

DREAMS BEYOND BORDERS
Turning Vision Into Reality
Idada Ogiesoba

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For all who have fought for breath, for freedom, and for the right to be heard.

And for those who continue to rise.

"To be silent is to be complicit."

— John Stillwell

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Table of Contents

Prologue: A Nation on the Brink

Chapter One: The Seeds of Resilience

Chapter Two: Rising from the Ashes

Chapter Three: Leadership in the Eye of the Storm

Chapter Four: A New World, Old Struggles

Chapter Five: Turning Pain into Purpose

Chapter Six:

Empowering the Silenced

Chapter Seven: The Battle for Sustainability

Chapter Eight: Fires of Opposition

Chapter Nine: Shadows of Doubt

Chapter Ten: A New Generation Rises

Chapter Eleven: Crossing New Frontiers

Chapter Twelve: From Vision to Action

Chapter Thirteen: Legacy of Resilience

Chapter Fourteen: Bridges Across Borders

Chapter Fifteen:

The Weight of the Mantle

Epilogue: The Path Forward P r o l o g u e

A NATION ON

THE BRINK

Nigeria – the country, so full of promise, so full of promise with a depth of culture and natural resources, which of course is held back by the corruption and the constant duality in the treatment of its people. It has been for decades denying its women and its youths, who are the virgin of any productive and progressive society, their dreams by-system failures.

Dreams Beyond Borders follows an inspiring narrative about leadership and hope which shows how someone can transform everything through inspired action. The journey of Azimi parallels the pursuit of progress by his nation throughout its experience of victories and obstacles. Through the process of making purpose from pain he finds out the real

transformation goes beyond individual success since it sets a path for countless future generations to follow. The story showcases bravery as well as persistent dreams which cannot be restrained and showcases an absolute belief that brighter futures remain reachable.

Being a native of this reality that Azimi Koko consciously navigated through, the mechanisms of poverty, disregard and mistrust were most profoundly illustrated. It tells not only the crisis of the man but the crisis of the nation which seeks for the change. As the world hurtles towards an interconnected future, Azimi dares to ask: Does one person's pain lead to change for everyone?

Chapter

1

THE SEEDS OF RESILIENCE

The sun rises from the horizon and its rays started reaching the small village of Azimi's birth. It was a place of small harmony and was based on the cycle of seasons and the hardships of individuals. The stink-husk from the freshly ploughed farmland floated in the air alongside the steam that rose from the boiling yams as people got ready for more work. Here in this village dreams were shared at the break of dusk and hope was endured by those who had no choice but to hold it. Azimi was six when his father appeared to be omnipresent in their small house though his movements were terribly restricted. He was blessed to have a father who could wrest a livelihood out of the barren land and yet guide him about the world outside the village. However, those lessons were never to continuous who had no choice but to hold it endured hope as one evening with a life changing twist, Azimi's father became ill. In a few days he disappeared, and the space he left appeared to be so great that the very ground appeared to weep for the lost one.

Azimi was much too young to comprehend that death was final, but he realized what it meant. His mother who once sat hidden in the shadows became the breadwinner and a protector all in one. Her struggle was in a society where the men sat at the centre of every home, and she was a brave defiance of every tradition. She toiled day after day with her hands being rough like the farmers her fingers cording baskets all through the night to sell in the market. A never walker she remained throughout and did not even make a sound to teach Azimi on the importance of enduring till the time of thorough examination.

A life after losing his father became a litany of changes. These responsibilities made Azimi the man of the house; title which seemed to mean more work than prestige. Since early morning he accompanied his mother to wake up and work on their farms while in the evenings he listened to Kokihi's tales of future he doubted he would ever experience.

Education was a privilege for a few select children with families who could afford fees and acceptable school uniforms. But still, and in spite of what he was doing, tilling the fields, Azimi's soul yearned for the classroom. He spent minutes standing with his hoe resting on his shoulder and wish he were a writer with ink stained hands and a desk filled with papers he has written.

The revelation came when a teacher from the village school, where they too attend, came over to their house. She had been informed that this boy, Azimi, was extremely intelligent and had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and she persuaded his mother to admit him. The day Azimi entered the class was one that he will never forget in his entire life. The chalkboard was looming as large as a movie screen was, a gateway to a world he only saw in his dreams. Yet, his joy was short-lived. Many children were packed in the school, while more children than the available desks and the teacher could handle. Nevertheless, Azimi wanted to learn which indicates that there are many obstacles that learners have to overcome whenever they are learning.

