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TRANSCRIPT
Into Africa
“Peter Obi on Leadership with Integrity”

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FEATURING
Peter Obi
former governor of Anambra State and 2023 Nigerian presidential candidate

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Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, I'm a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything Africa, politics, economics, security, and culture. Welcome.

In this episode, we turn our attention to the political and economic crossroads facing Africa's most populist nation, Nigeria. Despite its vast potential, Nigeria continues to grapple with persistent challenges, including youth unemployment, overdependence on oil, and the urgent need for economic diversification. At the heart of these challenges lies the critical issue of government accountability, as millions of Nigerians demand more transparent, responsive, and responsible leadership. The quest for good governance and inclusive growth is now more critical than ever, as the country's vibrant youth populations seek meaningful opportunities for the future. Yet, there are reasons for optimism. Innovative entrepreneurs are redefining business landscapes, social movements are calling for reform, and policymakers are exploring pathways to unlock Nigeria's immense human and natural resources.

Joining me to unpack these vital issues is Peter Obi, a distinguished Nigerian businessman and reform-minded politician best known for his tenure as governor of Anambra State from 2006 to 2014. Renowned for championing good governance and accountability, Obi led sweeping reforms in state finances, education, and healthcare. With a degree from the University of Nigeria and advanced training at Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, and the London School of Economics, he has held top executive roles in banking, including as chairman of Fidelity Bank PLC. A respected national figure, Obi has served on Nigeria's economic management team, was vice presidential candidate in 2019, and was the Labor Party's presidential candidate in 2023. His leadership is defined by integrity, transparency, and a steadfast commitment to people-centered development, making him one of Nigeria's leading voices for reform and progress.

Good afternoon, sir, and welcome to Into Africa.

Peter Obi:

Good afternoon, thank you very much for inviting me.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

It's a pleasure, it's a pleasure, sir, it's an honor. So, you've come a long way to be with us in Washington, DC. May I ask what brings you to Washington?

Peter Obi:

A variety of things, you know, I have, uh, invitations from different organizations like yourself, and that's what brought me to Washington. And I had a lecture in Johns Hopkins University.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You gave a lecture at the Johns Hopkins University, it's a place that is dear to my heart because I'm affiliated with that university as well as a lecturer. You, sir, have been a longtime advocate for good governance and accountability in Nigeria. What, in your view, are the most urgent reforms needed to restore public trust in Nigeria's government today?

Peter Obi: Well, I've always maintained you need to have leaders who are competent, who have the capacity, compassion, and commitment to be transformative. 'Cause when they're competent, they'll understand what is required in terms of development. When you were doing the introduction, you did mention the ills of the country, so you need, it's like you have said what is the problem, you are sick, you go to the hospital, you say, "What is the problem?" The doctor needs to deal with this. So we need like a political doctor that will deal with those things you mentioned.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You talk about competence, capacity and compassion, and they need to be committed to transforming the place. One word we don't hear very often in leadership is compassion. Do you care to expand a little bit, what will that look like in the context of, uh, Government of Nigeria and governance?

Peter Obi: Leadership devoid of compassion is no longer leadership, because you have to care about the people. It is like you have the people that makes all the difference, so every day you're thinking about them. A leader is like a doctor who attends to people in need, especially the vulnerable. 'Cause that's the purpose of government, the purpose of government is to care for the poor, the most vulnerable, those in need, and everything. That is why government in the first place, it is not meant for the rich and the famous, it is about caring for the people, and a leader must think about that 24 hours.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: As we care for the people, the people demand change. You have just talked about transformative leadership. Nigeria, you know, you mentioned com- competent and capacity, but Nigeria's full of smart people with big degrees, experiences in the international arena as well, where are we failing? I should just put it that way, bluntly, where are we failing?

Peter Obi: Well, being able to support and elect the quality of people I've mentioned, but let me even tell you, degrees and educational qualification is not a measure of integrity or compassion, they are two different things. Because you are educated does not make you a leader, because it's so many educated people who are totally incompetent in

leadership, who don't have the capacity for compassion, and commitment to tr... So, these are two things, so education and qualification aren't as major as integrity.

It is good to be educated, it is good to remain focused, but we need to look for people, and that is why it is good to look at people's, where they're coming from. So let's not just judge this person on the educational qualification, what have they done in the past, where have they managed? What did this- this leader do? I always tell people, my background is an entrepreneur, I'm a businessman, I started as a small trader, so I know the problems of a micro trader, I know the problems of a small trader, I know the problems of a medium trader. I went into the corporate world where I became director of institutions, so I know the problems they're going through. I was even chairman of the Nigerian Exchange Commission, so I know what even happens in the- in the markets there, and I've been a governor.

