O n the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Cape Town in March 2013, I chaired a book launch starring Nigeria’s formidable first female finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, re- splendent in her trademark African traditional dress and matching head-gear. She talked unpretentiously, without the affected foreign accent of some Nigerians who have spent two decades abroad. She had recently published a book titled Reforming the Unreformable on her time – between 2003 and 2006 – as finance minister of Africa’s largest economy, the world’s eighth most populous state, and its sixth largest oil-producer. She had been the architect of the deal to pay off Nigeria’s $30 billion debt (the second largest such debt deal with the Paris Club of creditors at the time), and led a team of technocrats seeking to tackle corruption, build efficient public and private institutions, obtain Nigeria’s first sovereign oil debt rating, and transform the country into an emerging economy.

Without any notes, Okonjo-Iweala gave a fluent, inspiring, and intrepid 30-minute presentation, breaking down complicated economic concepts in ways that were easy for the general audience to digest. She berated Nigeria’s failure to create a system of sound planning and financial management of its oil resources; described Herculean efforts to fight vested interests at great personal cost; detailed how she had used her impressive international network to achieve Nigeria’s debt deal; observed that Nigeria’s political class appeared to be intimidated by its economic technocrats; and brushed off concerns about women not being equal to men. Nicknamed Okonjo-Wahala (Troublemaker) by Nigeria’s lively press, this was a virtuoso performance to a South African audience fed on a constant staple of stereotypes about corrupt Nigerian drug-traffickers.

My impression of Nigeria’s ‘Iron Lady’ was of an incredibly competent, courageous, and intelligent individual with a strong sense of public service. I, however, also had the impression of a diva who was aware of her own importance, clearly enjoyed her celebrity status, and came across as a ‘head-of-state in waiting’. Okonjo-Iweala is not shy about blowing her own trumpet and her role in the Nigerian reform team, talking of the ‘legitimacy and dynamism that I brought to the team’. Forbes named her among the ten most influential women in the world in 2011, while Foreign Policy listed her among the top 100 global thinkers in the same year. The 60-year-old technocrat’s brilliant economic credentials are from the prestigious Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), obtaining her doctorate in the latter institution. It is clear that the poor grasp of complex economic issues that many of Nigeria’s political leaders and parliamentary dunderheads have exhibited is what has given technocrats like Okonjo-Iweala their immense power, and a belief that they can take better decisions than the leaders they seek to advise.

In her book, Okonjo-Iweala describes in brutally frank terms the mutual antipathy between politicians and technocrats: ‘We would keep away from politics, since in any case most of the politicians left a lot to be desired. In fact, I could sense that the politicians felt our team did not appreciate them and regarded them with disdain’. During the Cape Town book launch in March 2013, Okonjo-Iweala made the rather intriguing point that she eventually came to see no difference between politicians and technocrats, and noted that she had had to become a politician (while longing to no party) in order to be able to do her job effectively. This phenomenon of political technocrats was particularly prominent during the era of the ‘Super Permsecs (permanent secretaries)’ of powerful mandarins under military rule in the early 1970s. It produced such prominent figures as Allison Ayida, Philip Asiodu, Abdulazeed Atta, and Ahmed Joda, who dominated General Yakubu Gowon’s ‘kitchen cabinet’.

Okonjo-Iweala grew up in a solidly middle-class Nigerian family with both parents being professors. Her upbringing was a happy, idyllic one full of ballet classes and piano lessons until the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970 forced her family back east, having lost all their savings. Her father was determined to succeed, and perhaps also to see no difference between politicians and technocrats. He regarded them with disdain.’ During the Nigerian civil war of 1967–1970, Okonjo-Iweala was enrolled into the Biafran army. Living on one meal a day, watching children dying, and sleeping on the floor of a bunker were formative experiences that made Okonjo-Iweala determined to succeed, and perhaps also contributed to her three-decade exile in graduate school and at the World Bank in Washington D.C., where she rose to become vice-president in 2002.

