

The People on the Other Side of Policy

Ajíbólá Oládiípò

Executive Director, Nigeria Food Security Project

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Protocols.

Good afternoon.

Before I speak about the responsibility ahead of you, I want to recognise what you have already done.

You made room to learn.

For some of you, that meant studying after a demanding day at work. For others, it meant returning to an assignment when you would have preferred to rest. Whatever your circumstances, you stayed with the work long enough to arrive here.

That deserves recognition.

Congratulations.

And to everyone who made this programme possible, thank you for investing in people who will help shape the decisions that shape our food systems.

Today, I want to speak about the people on the other side of policy.

The people who may never read the documents we write, but who live with their consequences.

There is a particular kind of disappointment that deserves our attention.

It is the disappointment of someone who has done everything we told them to do.

The farmer who planted, tended the crop and brought in the harvest, only to discover that selling it would barely cover the cost of producing it.

The young graduate who acquired the skills, developed the business plan and applied for support, only to find that the opportunity depended on access they did not have.

The parent who works hard and still has to stand in the market, calculating which essential food the family will do without.

These people have already made an effort.

Our responsibility is to ask what happened between their effort and the outcome they deserved.

That question sits at the heart of agricultural policy.

And, from today, I hope it will sit at the heart of your work.

My own route into this work was not a straight line.

I did not begin my university education with a settled ambition to become a food policy strategist. Food Technology was not what I had originally planned to study.

But studying food gradually changed the questions I asked.

I became interested in what happened beyond the product itself. How did food move? Who could afford it? What happened to what we could not preserve? Why could the people producing something so essential remain so vulnerable?

Those questions led me further into public service and policy.

They also taught me something about purpose.

Sometimes, purpose becomes clearer as we pay closer attention to the work already in front of us.

So, if anyone graduating today is still uncertain about where this journey will lead, give yourself permission to keep discovering.

Take the next useful step. Do it seriously. Let what you learn sharpen the direction you take.

You do not need a complete map of your life to begin making a contribution.

But you do need to care about where your work lands.

Because agricultural policy lands somewhere.

A decision about a road lands in the cost of moving produce.

A decision about electricity lands in whether a processor can keep operating.

A requirement attached to a credit scheme lands in whether a farmer can qualify.

A delay in releasing funds lands in a planting season that cannot wait for our paperwork.

Eventually, decisions made around a table arrive at somebody else's table.

That is where their meaning becomes clear.

For the person making a decision, a delay may be administrative. For the person waiting, it may consume the opportunity altogether.

This is why I want you to develop the habit of following a policy all the way through.

Follow it beyond the announcement.

Follow it beyond the launch and the photograph.

Follow it to the office responsible for delivery. Ask whether that office has the authority and resources to do the work. Ask what the applicant must actually do to receive the benefit. Ask what happens when something goes wrong.

Then go further.

Find out whether the intended person received anything useful.

A programme can meet its reporting requirements while leaving its central promise unfulfilled.

Your responsibility is to notice that distance and help close it.

The capstone work you have completed has given you an opportunity to examine problems and make recommendations.

Keep that discipline.

But remain willing to let the people affected complicate your understanding.

Imagine recommending a storage facility.

The proposal looks sound. The need appears obvious. The projected benefits are persuasive.

Then you sit with the farmers and learn that they cannot afford to wait for payment. They have debts due immediately after harvest. Holding their produce for a better price would require money they do not have.

Suddenly, the storage question becomes a financing question too.

Or you discover that the facility is accessible to the largest producers, while the people with smaller quantities cannot afford the transport.

Now you have another problem to solve.

This is what listening does. It gives our analysis a chance to become useful.

The people we hope to serve carry knowledge of the conditions under which our ideas must survive.

Respect that knowledge.

Go into communities with questions you are prepared to revise. Explain your recommendations in language people can challenge. When someone tells you why your solution will be difficult to use, stay long enough to understand.

A person should be able to recognise their own life in the policy being designed on their behalf.

And as you listen, remain honest about the evidence.

You will encounter pressure to sound certain.

A client may want a stronger conclusion. A supervisor may prefer a more flattering result. An institution may have invested so much in a programme that admitting its weaknesses becomes uncomfortable.

In those moments, your judgment will matter.

Say what the findings support. Explain what remains uncertain. Correct your position when better evidence emerges.

There is courage in saying, “We do not know enough yet.”

There is also courage in saying, “We know enough to act, and this delay is hurting people.”

Learning to distinguish those moments is part of the work you are entering.

Your credibility will grow through the care you take with both.

I also want to prepare you for a quieter part of this journey.

Much of the work that improves public life attracts very little attention.

You may spend months helping two agencies agree on who is responsible for a task.

You may revise a guideline until someone with limited time and resources can actually use it.

You may help make a selection process fairer, or identify why an intervention repeatedly fails to reach a particular community.

There may be no stage for that work.

Do it with care anyway.

Someone may experience the result as a payment that arrives when expected. A service they can access without knowing anybody important. An application they can complete without paying someone to interpret it.

Those are substantial achievements.

A functioning institution allows people to plan their lives with a little more confidence.

It reduces the amount of pleading required to obtain what should already be available.

That is a form of dignity worth working for.

To those of you who will enter government, take that responsibility seriously.

To those who will work in research, stay interested in what happens after publication.

To those building businesses or working in civil society, understand the public decisions that shape the conditions around you.

And wherever you work, resist the temptation to become comfortable with suffering simply because it has become familiar.

Repeated exposure to a problem can make us less attentive to it.

We learn its vocabulary. We become fluent in its indicators. Eventually, we can discuss it for an hour without remembering that somebody is living through it while we speak.

Guard against that.

Keep people close enough to your work that their experience can still interrupt your assumptions.

Let me leave you with something practical.

Within the next ninety days, choose one problem you can examine closely enough to make a useful contribution.

Choose something specific.

Perhaps an extension service that farmers struggle to reach. A market where producers cannot obtain reliable information. A support programme whose application process excludes the people it intends to help.

Speak to the people affected.

Identify the institution with responsibility. Understand what prevents action. Develop a recommendation that names who should do what, with what resources, and how anyone will know whether it worked.

Then put it before someone who can act.

Follow up.

Use the relationships you have built in this cohort. Read one another's work. Share what failed as readily as what succeeded. Keep asking whether your ideas survived contact with reality.

Your first contribution may be modest.

Make it useful.

A useful piece of work gives you somewhere solid to stand for the next one.

Graduates of Cohort II, you are leaving this programme with knowledge that can help you ask better questions and make better decisions.

People will encounter the value of that knowledge through what you do with it.

They may never know your name.

A farmer may never learn who helped remove an obstacle from a programme. A trader may never know who made a process more predictable. A family may never meet the people whose work helped food reach them more reliably.

Yet their lives can become better because you took your responsibility seriously.

Hold on to that possibility when progress feels slow.

Hold on to it when the meeting is difficult, when the evidence is inconvenient, and when the work seems too small to matter.

Somewhere beyond the document is a person waiting for something to work.

Let that person remain present in your thinking.

Let their time matter.

Let their effort matter.

Let their dignity matter.

And when the congratulations have quietened and today's ceremony becomes a memory, return to the work with this question:

Whose life can become better because I learned what I learned?

Begin there.

Congratulations, Cohort II.

Thank you, and may your work give people reason to hope.