**THE PRESIDENT YOUNG AFRICAN LEADERS FORUM: MY EXPERIENCE**

**By: ADEWOLE Taiwo Adegboyega**

The young African Leaders forum is an avenue which brought together 115 Young Leaders from 40 African countries out of which seventeen countries across sub-Saharan African celebrate fifty years of independence, in honour of this; President Obama hosted the Young 115 Young leaders from civil society and the private sector.

On the 16th of July,2010 I was in Oxford University conducting a capacity training for Lagos State Ministry of Environment and other private sector when I received an alert on my blackberry saying I have been nominated to represent Nigeria at the 1st Young African Leaders Forum in DC, I have to quickly round up my training with the delegates and arrived in Nigeria on the 2nnd of July, 2010 and I started communicating with Barth, Flynn ED and the two other participants (We are three in all selected from Nigeria) via email and I have to set up a Facebook page for the Nigeria-Young African Leaders Forum.

On the 28th of July, I have to travelled down to Abuja for the pre- departure briefing though I got late to the venue i.e. The US mission in Abuja, due to flight delay from Lagos, I was able to meet with the other participant, Barth, Flynn and the Ambassador (Robin Renee Sanders) in Person and also took some Pictures with the Ambassador,

After the briefing from the Ambassador, we are signed the Purchase order, receiving report and voucher agreement. While on the 29th of July, the report was in all the media houses about the Young Leaders from Nigeria.

Finally we all left Nigeria on the 1st of August 2010 for the US, I met with Ruth and Bako at Frankfurt Airport as the boarded from Abuja while I left from Lagos, We finally arrived Dulles International Airport on the 2nd of August around 2pm, We met with other delegates from other African countries at the airport, about 15 of us in all boarded two coaches to the State Capital Hotel, our official Hotel in Washington DC. We were welcome by the staffs of department of states and we were all handed over a file which contains all the activities to be carried out during our stay in DC.

Later in the evening around 5:45pm we all depart for the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, where we were address by the department of state officials and we were hosted by Aspen Network for development Entrepreneurs along with Mercy Corps and ImagesNations for a cocktails meeting, in the process, we were able to interact with other delegates, took pictures and interact with staffs of the various organization present and also with some media houses. We all depart to our hotel room around 8:30pm to have some rest for the night.

On the second day as early as 6:50am we all assemble at the hotel lobby and walk down to the Department of State Auditorium wish is just a walking distance from the hotel, after going through security check and registration we all had our breakfast and also the networking session was still going on during the breakfast. Later we were address by the Ambassador Johnnie Carson who is the Assistant Secretary for African affairs, We were also addressed by three staffs of the White House about the rules and regulations of the town hall meetings with President Obama, which include the mode asking questions, taking pictures, the use of Camera and mobile phones during the town hall meetings.

We later went into difference session based on what we have selected to attend, I attend the first sessions which talk about Access to Capital, the Session discussed the following:

* Opportunities for small and medium sized African enterprises
* What models, tools or approaches have successfully removed barriers to financial access
* What are some successful approaches to meet the capital needs of African firms,

Among the panelist is the Executive Director for the World Bank, Vice President for Sub-Saharan African IFC

We went for another brief tea break before going for the second session which also talks about Technology and Innovation in Africa: Trends, Tactics and Tools organizations can use

The session focused on the following issues:

* An overview of what technology, innovation and tech entrepreneurship can bring to the continent
* A discussion of innovation ways that mobile devices are used across the continent
* Practical case studies of cutting edge technology tools that can leveraged to increase the reach and impact of organization
* Information on how attendees can participate in the Apps for African projects

Among the panelist is Emeka Okafor of Venture Catalyst and Entrepreneur, Ken Banks founder of Kiwanja.net

Later after our Lunch, We were address by the Secretary of State Mrs. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who share the thought of President Obama about the Young African Leaders and she also share her own thought also and shared her experience about her visit to Africa as the 1st lady then and later as the Secretary of State.

After her address, we went for Lunch and during the Lunch we were approached by the News Agencies of Nigeria (NAN) agent who took our picture and few interactions.

