



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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BLAIR: We are here with the Honorable Deputy Governor of Lagos State and this is an interview for Innovations for Successful Societies at Princeton University. Perhaps we could begin with what you see as—the work that you have been doing here that has been most successful, that has been able to make changes where it was not possible before, and perhaps some of the programs you are most proud of.

SOSAN: *Well, I will start by introducing myself properly.*

BLAIR: Sure.

SOSAN: *My name is Princess Sarah Adebisi Sosan, Deputy Governor, Lagos State. I assumed this office on 29th May, 2007 as the Deputy to His Excellency Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola, the Executive Governor of this great state. When we came in, we already had our program of what we wanted to do. This focused specifically on making the roads better, improving transportation, improving healthcare, improving education, and so on and so forth. Improving the lives of people, which we call poverty alleviation.*

At the onset of the administration, I happened to be in charge of education development in this state and that is precisely the Ministry of Education. The past administration had tried a lot to put our schools in good shape, but yet we still have a lot of challenges in this area because it had always been a metropolitan state—18 million people, a state where everybody from the 36 states of the country are concentrated in. A state where we run free education programs. Free in the sense that from the nursery, primary, junior secondary, senior secondary—you access free education.

We felt, to improve on this aspect schools have to be like a home to the students, to the populace. So, we have to start improving on the infrastructure of these schools as well as providing schools in remote areas where there are no schools. This has led to the increase in pupil enrollment in most areas of the states. In doing this as well, it has helped us well in increasing the economic capacity of most people involved in the rehabilitation of these schools, in supply of furniture to these schools, painting industry. A lot of skilled manpower has been developed through this rehabilitation work we have been doing in most of our schools.

We now discovered that most of our students, due to the economic situation of parents, do not have textbooks. The state governments with the magnanimity of His Excellency the Governor, procured books for all these levels of education—for the over one million pupils and students we have in our public schools. We have 1,610 primary and secondary schools right now in the states. So, we provided books for all the students in five core areas—that is, English, mathematics, the sciences, economics—irrespective of your background, free.

Apart from that, even our teachers, for them to use these books effectively we have done a lot of training packages for them. We have increased what the number used to be. For the last training, almost 10,000 teachers were trained and retrained, and this is an ongoing thing. We keep them as preferred staff. It is when they have the quality, that they give it back to the students. Apart from this, the examinations, the final year students sit for—like you have your GCE level and so on—we have the West African School Certificate Examination. We pay

for all this because over the years, we discovered that many parents couldn't pay at the terminal point for their children. So, the state government pays for this practice for almost 60,000 students yearly.

Likewise for the terminal examination we have at the middle level education, that is JS3. We also pay for their examinations, as well. We have even improved on equipping our science laboratories. We have been focusing on that area. Most of our secondary schools do not have laboratories. We have really worked on that area, as well. We have equipped them in phases and very soon we will be completing the remaining. We have about a hundred schools left to equip, out of three hundred plus. Science teachers have been retrained as well.

Apart from that, we have what we call all over the world, girl scouts, boy scouts, the uniformed voluntary clubs. There are clubs all over the world that values are taught, leadership skills are taught, team spirit, and so on and so forth. For some time now, the membership for these clubs have decreased in our schools. So, recently we relaunched these societies. The state government provided uniforms for all the students that participate—and even teachers, since the teachers would be the ones to supervise, to oversee these clubs in the schools. It is mandatory that each student should belong to one club at least.

Apart from that, we have special schools that cater for the challenged students. As part of our policy to integrate the physically challenged students, we have units in our regular schools where they can mix with the others. We call them inclusive units, as part of the formal regular system. Now we have special schools on their own, especially for those who have increased challenges of physical abilities. We have some special schools that we have to equip, we have to rehabilitate, and we also provide transportation by providing buses to take them around, because we saw that as a challenge. Most parents, they keep those children at home because they have no means of transport. There is no means of the financial capacity. We do this and we feed them. Each child in the special schools are all fed, as well as those in the inclusive units of the regular schools— we feed them as well.

In the technical vocational area, we felt that these days, skilled manpower is a challenge even all over the world. We have five technical colleges where we produce students that specialize in vocational aspects like learning carpentry, mechanical engineering, welding, and bricklaying. We have now reengineered all these technical colleges by rehabilitating them, by providing additional equipment for them. In these schools, the teachers said for some years, they never had the opportunity for training. That we have done for all the teachers in all these technical colleges. Right now, we are even partnering with some colleges abroad to bring in their expertise to teach our students in these schools. So, we are looking at that area also to improve technical schools.

In the sporting area, we see education as a total thing where you give children opportunity to express themselves in sporting activities. When you give them opportunity to express their social life, the exhibition of attitudes are different when you give opportunity for all that through debates, through a lot of interaction, through talent—we do all that and we do that through football. We have competitions, like the Principal's Cup, where all the secondary schools compete and the winner is always rewarded with cash prizes and some

equipment for their school as well. We introduced female soccer as well into our secondary schools, to encourage most of those females interested in soccer.

