**We need to put our generation to work, urgently**

*Being a speech delivered by Chude JIdeonwo, Managing Partner of Red Media Africa at the Sterling Bank ‘Get Ready for Work’ programme in Lagos, Nigeria on Friday, 11 September 2015*

You know when I began to get scared? I used to live in a one-bedroom-ish ‘face me I face you’-ish house like that in Akerele, Surulere, barely 7 years ago, and I would see so many young people – mostly male, but also female – sitting around, standing around, doing nothing. Absolutely nothing.

They were there in the morning, it didn’t matter how early; they were there when I returned from my NYSC duties around 6pm. On the days I was ill, I would notice them just moving around – talking, shouting, fighting, whistling at girls.

I realized – slowly, oh slowly – that this is the reality of the unemployment figures that I heard every day. I realized what was happening with and to these people, something I could never imagine happening to them: they had nothing to do.

It doesn’t matter if, maybe, they’ve been searching and haven’t found, the skills they have have not found tools, they’ve been laid off or are physically/mentally challenged, they are lazy or just not serious, they don’t have the information they need – they were jobless; they had nowhere to go.

You’ve heard the statistics –or or maybe you haven’t:

You should be worried. Oh, you should be worried.

We’ve heard a lot about Africa’s youth bulge – about how 70 percent of our population is below 35, and how this is an empowering time to be young in Africa. You’ve heard it. What you’ve not heard, or heard enough of, is how many of those people have no jobs and no incomes. How many of them will turn to crime, how many of them will be used by politicians, how many of them are disease vessels, how many of them will live for the next 40 years and become a real demographic burden making a worse crisis than anything the nation is seeing at present.

If you have been following the news for the last few months, you would have noted the influx of refugees into Europe. Many of them come from war-torn Syria, where millions have been displaced because of a regime determined to remain in power, whatever the cost. However, at least twice a week these days, there is a story of a capsized boat leaving either Libya or Somalia to Europe as well. These boats are carrying economic migrants from Africa. Some of them are Nigerians. This high influx challenges the narrative of ‘Africa Rising’ that has been in the news for the past 5-10 years. All kinds of questions begin to float around my mind: For whom is Africa really rising, if people can take such huge risks, make such an uncertain journey, just to leave Nigeria and other countries in Africa, with many more aspiring to make the same journey? Can anything other than sheer hopelessness force a person to risk life and limb in that manner? If Africa’s youth, people like you and me seated here today, continue to exist in environments that reduce their opportunities to better themselves, to make a better life, what is likely to happen in the near future?

These are your peers – and mine. You know them. You have at least a brother, a cousin, an uncle, a former class mate, a distant relative, a neighbor, a friend who does not have a job, and is…just there. And the ranks are increasing.

Nigeria is hard, I know. Many of us have stories that are justified. Have you seen our public secondary schools? A disaster. Students are learning under trees, Libraries were a thing of the past when I was in the university 7 years ago, lecturers can’t even speak English properly, and many graduates have to rely on teacher-aided malpractice.

There is poverty in the land. Hidden fees rule for young people whose parents barely earn, what, 15,000 Naira per month? People say girls have turned to prostitution, what they don’t even tell you is that the country is so hard, ‘runz’ are no longer that lucrative. Many young people find themselves buffeted by these challenges and they can hardly focus on their education, and that is those who are lucky to have an education.

For the rest, barely to survive is a challenge. No one will help you with a loan, even if your idea is brilliant. Nowhere to turn when you need to learn a business or a craft because you are far away from Lagos. The government builds vocational centres, but some can’t afford them, and the others learn nothing.

Companies want 5 years post-graduate experience from new graduates; SMEs are quick to fire you because you can’t learn fast enough, there are not enough jobs for even a fifth of the graduates that we have, or many of us are so badly equipped for the jobs that exist.

It’s an abysmal situation.

Everyone’s story is not identical; some people have it easier, some have it worse, but I will tell you my story – a story of opportunities and value, and growth in that same Nigeria that you are talking about – the one that does not give you opportunities, and will not help you grow.

So I will tell you a story that I heard back in 2013 from a 30-something year-old Nigerian – who was one of our suppliers at the time – in his own words. If like me you went to a Nigerian university, it’s a story you will certainly identify with.

He got into the Ogun State University in 1999 for a diploma in law – he planned to get good grades so he can process for a Bachelors in Law.

