

## **NEHEMIAH'S LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES IN REBUILDING JERUSALEM: LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The Old Testament book of Nehemiah provides a remarkable example of a leader motivated by, and acting for, good of the people. It also provides an example of the use of effective means in leadership: the pursuit of excellence in leadership and a passionate focus upon achieving desirable results. Nehemiah was actively involved in projects from start to finish. One of the distinctive features of Nehemiah's leadership was the way he involved others. He motivated people and mobilized them to carry out his plan. Everyone, from the high priest to the goldsmiths, and merchants to the common citizens got involved. Throughout the entire process, Nehemiah was a participatory leader. He led his followers from a position alongside them, rather than being out in front or trying to push them from behind. Hence it is the aim of this paper to x-ray the leadership strategies of Nehemiah as recorded in his memoir and the lessons for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. This is because many political leaders in contemporary Nigeria have tended to invert or subvert leadership and continue to deny its positive principles. Thus the concept of leadership as exemplified by Nehemiah is helpful to the extent that it helps to emphasize the essence of leadership. The paper therefore concludes that for the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria, political leaders should be conscious of the fact that leadership bears the clarification which Nehemiah's strategies in rebuilding Jerusalem represent.*

**Keywords:** Nehemiah, Leadership, Jerusalem, Sustainable Development, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

One of the most compelling examples of leadership in the Old Testament is Nehemiah. The book of Nehemiah involves the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls following raids by the Babylonian Empire. Nehemiah revealed an incredible ability not only to lead but to plan, strategize and execute major projects. This is why MacDonald (1995) says:

If you are having any sort of a building program and are having trouble getting people involved, Nehemiah is the book to read. The leadership

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questions needed to get a nearly impossible job done are wonderfully exemplified in this 5th century BC Hebrew leader, (p. 481).

Nehemiah organized the political administration and defence of Jerusalem (Comay, 1978). We have a listing of those who supported Nehemiah in his vision of rebuilding Jerusalem. At the head of the list stands the high priest Eliashib - He was the grandson of Jeshua (Neh. 12:10), who himself was the high priest during the period of Zerubbabel's activity (Ezra 2:2; 5:2). People are important for him; he values contacts and spends himself for them (Neh. 5:16). His eloquence is brief and succeeds always in gaining the hearer's reaction (Neh. 2:17; 5:7; 13:25). His optimism refuses to notice pockets of reserve or resistance in public opinion (North, 1995). All these made Nehemiah outstanding in development of Jerusalem.

Development is a relative term meaning different things to different people. According to Uche (2007), what seems common to the different meanings of development is their common features which include striving towards national interest, a stable economy, the quest for unity, greatness and prosperity. Others may include striving towards justice, equity and promoting academic curiosity and opening new frontiers in job creation, scholarship and moral transformation. Sustainable development refers to a definite growth in every sphere of the structure of the society; the putting in place of functional measures such as education, respect for rule of law, democratic ideals, hard work, and social justice. Others include offering hope to the weak and growth in individual and socio-economic levels of progress in national life. These show that Nehemiah, as a leader, contributed to the development of Jerusalem.

Leadership is one of the greatest challenges of mankind, and in recent times in Nigeria, issues that pertain to leadership have vociferously brought to the fore in national discourse several other vexing topical issues in the country. Some have said that chief, among the several debates that have characterized our sad and sorry plight as a nation, is the question of leadership or apparent lack of leadership. It is, therefore, the aim of this paper to study the leadership strategies of Nehemiah and their lessons for ensuring sustainable development in Nigeria.

### **The Situation of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's Time**

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon pillaged the city of Jerusalem, the temple and took thousands of the Jews captive. However, the city was spared to a vassal state to Babylonian empire. Regardless of the strong remonstrances of prophet Jeremiah and other prophets, Zedekiah revolted against Nebuchadnezzar, ceasing to pay tribute to Babylon. King Zedekiah entered into alliance with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt and in such disobedience, Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC besieged Jerusalem and after eighteen months of siege destroyed the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem. According to Nichol (1976), the Babylonian invasion into Judah in 586 BC consequently led to the destruction of the temple and the city walls of Jerusalem. This undoubtedly exposed the Jews to the problem of insecurity and lack of a place of worship.