Apart from that, there are athletics and also other areas of sports they are involved and we are encouraging. We make sure that annually, each school holds an inter-house sports activity to give opportunities for all of them to compete and showcase their skills. At the ministry, we collaborate with the Ministry of Sports.

We encourage our children actually, to go into a lot of competitions, even outside these states. In sciences, they've always been coming tops, in sciences. We have a program we call Spelling Bee competition. This is an annual program that a lot of students and even parents look forward to. We hold the elimination series at the district level—that is the local level. Then at the state's level, we organize the grand finale. It involves a lot of hard work and seriousness on those students. The winner of this competition becomes a governor for one day. Yes, the winner on an appointed date will come to our executive meetings, the executive council's meeting, sit on the governor's chair and deliberate over issues for maybe one hour, as governor for that day. It has been so exciting. We also reward them with exchange programs overseas.

Over the years they have been going to Finland and some other countries through the foreign exchange program. We've added another reward to that by offering them even scholarship for university education. So, in these areas that we've done so well—apart from the textbooks, improvement in teachers' welfare, as well.

BLAIR: Sure.

SOSAN: *Teachers have never had it so good. In our states we pay them promptly and we give them opportunities to attend more programs than is done in other states. So, we never have problems with them, except if it is a national issue. Our teachers are very happy with what we have been doing. In taking decisions, we don't do it in isolation. We encourage private contributions, private providers of education. Just recently, we had our education summit where everybody in the society was invited to come and contribute to how we can improve more, on access to quality education and also funding, because funding is the great issue in education. No matter what the funds you have, it can never be enough.*

Here in Lagos we have a number of schools—I told you over 1000 schools—and we want it to be a place where children will be happy attending. So, the education summit just concluded and as part of the communiqué—things we had talked about—to help us move education forward in the state. Like I said, we used to train and retrain our teachers because we thought the teachers would drive the teaching, by learning in the class, too. If we don't do it well, then we don't get good results. So, we reward them annually as well. We call that the Merit Awards Program.

Since we came on board, it has never happened before—the best teacher—is given a car. So that will motivate others to want to do their best, to be resourceful. Do your best to get teacher/learning across to your students, without too much stress. We encourage our teachers to even look inwards in providing

special materials. They don't teach abstract, look inwards—old calendars and things around you can be used in the class, too.

We have a resource center, the Educational Resource Center. You want to make materials to enhance your teaching, you go there, the materials are there, the instructors are there to teach you, to assist in what to do. So, we do have that as well for our teachers.

BLAIR: When you think back to the beginning of your term here, what were the—you had grand plans for the education sector—

SOSAN: Yes.

BLAIR: What was the process like to begin to build the political coalition to get this through. I mean, obviously, there are a lot of difficult choices.

SOSAN: *Well we came in, like I said, there were a lot of challenges, especially having to do with infrastructure of the schools. We knew what we wanted immediately. We felt to do this the funding in previous years was increased. In previous years a ratio about 50%.*

BLAIR: Of the total budget?

SOSAN: *No, not of the total budget. I mean, what is allocated to education in previous years, we have to add more to this. There was an increase, a large increase, to what is allocated to education. That has helped us in doing most of these things. But nevertheless, funding is still a challenge to us. Even with the increase, it is still very difficult for us to provide all those things we wanted. As a result of that we said, "we can't just fold our arms and say by the time we utilize what we have—" Let's find other ways of getting funding, because it is the greatest challenge. If you want quality things—you want the best things—it costs money.*

We now put up an initiative we call "Support Our Schools." This has been in place previously. It was another name, "Adopt A School," but the response wasn't so encouraging for the previous years. With proper planning and focus, the response has been encouraging because the transparency is there. You come in, we give you a list of the things you can do to assist a school, whether you want to rebuild a school, whether you want to equip a laboratory, whether you want to put up a library—you give us, we give you the specifications. You go ahead, you go into the school to do it yourself. We just supervise, to see that you do the right thing. So, it has been a really good thing.

And we have made use of the ICT (Information Communication Technology) by going online—let people see what our needs are, let people know who to come to. There is an officer in charge of this. That has really made it so encouraging. Very soon those people who have really assisted us will be invited to a recognition and thank you program. We use that opportunity to welcome even people in the diaspora, to assist us in the educational sector because education for all is the responsibility of all. We must get educated. We must provide education, especially as 80% of the children in public schools—they are from the poorer class. The middle class and the upper class attend highbrow private schools. These poor children form the majority of the population. If we don't educate them, it is a big problem to the society.

BLAIR: How did you go about—was it easy to convince people that there needed to be a large increase in funding at the beginning?

