

The Contributions of Veterans in Business and Economy: Africa as a Case Study

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Abstract

This paper discusses the growing influence retired military men and women are now exacting in African society based on their business franchises, which cut across telecoms, agriculture, mining, shipping, oil and gas, broadcasting, small medium enterprise, and more. These are mass-oriented and beneficial investments not only to the society but to the economic growth of their respective nations, which will be advantageous to the collective development of the society and the continent at large. This paper shows a relationship between the period spent as service members and in business careers after retirement, which is a positive indicator and a palliative to stem the idea of young military officers nursing the nocturnal ambition of coup d'état, since life after service years are no longer an armageddon.

This paper takes a periscopic view of how these veterans' impacts and successes in their new chosen careers have positively affected their immediate communities and beyond in the areas of youth employment and empowerment; capacity building; and re-focusing, re-engineering, and social development indicative of a transformation that underscores a paradigm shift in people's perception of the men and women in khaki.

Keywords: veterans, economy, business, GDP

Introduction

Africa is viewed as a “dark continent” from three major perspectives:

1. Unknown terrain to the Europeans—which is a euphemism for danger and harsh weather conditions (basically because of its hot climate),
2. A synonym for maladministration of resources, famine, acute hunger, diseases, poverty, malnutrition, and deprivation, and
3. A continent predominantly populated by the black people.

Africa is a continent with a population of about 1.033 billion of able-bodied men and women, making it the second largest and most populous continent in the world after Asia.

The continent is rich in virtually everything: its vast land and good soils can grow any type of crop, and its natural resources include oil and gas, gold, nickel, bitumen, diamond, and uranium. These are features of the continent aside from its burgeoning population, which can also be described as an asset.

Most African countries’ service men fought at the fore of the Second World War, although little or no credit was accorded them in the course of history. They were abandoned to their fate after the war by the colonial imperialists. Their situation meant they almost would have been better dead than alive, especially for the injured soldiers. The culture of a lack of care and poor welfare support were all sign posts that the profession had no future after retirement, hence the culture of coup d’état pervaded almost the entire continent. Militarism or Junta regimes across Africa were signs of fear of the unknown, concomitant with poverty, greed, nepotism, and despotism. Although some military men tried to restructure their countries by wiping away corruption, they accused the politicians, and subsequently, they became worse off. As the saying goes, “absolute power corrupts absolutely.” It is no coincidence that the timely emergence of this historiographical, fact-oriented discourse and revisionism has dovetailed with the post-decolonization and colonization eras and has shed light into the picture of military service members and in public service and as veterans in Africa. The question is, why join the force if not for a career worthy or satisfying? The answer is very simple! The background and orientation of most Africans will always favor a profession that can make them a “lord,” holding power and job security similar to that of kings and local chiefs.

According to history, the Second World War was a watershed of some sort, which marked a hegemonic re-ordering of the world. Europe started to lose its colonial powers, financially crippled by the war and struggling to be relevant in the emerging schizophrenic international system of the Cold War era. Conversely, one of the major points of debate has been the extent to which poverty, deprivation, fear of the unknown, power tussles, nepotism, and despotism have influenced their negative outlook over time. To be candid and just, the perpetration of heinous crimes and human right abuses were not (totally) the actions of the junior cadre of the military but were executed on orders from above. Some in all honesty were taken in the interest of national unity and integration. Nevertheless, they resulted from poor decision-making. Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “there are no bad soldiers but bad officers.” In other words, the heads of the military juntas in the continent are to be blamed for most of the economic woes of Africa.

Judging from this perspective, my main point of discourse is the paradigm shift of veterans to contributing meaningfully to the economic development of their nations via their private businesses. Hence my topic: “The Contributions of Veterans in Business and Economy: Africa as a Case Study.”

These developments have made veterans nationalist even in politics, and the degree of their involvement are born retrospectively out of nationalist mythologies even in the post-military junta era.

Scope

This paper focuses on the economic impact of African veterans in their chosen careers after retirement. The preponderance of them are involved in SMEs [small and medium enterprises], a reality that is pivotal in the alleviation and reduction of poverty by gainfully employing people. Veterans have now come to terms with democracy and the rule of law. And though it might seem paradoxical, for democracy to survive especially in Africa, the economic empowerment of the veterans is sine qua non.

