

11-1-2015

## Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Reforming the unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012.

John Olushola Magbadelo Ph.D.

Centre for African & Asian Studies, Abuja NIGERIA, smagbadelo@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Magbadelo, John Olushola Ph.D. (2015) "Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Reforming the unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 9.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1265

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol7/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of International and Global Studies* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

**Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Reforming the unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012.**

There have been many books on the administration of Nigeria's President Obasanjo (1999 - 2007), whose administration has been credited as having introduced the necessary reforms and policies to arrest the decline of Nigeria's economy at the inception of democratic governance in 1999, after several years of military dictatorship. In fact, the Obasanjo administration is a well-documented administration in the history of the country. Dr. Okonjo-Iweala's book, which could pass for the author's memoir, particularly, with respect to the conception and implementation of the many reforms the book carefully chronicles, as it covers only the period during which she was appointed Minister of Finance by the Obasanjo administration from 2003 to 2006. The author's main objective for writing the book was to popularize and externalize the lessons of Nigeria's economic reforms while acknowledging the efforts of the "courageous men and women who undertook the struggle for a better life for Nigerians, by Nigerians."

The book contains eight chapters and an appendix of tables and figures. The work opens by discussing in chapter one the processes that led to the establishment of Nigeria's Economic Management Team<sup>1</sup>, the challenges the team faced, and the development of the essential elements of the proposed reforms and the introduction of the economic blueprint for driving the reforms. Chapter two highlights the macroeconomic problems of the country, including oil price volatility, inconsistent budget process, among others, which necessitated a series of macroeconomic reforms consisting of budget reforms, procurement process reform, civil service reform measures, as well as a disciplined implementation of monetary policy. Chapter three chronicles the processes and effects of the implementation of privatization, deregulation, and liberalization policies across some selected sectors of the economy. Other structural reforms covering the Civil Service, trade, tariff, customs, banking sectors and their impacts are explained in chapter four. The fifth chapter, which presents the administration's fight against corruption, analyzes the different manifestations of corruption in the country, classified into : *corruption on a grand scale* (i.e. theft of public assets by public officials); *corruption from the top* (i.e. theft of public assets by a former dictator); *corruption from within* (i.e. corruption by foreign companies and their domestic partners in crime); and *corruption from the bottom*, portrayed as being based on private intimidation. Chapter six details the high- level negotiations that eventually led to the eradication of \$30 billion of Nigeria's external debt, 60% of which was cancelled outright. Chapter seven presents the lessons that reformers across the world could draw from Nigeria's experience. Chapter eight, which concludes the book, provides an attempt by the author to prove that the series of reforms implemented by the Obasanjo administration launched the country on a path of sustainable growth and development, while still doing what needed to be done to consolidate reforms across all sectors of the economy.

The book under review came five years after the end of the Obasanjo administration, by which time many of the *dramatis personae* of the administration had presented detailed accounts of the issues broached by the author of this book. Thus, this work did not bring any fresh facts on the challenges or politics of implementing the reforms introduced by the administration. Okonjo-

---

<sup>1</sup>The Economic Management Team (EMT) comprises Ministers and Heads of economic-related Ministries and Agencies of Government including Finance, Trade and Investment, National Planning, Petroleum, Budget, Customs, Inland Revenue, Agriculture, etc. It is noteworthy that the EMT was chaired by the President during the Obasanjo administration while under the Goodluck Jonathan administration, it was chaired by Okonjo-Iweala.

Iweala's book also does not make reference to any of the volumes written before this work on the Obasanjo administration, by both its critical observers and supporters alike. Perhaps, it is safe to view the book as the author's personal accounts and interpretation of the forces, processes, challenges, and politics that were at play during the Obasanjo administration. Even as a personal account, however, the text lacks teeth. For example, during any transitional phase in which reforms that determine the nature and character of the future are implemented, opposition was inevitable. Particularly vociferous in their opposition were those who opposed the government's cuts to the country's Civil Service. As such, it was naïve of the author to assume that by simply focusing "on four sets of critical though not exhaustive reforms" in the Civil Service (p. 56), the Civil service would be neatly re-positioned. While the concern of the government reformers was on cutting cost by "lessening the fiscal burden of the Civil Service" on the economy, they failed to give serious consideration to the ways of gainfully utilizing the 30,000 staff that were laid off in the government's pursuit of the objective of 'rightsizing' some ministries, departments, and agencies. It should therefore have surprised no one when opposition arose.

Further hindering the credibility of this work is the author's own suspect political history. The fact that the author also served as the Minister of Finance and the Coordinating Minister for the Economy under the recently ousted President Goodluck Jonathan, positions she held from 2011 to 2015, granted her the unusual opportunity to pursue her vision for reform of the Nigerian economy with little impediment, having had even greater freedom to operate under President Jonathan than under President Obasanjo (2003 — 2006). With the benefit of the hindsight, however, it seems that Okonjo-Iweala's performance under the earlier Obasanjo administration was comparatively more successful than that under the later Jonathan administration. For example, despite an objective of removing the debt burden on Nigeria in 2005, Okonjo-Iweala, under President Jonathan, helped to squander millions of dollars in oil sales for three consecutive years, resulting in a debt of \$63.7 billion, with no concrete project on ground to justify such debt burden. The mismanagement of the country's economy by the Jonathan administration which some might blame on Okonjo-Iweala, who was the Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy—, contributed to the shameful electoral defeat the Jonathan administration suffered in March, 2015. So devastating were the effects of the policies of the Jonathan administration and so pervasive was the corruption that some elder statesmen, like General Theophilous Danjuma, have called for a probe of President Jonathan and his administration.

In light of the author's direct involvement in the Jonathan administration, it is disingenuous of her to offer insight or philosophy on economic reforms. Indeed, the objective of writing a book encouraging the next generation of Nigerians to carry forward "the lessons" of the reforms Okonjo-Iweala herself helped implement, has no merit given that the outcomes of these reforms impoverished more Nigerians than has ever been the case since the country attained political independence. It is for this reason that the title of the book would more accurately be "The Politics, Challenges, and Prospects of Reforms: The Case of Nigeria," as the current title: "Reforming the Unreformable:..." is a misrepresentation of the reality of the Nigerian political economy. If reforms failed in Nigeria, it was not because Nigeria cannot be reformed. Rather, failure was as a result of the implementation of poorly conceived reforms and the incongruities between the proposed reforms themselves and the operational environment in which the reforms were to be implemented. The reformers, including the author, have themselves to blame for the limited success of their reforms because they ought to have factored into their

strategy all the variables (dependent and independent) that would have enhanced the functionality of the proposed reforms. The text, of course, fails to articulate this.

Despite these shortcomings of the work and the dubious nature of Okonjo-Iweala's own involvement in the political history she recounts, it is still necessary to commend the courage of Okonjo-Iweala for coming out with a book on reforms with specific reference to Nigeria some few months following the end of the Jonathan administration, which was already showing signs of political collapse at the time of publication. Unfortunately, however, the book primarily simply serves as well-documented evidence of the role Okonjo-Iweala played during the early stages of the conception and implementation of the series of reforms introduced by the Obasanjo administration—and not as a resource for the successful implementation of economic reform. Therefore, while it will complement other existing literature on the problems of implementing reforms in countries with political and economic conditions similar to Nigeria, it does little to fulfill its own objective of highlighting the Obasanjo reforms as an example of successful economic reform.

John Olushola Magbadelo PhD  
Centre for African & Asian Studies, Abuja NIGERIA  
[smagbadelo@yahoo.com](mailto:smagbadelo@yahoo.com)