Around 12:30 we all have to leave the department of state for the white house, on arriving at the white house, we have to go through thorough security check again and we were welcome to the East Wing by the White House officials, we were allowed to take picture of the green, red and blue rooms in the white house, later on we were all asked to settled down in the East room where President Obama address the town hall meeting for about an hour and it include the question and answer sessions. After the town hall session, the photo session still continue in the East wing of the White House, I also met a Nigerian who is an associate director office of Public Engagement Mr. Williams Opeyemi Jawando. We were all given a letter signed by President Obama and also a pack of chocolate as a gift from the White House.

We all depart to the Hotel and later in the evening we went for the Business and Opportunities in Africa which was hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce, during this networking session, I was able to meet with some Nigerian and also some organization that are already doing business in Nigeria and some other African countries.

On the 3rd day as early as 7:35am we all departed for the Capitol Hill and we meet the following congressmen who came to address us around 8:30am

1. Senator Russ Feingold of Wisconsin
2. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois
3. Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia
4. Congressman Donald Payne 10th district of New Jersey

And some senate and house staffs also address us; they are mostly from the African affairs section of the congress, Senator Durbin told us he was the first person to endorse President Obama to contest for the Presidency in 2008.

Later in the morning we all depart for the Peace Corps Headquarters, where we were given another complete kits which contains lots of materials and activities to be carried out with Peace Corps, we were all addressed by Aaron Williams who was the 1st Director of Peace Corps.

After the address we went into plenary session with the topic: leading change through social entrepreneurship and civic engagement which has two panelist i. e Frederick Swaniker, founder & CEO of African Leadership Academy & Forum Delegate alongside Virginia Emmons McNaught, founder of Educate Tomorrow & Returned Peace Corps Volunteer/Niger 2000-2002.

After the Plenary session, we were divided into various groups under the peer to per Exchange groups and I feel under the Gender in Development where we discussed the various challenges and opportunities related to gender in our various group, during the peer to peer exchange group, we had our lunch and later departed for our community service.

I went to the SOME organization, which is an Employment Training Center in the outskirt of DC

At the Employment Training Center we met with the Directors, the teachers and some of the students who came for the training, they do training them on secretariat jobs, medical and Technology, we were able to interact with some of the students conduct a mock interview for some of them and finally we had a question and answer session with the Directors and the teachers, the training conducted for their students ranges between six to nine months after which they graduate and apply for jobs in organizations

Later in the evening, around 7:30pm we all went for dinner and farewell party organized by McKinsey/Young Professional in Foreign Policy, the company was able to present the various case studies carried in some selected African countries on various business growth and prospect in Africa.

The dinner later led to a small party where every participant took to the dance floor and party until 12mid night.

The last day of the event took us to the Newsuem otherwise known as The First Amendment Center, the first discussion was by Under Secretary of state for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale and Under Secretary of state for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero, the discussion gave every delegates to view their opinion about the forum, and three other participants joined them on the panel and they were able to share their thought and the way forward, participants also went into question and answer session with the two Under Secretary

About an hour later, we went into the final party of the forum which is the Networking and Partnering which was hosted by the private sector and the civil society organization. During the networking session, we were able to meet with lots of American organizations who are already doing things in Africa and those who are willing to tap into various opportunities in Africa.

The closing luncheon was delivered by Avis A.Jones-DeWeever , Executive Director of the National Council of Negro Woman.

At the end of the Forum, I have been prepared for the challenges ahead in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, during the forum I also learnt that We have problems in Africa and at the same time the solution is with us in Nigeria, The Nigerian you can be the change they want to see, if they are really serious about it,

In conclusion I believe a good leader is made not born. If you have the desire and willpower, you   
can become an effective leader. Good leaders develop through a never-ending process of self-study, education, training, and experience.

I was able to reach some agreement with the following organization in the US, United State Environmental Protection Agency, United State Green Building Council and the Institutes for Local Reliance, all in Washington DC to organize capacity building for government and private sector in Nigeria on Environmental Sustainability.