Okonjo-Iweala avoids such personal details in Reforming the Unreformable.
able and focuses squarely on her time as finance minister between 2003 and 2006. The book took her four years to write. Despite the technical subject matter, it is highly readable, rich in detail, and devoid of complex economic jargon. The author’s skillfully honed style and a bird’s-eye view of Nigeria’s chronically underperforming and stag-
geringly corrupt state. Her six-month stint as economic adviser to President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000 had led to Okonjo-Iweala establishing a Debt Management Office and given her in-
sights into the country’s parlous policy-
making environment. The book covers the strategies of Okonjo-Iweala’s ‘Eco-
nomic Team’; the actual implementa-
tion of goals to address the structural constraints to private enterprise in Ni-
ergia’s economy through sanitisation, deregulation and liberalisation; restruc-
turing the civil service, trade, tariffs, corrupt earnings sectors; the bat-
tle against corruption; the successful and titanic struggle to achieve the an-
nulment of Nigeria’s debt; and the les-
s learned from the reform process.

Okonjo-Iweala herself recognises at the outset: ‘Nigeria has always been complex to govern in a way outsiders do not often understand or fully grasp’. She describes the country’s three de-
cades of military rule as ‘politically and economically disastrous’ and castigates Nigeria’s ‘kleptocratic elite’ which she notes has ‘a very limited vision’. The country’s Lilliputian leadership had failed to raise $500 billion of oil earnings since the 1970s. Okon-
jo-Iweala observes that the same rapa-
cious elite may be one of the largest obstacles to reform, as it continues to feed at the trough of a parasitic state. She describes the deleterious impact of the ‘oil curse’ on Nigeria’s agricultural and other sectors, as well as its destruc-
tion of the country’s moral and social fabric. She condemns ‘white elephant’ projects such as the Ajaokuta Steel Mills which was squan-
dered without any concrete results.

Before embarking on her reforms, Okonjo-Iweala obtained advice from Brazil’s former deputy finance minis-
ter and local and national governments, received, in order to empower their constituents to be able to hold them more accountable. Anoth-
er major achievement of the reforms was the liberalisation of Nigeria’s an-
itiated telecommunications sector in 2003, allowing private mobile phone operators like South Africa’s Mobile Telephone Networks (MTN) and Ni-
ergia’s Glo to provide services to mil-
lions of Nigerians. Banking reforms also saw the consolidation of banks from 89 to 25 and the increase in their capital base from $15 million to $192 million. A competitive bidding process for contracts saved the country about $1.5 billion in two and a half years.

The climax of this rich story is un-
doubtedly the historic debt deal after a successful two-year effort between the Nigerian government and the Paris Club between 2003 and 2005. Okon-
jo-Iweala deserves the most credit for this impressive achievement. Before the debt deal in 2002, Nigeria’s an-
umal debt service to the Paris Club of $1 billion would have represented a third of its overall budget; ten times the na-
tional health budget; and five times the education budget. Okonjo-Iweala ne-
gotiated a $1 billion annual payment to restore Nigeria’s fiscal credibility. Following marathon all-night negoti-
ating sessions in Paris in October 2005, the deal was struck, with Nigeria pay-
ing $12 billion and being relieved of $18 billion of debt. The agreement led to the liberalisation of African anti-terror sanctions, and oil-sector foreign di-
rict investment doubled from $2 bil-
ion to $4 billion following the accord.

Okonjo-Iweala is honest in ad-
mitting that her reform efforts could have benefited more from cultivating cabinet members and consulting more with civil society and the civil service. This suggests that rather than proceeding through intellectual argumentation and rational persuasion, it was often assumed that ‘vested interests’ would block reforms. Changes were therefore often forced through with the help of the notoriously autocratic president, Olusegun Obasanjo, without proper intellectual debate and disagreement or wide consultation with key interest groups. It is almost as if some of the genuine opposition to reforms is treated as treasonous, and critics of reform are sometimes unfairly branded as being part of the corrupt ‘vested interests’. Un-
tonishingly, Okonjo-Iweala admits that the reformers actually stopped trying to gain the support of senior civil servants in their efforts to reform the civil ser-
vie. It was no surprise that this particu-
lar effort at reform failed spectacularly. The reformers often come across in the book as a secret society and cabal of un-
accountable priests championing a reli-
gion of neo-liberal reform. Such dogma was, however, not to be challenged, and anyone who tried, was brand-
ed a heretic to be burned at the stake.