The invasion and captivity resulted to moral decay and severe religious compromise contrary to Yahweh's instruction in the Torah. Exploitation of the poor by the rich and leadership oppression and injustice climax the period. After the Babylonians were defeated, the Jews in Babylonian exile were liberated by Cyrus in 539 BC. At this point in time, institutions were in shambles. The initial returnees could not do much. In such catastrophic circumstances, Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah gained prominence in Persia (Neh. 1:1; 8:9). He attained to a very strategic and influential position of personal cupbearer to the then Persian king Artaxerxes I Longimanus (465-424 BC).

According to Drane (1978), Nehemiah wrote a first-hand account that is preserved in the biblical book named after him. The memoir starts with Nehemiah at the winter place in Susa with the royal entourage. His kinsman Hanani from Jerusalem came to visit him with a group of fellow Jews. Nehemiah, a devout Jew, was deeply upset by their report of the conditions in the holy city, where the people were in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, gates are destroyed by fire' (Neh. 1:3). The description of the defenceless city and the pathetic situation of the Jews Nehemiah heard from his Jerusalem relatives filled him with a desire to go to Jerusalem and remedy the situation.

Nehemiah waited for a suitable moment to broach the subject with his master. Some four months later, he was serving wine to the king and queen at dinner. The king asked him why he was looking so sad; since he was not ill there must

be something else troubling him. Startled at this show of concern, Nehemiah blurted out that he was unhappy because the city where his ancestors were buried was in ruins. The emperor asked him in a kindly tone what it was that he wanted. Nehemiah sent up a hurried prayer to the Lord, and plucked up the courage to make a bold request. Since he was an advisor of the king, he had no difficulty in getting the king's ear.

Nehemiah took permission from the king to restore the dignity of his ancestral home, Jerusalem. He persuaded King Artaxerxes I to make Judah an independent province, name him its governor, and allow him to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem. In regard of this request, Nehemiah was appointed as the governor of the province surrounding Jerusalem and permitted to go and contribute his quota in rebuilding Jerusalem. The king also agreed to provide Nehemiah with a letter of safe conduct addressed to the authorities in the 'Beyond the River' Province. The chief royal forester was instructed to supply him with all the timber he might require for the work.

### **Nehemiah and His Leadership Strategies in Rebuilding Jerusalem**

Nehemiah arrived Jerusalem in 444BC and started the work of rehabilitation and restoration. He was skillful enough in political matters to foresee that he would face great obstacles from local officials who did not want any change in the power structure. When he came to Jerusalem, he saw that the level of corruption in the land was more than he imagined. The people had disintegrated themselves into the rest of Palestinian politics. The business men in Samaria had established link with Jerusalem and to stop this Nehemiah had to stop free thoroughfare to Jerusalem. In this regard, Nehemiah mobilized his fellow Jews on the task of rebuilding the damaged walls. He called together a meeting of leading men from the city and the surrounding towns: priests, officials, notables, and heads of artisan guilds. He called on them to co-operate in rebuilding the walls: 'Let us rise up and build' (Neh. 2:17). They responded with enthusiasm. Reconstruction work was carried out amidst stiff opposition from the Samaritans, Sanballat and Tobiah (Neh. 4). In other words, opposition could not prevent Nehemiah's vision; rather it was a stepping stone towards the actualization of his vision.

The Samaritans had maintained some level of jurisdiction over Jerusalem before the return from exile and thought themselves original descendants of Abraham. To just sideline them as Nehemiah wanted was incomprehensible. In order to

maintain original Jewish stock, Nehemiah had no option than what he was doing. It was said that workers who rebuilt the walls built with one hand and held arms with the other hand and in an amazingly short time of fifty two days they finished the job. Even though those of them who knew what the original wall looked like wept because the present one was nothing to be compared with the former; the new one nevertheless acted as a moral booster to the people. At least Jerusalem felt secured from outside negative influences. This to some extent reminded them of the good olden days.

