

Special Remarks Presented at the Occasion of the Official Launch of Grand Challenges Nigeria

**His Highness
Muhammad Sanusi II, CON, PhD. (London)
Emir of Kano
Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the
Nutrition Society of Nigeria**

**Banquet Hall, Aso Rock. Presidential Villa
November 18, 2024**

Protocols.

It is my responsibility to contribute some remarks to the conversation we are having on the occasion for which we are gathered here today. As we celebrate the vision and the effort that has gone into the birth of this initiative to fund and advance impactful research and innovations in health and development for Nigerians, the gravity of the problems it hopes to address should also not be too far from our minds.

We face sobering health and development realities as Nigerians and there has been much debate about where the blame for this should lie. With a population of less than 300 million people, we have more poor people than any nation in the world, including China and India which have more than a billion people each¹. We rank 110th out of 125 countries on the 2024 Global Hunger Index – even worse than some countries at war². The death of our women at childbirth is at a criminally high 1,047 women per 100,000 live births³ and we are still losing 107 children before the age of 5 years for every 1,000 live births⁴. Last year, we may have lost an estimated 200,000 people to malaria⁵ and we did not have nearly enough physicians to care for our people even before losing them to the health systems of other countries. And we have not even begun to talk about the effects of hyperinflation, insecurity or climate event displacements. You know these statistics better than I do.

Regardless of where you put the blame, the responsibility for ameliorating these difficult conditions will require both “focused effort” and “collective action”. This principle of “focused effort” and “collective action” has underlined the framework⁶ of “Grand Challenges” as a model that has been used since 1900⁷ for solving difficult and intractable global problems as we may describe what Nigerians currently live through.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1228553/extreme-poverty-as-share-of-global-population-in-africa-by-country/?hl=en-gb>

² <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/ranking.html>

³ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/maternal-health/maternal-mortality/>

⁴ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-survival/under-five-mortality/>

⁵ <https://www.afro.who.int/countries/nigeria/publication/joint-press-release-nigeria-receives-malaria-vaccines-ahead-roll-out#:~:text=As%20Africa%E2%80%99s%20most%20populous%20country%2C%20Nigeria%20carries%20the,nearly%20200%2C000%20deaths%20from%20malaria%20occurred%20in%20Nigeria.>

⁶ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/04/09/21st-century-grand-challenges>

⁷ https://visionaryleadership.com/grand-challenges_background_impact_and_implications/

We have here among us today some of our brightest minds who are doing remarkable work with Grand Challenges funding since 2003⁸ to create better conditions for everyone thanks to the leadership shown by the Gates Foundation and funding partners from around the world. Some of you are integrating Large Language AI Models to support frontline health workers in low-resource settings⁹ and for women-centred care¹⁰. Others are applying their human genomics expertise to eliminate malaria¹¹ and bacterial genomics knowledge to create health solutions for people¹². And several others are focused on strengthening fragile food systems to enable sustainable and nutritious diets for health. More important than each individual research or innovation though, is that your work is being done as part of a collaborating community of innovators directing resources and efforts jointly at defined problems. This model is how we win.

Until now, the agenda for these challenges has been set by other Grand Challenges programs and our researchers and innovators have keyed into the global or regional ones. There is nothing wrong with this, and we thank the various Grand Challenges programs for their vision in this regard. What we have here today, however, is a Grand Challenges for Nigeria, that is set to a Nigerian agenda, for Nigerian innovators, to solve Nigeria's problems. Of course, we do not win in isolation and the Nigeria project must share with and leverage the knowledge and advances generated by the network of Grand Challenges programs. Yet, it is important that we define our priorities ourselves and commit resources and our best minds to them.

I would therefore like to thank the Federal Government of Nigeria and the core of organizations that have recognized the opportunity that this framework presents towards innovating solutions to our problems and are supporting the project to define the agenda for innovation investments. The leadership demonstrated by the office of His Excellency, the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as well as the office of the Honourable Minister of Innovation, Science and Technology have laid down the example for other MDAs and sector partners to emulate. I should also recognize the foresight of the Nigerian Institute for Medical Research, the Nigerian Stored Products

⁸ <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/history>

⁹ <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/grant/large-language-model-llm-tool-support-frontline-health-workers-low-resource-settings>

¹⁰ <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/grant/integration-large-language-model-llm-women-centered-care>

¹¹ <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/grant/strengthening-nigerias-surveillance-system-malaria-elimination-integrating-molecular-and>

¹² <https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/grant/leveraging-bacterial-genomics-health-solutions-africa>

Research Institute, F3HI60, Dalberg Global Development Advisory, and the Aliko Dangote Foundation for their early vision.

Let me save my last commendation for the Nutrition Society of Nigeria which worked to establish the Grand Challenges secretariat for Nigeria and pulled together the coalition behind it. As the Chairperson of your Board of Trustees, I am proud of the courage you have shown.

Today, we will begin setting our agenda and requesting proposals from our best and brightest minds. I invite you to forge forward by addressing the issues at their hardest to benefit the lives of the greatest number of our citizens.

So, despite the realities, congratulations are due all around for the task we have set ourselves.

Thank you and God bless.

END.
