

ITF: TWO YEARS OF PROFESSOR WAPMUK

The achievements of Director General of the Industrial Training Fund, Professor Longmas Sambo Wapmuk only two years in his term should provide cannon fodder for majority of Nigerians clamouring for square pegs in square holes in the appointment of people into positions of leadership.

But it was not smooth sailing when he took over in August 2006 as the organization was assailed by numerous problems.

The Industrial Training Fund was established in 1971 with the mandate of generating a vast pool of indigenous manpower sufficient to meet the needs of industry and commerce. Regrettably, poor funding and other sundry factors had contrived a situation where the organization could hardly meet these expectations. Lack of promotion, staff training and poor welfare packages had ensured that morale of the staff was at its nadir. The Federal civil service reforms which had kick started two years earlier, and had taken hold in nearly all Federal Government Parastatals, had not even commenced in the ITF; and coupled with the functional problems, it will be fair to suggest that the organization Prof Wapmuk inherited was in dire straits.

Tackling these problems should challenge any manager, but when you are a professor of public administration and a retired permanent secretary,

your grounding in theory and practice should place you in good stead, and it did.

As a direct response to this dire situation, the Director General rolled out an agenda for the ITF as follows: A machinery for the effective and sustainable implementation of the ITF mandate in line with the 7- point Agenda of President Umaru Musa Yar'adua and the NEEDS strategy with emphasis on strengthening the private sector to take advantage of the avalanche of opportunities that abound in the domestic, regional and world markets; implementation of the Fund's core assignment of promoting vocational skills, realization of the reform programme of the Federal Government with particular reference to tackling corruption, promoting transparency and accountability in governance as well as galvanizing and motivating the workforce through improved staff welfare. About two years, the Director General may have met all the targets he set for himself.

RESTRUCTURING

One of the first actions of the Director General was to reorganize the Fund in line with the dictates of the public service reform agenda, which among other things canvassed a leaner, more competitive public service structures, devoid of leakages and wastages. Whereas the process had commenced or had been completed in other Federal institutions, it was not the case in the ITF.

The reform process that the DG embarked upon led to the collapse of the nine department structure of the Fund into six departments, just as over 400 staff that were in breach of the requirements spelt out by the Bureau for Public Service Reforms were sacked. Unlike in other institutions, all staff that were downsized were paid all their entitlements to enable them start new lives. In all, the ITF paid a total of two hundred and sixteen million, five hundred and thirty six thousand, seven hundred and sixty Naira, sixteen kobo (₦216, 536,760.16) as terminal benefits. For his adherence to the dictates of public service reforms, the ITF was commended by the Bureau for Public Service Reforms.

STAFF WELFARE AND INTERNAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Another area that has witnessed remarkable strides these last two years is the welfare of staff and internal capacity building. As a seasoned administrator, the DG knew that the huge targets he had set for himself and the organization will not be realized if the workforce was not carried along. As part of efforts towards this, the contentious issues of delayed promotions, upgrading and wrongful placement had to be immediately tackled. One of his first actions on assumption of duty was promotion of those who had met necessary criteria for promotion. In all 600 staff were promoted just as all cases of wrongful placement and upgrading were resolved in his very first year.

The ITF was also among the first organizations to pay the 15% percent salary increase announced by the Federal Government. It was also among

the first institutions to implement the Harmonised Salary for Public Servants and the arrears thereof.

To further motivate the workforce, the DG championed the transition from HAPSS to CONTISS-the wage structure enjoyed by all training institutions in the country; and also revived the ITF Loan Scheme which was comatose for sometime.

It is however in the area of staff development that the DG recorded marked achievements. In 2007 alone, about 1,126 members of the Fund's workforce attended one form of training or the other. A breakdown shows that 1,062 were sent on local short courses, 27 were sponsored on long term training, while 37 embarked on overseas training. This tempo of training and retraining was continued in 2008, when a total of 720 members of the Fund's workforce attended one form of training or the other. 592 were sent on local short courses, 60 were sponsored on long term training, while 67 embarked on overseas training. Overall, all members have been trained; in some cases, severally in only two years of the administration of Prof Wapmuk.

Also, in a bid to meet the training needs of our varied stakeholders, the Fund has constituted an array of skilled professionals code named 'Crack Team', trained in various skills and trades for the purpose of boosting their effectiveness.

THE 10 YEAR BLUE PRINT

If the aforementioned efforts are suggestive of the direction the DG wanted for the ITF, the 10 year blue print which was unfolded by the ITF in 2007 should encapsulate its ambition. The document, which is the first such long term plan, was designed to provide a defined direction over the ten year period.

The blue print addresses several key areas with short, mid and long term goals. Some of the areas captured by the plan include, Training Delivery System, Research and Development, Setting and ensuring standards, Skills training, Business process and production quality improvement, and Micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMES) support.

Others are the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), Training Technology Services, Information and Communication Technology Services, Data Bank and electronic learning system and Human Capacity Building in ICT.