In November 2001, he had his final exams. The last paper was Land Law. He had prepared well, and the exam was sweet, Oh, it was so sweet that he asked extra sheets.

It was all going so well, until a few minutes to “pens up”, he realized that his answer booklet wasn’t perforated & he wouldn’t be able to attach the extra sheets to it. The invigilator had already started calling people to tidy up their work & prepare to submit.

So he went up to the invigilator and asked for the instrument he could use to insert holes in the booklet. Mr. Lecturer said no, and told him to use his pen to pierce holes in them. While he was trying to do this, time had run out & the lecturer snatched the paper from him.

My friend started pleading with him to let him tie it up. His classmate who had finished 30 minutes ago was passing by, saw him begging and joined him to plead. The lecturer asked him what he was doing in the hall after he had submitted and also seized his own paper.

So now, my friend began to beg – not for himself – but for his good Samaritan friend. Unfortunately, the Lecturer in charge of the course, a man called Mr. Olowookere walked in, and the invigilator told him what happened. He asked for Jide’s name, Jide refused to tell him. So he snatched Jide’s ID card and kept it.

A small crowd gathered outside and began to beg the lecturer, but he refused to show mercy. In the frustration, someone in the crowd said in Yoruba that the lecturer deserved to be shot. That was the nail in their coffin.

My friend went about begging lecturers to intervene. One of them told him what to do, but that he wouldn’t be able to get admission for Law. During the break, my friend began to process admission to read Philosophy.

School resumed in June 2002, and my friend and Jide went to check their results. They aced all, expect for Land Law, where they both failed. He almost broke down.

He went to meet his uncle and together they went to meet the Diploma coordinator. That is where they head that Mr. Lecturer had claimed they threatened his life. His nightmare had just begun.

This was a faculty where if you got just one Carry-Over it can be waived, but Mr. Lecturer made sure they couldn’t get this privilege. They appealed to the faculty board, insisting on their innocence – their appeal was denied.

They were advised to retake the paper, but the exam was just a few days away, my friend wasn’t an academic genius, he had no time to prepare, he had already missed continuous assessment and a whole year of school – and money was tight at home. How was he going to come up with the school fees? And he didn’t do anything wrong!

You know how school can be. The Sub Dean of his department helped him to get access for lectures and sit for exams in philosophy while he protested the Faculty of Law decision; of course for four years he couldn’t get a matriculation number, and couldn’t gather the resources to go somewhere and start again. All the while continuing to battle the Faculty of Law decision. But appeal after appeal was rejected, even though there was no proof that he did what they said he did.

He got a project supervisor in 400 level, got his project topic approved and even submitted his proposal along with chapters 1 & 2. But before the 400 level first semester exams, the authorities came to him and told him no way, he had to go back to getting that Diploma in Law result, because he wouldn’t be able to graduate.

A miracle happened, he finally – four years after! – got justice from the board. Ah, but the nightmare did not end.

The Diploma in Law coordinator simply refused to release the result, even after the Dean had spoken to him. Then in 2009, they appointed a new coordinator. And what happened next? This one said, ah, I don’t know anything about the case oh’. Okay, lecturers that knew about it briefed him, then he said: Well I cannot find your records’.

And that was it. That was it.

9 years of his life, wasted. Gone. Taken. In 2010, 9 years after, he decided to move on with his life and forget about OSU, and about University.

I want you to take a minute and let that sink in. It’s a true life story. It’s a tragic but very familiar Nigerian story.

But that is not the end of the story. The end of the story is that my man didn’t let himself go down without a fight – he quickly picked himself up, and he kept moving. He kept pushing.

Before you know what he had gotten a job with a bank in Nigeria – despite having only a Secondary School Certificate. He went in with faith, he battled it out with others, and he got that job.

In addition to that, he started a business while he went through the problems with the university. He first started as a newspaper vendor in 2005, and that quickly grew to a business called Barows 21– securing sales experience, corporate experience and built a business that had a decent level of patronage.

Listen to what he said to me then: “I’m not saying I won’t get my law degree. But not now. All I’m concerned about at the moment is growing my business. Most people get a degree because they eventually want to get a job with it, or because society expects them to, and not because of the knowledge they hope to acquire. But I already have a job. Getting a degree, for me is all about personal fulfillment. I’m already educated. And I’m still learning.”

I share his story because he refused to be one of those young people that I saw nearly ten years ago and that I see every day on the streets. He chose to be part of the solution.

A former boss used to tell me – if you come to me and tell me xxxx, I will pity you, but I will not respect you, and I probably still not employ you.

