

Q&

She says Westerners are selling Africa short

By LYNN COOK HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Just call her Oby (pronounced "Oh-bee.").

The World Bank's vice president for the Africa region, Obiageli Ezekwesili, knows her name is so complicated most people won't even attempt to pronounce it. That doesn't bother her. What does aggravate Oby is that many Westerners take one look at Africa, see an impossibly complex continent enmeshed in poverty and political corruption, and won't venture near it for business or pleasure.

"I want to show you the other face of Africa — the one that is hardly ever heard and hardly ever seen," she recently told an audience of the World Affairs Council of Houston.

Before joining the World Bank, Ezekwesili served as Nigeria's Minister of Education and, before that, Minister of Solid Minerals. She started her career in auditing with Deloitte & Touche and went on to chair the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which obtained the first-ever audit of the oil and gas sector there.

Exxon Mobil Corp. Chief Executive Rex Tillerson has praised the initiative, saying that "EITI has helped improve the investment climate in

Nigeria."

Ezekwesili spoke with Houston Chronicle reporter Lynn Cook about energy, infrastructure and corporate social responsibility in Africa.

Q: I think there is this sense, especially in the energy sector, that the governments of many African nations are some of the most Byzantine and corrupt on Earth and it's very difficult to do business there. Is that true?

A: Let's back up for a moment. Corruption is a problem that has no territory. Corruption and bad behavior are not bound by borders.

Companies are ready to play into that game, and they do. The game gets hosted by corrupt government officials, and the only loser is the rest of the population. Corruption is all about supply and demand. The parties are always the same.

There's a sense, I think, that corruption is a cultural thing, and that is not true. It's just bad behavior. In traditional African society, bad behavior had grave consequences.

Q: But there is a need for more transparency and better institutions. You've been a huge advocate on that front. What's government's role, and what part does the private sector play?

A: The private sector is not the bastion of transparency it sometimes claims to be. The resources of those countries should be governed properly, yes. But when we in Nigeria said, "OK,

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we'll throw open our books" — which is what these companies had been asking for — they did not want to reciprocate.

It's true we need more anti-corruption officials and people who are willing to take on that role, better police protection, better enforcement of property rights and the rule of law. There's still a lot of work to be done in many places.

Every nation gets built by its own people. Others can help, but Africans shouldn't be the receiver of goodies forever. The only thing outsiders can do is support.

Q: You mentioned in your speech that Western companies are missing out by not investing in the electricity sector. How so?

A: Today, only 25 percent of Africa's population has access to power. That's terrible. Some of the problem comes from the derelict monopolies in public sector utilities, but there is huge pent-up demand for it. I think today's power sector in Africa looks very similar to the way the telecom sector did a few years ago.

Companies in the U.S. ignored the promise of telecom in Africa, and they missed out. In my country, Nigeria, there were only 500,000 telephone lines five years ago. Today there are 60 million. South African companies got that business. Today we're seeing Indian and Chinese companies understand the potential in Africa, but still many Western companies have reservations.

The naysayers will tell you there's no premium in

it, but you don't discover profits until you go seeking for them. That's where the power sector is today.

Q: On the energy front, it seems there are several African countries that are blessed with resources but haven't been able to use them for transformation. What will it take to make ordinary people's lives better?

A: Let's look at where people's lives are better. They could follow the path Botswana took. Botswana has diamonds and through good governance that is now a middle-income country, although it still has its problems with HIV. There are still inequalities.

The poor don't need a handout. They need access to economic opportunity.

They need education. You and I are here today because somebody invested in the liberation of our minds through education. Condoleezza Rice said, in the U.S., the lack of education for all is a high security risk for the country. How much more so for a continent like Africa.

It's not minerals but the mind that will transform African economies.

Everything about Africa, all the resources, will come to nothing if Africans do not get the education they need.

Q: You mentioned education for all and how there are several countries that are making investments and the World Bank is funding some of that. Where are the biggest steps

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being taken?

A: Togo offers free education for every child. Ghana, Benin and Cote d'Ivoire, to name a few. Many countries are waking up to the idea. And, regionally, there's a lot of partnering that's working.

The African Union has made some great strides in advancing regional infrastructure: power, ports and rail. Through a power pool project that crosses borders between Mali and Ghana, the cost of electricity has fallen to 5 cents per kilowatt-hour down from 25 cents per kilowatt-hour. More people have access because they can afford it now.

It's still a long journey ahead. There are problems — we're not denying Darfur or Zimbabwe — but the homogenous treatment of Africa isn't enlightened.

We need to desegregate the good things from the ugly things and show people where the opportunities are. One-third of Africans live in countries where the GDP is growing at 5.5 percent or more, but you don't go where you don't know.

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