Nehemiah came back after twelve years to find out that things had deteriorated much. In his absence, dissident elements asserted themselves (Holmgren, 1987). During this time, things had returned to what they were before. Foreigners had come to live in Jerusalem, and the people were not observing the Sabbath day. On top of that, the worship at the temple was not as strict as Nehemiah would have liked it to be. Some of the priests had been forced to leave their posts to go work on the farms, just to make a living. At the same time, Eliashib the high priest had given suite of rooms in the temple to Nehemiah's enemy Tobiah (Neh. 6:10, 4:3). Many Jewish people were again marrying foreigners and even the high priest's own grandson had married daughter of Sanballat. Nehemiah was determined to change all this. This time, he took very strong action. He prevented people by force from doing business on the Sabbath, broke up marriages with foreigners, arranged permanent sources for the support of the levites, and even threw out all the furniture of the Ammonite governor Tobiah from an apartment in the temple which the high priest had let the governor use (Boadt, 1984).

As at the time of Nehemiah's leadership, injustices and oppression prevailed as the poor were continually oppressed by the rich. The poor mortgaged their lands, vineyard and houses for food while usury prevails in the land contrary to Yahweh's injunction in the Torah. However, Nehemiah's remedied these injustices by urging the people to return the properties of the poor. His administration was in no way exploitative because he was sensitive to the welfare of the people. He completely denied self for the interest of the nation.

Nehemiah organized his voluntary labour force in a methodical fashion. Each gate and each section of the wall was allocated to a separate group: the priesthood, the levitical orders, merchants, guilds such as the goldsmiths and

perfume-makers, and contingents from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, Mizpah, Beth-zur and other towns in Judah. Some of the well-to-do merchants were made responsible for the sections adjoining their homes. A district official called Shallum is on record as having drafted his daughters to work with him on his section. Nehemiah's detailed work schedule lists ten gates that had to be reconstructed: The Sheep, Fish, Old, Valley, Dung, Fountain, Water, Horse, East, and Watch Gates.

In the districts adjacent to Judah, there were men in official positions who were opposed to restoring the fortifications of Jerusalem. They resented the arrival of Nehemiah and did their best to frustrate his plans. Nehemiah's memoir identifies them as Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab. Before the work commenced, Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem appeared together in Jerusalem and derided the whole undertaking, asking in jest whether Nehemiah was making preparations to rebel against the emperor. Nehemiah dismissed them curtly, pointing out that they had no standing in the city and did not share in its traditions: 'you have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem' (Nehemiah 2:20). Come what may, he told them the people would 'arise and build'. Despite the oppositions, Nehemiah completed the project of rebuilding Jerusalem successfully.

The story of Nehemiah and his work is one of great faith and perseverance (Ogba, 2011). In the face of great hardship and much opposition Nehemiah manifested the qualities of outstanding leader and successfully completed the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and making it a protected and defensible city once again. His reformation on the cultural and moral life of the Jews was a continuation and completion of what was begun by Ezra, his contemporary. He and Ezra joined in reading the Torah (Law of Moses) to the people, observing the Feast of Tabernacles, and in making a public confession of sin, with the people making a covenant to keep the law. Okwueze (2001) notes that Nehemiah reawakened the cultural and moral consciousness of the people through renewing of the covenant they had with God and the restoration of the true worship of Yahweh which the people had abandoned as a result of their result.

## **Jerusalem of Nehemiah's Time and Nigeria of Today**

The state of Nigeria has not fared better than that of Israel. As Israel has passed through many vicissitudes so has Nigeria done in many respects but the period that properly reflects that of Nehemiah in Jerusalem could be likened to the democratic practice presently in the country. Military era in Nigeria was so much blamed for ineptitude in governance the same way the Jews pointed at the sins of their fathers as the cause of Jews' problem. Today many Nigerians blame the immediate administration of Goodluck Jonathan as the cause of the present economic crisis in Nigeria.