And you see he only told me this story AFTER he had provided a service, AFTER he had met a need, AFTER he had picked himself up, after her had shown his worth. AFTER he had earned my respect. Have you earned my respect?

I know what he is talking about, even if mine is a different story.

It was in that same Nigeria that, without connections, I gained admission to the University of Lagos when I was only 15. People said I would have to bribe, and I should do an affidavit to INCREASE my age. But I had faith, I wrote to the Vice Chancellor, I met the man, I was interviewed by him, and he legally waived the age requirement. That was my first cue that with faith a lot is possible in Nigeria.

It was in that same Nigeria that I went to public secondary school and university, my parents pulling every naira they had to make sure that I had the best education they could afford; it was in that same country that I developed my writing, through training and scholarships that I couldn’t afford. It was in that same country that I got my first job on television when I was only 15, that same country that I published my first novel with a publisher in Ibadan who just believed in that small boy he saw. This same country that I began my career as journalist writing for TEMPO at 17, after a meeting with the man who is now Senator Femi Ojudu and I share his name so you can confirm.

It was in this same country where I got my first corporate job offer by an executive director at an oil company because she was impressed. She hadn’t heard of me before, no one gave me a note. This same country where myself and my friends founding a company without a kobo in our account, and no money from our parents, and two of us run a business now that is worth tens of millions of naira. The same country where I spent six months pursuing our president for an interview and secured it without calling anyone. The same country where my aunty was minister of finance but I never met her, until the works of my hands made her notice me. The same country where I met a minister for the first time in her office simply by doing my work diligently and sending her an email to tell her so.

This same Nigeria, where we built a brand – The Future Awards – out of nothing; just faith in ourselves, a relentless desire to succeed, and an inability to take no for an answer. To look Nigeria in the eye and say, you can’t hold me back. You are my country – I will succeed in you, goddammit!

I look at my own team over the years and it’s the same story of grit and strength and character and vision and ongoing success. One of them worked for a man that owed him for four years, and he is still standing. One of them has a father who refused to pay for his fees and he is still standing, one of them took the bull by the horns and began to volunteer with us four years ago and she is now leading this project, one of them from his job as a driver has pulled himself up, gone through the polytechnic, secured a job, is training himself in film, one of them is barely 24 and already leading one of our companies, one of them is paying her way day by day to pull herself through university job after job, another her Masters; one of them returned to Nigeria after years in England and immediately landed on her feet and is surviving a country many have run back from. Oh the stories abound!

Oh my goodness, these are the people that show me that anything is possible in Nigeria!

I say this to you so that it will inspire you – I lead the team that has created so many brands, Y! Magazine, Y! TV, Y! Radio, The Future Project, The Future Awards, Red Media, YNaija.com, TFESS and more and my journey has just begun.

By the grace of God, I am 30 today and I have just begun.

My story, and the story of this organization is a testimony that much is possible in Nigeria, in spite of Nigeria.

Today’s programme won’t solve all your problems. At the end of the day only you can solve those problems. But it is here to help you. Merely by sitting here, by having access to a programme like this, you have more privilege than many of your peers.

Don’t let Nigeria hold you back, don’t let those fears and those worries and those obstacles hold you back – take advantage of the opportunities you have in front of you, take advantage of the hand held out to pull you up.

Maybe you need to stop talking about the government and criticizing everything and everyone you see and you need to focus on your own life and forge your own path, and build your own success.

It is important because we cannot change Nigeria nada if we are hungry and jobless. And if you can’t get your hands to work, whether you have an education or not, whether you have capital or not, whether you have a mentor or not, whether like me you have stomach, back and eye problems or not, then you are part of the problem.

Some of you need to stop using social media for frivolous things, and use them instead to showcase the work of your hands. More and more of your peers have started – and are starting – businesses entirely off the patronage they get from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. A number of people have gotten jobs there as well.

So I say to you today: Get up! Get to work! Get off your bum. Get something going, stop finding excuses, and get started! Brush off the problem, try again. Get the dust off your feet, try something else. That is why you must listen closely to what you hear here today, and you must immediately begin to apply it. Tell that silly doubt and cynicism in your mind to be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea! You can do it is not a message for other people; it’s a message for you, today, now. Stop complaining, stop dragging your feet, stop whining. Do something. Because at the end of the day, you have no excuse. Gba be, you have no excuse.

Thank you very much, and God bless Nigeria. END.