



Remarks by Mr Edo Ukpong

A warm welcome to all of you who have graciously availed this ceremony of your esteemed presence. It is an honour to be asked by the organizers to chair this 9th edition of the Inoyo Toro Annual Teachers Award in Akwa Ibom State. This is my eighth time of attending this ceremony and I recognized from the onset the importance of this laudable initiative and the need for all of us in our own different ways to support any effort that will uplift the teaching profession. Indeed the theme of my remarks will focus on different ways we all can lend some form of support or the other.

It does not take a genius to recognize that education is the most important component of development in any society. Similarly, it should be obvious to all, that teachers drive the education sector. Indeed as one seasoned educationist pointed out some years ago, our governments make the mistake of equating the erection or renovation of classrooms with improvement in education whereas it is better to have good teachers teaching under a tree than students in well-constructed classrooms with no teachers or poorly train teachers. Indeed, teachers by the nature of their role in society are the most impactful change agents. Teachers, are best placed to drive development in society in as much as it is their students who will eventually be charged with administration of all aspects of societal coexistence. The output to society in terms of quality of governance and coexistence in all ramifications, will obviously be tied to the quality of education in the society. So, if we recognize that teachers play such a pivotal role in society, why are we not treating them better?

Governments are generally responsible for the education sector and are by far the biggest employers of teachers. In Nigeria's example, because of the sheer huge numbers of teachers it employs, it will be difficult to expect in the near future for our governments at all levels to be in a position to pay teachers anything near meaningful wages. Yes, it is true that the best education systems as in Finland and South Korea for example also pay the best wages to its teachers. In Finland, a primary school teacher with about 15 years'



experience earns over sixty thousand dollars per annum! That translates to well over two million Naira a month! Paying teachers well is obviously a key factor in encouraging and obtaining good output from our teachers. Given the fact that our governments will not pay enough to motivate our teachers, what can we as ordinary citizens do to motivate our teachers and prop up standards?

The initiative of the Inoyo Toro Foundation in instituting these awards is obviously one of the laudable ways. As human beings, we all love to and deserve to be appreciated for any progressive contributions we make. The mere fact of just gathering teachers in this kind of high profile ceremony with a galaxy of captains of industry and public officials in attendance can only boost the morale of our teachers present and even those not in attendance. The prize money attached to the winners in various categories is significant enough to make a change in their lives and encourage competition for excellence among teachers, which can only be for the good of society. I can observe that the participation of mentored schools has grown in leaps which tells me more people are aligning with the objectives of the Foundation and throwing in their support. This is commendable but we must not only continue to support the Foundation but do more!

As I said earlier, every human being likes to be appreciated. It does not always have to be cash! At times a simple handshake will do! We will all agree that we do not accord our teachers the regard and gratitude worthy of their positions. No matter the opinion we have of their standards or performance, they are who we have now and like it or not, their standards or performance are the making of the society. Treating them shabbily or without regard will only make matters worse. As a product of two teachers, I grew up being called fondly 'Akpan Teacher' (Teacher's first son) by everybody around us and I was very proud of that fact. The same is not the case today where teachers are regularly bullied by parents and students and generally looked down upon by society. We must change this attitude and we can all play our roles as individuals in reversing this narrative. To get anything meaningful from our teachers we simply must accord them the requisite respect and appreciation. Let me start by challenging those in attendance today. Take the



phone numbers of about three teachers in any school of your choice in your locality, call or send them goodwill messages from time to time and find out how they are doing. You will all be surprised at the positive impact this small gesture will have on their morale and self-esteem. Many of us make the mistake of not giving a damn about these public school teachers because our own children do not attend public schools. A big mistake because even though our children do not attend these schools, our society is actually run by people who attended public schools. The society is run by police officers, customs officers, soldiers, other civil servants etc.; and not people working in the ExxonMobils or MTNs of this world! The Level of service we get from them is dependent on their education and mind you including especially civics education! So, we must see ourselves as stakeholders. May I suggest we follow up the phone calls/text messages with gifts to be shared by the teachers. A bag of rice or other items to be shared, will show that we value their services. Invite the teachers in your chosen school to any private functions you host and recognize their presence!

Now to government, these are suggestions that will not cost government any extra money. In Uyo here, I have seen billboards promoting the DAKKADA initiative with faces of actresses, boxers, etc. Let us add our teachers to the mix! Government can request the names and pictures of various winners of the Inoyo Toro Foundation Teachers Awards and use some of them on these beautiful billboards. I make bold to say that the DAKKADA initiative itself as laudable as it is will only succeed if teachers are in the forefront. It is only when our teachers are up-lifted, will the society be uplifted! I do not see why government will not see the benefit of further inviting them to official functions and recognizing them. As simple as these suggestions are, they will give our teachers the sense of worth which is so obviously in critical short supply and impacting negatively on their performance.

Ladies and gentlemen, the suggestions above are just a guide and I am sure there are many other resourceful incentives out there. Let us not consider any initiative too little but rather strive to make our own contribution no matter how little they may seem. It is



for our own good! Communities must take ownership of teachers' welfare, security and the educational facilities in the communities. Government cannot provide facilities and also safeguard them. Vandalization of school facilities or harassment of teachers can only occur where the community does not place any value on education! Such a community will pay a huge price for its ignorance and neglect. Educate those in your community and let us work together to uplift our teachers and thereby improve our standards of education and ultimately our dear country.

Thank You.