The NEEDS strategy – like the con-
tinental New Partnership for Africa’s Devel-
opment (NEPAD) championed by leaders like Olusegun Obasanjo and South Africa’s Thabo Mbeki – turned out to be a top-down plan imposed on the country without proper and wide-
scale community consultation and buy-in from civil society actors. The Na-
gerian civil society actors in the book remain mostly nameless and faceless. Their criticisms of NEEDS is never spelt out or explained. One does not have a sense that there was any seri-
ous engagement with these groups. The core of Nigeria’s intelligentsia is cari-
catured as ‘inclined towards socialism’, as if this somehow made this minority (certainly not a ‘core’, as Okonjo-Iwea-
la asserts) less patriotic. She tends to lump all opponents of reform together, sometimes blurring the line between opportunistically vested interests and gen-
uine intellectual opposition. The views of Nigerian and African economists and think-tanks are also completely absent from the book, even as Western schol-
ars like Columbia University’s Jeffrey Sachs are admiringly cited. Indigenous solutions to these deep-seated prob-
lems simply do not seem to have been taken as seriously as external advice.

Okonjo-Iweala seems to have an exaggerated faith in external civil so-
ciety and other actors, many of whom, such as Ann Pettifor of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, she cites adoringly. Some of these individuals, like the Irish pop stars Bono and Bob Geldof, in fact have a fore-shortened vision of African anti-poverty solutions, and oversimplify the situation of African democrats and expose the poverty of genuine leadership in these critical areas. Okonjo-Iweala’s key re-
form allies, from whom advice is often sought, also appear to be external ac-
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opment (DFID); the Commonwealth Secretariat; and the Washington D.C.-
based Centre for Global Development.

In terms of other reforms, the author frankly concedes that customs reform was a ‘nightmare failure’. This also glaring supervisory and regula-
tory failures that led to a severe banking crisis in 2008/2009 which nearly de-
stroyed Nigeria’s financial sector. This industry was exposed to be as riddled with greed and corruption as any oth-
er in the country, with lavish lifestyles and spending being sustained with the funds for which ‘Nigeria’s credit rating’ was, however, not to be challenged, and anyone who tried, was brand-
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She notes that ‘Nigeria had become synonymous with the word “corrup-
tions”’. The me, Diepreye Alamieye-
a, Diepreye Alamieye-

seen in the book: monitoring and evaluation officials bribed to authorise incomplete projects; ‘leakages’ in the Budget Office and Accountant Gener-

eral’s office; the huge salaries of senior civil servants sharing the ill-got-
ten interest on government deposits with officials in commercial banks; ‘ghost workers’ collecting salaries and pensions of non-existent staff; legislat-
ators inflating budgets; profligate public enterprises being treated as personal egg nests; private bankers engaging in ‘insider trading’ and squandering de-
positors’ funds; General Sani Abacha stashing $5 billion of Nigerian mon-
ey in Swiss bank accounts and raiding the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) for $2.2 billion which was carried away in trucks; the money-laundering (nearly 2 million pounds) governor of Bayelsa State, Diepreye Alamieye-

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tory failures that led to a severe banking
most damaging corruption; developing measurable indicators for success; and withstanding personal intimidation – also seem rather academic and do not seem capable of addressing this cancer systematically at its roots. Part of the obvious problem which Okonjo-Iweala is unwilling to spell out is that fish rots from the top: many of the political leaders with whom she is working are part of the problem of corruption she is seeking to tackle. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) arraigned five governors in 2007, convicting two; Nigeria’s Inspector-General was convicted and sentenced to six months in jail; while several billions of naira in stolen money was recovered. The EFCC was, however, clearly used selectively by Obasanjo as a political instrument to intimidate and neuter his opponents.