So I want people to ignore all this and say, "Well, it's, look at this one then," 'cause you have the experience. It's not just from them who say, "Oh, because you have PhD and because you're, so you'll do very well." Will I show, will I have that care?

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

In that case, then, you just introduced another word. We started with competence, capacity, then we talked about compassion, you just discussed, now you have in- introduced integrity. How do we build that? You as a gov- as a governor, you as a trader, as an entrepreneur, as a leader in the, on the board and so on, how do we foster that integrity?

Peter Obi:

It starts with you. A leader must hold himself accountable before the people hold him accountable. It starts with you, you must hold yourself accountable before the people hold you accountable. And how do you do that? You must ensure that, uh, whatever action you're going to take, whatever you're going to do, the first question of a leader, is it right, will it benefit the people? Is this for common good? Otherwise then life is not worth living. You must examine yourself daily, every minute as a leader.

'Cause your showing the example you're not perfect, I'm not perfect, I'm not a saint. So, but I, you strive to do the right thing. It's difficult, extremely difficult, but it is for you as a leader, because you're not just a leader, you're also a role model and an example other people will follow, so all this is critical, So every day you try to do the right thing and everything.

Imagine if you go down here now and you hear that I am fighting on the streets, what's that, so even if I go down and somebody said, "Oh, you are this, you're stupid, you're that," I try to restrain myself because

what am I doing? At that stage I'm saying, "Well, listen, this person can't talk to me like this, but I have to restrain myself," cause I've become a role model. I become an example of a person people want to emulate, so there are things that I will not be able to do, and that's it.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Nigerian youth make up a majority of the population, yet unemployment remains high. In the context of what you just said, degrees is not enough to, are not enough to, uh, to be a leader automatically. Leaders, I mean, there's the entire debate of a leader is made, trained. I think it's both, some come with some qualities, some of us develop them as we get exposed to situations. What concrete steps should be taken by the government or the private sector to create more sustainable job opportunities? Because that's where our young people will get the experience, and also hone those situations where they build compassion and integrity as well.

Peter Obi:

You must look at what is the critical areas of development. It is education, it is health, and pulling people out of poverty. And why do you pull people out of their poverty? You have to look how you can aggressively support your MSME, micro, small, medium enterprises, 'cause that's where the young ones are at. All over the world, including the first world, the biggest contributor to GDP is youth. This sector, you need to focus on it. Even if you look at the huge countries like China, today 60% of their GDP contribution comes from the MSMEs. I find it surprising in the urban areas of China, 80% of the jobs is from MSMEs. And so it leads into Indonesia, they provide almost 90% of the jobs. And because we have youths who are highly entrepreneurial with too much energy, you need to hone that energy properly by moving the country from consumption to production by tackling the issues properly.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Moving the country from, uh, consumption to production, Nigeria, you just said it as well, is known for its entrepreneurship, as it's, Nigerians are all over the world. You go to any city in Nigeria, you see that, to use the street term, is people hustling. But hustle also tends to favor the informal sector, and so people are surviving because the formal opportunities are not always there, so these young people you're talking about who are full of energy and full of ideas, how do we channel their energy and their ideas into the formal sector?

Peter Obi:

You start with the informal to direct the formal. These youth study here, engage in their entrepreneurship and build their businesses, the enterprises, everything, they will get at the stage where you will formalize. Like even here, just look at how, for the example, like the- the Microsoft, they started from garage. You don't go in- in garage and say

that you be formal. No, 'cause they stay. As they grow it becomes formalized because they need it.

So you don't start from here, you start from here. As they grow, the city needs to formalize it. First it's not perfect show them that you- you can build a life by doing the right thing.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In that case then, they need the support of the government. In a lot of African countries, and Nigeria may be different, but you are the expert here, the state itself is viewed as a predatory state.

Peter Obi: You need to support them. They need all the support in everything. If you go to Indonesia, for example, the official interest rate is about 12, 13%, but for the MSMEs it's between 4 and 6%, and that is critical. They need all the support they can get, because also they need to- to be able to pull... Imagine having a system like in Indonesia now provides 90% of employment, you need to invest in it. Pulling people out of poverty is like education and everything, education is not an expense, it's an investment. The same thing for these people I'm talking, to invest in MSMEs is an investment, 'cause if the companies are running, the country becomes productive, the government generates more revenue from taxes and everything, 'cause you can't tax people who are unemployed. And you, they're looking for jobs.

So it's like you go to bank account, you're paying first because you- you want to do withdrawal like that, but you can't go and talk about withdrawal when you've not paid anything in. This is what's happening in Africa. It became you can't even start anything, that's why the youth are running businesses, they're running away, nobody's caring for them, nobody's showing them love, nobody's supporting them. They need the support.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: So where do we start in a place like Nigeria to start bringing this support so the state is no longer predatory? 'Cause that will remain with us for a long time if we don't change.