The Jews in exile frequently blamed their past. This sentiment is encapsulated in the saying in Ezekiel 18:1-2 this way: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on the edge". Nigerians the same way blamed their problems on long time of military rule. When the Jews came back from exile they started living the same way that precipitated the exile Nigeria has long abandoned military rule, yet the democratic regimes seem to be worse off.

The community of returned exiles never saw anything wrong in repeating a decadent life that condemned them to exile before. Nigerians, especially their leadership, are at the same level in corruption and mismanagement with their military counterparts. It was at this stage and condition in Jerusalem that Nehemiah had to come. He had risen to some eminent position in Persian court but still had the welfare of his people at heart. The disorderliness and religio-cultural insecurity in his ancestral home forced him to intervene. His concern for his people as a statesman was genuine enough to attract the attention of the Persian government who sponsored his projects in Jerusalem.

The attitudinal cum behavioural antecedent of a man that could guarantee him express permission to travel for years in pursuit of ancestral business cannot be clothed under the garb of pretence. The enviable career image and occupation trust that could guarantee a man rebuilding his home at the expense of foreign government must not be fake. Nehemiah was special to have possessed these qualities.

Nehemiah also possessed a charisma that enabled him gain not only audience but tacit followership in his home Jerusalem where he was scarcely known before them. The work of mobilizing the populace for the work of rebuilding was

not a mean one and no doubt a great attribute of sane leadership. He set to work and promptly delivered at a shot interval. To deliver is to lead and to be followed. Nehemiah successfully resisted the agents of negativity, not in a brutal form but a very diplomatic way. He addressed mixed marriage also in a diplomatic form.

### **Challenges of Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

There are observable challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria. They are discussed under misplaced priority, corruption, ignorance, lack of close monitoring, poor funding and implementation of development projects. Inability to set priorities right as a nation poses a serious challenge that explains retrogression in Nigeria. For instance, Nigeria is one of the world leaders in crude oil. Exporting it and importing the refined product is one of those noted misplaced priority. The inability in having functional refineries in Nigeria has cast doubt in the minds of observers as to federal government sincerity in tackling fuel crises in Nigeria.

Corruption is another cankerworm that has eaten deep into the psyche of Nigerians. Corruption has negatively affected every sphere of life in Nigeria. Definition of corruption will bring out the danger that it has posed as a challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Hornby (1995) defines it as a “dishonest or wicked behaviour”. Mish (2002) says that to be corrupt is to be morally degenerate and pervert. Corruption is so alarming in Nigeria that Transparency International rates Nigeria as the second most corrupt nation in the whole world. Corruption in Nigeria is exemplified in bribery, smuggling, embezzlement, arson, extortion, repossession, and oppression. Okodo (2008) adds that self-perpetuation of an administration in power is a corrupt practice in Nigeria.

Another challenge affecting sustainable development in Nigeria is parochial glorification. Many people in Nigeria hold high to their parochial glorification. Most Nigerians consider themselves first. Okodo (2008) sees parochial glorification and selfishness as unpatriotic tendencies which have given rise to a lot of crimes against society.

Ignorance is another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Maira (1998) sees ignorance as lack of knowledge or awareness. Having little or no knowledge is no excuse for not adding to the dignity of man and society. A prior



decision to deny the struggle aimed at making both ends meet by contributing positively in developing Nigeria's natural, material and human resources has questioned the sincerity of purpose of such Nigerians. Illiteracy is another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Illiteracy is inability to read and write; uneducated or ignorant especially in a particular field or subject.

Lack of monitoring remains another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. White elephant projects are pursued for the sake of material gains. Some are abandoned after billions of dollars have been sunk into them. One would have thought that the essence of feasibility study would have been to forestall any short fall in the expectation from the economic venture. Corruption seems to becloud Nigerian leaders' sense of accountability, fairness and probity. Many projects have been abandoned after collecting mobilization fees with a trip of sand dropped at the construction site. Such impunity results because there is no thorough supervision and monitoring of project.

