

Speech: Together, we can build further our partnerships for prosperity

Your Excellency, Governor Abubakar Sani Bello, and distinguished guests

I am delighted to be back here in Minna. This is my second visit during my time in Nigeria. I think it's important for foreign representatives to get out of the capital of the countries in which they serve, even more so in a country as large and diverse as Nigeria. The UK is firmly committed to its relationship with Nigeria at the state level as well as the federal.

The theme of our event today is Prosperity – seizing the opportunities across Nigeria, and tackling the barriers and the challenges that are currently holding back the scope for growth, trade and investment. We are also able to discuss initial findings from a report we have commissioned from PWC about the business environment and opportunities at state-level –looking in detail at Anambra, Edo, Ogun, and Niger.

We all know Nigeria's potential. It is the largest economy in Africa. It is set to be the 3rd most populous nation in the world by 2050. It is Africa's largest oil producer. It has fertile land; abundant natural resources; a large internal market; and a young, energetic population, with a deserved reputation for creativity and entrepreneurial spirit.

The UK-Nigeria trading relationship has traditionally been very strong. A number of UK companies are among the longest running international businesses in Nigeria. We are consistently in the top 5 of Nigeria's trade partners. However, we used to be number 1, and the British High Commission in Abuja, and our Deputy High Commission in Lagos, is committed to pushing us back up the list, particularly as the UK embarks upon a new role in the world as we leave the EU.

The growth required to rebuild this relationship cannot only come from the major multinationals – it will be built on SMEs discovering Nigeria's opportunities, building new partnerships and bringing in expertise to super-charge existing capacity.

We believe in the potential that Nigeria possesses, and we believe it can be harnessed to create jobs and prosperity. But business is not charity. Investors looking to put their time, energy, and money into new ventures overseas have hundreds of places they could choose. To attract investors will require developing a strong, credible and positive offering, and an enabling approach from the government and government agencies.

Some of this lies with the Federal Government – and we commend their efforts in this regard. The Economic Growth and Recovery Plan sets out an ambitious range of targets for ensuring that Nigeria builds back better from recession. And the 60-day plans for Enabling the Business Environment have already led to some useful reductions in bureaucracy and streamlining of what used to be

some cumbersome business processes. More is required – and the UK is engaging on several fronts to support these efforts.

But state level governments also have an important role to play. DFID projects, such as GEMS, offer examples of how States can re-orientate their offer to investors. No two states are the same, but some common themes include: land reform and protection of ownership; active and accessible investment promotion councils; transparency over tax and regulations; as well as the commitment to building productive supply chains and supportive infrastructure.

Initial findings from research we have supported emphasise the opportunity of Niger State, with its significant land-mass, hydro-electric dams, as well as huge potential in agriculture and mineral resources. Niger's shea butter production is famous, of course. But more investment is required to refine production and packaging for an international market.

There have also been positive steps in improving the business environment – with some significant moves up World Bank's Subnational Doing Business Rankings between 2010 and 2014, thanks to building additional capacity, streamlining processes, and improving registration systems. Your Excellency, with your business background, I am sure you will be keen to further improve these rankings.

As with many other states in Nigeria – over-reliance on statutory allocations from the federal level can lead to vulnerabilities. While this is a challenge – it should also be an additional encouragement to take the bold steps necessary to attract private sector investment, development, and growth to diversify activity and enhance revenue generation. That is not to say it will be easy – but I am confident that the detailed analysis, when available, will offer several avenues for further discussion and debate. It will certainly form part of our interactions with UK businesses, and can function as a “calling card” for Niger State in engaging potential investors in a serious conversation about the opportunities available here.

There is also a role for local businesses – which is why we are so pleased to see many of you here with us today. You don't need me to tell you how much work it takes to make a business successful – or of the risks involved in trying to grow in a difficult economic moment. What works in the short term may not work in the long term. Nigeria's great potential will only be achieved through sustainable means. There may be what we call “quick wins” through changing regulations, or through harnessing new, adaptive technologies. Other issues may take longer to tackle in order to build broader prosperity across the states and the country as a whole.

The UK is committed to supporting this – it is why we are here today. We continue to work closely with the federal government on projects that can impact the whole of the country. This includes DFID support to infrastructure planning and management; policy development expertise; and pilot programmes that offer models for success.

We will share the reporting that comes out of our current cooperation with

PWC – and we hope that this will be the start of productive discussions, proposals, and action. We look forward to being able to continue this process to attract more UK companies to Nigeria, and indeed here to Niger, to build further our partnerships for prosperity.