SOSAN: *It wasn't easy, but people see that the kind of government we have in place in Lagos is a government to be trusted; it is a government of people with integrity. It is a government of people that have the passion, that have the commitment. Voluntarily they come up and say we want to do this for you, we want to do this. I receive a lot of letters, "we want to do this." Some schools in one of the areas in Agege were commissioned. A lot of them have been coming in willingly because they see the openness there. If you want us to do it, we do it with you. You see everything transparently so they believe in us. They can see that even the taxpayers' money is being put to judicious use by the state government.*

From the leadership down, the team has the commitment and the passion at play. As a woman, I'm here. I work until late into the night; I work over the weekend. You can call me any time, you get me. The leadership has made public the telephone numbers of all EXCO members and top government functionaries. Our local government is out there so you can access us. I think that has endeared people to us, that this is a serious government that must be given support. The money is not yet enough, the funding is not enough, but at least they can trust us that we are doing our own best—the little bit we can do with available funds. So, they are ready now to partner with us, to say we'll do this with you too.

BLAIR: What about increasing the budget with the legislature, was that a difficult process?

SOSAN: *Like I said, even the government has a ten-point agenda—infrastructure, education, water provision, and so on. It wasn't that difficult because for allocation of funds, to budget for it, you have to see, look at what comes in, what we can generate generally. You have to look into that and see how you want to allocate. You know these are social services. Healthcare is also there. People need—in that part of the world we also have to improve, provide a lot of healthcare for our people. So, that is one area that takes a large chunk of money as well, and education as well, is also a social service and needs a large chunk.*

Then we need to move on the roads to make commercial activities, economic activities of this state. All these programs must be sustained. So, I don't think that any leader has to be convinced that he needs funds to execute projects and programs. Then as I said, there has been an increase, compared to previous years, in the money allocated to education in this state.

BLAIR: Why do you think it was possible now and not before, when people presumably before knew that education should be a priority? Why has it been possible to get this done now and not before?

SOSAN: *Not that it wasn't possible—not that people never knew that education is the necessary thing—but before, people they tended to believe that to get to the people in charge then, that it was not easy. Unlike now, that they can access people like me. They can access officers that are in charge, so that's a big difference. The openness of how we do things now has been a great change from what used to happen before. Even at the offices, there has been a sort of restructuring. That means that departments that are in charge as well, you*

reassess people. The issues that have to do with the public, you want to put in capable officers. You understand what I'm trying to say?

BLAIR: Yes.

SOSAN: *So, that's another big area. I am sure you are aware that democracy was recently restored to this country in 1999 and we really suffered under the military. With military administration then—no attention was paid to many things and everything had collapsed and education really suffered. Our schools were mostly near collapse, teachers not being paid and, a lot of things. The rebuilding has been a gradual process. Even when you spend billions, you don't see it manifest in time. So, we have to start gradually building it all.*

BLAIR: How did you go about convincing people that this was a government that could be trusted? That sounds like a very tall order to go about. What was the plan to convince people, voters, as well as other parts of civil society?

SOSAN: *You see people, you tell them "I'm doing this." They want to see it. That way we have been able to prove in this state, that "we want to do this." This is our budget. This is what we spend the budget on. So, you go around and you see the manifestation. You want to see a lot of roads that have been completed. You want to see a lot of changes that are taking place. You see schools that are being rebuilt, that are being rehabilitated. You see the books, you see the physical things. I think that is convincing enough, for anybody.*

BLAIR: Yes.

SOSAN: *Even you see payments of tax, which is the area where government generates funds—mostly in all civilized world. A lot of government—that is what helps them in funding their programs as a government. The reluctance to pay them has now reduced. People are now responding because they see their money, they see it is the taxpayers' money in action. They see roads that are being built. You see buses that have been provided. Even most of the schools. You go in there and say, "this was a school, school can't be like this." So, they see the physical manifestation. We have given them that to trust us.*

BLAIR: In the early discussions about what the general plan for governance would be, was that part of the discussion to say look, we've got to get some things that are very visible that people can see?

SOSAN: *Sure. You mean, when we were going around to say "vote us in, you will not be disappointed?" Yes.*

BLAIR: And when you began to formulate the plan for governing, when you came in, part of the plan was—

SOSAN: *You know, even before you come in, like a democratic government there are things you want to tell your people that we're going to do or we're going to improve on, and these are the areas—. We continue to have free education and we even provide the quality, not just education. We make roads for you. We provide water for you. You will access free healthcare and you now see all these things that we said. We said it and we are doing it. After four years—within two years, you've seen all these things manifested. I think the people have said, "yes,*

you said it, you have walked the talk.” It’s all over. Hospitals have been built. Maternal and children’s hospital, they have never been there. All over the state the construction is going on and is well equipped. Our general hospital has been acclaimed to be the best because of the kind of equipment they have and the kind of doctors that we have there. People are coming in. We even recruit for people in the Diaspora to come and give the best health care.

BLAIR: I’ve taken up a lot of your time, thank you very much.

SOSAN: *You’re welcome. We need people to know what we are doing, so that we continue to get their support. We welcome ideas on how to even do it better than what we are doing. We are very lucky to have a leader that is young, dynamic, committed, and focused—it has really helped our government. The people of Lagos, they are very happy. As I said, they have not made a mistake in choosing him as a governor to lead—they have not made a mistake in choosing all of us to work with him, as well.*

BLAIR: Well thank you very much.

SOSAN: *Thank you very much and I hope it will be useful for your studies.*

BLAIR: I’m sure it will.