

# Sonny Echono: Consolidating the Gains and Integrity of TETFund.

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**A**rch. Sonny Echono came on board as the Executive Secretary of Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), perhaps as the most experienced ES in the Fund's history. He is the only ES that had served in the Fund, before his appointment as boss of the Fund. He had been a board member of TETFund for four years, prior to his appointment as ES. However, the most remarkable or unique position of Echono, having served as the Permanent Secretary of the Education Ministry, had positioned him and equipped him with the knowledge and experience of the workings of TETFund, as his was like a supervisory role over the activities of the Fund. He is well aware of where it lacks the most, and where it has achieved the most feats. TETFund has been the lifeline of Tertiary Education in Nigeria, as its intervention projects all over the Federal and State owned institutions in the country, stand out as the most impactful and successful projects in the universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education.

Echono's first 100 days in office, came on board with very pertinent reforms that had hitherto beleaguered the optimal delivery of projects and interventions. First was the reform to step up the project life cycle implementation, so that the completion of projects would be most timely. This saw to the issuance of audit clearance of projects at the last tranche. The Strategic Planning Department of the Fund also stepped up their interaction and working relationship with the Federal Inland Revenue Service, FIRS. This developed a somewhat seamless relationship where disbursements to the Fund have been timely and precise. Other regulatory agencies like the NBTE, NCCE and NUC were robustly engaged, to improve on the working relationship and partnerships between TETFund and these institutions.

TETFund has built quite a name over the years, building solidly on its integrity, the development of qualitative projects, timely interventions, the development of research and human capital; and of course the efficient implementation of its policies and framework for the advancement of tertiary education in the country. To all these are almost equal and egregious challenges that the system puts up, to fight the optimal running of the Fund. There have been very malicious and taintful media campaigns against the management and board of the fund for the very obvious reasons, of the very frugal way TETFund has been running its affairs.

Top in these campaigns are the spurious allegations of contract racketeering. Certain vested interests began to sponsor damning media publications, just 4 months into the tenure of Echono as ES. The Director of Public Affairs, Abdulmumin Oniyangi, had on the 22nd of July, 2022; issued a press release titled, 'Corruption Fights Back as Echono Implements Sweeping Reforms'.

Fraudsters were perpetrating their deed to tarnish the very good image of the Fund and create public distrust against the agency.

Special Intervention approval letters were created and presented to Heads of Institutions by persons who still claimed to represent the interest of the fund. The agency had however swiftly swung into action by alerting security agencies, whom have already made some arrests, with the culprits facing prosecution. Another challenge facing the fund recently is the abscondment of scholars whom had been sponsored by the fund for Higher Education abroad. These scholars acquire the Higher degrees abroad, and then turn round and abscond from the bond/ guarantee accompanying the sponsorship. Their guarantors have had to suffer the brunt of this misdemeanor, where they are asked to pay up for the funds. With this development, TETFund is working out strategies and policies, with the relevant stakeholders, such that stringent measures can be taken against those who deny the country their acquired expertise. About 40 institutions with no less than 137 scholarship candidates have absconded and left the fund with no choice, but to make moves to enforce the repayment of the sponsorships.

There's also this disillusion by citizens and their lawmakers alike, who think that TETFund has excess funds lying around, which is being mismanaged. Until recently, when the ES revealed to the House of Representatives Adhoc Committee investigating an alleged misappropriation of funds, no one knew that the Federal Government had indeed borrowed money from the fund, to the tune of 323 billion; of which only 48 billion has been paid so far. This has indeed been a setback to the timely manner in which TETFund has always operated. This has also implied that funds, in terms of the foreign exchange needed to pay for overseas scholarships, is fast becoming challenging, especially with the very tough exchange rates of the Naira to the dollar. Notwithstanding the challenges, distractions and sabotage, Arch. Echono seems to be surfing through, riding over wave upon wave of malicious attempts at making the TETFund management team cower, and submitting to the kleptomaniac inhibitions of the vested interests — whom have been plagued by the integrity of the Fund. Echono, coming from a much disciplined schedule of due process in procurement, has been up to the task of safe guarding the integrity of TETFund as we know it. Echono knows all the nooks and crannies that corruption has been seeking refuge in, trying to degrade a fund that has been the saving grace of tertiary education in Nigeria. TETFund's saving grace for now is having a veteran and seasoned civil servant like Arch. Sonny Echono at the helm of its affairs.

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