Three key areas stand out especially in terms of their ambition and implications on the national economy. These are skills training, business process and production quality improvement and micro, small and medium enterprises support. In the area of skills training, for instance, the expectations are that the plan will yield an adequate number of quality personnel at different occupational levels in industry and commerce. As efforts to meeting these expectations, the present management has commenced the retooling and re-equipping of its

Industrial Skills Training Centres in Lagos, Kano, Jos and Lokoja. 15 others will be established in the six geo-political zone to cater for skills and trades already prevalent in the areas they are situated. Of special significance is the foray of the Industrial Training Fund in the oil and gas. Although the Fund had severally trained staff of oil companies operating in Nigeria, the Oil and Gas Industrial Skills Training Centre that is being contemplated for the Niger Delta will redress the current absence of skilled Nigerians in this sector and also stem spiraling violence in the region, which has been blamed on youth unemployment.

Another area of the blue print that attracts attention is the emphasis on Micro, Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (MSMEs). Growth and development of MSMEs is attested to as engine of all growing economies. Indeed, the emergence of South East Asian Tigers as an economic force owes largely to its vibrant MSMEs.

In Nigeria, however, their development has been hampered and stifled by the absence of the requisite capacity required in the running of any enterprises. The 10 year blue print proposes to address these areas through the building of internal capacity within the Fund that will arm this key sector with the appropriate skills to ensure that it fully takes off. In this way, counseling for start up, feasibility and viability studies and aggressive pursuit of collaborations and working relationships with organizations like Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Nigerian Economic

Summit Group (NESG) and others would have been achieved, towards provision of support services to MSME.

The most ambitious aspect of the 10 year plan is its Information and Communication Technology component. The ambition of the ITF as spelt out by the ten-year blue print would place the ITF on the same threshold in terms information technology with similar organizations in other countries. The blue print indicates that in the next few years, the Fund would have among others linked up all its Area Offices and Centres, designed and installed all video conference facilities, created virtual web pages and would have acquired the capability to administer an e-learning system even as efforts would have concretized towards a certification system for ICT programmes in liaison with micro-soft, CISCO and other reputable firms.

TRAINING SERVICES

This is one area the DG notched remarkable achievements. Although the activities enumerated above should ordinarily distract a less focused Manager from his organisations core functions. Instead of viewing the reform as an impediment to the realization of corporate goals, the DG, like all forward looking executives, saw the massive reform of the economy and a globalizing world as an opening for the ITF to further realize itself by generating appropriate human capital solutions to challenges that emerged with them. To achieve this, the Fund in 2007 alone, conducted 61 identification of training needs surveys. In response to the needs that had been unraveled by the surveys, the Fund generated

27 new training programmes for companies in Nigeria. Over all, the Fund implemented 200 Scheduled and Unscheduled programmes that attracted 6,700 participants from 1,433 organisations nationwide.

In 2008, the Industrial Training Fund also implemented 493 scheduled and unscheduled training programmes that attracted 11,431 participants drawn from 1,836 organizations across the country.

In addition, as a mark of the DG's doggedness, the Fund's efforts to export its service to other African countries witnessed a major break through as the Fund trained management staff of Kampala based National Insurance Company in Uganda.

The Fund also organized the 17th Biennial National Training Conference which took place at the Shehu Musa Yar'adua Centre in Abuja. The National Training Conference which is a forum where trainers all over the country convene to examine and analyse issues affecting the industry and the economy at large dwelt on Technical Vocational Skills Acquisition for Employment and National Development. Over 125 participants from organizations nationwide attended this forum.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND SKILLS ACQUISITION

In recognition of the fact that the fight against poverty as envisioned by the 7 point agenda of the Federal Government will be a nullity if Nigerians are not equipped with appropriate and employable skills, the Wapmuk led Management commenced the process of the establishment of

Centres that will furnish Nigerians with such skills. Towards this end, the ITF forwarded a proposal to the Federal Government in 2007 for the establishment of 15 Skills Centres in the six geopolitical zones of the country. The proposal has been approved by the Federal Government. Even as sourcing for the financing for these Centres has been stepped up, retooling and expansion works on the three (3) existing Centres in Jos, Kano and Ikeja have been completed, in an effort to bring them in tune with these renewed expectations.

Meanwhile, the design for the Abuja Model Skills Centre which is expected to take off in 2009 under the Technical Cooperation with the ITE of Singapore has been concluded, and when it effectively takes off, will cater for 5 trade areas.

In addition, the long term skills training programme at the Industrial Skills Training Centre, Ikeja was revived and recently graduated 62 trainees of its two year programme. ISTC, Kano, currently only implementing short term courses will also commence long term skills training programme later this year.