Peter Obi: You have to give them access to finance, you have to d- do some trainings and stuff, everything to support. Even understand, even just encouraging them by just you're there, you lead, like you said, "Oh, you're doing this, we will..." Just mentioning that support and everything, giving them tax incentives also. There's many things you can do.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Security is often an issue in Nigeria. When I travel to Nigeria-

Peter Obi: It's definitely an issue.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Yeah. When I travel to Nigeria, you know, my fixer asks, "Do you want a car?" "Yes." "Do you want just a car and driver, or do you want a car with security?" And I say, "A car with security," and that means when I arrive at the airport, there will be a car and a driver and a police officer, and this police officer will stay with me for the time for the remainder of my stay. And it always hurts, it hurts because I know as long as this police officer is with me, that somebody in whatever city I am in who needs police support is not gonna get.

Peter Obi: Yes.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: How did we get there, and what should we do about this?

Peter Obi: The same thing we've been talking. There's insecurity because government needs to tackle it. All over the world, studies have shown the more you pull people out of poverty, the more you reduce criminality. And you've seen there's no crime where there's no, where people are just like, like there is in America here, there's still crime here, but it's minimized because nobody's needing our police, so the police are available. Whatever you do, they will appear because they're not there looking for big men to follow and everything.

So, but how do we get there? We need to pull people out of poverty, and easiest means of pulling is education with skills. When people are gainfully employed, you reduce criminality.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: During your tenure as governor, you made notable improvements in education and healthcare. What lessons from your experience can be scaled up nationally? We have to learn, the good experience is in Nigeria all over the place as much as there are some challenges, so what do we do?

Peter Obi: The most important truth for development is education, number one. It's ambitious. The more any country's educated, the more developed it is, it's improving everyone in the world, whether it's to China, to India, to this, everything. So you need to invest in it.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: And how did you do it in Anambra?

Peter Obi: And the same thing with health.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

Mm-hmm.

Peter Obi:

I say that a healthy nation is a willing nation, everyone needs to be healthy, so you need to take care of people's health so they can become productive. That's the same if you look at what is the most critical measure of development, HDI, and what is the components of HDI? Life expectancy, education, literacy rates, and in the quality, um, in the quality of, um, [inaudible].

In Anambra State when I became governor apparently, we quickly adopted Millennium Development Goals, 'cause that was what was developed by United Nations then as development, so we didn't need to start looking for anything, what we needed was to develop strategies to ensure that we simultaneously implement all these goals across. So we're not there for showmanship, we're not trying to build big infrastructure. You know, you get the most African countries, they like big infrastructure, but they can't build physical infrastructure without building the human infrastructure, 'cause it's [inaudible].

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

So HDI being, uh, Human Development Index, and if I hear you well, what you're saying is we need to go back to the fundamentals. Just do the fundamentals (laughing), do the right thing, and you'll see the fruit.

Peter Obi:

The other ones will come, because as when you- when you do education, you train those who will do the big infrastructure, those who'll make the trains run, those who'll develop cars, those who'll... So you don't go and have, uh, big cars on the road without big infrastructure where you do not have the human infrastructure.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

There is, talking about great, uh, Human Development Index, but also talking about great infrastructure, this brings to mind another element, which is China. China has been the master of big infrastructure across the continent. We're talking stadiums, we're talking roads, even houses of parliament now across the continent are built by the Chinese. How do you see the role of China within the economy of Nigeria, or even the political economy of Nigeria, to be a little bit more expansive?

Peter Obi

I'm not against China supporting us. They can be part of it, I'm going to borrow money from China to do it, but investing in non-critical areas is my worry. Jamaica went to World Cup without having a formal national stadium. You don't need a stadium, you need a field. But it's different because when you even build a stadium, you probably can't afford it because they have no money, so they cannot pay to go and watch match. That's what's happened across Africa.

So you need to... You see, this is something that is unique. You need to get them to love the game by playing it, certain countries like China,

Cuba, Brazil have used sports to pull people out of poverty, reduce the criminality and everything, so you need open fields and awareness. It's like they need to build it for my stadium, that's why I need people to come and pay to watch the game, and they can't afford it, so you have to know that. So why do you go to borrow money to build it, we're borrowing money to build new airport structures and everything, when you don't even have the passengers? They can't afford it.

In the US, for example, we have population of about 360 million. The traveling public in our country is nearly about one, over 1.4, 1.5 billion, so four times the population of the US is moving around in that country. I can confidently tell you that less than 5% of the people, the population, leaving too much, travels around the world. They can't afford to fly. So you don't need the same thing, so what you need is a basic functional airport with a runway so the plane can land, not the building, 'cause they have nothing.

