

BOOK REVIEW

FIGHTING CORRUPTION IS DANGEROUS: THE STORY BEHIND THE HEADLINES, BY NGOZI OKONJO-IWEALA

Reviewed by: **Udoh, Idoroenyen⁹**

In her book, *Fighting Corruption is Dangerous*, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (NOI), a two-time minister of finance for Nigeria (2003-2006; 2011-2015) and currently Director-General of the World Trade Organisation, addresses the events that occurred during and after her second departure from the Nigerian finance ministry. This memoir follows her 2012 book: *Reforming the Unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria*. To begin with, that 2012 book was meant to have a sequel. However, given the events that transpired during her tenure, NOI instead writes about the dangers of fighting against corruption. In this memoir, NOI unpacks unsettling experiences and plots that we will later discover were meant to cause her to resign from office. These events were ‘dangerous’ and sinister consequences of opposing jobbery in Nigeria.

The main aim of this book is to first, detail efforts by the Jonathan administration to fight corruption; second, to highlight the successes and shortcomings of the administration’s quest to extirpate corrupt practices; third, to reveal the attacks NOI suffered after leaving office, all from NOI’s point of view. It is to shine a light on the multifaceted, hostile, opportunist nature of corruption to the nation-building advocates, developers and whoever is reading. Okonjo-Iweala’s description of Nigeria at the beginning of her book gives an overall idea of the country. Nigeria has an ethnically diverse population, and its GDP is part of the highest on the African continent. The constitution allows multiple political parties, but there are two most well-known, which are the People’s Democratic Party and the All Progressives Congress. Finally, Nigeria has a plethora of natural resources. Underscore the last two facts.

When NOI left the finance ministry the second time, the PDP had been in power for over a decade. The APC is composed of smaller political parties, and these parties served as the opposition before taking over in 2016. Yet,

⁹ Udoh, Idoroenyen studied International Relations and Diplomacy at the Afé Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

the corruption problem that plagued the government by the PDP seems to have worsened under the APC. Also, the vast natural resources have been mismanaged. Political parties (comprising ruling elites) and the natural resources of Nigeria in NOI's short description of the country are vital factors in the context of corruption. In her description, NOI does not fail to mention the forgotten honest Nigerians and heroes, as the corrupt actions of a few have taken the spotlight and have "given the country a bad name—one associated with corruption."

All chapters in this book have hooking titles. For example, *The Intimidation Game*; confronting the oil scammers; a twisted budget process; and the *Public-service Scams* chapter that exposes the ghost workers and ghost pensioners' schemes.

A very shocking account one stumbles on in this memoir is the abduction of NOI's 83-year-old mother. It became clear that the kidnap was politically driven when the abductors demanded that NOI resign publicly rather than make a ransom payment. This intimidation tactic is not new even in 'democratic' Nigeria. Chris Ngige in 2003 and Senator Nelson Effiong in 2021 are examples of kidnaps with political undertones. NOI writes about undertaking office duties during that period: "I did not believe I could carry off the presentation, but my father insisted...I needed to show them I was not daunted and could not be blackmailed." The kidnap was traced to Okonjo-Iweala's disputes with an oil-marketers cartel defrauding the country and the *Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Program (SURE-P)*. NOI however notes that the SURE-P scheme was not under her purview. Perhaps, that case of mistaken identity exacerbated the situation with the cartel. Nevertheless, a thing is clear: there is a big corruption problem in the Nigerian oil market. There exist perpetrators, the big dogs, who try to protect what they think is theirs. There is a nexus between oil marketers' cartels and the petrol subsidies and revenue losses.

Okonjo-Iweala initially resisted the call to serve as the Nigerian finance minister for the second time. But the country needed an expert, especially one of international repute, to restore confidence in the Nigerian economy. It seemed to the Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (GEJ)'s administration that it was a position NOI would fill best. Of course, with the political circumstances of that time, opposition threats, as well as unrest during the presidential election that swept across the North having religious and ethnic underpinnings, confidence in the Nigerian economy was lost. President Goodluck Jonathan must have been persuasive as NOI began to reconsider after a phone call. NOI also notes that certain elements were ready to

frustrate the Jonathan government. Furthermore, they felt NOI should not have been part of the government. That was relayed by a friend, who to her, gave “a strange warning.” This exposé confirms the rumours that those who cared about Nigerian politics had heard. There were characters ready to undermine the government. Two financial drawbacks Okonjo-Iweala discovered in Nigeria were the oil subsidy program and cash-based government transactions that left room for the diversion of funds.

Cynicism, fraud in the Nigerian oil markets and government dilemma summarise the chaos in attempting to phase out oil subsidies. There was a need to remove the oil subsidy, popularly known as fuel subsidy, as it created a deep hole in the country’s coffers. Even after 2015, oil subsidies are costing Nigeria. In 2021, petrol subsidy payments gulped N1.573 trillion. Wealthy oil merchants benefit far more than regular Nigerians from this oil subsidy. The irony, however, is that average Nigerians guard oil subsidies and rumours of removal are received with agitation, according to NOI. This is because Nigerians do not trust the government, according to Okonjo-Iweala. They feel it is the only immediate benefit of Nigeria’s oil resource that they enjoy. Of course, with a proven 37 billion barrels of oil reserves as of 2016, Nigerians are against paying higher petrol prices. The civil society movements, the alleged fake scarcity, the smuggling of oil to sell for more across the Nigerian border, opposition parties taking advantage of the oil subsidy matter, and the unaccounted-for oil revenues are pertinent issues NOI addresses in her memoir.