This rich narrative demonstrates the importance of cultivating influential people in order to achieve key goals: in this case, the annulment of Nigeria’s debt in 2005. US President George W. Bush and his Treasury Secretary, Paulson, visited Nigeria’s President Obasanjo and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown; Mexican finance minister, Francisco Gil-Diaz; World Bank president, Jim Wolfensohn; the IMF’s first deputy managing director, Anne Krueger; deputy German finance manager, Klaus Koch-Weser; Okonjo-Iweala’s former boss at the World Bank; senior deputy Director-General in Japan’s finance ministry, Kiyoshi Koda (a former World Bank colleague); Secretary-General at the Paris Club secretariat, Emmanuel Mouldin (a former alternate World Bank Executive Director); and the World Bank’s Nigeria country director, Hafez Ghanem – all play an instrumental part in the Nigerian debt drama. It was almost as if Okonjo-Iweala’s two-decade career at the World Bank had prepared her for this historic role.

In one particularly memorable passage in the book, the author recounts a visit to the White House in May 2005 during which President Obasanjo struggles to convince George W. Bush to back the annulment of Nigeria’s debt. Okonjo-Iweala steps in, realising that she may never get such an opportunity to state Abuja’s case. Her points are wise and practical, and reflect a deep understanding of the politics of the West and the World Bank. She button-holes him by grabbing his jacket, explains her mission, and asks for a meeting. Bush agrees, and Okonjo-Iweala is allowed to spend two hours with the president. Sheucceeds in getting his commitment to help Nigeria.

Though a competent economist, Okonjo-Iweala can sometimes come across as politically naive. Critics have charged her with lacking a political antenna: she received much blame for the bungled effort to eliminate oil subsidies in Nigeria in October 2004. She had underestimated the widespread anger and cynicism of the Nigerian public towards a corrupt and copulant political class that was not trusted to spend any surpluses resulting from the removal of oil subsidies on the public interest. Six people were killed in the ensuing demonstrations. She again came in for scathing criticism when she pushed for removal of oil subsidies in her second stint as finance minister in January 2012, which led to nation-wide demonstrations, and the government of Goodluck Jonathan eventually negotiating a compromise.

Okonjo-Iweala sometimes describes issues such as the impact of the removal of fuel subsidies on the poor and massive retrenchments of workers in cold, technical language that is devoid of empathy. It is almost as if workers are units of labour rather than real people with flesh and bones, and families to feed. In April 2014, she declared that the Boko Haram terrorist threat had been “isolated” in Borno and Yobe states and “growing at a much wider rate. In terms of gender issues, Okonjo-Iweala also appears to promote the fight by individual leadership rather than by waging specific gender-focused battles, opening her up to charges that, like the original ‘Iron Lady’ – Britain’s Margaret Thatcher – she is no different from her power-seeking male colleagues, and often fails to promote the cause of women systematically.

Okonjo-Iweala also pulls her punches in her complex relationship with President Olusegun Obasanjo, whose leader of government she called a “political bo’ in Nigeria’s grand drama of a ‘Village Headmaster’, she blew the whistle on the damage of oil bunkering to the national fiscus, revealing, in February 2012, that such theft resulted in the loss of $1 billion a month (150,000 barrels a day) to the treasury. For her outspoken courage, Nigeria’s ‘Iron Lady’ has had to endure some difficult personal incidents. Her 83-year old mother was kidnapped for five days in 2009, and the traumatised ‘Iron Lady’ rejoined public life the following month.

So, was Okonjo-Iweala successful in “reforming the unrefromable” or not? Though clearly steeped in the dark arts of bureaucratic intrigue after two decades in the snake-pit that is the World Bank, Okonjo-Iweala and her band of reformers failed to convince the political power to make a country as diverse and complex as Nigeria to adopt her reforms in a sustained manner. If one assesses her efforts in terms of the goals of the comprehensive strategy of ‘good governance’, her results are not encouraging. Nigeria still suffers from poor economic manage-