And you go and borrow money and do this, and you don't have money to pay them back. You just said that we borrowed money for parliament, we should borrow the money to build primary and secondary schools for basic education, we should borrow the money to build primary healthcare. Today, we have high infant mortality, so we have now overtaken India, seven times our population. So you need money for primary healthcare so people can be healthy, not to build stadiums or build airports that you don't need.

I'm not against anything, you need to direct your resources to areas of need, areas of impact on society. And these are the types of things that I say, people say, "Oh, he denigrates Africa." No, I'm saying what we should do, 'cause we're doing the wrong thing. I experienced as a governor, people said to me, "Oh, the governor mentioned it's not good." No, I have to fix schools, I'm not there to build where I'm gonna live, I'm to fix schools, I want schools to work. I want the children to go to school. I need to buy them computers. I go and ask HP, I bought the highest number of HP laptops ever bought by a government while I was there in all of Africa. That's what I need, not to buy a mansion. I'm not gonna, I can sleep anywhere, but let the children go to school.

Mvemba Phezo
Dizolele:

It's your view then that all these foreign investors, particularly partners, states that want to partner with Africa for their development, African states should direct them where they will have the great impact of HDI?

Peter Obi:

The critical areas of development with the H-, will be improved where there will be development. So I want to see primary healthcare working, I don't want to invest in stadiums, I don't want to invest in building mansions that makes no meaning to anybody. I want to see impact.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In that impact thing then, Africa is also given now, they are given a- a set of choices and options. You know, sometimes we call this great power competition, sometimes we call it middle power competition. How do you see Africa harnessing these new choices that they have on the table? So you have the Gulf Arab states, you have India, you have Turkey, there's a set of countries that have much more capacity to help, so they're coming, investing. Africa is one of the fields that they are rushing to, there's a certain rush for Africa. How does Africa harness that?

Peter Obi: Let me tell you, what I said to the US senators yesterday. Africa doesn't need aid, Africa needs leadership. It's a country of incredible opportunity, a continent of incredible opportunity. We have 30- 30, over 30% of the world's minerals, we're the second-biggest continent by size, about 30 million square kilometers, out of which 60% of our arable land is uncultivated. No other continent has boast that. We have the highest, we're the second in the, in population with over a billion of our youth in their productive ages. No other continent has that. That is what you need to invest in, by putting investment in education, in skill, in everything. Imagine if you can harness too, nobody can challenge you. So you don't need aid you don't need support, you know? This is where our country can come. There's nothing wrong with borrowing. You can borrow. You don't need to use the money you've borrowed for... You're borrowing for consumption and you're borrowing for investment. If you borrow money for investment, you pay it back and that's it. If a person did that, they will add value. But if you borrow for consumption, you're finished.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The model of the states, I talked about it earlier a little bit, talking the state being predatory, is a model that were, was adopted from the Colonial days. You know, the colony became the state, the colony as pred- uh, predatory, the state is gonna be predatory. Today, where do you see the need to reform the state fully so that A, it's not so centralized as it is everywhere else, because the colony was centralized, so it's not all about exploitation, because that's what the goal of the colony was? How do we build states that are responsive to the people? Is that too late, or Africa needs to go back to the drawing table?

Peter Obi: Well, it's not too late. This has been a common problem with leadership. Any leadership that will arrives will have the responsibility to care about the people. All you see in Africa is the collective effect of leadership failure over the years. Whether this is right or wrong, Africa and its citizens have a critical opportunity, if it's weather, we have best weather, you- you know, a real environment. So it's everything, the food, they need the food so people can eat it.

So what we need is leadership. There's nothing wrong with our air, environment, or anything, the only reason that we have that is lack of leadership. We need leaders that can rise to their responsibility, do the right things, and that's corrupt because corruption kills everything.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Corruption kills everything. There is hope. Where do you see, if you were to look into crystal ball over the next 30 years, are you optimistic about it, are you pessimistic? Where do you see the change coming from?

Peter Obi: Leadership, leadership, leadership. That's the critical thing. If you get it right, it will, if you can get a leader who understands the damage of corruption, corruption kills entrepreneurship, 'cause nobody thinks that they can respond. It kills prosperity, it kills [inaudible] And if you can help people to understand that they need to be productive, you can get young ones, you build a society where people's hard work, energy, talent to match up with the opportunities.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: On that note of leadership, leadership, and more leadership, I'd like to thank you Governor Peter Obi for joining us today and sharing your perspective with our listeners.

Peter Obi: Thank you very much.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends, subscribe to our podcast at Apple Podcasts. You can also read our analyses and reports at [csis.org/africa](https://www.csis.org/africa). So long.

(END.)