### **Leadership Role of Nehemiah as a Model for Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

There are a lot to learn about leadership from Nehemiah's example. One of the first tasks of a good leader is to determine a goal, and create an environment in which the goal can be accomplished. Nehemiah's first objective was to enlist the support of the king. When he approached the king and was asked why he looked so sad, he told him that if the king found favour with him, it was his desire to be dispatched to Jerusalem where his fortunes were buried, to rebuild the city. With these simple words, he established a dear and unambiguous goal, and facilitated the king's decision to support that goal Neh. 2:7-8. Nigerian leaders should not only be determining goals for development of the nation, they should as well create enabling environment in which the goal can be achieved.

A good leader always communicates goals to coworkers and subordinates. After receiving the king's approval and support, Nehemiah travelled to Jerusalem and set about the task of rebuilding. This was not a task within the capability of one man, however, and he had to gain the confidence and support of people in the area to achieve it. Before he did anything else, however, he first inspected the city walls to determine the magnitude of the task. He then returned to the city and communicated his findings to the priest, nobles, officials and others who would actual work. He informed them that the walls and gates must be restored in

order for them no longer live in disgrace. Again, Nehemiah established clear goals and why it was in their interest to support those goals, another essential trait of effective leadership.

One of Nehemiah's leadership strategies is his ability to develop people. The natural tendency for most contemporary leaders is to want to handle everything themselves, because then they can be sure that it is handled the way it should be. The problem with this is that there is only so much a person can do and even if you manage to do everything yourself, you run the risk of burning out and causing yourself some serious damage. The most important thing Nigerian leaders can learn from Nehemiah as a leader is to develop people under their authority, into capable leaders and delegate responsibilities to them. This gives people a sense of belonging and opportunity to contribute their quota in societal development.

Nehemiah was a great mobilizer and motivator who was passionate about his work. He was a great administrator and he delegated duties effectively based on people's skills and talents. He was a strong leader who focused on his work despite being under heavy criticism. He was despised but he never gave up, rather he kept on pressing on the people to accomplish their mission. He knew how to establish a great relationship with the people. He worked together with the people. He also cared about the people for he helped the poor and upheld justice and truth. He had no favoritism for he rebuked his officials and nobles for exacting usury on their own people.

A good leader determines the proper strategies to dealing with change and opposition to change as exemplified in Nehemiah. Nehemiah was not without opposition for his plans for Jerusalem. Many of the local tribes were angered by the rebuilding of the walls, and threatened to attack Jerusalem and spread trouble. In addition to praying to God for guidance and aid, Nehemiah had guards posted day and night to meet the threat. Here, Nehemiah demonstrated the importance of determining the obstacles to achieving goals and developing strategies to mitigate them. Nigeria is battling with the problem of insecurity and the government has not done enough to forestall that. Until the problem of insecurity is solved in Nigeria, there cannot be effective development in the nation.

Nehemiah also finished and completed his project by being persistent and consistent. Through his courage, he and Jerusalem gained respect from their neighbouring countries because he never relented in his work. Nehemiah also understood the need of quality leadership with integrity and fear of God. He appointed men of character to be in charge of Jerusalem affairs. Nigerian political leaders should therefore internalize these leadership strategies of Nehemiah for achievement of good leadership and sustainable development in Nigeria today.

### **Conclusion**

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah provides a remarkable example of a leader motivated by, and acting for, good of the people. Nehemiah's leadership is one of great faith and perseverance. In the face of great hardship and much opposition, he manifested the qualities of an aiding leader and successfully completed the task of rebuilding Jerusalem. There are three kinds of people in the world: those who know what is happening, those who watch what is happening, and those who make things happen. Nehemiah was a man who made things happen. He applied positive leadership strategies that aided him in actualization of his plan. Hence, for the attainment of good leadership and sustainable development in Nigerian, political leaders should be conscious of the fact that leadership bears the clarification which the qualities and strategies of Nehemiah represent.

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