“If transparency in revenues was an irritant to the governors, the next set of policies to manage Nigeria’s volatile oil revenues and stabilize the economy was perceived as a direct threat to the governors’ control of and autonomy in managing fiscal resources in Nigeria’s extreme version of fiscal decentralization.” The above was quoted from the book. Here, Okonjo-Iweala was discussing the bottlenecks in trying to make governance and national finance more transparent, and one of such was the opposition to the oil-price-based fiscal policy. The oil-price-based fiscal rule: save during a boom in oil prices by reducing domestic costs and then use saved-up funds when oil prices are low. However, despite its success during the Obasanjo (civilian) administration, many of the State governors during President Goodluck Jonathan’s tenure were adamant and opposed the policy. The few exceptions were the likes of the then Governor of Anambra State, Peter Obi, as mentioned by NOI.

Spurious international business deals and transactions can be considered the bane of Nigeria's business relations. In the past few years, there have been several botched government contracts, which have caused the loss of millions of naira. These were contracts that should not have been agreed upon in the first place without revisions. The book contains examples of times when such almost occurred. One case of obscure financial proposals involved a shipbuilding company which sought to modernise and re-equip the Nigerian navy dockyard and then use it to repair and construct new naval vessels. The renovation was to cost Nigeria nothing. In return, the Navy was to supply its ships for repair, and this arrangement was to last till the period of the memorandum of understanding. Similarly, the Navy could purchase vessels, and the company will build them in the refurbished yard. Either of the two is okay, as long as it would recover its investment along with a margin. At face value, that looked like a mutually-beneficial deal, at least to the Chief of Naval Staff. However, scratching the surface, it was discovered that while the company will borrow a commercial loan of \$2 billion in its name for the proposed investment, the guarantor will be the Nigerian government. That leaves the government as the sole risk-taker.

NOI also discussed public service scams and the administration's way of tackling them. For a long time, Nigeria has accounted for the salaries of non-existent government workers. Incorporating non-existent employees into salary databases is a scam to draw more funds into a part of the government and then have them siphoned into private accounts; another way is not clearing out deceased workers. Thus, the government delivers excess salaries — corruption in a word. There have been numerous shortcomings since the start of the 4th Republic that allowed for inflated government budgets. The recurrent expenditure has remained so high that there is little to spend on capital projects like hospitals and roads. In 2011, 74% of the national budget was for recurrent expenditure, according to NOI.

On The Platform programme aired on Channels TV in May 2017, Kemi Adeosun stated that 90% of government expenditure when she came into office was recurrent. In 2015, government workers' travel costs up to N64 billion, while the federal government only spent N19 billion on constructing roads. The wage bill when Adeosun became Finance Minister in 2015 was N165 Billion monthly. She argued that if revenue from crude oil, at the time a barrel cost above \$100, was used on power or just fixing roads, the economy could have been better. Adeosun planned to clean out

ghost workers, block leakages and continue with the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). IPPIS was part of the technological reforms introduced when Okonjo-Iweala was finance minister and funded by the World Bank in 2014. Civil servants and pensioners were to be enrolled and verified through the system, and their salaries paid directly from the government to them. In her book, NOI highlighted the role IPPIS had in curbing fraud and pointed out that several ministries, including education, strongly resisted for various abstruse reasons. In 2022, the IPPIS is still an issue for Nigerian universities, and its resistance might not be for vague reasons after all. While it helps to reduce corruption within ministries, departments and agencies, IPPIS makes lecturer recruitment difficult. Several public university officials have argued that it does not consider adjunct staff that work full-time in one university and part-time in another. It is one of the issues the Academic Staff Union of Universities sought to address during its over six months strike in 2022.

There are other unconventional ways money leaks from the federal government purse. One of them is judgment debts. The Ajaokuta steel plant saga lends credence to that fact. The long-standing contract dispute between Nigeria and Global Steel Holdings Limited cost Nigeria \$496million. The original cost was 90% higher before much mediation. For any reason, whether due to plain incompetence or that the contract was unachievable on the part of Nigeria in the first place, the Nigerian government not adhering to its contract agreements was not rare, and those figures were appalling. It incurred penalties which catered for corruption amongst parties involved. According to NOI, there were times the court, contractors and the ministry involved were complicit and inflated the penalties and debt the government owed. In the memoir, NOI details how the administration dealt with that matter, including the port reforms to reduce the cost of doing business in Nigeria. Eliminating the Cargo Tracking Note that grossed \$6 million from business owners was one of the reforms NOI and her team made. As always, there was resistance.

NOI also discussed her battle with the antifeminists, those against women occupying a high position in government, despite several achievements of Nigerian women. The ethnic bigots were also present. Then there are the “economic and political ideologues” who accuse NOI of being “a poster girl” for neo-liberal capitalism and someone who submitted to neo-colonial imperialism and its effects on Nigeria. NOI in this book highlights the importance of Nigerian people going past ethnicity and carrying the label “Nigerian”. Sadly ethnic bias is ripe in Nigeria; it is not new. “The existence of these various groups of detractors, who were part of “politics as usual”