To further strengthen the capacity of the Fund to effectively impart skills, the Prof Wapmuk nudged the ITF collaborative arrangements with various organizations both locally and internationally. Some of these are Directorate of Technical Cooperation in Africa (DTCA), National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), British Council on National Vocational Qualification Framework, Best Konsults, National

Institute for Hotel and Tourism Studies, (NIHOTOURS) Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN), Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN), Petroleum Technology Development Fund (PTDF) Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC), Centre for Niger Delta Development (CNDD) and the Institute of Technical Education Services of Singapore (ITE). Indeed, ITF's collaboration with ITE has given rise to the establishment of the ISTC, Abuja which will come on stream later this year.

As further proof of our commitment in this direction, the Fund has embarked on an employment drive for engineers and related experts to shore-up our stock of in-house professionals in vocational education.

SIWES

Despite the funding problems that have bedeviled the Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) for some time now, Prof Wapmuk refused to give up on the Scheme. In 2007, the Fund disbursed Eight Hundred and Fifty Million, One Hundred and Forty Thousand, Five Hundred Naira only (₦850, 140,500.00) as allowances to One Hundred and Ninety Five Thousand, Eight Hundred and Ninety Students of accredited disciplines for 234 tertiary institutions and Sixty Six Million, Nine Hundred and Twenty Four Thousand, Five Hundred and Fifty Nine Naira only (₦66, 924,559.00) as supervisory allowances. This was even as only Five Hundred and Forty Two Million, Eight Hundred and Seventy Two Thousand, Seven Hundred and Twenty Three Naira, Forty Three Kobo (₦542,872,723.43) of the Seven Hundred and Sixty Five

Million Naira (N765m) that was appropriated, which in itself was not enough to cover the payment of the Students and Supervisory Allowances, was released. The outstanding balance of Two Hundred and Twenty Two Million, One Hundred and Twenty Seven Thousand, Two Hundred and Seventy Five Naira, Fifty Seven kobo (N222, 127,275.57k) has not been released up to date.

In 2008, the Fund disbursed a total of N780, 921,379 to tertiary institutions as students and supervisory allowances.

It must however be noted that the SIWES Scheme has posed many challenges for the Fund. The critical and most disturbing aspect is the spate of agitations from students in various tertiary institutions leading to disruptions of academic activities in such institutions as well as the kidnapping and threats to lives of our staff and property. Whereas the number of participants for the SIWES Scheme is on the increase owing to the springing up of new Universities, Colleges of Education and Polytechnics and also the number of accredited courses commensurate funding by the Federal Government to tackle these increase is lacking. From our records of three (3) years, 2005, 2006, and 2007, the ITF is being owed a total of Three Billion, Nine Hundred and Two Million, Five Hundred and Eleven Thousand, One Hundred and Thirty Five Naira (N3, 902,511,135.00). Coupled with persistent under appropriations and non- release of appropriations, the Scheme has become a sort of an albatross for the Fund. This is because the ITF has had to bear the brunt of participants' displeasures each time their allowances are not paid as at

when due. Several Area Offices have been picketed by rampaging students. To avert these incidents, it is the opinion of the ITF that a separate budgetary subhead be created for SIWES just as it has been done for the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC)

REIMBURSEMENT

The statutory Act setting up the ITF makes provision for employers of labour to be reimbursed to the tune of 60% of the 1% annual training levy. The reimbursement scheme was designed as part of efforts to encourage employers of labour to train and retrain their workforce. Since the inception of this management, measures have been in place towards ensuring that contributing employers benefit from the scheme. But the tune to which employers have been reimbursed is unprecedented. In 2007 alone, the ITF processed and paid a total of one billion, two hundred and fifty- two million, six hundred and fifty nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty one naira, fifty seven kobo (1, 252, 659,981.57) to two hundred and thirty eight (238) employers representing an increment of twenty one percent(21%) over reimbursement claims made in 2006. In 2008, the Fund processed and paid a total of one billion, eight hundred and thirty seven million, seven hundred and seven thousand, four hundred and thirty seven naira, thirty-five kobo (1, 837,707,437.35) to 273 employers; an improvement over the one billion, two hundred and fifty- two million, six hundred and fifty nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty one naira, fifty seven kobo (1, 252, 659,981.57) that was paid to 238 employers in 2007.

Some of measures put in place by Management led by Professor Wapmuk, which include the 5th reimbursement scheme that reduced the bottlenecks and paper work and the scaling up of reimbursement workshops for schedule officers in companies.

REBRANDING AND PUBLICITY:

This is perhaps one area that Prof Wapmuk has chalked up record achievements. When he assumed duty in 2006, little had been done towards boosting the profile of the Organisation. Even within its immediate environment, few people knew any thing about its activities. Prof Wapmuk has almost reversed the poor profile by approving the implementation of a re-branding agenda that is already yielding results. The philosophy comprises two components- internal and external. The internal component entails the orientation of the entire workforce of the Fund to serve as brand ambassadors in action, word and deed while the external component is about drawing up programmes and actions that will satisfy the aspirations of its publics particularly especially the Organised Private Sector.