Veterans are die-hard sticklers to rules. They may not be a 100 percent perfectionist, but they are better “doers than sayers.” This attribute is also taken into the foray of their businesses, where rules that are termed too restrictive or cagey are enforced to the dismay of people with little or no military background. Yet findings show with clarity that staff working with veterans are more productive and more time-conscious in terms of early arrival and proper departure time—invariably, they are always put on their toes and always at alert and active, in contrast to common images of the government-controlled civil service, where lackadaisical attitudes and ineptitude pervades. Veterans are also known for being very articulate, an attestation to their years of training in strategic planning. Their high principles turns a work force to be productive, effective, accountable, dedicated, and dependable.

Veterans are mostly misjudged by the populace who do not understand their unique style of training as opposed and different in both outlook, philosophy, and methodology to most civil training. People easily forget the following:

- 1) The veterans are the product of the societal training they received;
- 2) They have over the years sacrificed a “normal” life for our collective security, be it at home or abroad;
- 3) Their wives, children, and parents harbor many emotions, pains, and frustration over the ultimate fear of long absence or loss of their loved ones;
- 4) Veterans’ children suffer psychological and at times emotional trauma over incessant transfer and relocation from home and schools;
- 5) Some of their children live as though they are in a single parent’s home; and
- 6) With all these abnormalities, a certain modicum of respect ought to be showed these service men and women, even once they have become veterans.

Based on the above, we should recognize that veterans draw on their years of experience and expertise especially in terms of having sound knowledge of the country to establish businesses that would be beneficial not only to them but to their immediate communities and to the economy at large.

Veterans are employed today

- as teachers in primary and post primary schools;
- as commandants of different corps groups;
- as employees in their respective disciplines (e.g., as engineers);
- in emergency periods, like during search and rescue operations; and
- in the Merchant Navy/Marine profession, especially the Security Navy.

Veterans are being seen with more respect today than in years past, largely because of civil rule and the service they have rendered to their fatherland. They have also come to terms to rules of law and democracy predicated on the popular wishes of the people. Images of veterans successfully integrated into the economy after the end of their military careers is on the rise on a daily basis. They are now in all manner of businesses ranging from the establishment of universities and other forms of higher education to agriculture, telecoms,

mining, SMEs, filling stations, broadcasting, shipping, freight forwarding, ship chandelling, hospitality, and oil and gas. Upon leaving the military, they are investing their retirement pay in business. The top notch among them are the generals who possess enough funds at their disposal to venture into massive investments. The rank and file also aren't left out, because they venture into SMEs like poultry and other livestock, electrical and electronics installation, carpentry, and welding.

In Sudan, for instance, there is a planned reintegration by 2020 of about 150,000 combatants—80,000 from the SPLA [Sudan People's Liberation Army] and another 70,000 from security services (such as police, fire and prison services). These veterans are to produce a local workforce and counter one of the wars legacies of a vocational skills gap.

Majur Mayor Machar is the deputy chairperson of the National Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration Commission in South Sudan. He recently said, "You have to pay for peace and security, and also reward those people [former combatants]. They are not simple people. You cannot treat them lightly. They feel it deeply. We are investing in these people in two aspects. They are going to be the manpower in developing the country, and also it will allow us to free up resources for a professional army."

One veteran this to say: "I will establish tomatoes, onions and cabbages, and this will make me a pioneer in the state [for these crops]." That's an astonishing idea to think of in a nation that has been war-ravaged.

Lieutenant General Ian Khama retired a man of great influence in a small African country of Botswana. He used his wealth of experience to transform the economy of that country to be the best in Africa. Botswana is judged to have the most stable economy where different businesses flourishes.

General Olusegun Obasanjo retired a war veteran himself, having served in the Nigerian military between 1958–1979. After retirement, he set up business as a commercial farmer with the same energy and single-mindedness he had displayed in office. His Obasanjo Farms project is one of the biggest and most diversified in Nigeria and perhaps in the whole of Africa, with a workforce numbering over 7,000.

The farm nets an average of N40,000,000 (forty million Naira) a day, which translate to about \$250,000, in five working days. The farm is grossing 200 million Naira a week, so with fifty weeks of work (excluding two weeks to clean up and maintain), the Ota farm must be grossing approximately 10 billion Naira (\$62 million) in a year.

