola in 2014, and most recently with COVID-19, where a health crisis engulfed the world and led to massive economic contraction, the fallout from which we are still experiencing.

Finally, because health matters affect everyone, it offers you as politicians an important avenue to reestablish the compact between the State and its citizens, to gain their trust, and earn political capital.

Primary health care and immunization present some of the best-buys for public spending.

For every N1 spent on immunization there is at least N26 in value generated, in addition to saving lives and reducing human suffering.

For every mother who has access to quality Antenatal Care and Safe delivery, you are investing in the next generation, through their infants and enabling a mother to live and nurture her child.

But how do you signal prioritization of health in your agenda?

I argue that beyond supportive speeches, you will signal importance of health in your agendas by ensuring competent individuals with the right values are in your health teams.

You can articulate clear policy priorities in health and the results to be expected.

For example, you may make tangible measurable goals like saving 100,000 lives from preventable causes of diseases and death, from which you base your choices of the primary health care approach as foundational for your health policy. This will mean access to quality basic health care services, such as immunization, leaving no one behind, stamping out disease outbreaks, improving community health workforce and engaging community and traditional leaders and women groups.

It will follow then that your governments signal the prioritization by allocating budgets efficiently and releasing the resources as at when due, including co-financing obligations.

Focusing on the primary health care approach by default is cost effective, providing basic services for the many.

But primary health care approach does not mean cheap health care for the poor.

And, well functioning and staffed hospitals, diagnostic facilities fit in within an integrated health system with primary care at the foundation.

Reducing leakages and wastage of resources can expand your constrained fiscal spaces.

Beyond allocating budget and releasing resources, your visible presence and voice, gives direction and signals to all leaders and people in your state that you care about the health of women, children, adolescents, elderly, and wider population.

For your external partners, they are all here to support you.

Whether it is the UN Agencies like WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, or Global Health Initiatives like Gavi, Global Fund, Foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, or Bilateral entities like USAID, UK, JICA and others, they are all here to support you.

But you must own and lead in the efforts.

No one should pretend that they care about your people more than you do.

The fate of Nigerians lies in the hands of its leaders at all levels.

There are no externally driven solutions that would work by themselves, without adaptation to our local context.

All the global development partners have good intentions, but they may not understand the local context.

Hence, they also need humility and patience to learn, so that they can be more effective and efficient in their support.

The development agenda must be owned locally. And you must strive to align the priorities of external actors with your people-oriented priorities. This does not mean you outsource the priorities to the external actors.

External actors can provide you technical assistance to analyze, develop tools, prioritize, mobilize, and implement, but they should be based on what makes sense to you as well.

Your priorities are set your strategic plans and expenditure frameworks and you must insist that the partners to align with your plans. Because as elected leaders in Government, you are the ones responsible to the people and to be held accountable if you fail.

Where there are gaps in government systems, you may use external partners to strengthen those systems, not to substitute them.

You will need to demonstrate your commitments by meeting your own obligations, a crucial means to establishing credibility.

As your States show good results, external partners will be more enthused to mobilize additional support for you.

Your teams will need to exude transparency and relentlessly demonstrate and hold each other accountable with the partners.

I also hope the external partners will be more transparent with your teams.

Accountability is not a one-way street, your partners will hold you accountable, and you must also hold them accountable.

And all parties should remember accountability to the people, whether here in Nigeria, or the taxpayers from partner countries.

Finally, in your interface with global development partners, remember that the colonial era is long gone. Your external partners are your partners, not masters. Respectful, dignified collaboration requires no one side to be always the supplicant.

And do not forget the local civil society, the Nigerian national technical assistance providers, who have contextual knowledge and will remain with you for longer. They should not be ignored because they are local, they have important contributions to make.

At the end, always be open to learn new things, from within the country, other States, other countries in Africa, Asia, as well as globally.

I am confident that if your Excellencies pursue the agenda of prioritizing health, despite all prevailing challenges, the results will become evident, your voters will be happy, your partners will double up on their support, and almighty God will reward you.

Thanks very much and I wish you God’s speed!