Obasanjo operates other franchises side-by-side with his farming business. He delved into education by owing one of the best citadels of learning; a higher institution (BELS University) with the state-of-the-art equipment that offers quality education to the future generations of Africans and to the world at large. He's also the first Nigerian war veteran and former president to build a world-class presidential library, titled the OOPL (Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library foundation), the first of its kind in Africa which parallels libraries like those of John F. Kennedy and other former presidents of the United States. Obasanjo also took an active interest in international affairs. He established the African Leadership Forum, through which he organized international workshops on African problems. He was a member of several international, UN, Commonwealth, and other agencies. He even ran for election as secretary-general of the UN. His membership of the Club de Madrid, a group of more than eighty former leaders of democratic states who are committed to strengthening democratic leadership and governance, is a great boost to the paradigm shift of veterans.

Obasanjo's colleague, Theophilus Yakubu Danjuma, a retired Nigerian general and a war veteran as well, was Chief of Army Staff from 1975–1979 and was the Nigerian Defense Minister as a retired general between 1999–2003. He rose swiftly in the Army ranks during the Nigerian Civil War as one of the field commanders in Enugu (the southeastern region of Nigeria). As a young army officer, he held the view that a properly trained and fairly treated Nigerian army could be the finest in the world.

After retirement, Danjuma took interest in different ventures, including the shipping sector where he founded Comet Shipping and the Nigerian American Line (NAL). His oil firm SAPETRO (South Atlantic Petroleum)

signed an oil prospecting license with the federal government of Nigeria on oil block OPL 246. The block later generated major oil finds, including the more than 600m barrel Akpo field and other finds, such as Egina and Preowei. In 2006, South Atlantic sold a 45 percent stake in the block for \$2.27b dollars. Danjuma has also chaired the board of Chagoury and Chagoury Construction, the former Universal Trust Bank, and was a former board member of S.C.O.A. Nigeria. He has served on the board or at one time owned interest in the following firms: MED Africa Group, First Universal, Nigerian American Ltd, Sahel Publishing Company, Tati Hotels, Jos, Continental Re-Insurance, Guinness Nigeria, Elf Oil, Nigeria Eagle Flour Mills, Eastern Bulchem, Ideal Flour Mills, Pan Ocean Oil, and Michelin Motor Tire Services.

In 2009, Danjuma's company Comet handled over two hundred vessels at the ports of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Calabar, and Warri because as at 2005, NAL-COMET acquired a roll-in-roll-out port (RORO) in Lagos, which makes it the largest independent port operator in Africa.

In December 2008, the TY Danjuma Foundation was created in Nigeria.

The Foundation's principal aims are to provide durable advantages through the implementation of development programs. The Foundation operates as a philanthropic organization, partnering with over fifty NGOs in Nigeria and making grants available to them with support of all the thirty-six state governors. The Foundation seeks to alleviate poverty in communities by providing basic amenities and education for children and young adults, while also providing free medical care for indigent people. Currently, \$500,000 (USD) has been given out through grants to NGOs working to relieve suffering in Danjuma's home state of Taraba. Taraba is historically one of Nigeria's most impoverished states, compounded by the absence of enough health services to cater for the masses. Furthermore, the state has the most cases of river blindness and other debilitating illnesses, and one of the many NGOs that is being supported by the Foundation is CASVI, working in Takum, Wukari, and Donga. CASVI's main area of expertise is the provision of free eye care services such as the treatment of river blindness in Wukari, Ibi, and Donga.

Conclusion

As a whole, Africa is becoming more populous and richer. It has experienced unprecedented and uninterrupted economic growth for the past three decades. Annual population growth is estimated to be 2 percent, while the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is expected to grow on average by 2–2.5 percent between 2012 and 2013, according to the 2012 World Bank African Economic Outlook. An African middle class of 313 million people is emerging that represents 24 percent of the continent's population, according to the African Development Bank. And the numbers keep rising. Within the next five years, spending power on the continent is expected to increase by 25 percent, while private consumption in the ten largest African economies is expected to more than double by 2020.

The fast-growing working-age population should, in theory, be able to substantially increase the continent's productivity level. This would result in a substantial decrease in the dependency ratio—the number of those dependent on the numbers working—within African societies. Both children and the elderly, as dependents, should be outnumbered by those able to work. This demographic dividend, which contributed to Asia's "economic miracle" in the 1990s could boost African economies and stimulate social development.

Conclusively, I posit that Africa is at the verge of a new dawn economically, and veterans are on the cusp of a meteoric transformation of the continent using their vast experiences in the reduction of social chaos and serving as a panacea to youthful unrest, hunger, strife, and deprivation. Their forays into business also quell the tide of social malaise that arises from idleness and joblessness.

No doubt, the bright future veterans now enjoy has made coup d'état across the continent unpopular, an attestation of their contributions to the economy and business.

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