Though, his determination was not enough to help him overcome the odds that were rampant in the education system. When he had to join the secondary school level, resulting to lack of proper identification the challenge became an unachievable one. The official record of birth was dismissed by the authorities, as his mother who had created

it from her head could not produce any genuine paperwork. He was, therefore, refused admission. It was only some time later that he found out that his mother had sought the help of local leaders in somehow reaching him; as their efforts to sway the authorities into releasing Azimi bore no fruit, however.

Faced with the reality of his situation, Azimi decided to take matters into his own hands. He began teaching himself, borrowing textbooks from older students and practicing his writing in the dirt when paper was scarce. His nights were spent hunched over a makeshift desk, illuminated by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp. Each page turned, each word written, was an act of defiance against the limitations imposed on him. The village watched in quiet admiration as Azimi fought for an education. Neighbour's would often find him under the shade of a mango tree, reading aloud to a group of younger children who looked up to him as both a teacher and an inspiration. His efforts did not go unnoticed. One day, the same teacher who had first encouraged him to attend school returned with news of a continuation program for students like him—those left behind by the traditional system.

The program was by no means flawless. It had no resources, and the classes were conducted in a hopelessly wrecked structure way beneath the status of a shelter. However, for Azimi it was a chance, and the man grabbed it with both hands, something that a person who knows the taste of hunger does not let it to rule him.

Hereby, the author shows how Azimi realized during his stay in the program that he was not alone in his fight. Other students like him had come across numerous barriers just to get a seat in those classrooms. He said, they spoke about their survival and the dreams of the future, the dreams which he also had. These contacts gave him strength and developed the idea that would steer him for several years – the idea of a world where no child would have to struggle to receive education.

Chapter

2

RISING FROM

THE ASHES

It was the continuation program for Azimi; the only string that pulled him out from the pit of hopelessness that could have swallowed all his dreams. Getting into the program had not been easy, the agencies had to be convinced, and the local administrators had to be persuaded; he was not confident initially. Now, however, Azimi was inside the company, he was not going to let this opportunity pass him by and quietly drop away. Each day started with the time before the dawn was breaking out over the horizon. Hearing the voices of his siblings Azimi stood up slowly from his straw mat so as not to wake the other kids sleeping next to him. The house was still, there was now and then the sound of his mother putting on her clothes to attend the field. She would serve him breakfast naked with small boiled yams, her exhaustion outlined her love but also her desire to see him go to school like her though she never got the chance.

It took a lot of energy to travel to the continuation program. Azimi traversed for miles on tiny, mean-footed roads which were twisting through forests, and stretching over brooks. In the rain, the thick mud stuck to his feet and walking barefoot was a real test of strength. That is why no matter how difficult he worked through all the past experiences, Azimi continued his way. At the prospect of the classroom with a chalkboard in front of several attentive-looking students, he was ready to move forward. When he got there, the sophistication of the facilities of the program was quite basic and yet challenging for him. It was a single-chamber building with walls damaged by cracks and a roof that leaked water severely. Picture wooden chairs; the desks were benches, and we divided the few available textbooks among numerous students. However, as this is also a drawback of using both forms, the energy in the room was phenomenal. The students that attended the class, including Azimi, had struggled to gain a place in the class, and this made them eager to learn as was evident by their active participation through questioning and note-taking.

Azimi was one of the most committed students in his program and proved to be a great asset in the pursuit of his dream. He was mainly observed his natural curiosity and ability to grasp complex concepts and this made his fellow students to respect him and his teacher to admire him. However, it was not a very easy journey that he completed. The continuation program itself, despite being seen as a light at the end of the tunnel, faced incredibly stubborn systemic issues throughout. The government had a tendency of not providing the schools with constant money thus classes being severally disrupted when the teachers were not paid. There were severe supply chain challenges, and due to the absence of some of the amenities the students had to make do with what they had.

But the hatred and frustrations never grew on Azimi's mind. He had to become responsible for forming study groups outside class and sometimes he would become the teacher under the tree when there was no classroom. These sessions became a source of life for many peer students who discovered not only a classmate in Azimi but a leader, and a man who would listen to them.

His determination for success was, however challenged when his family ran into financial problems. An especially unfavourable year had again destroyed their crops, which was barely enough to feed the family not to mention educating him. One day he thought of leaving school all altogether but the feeling of rejecting his dreams made him sick. And it was when he was in such a turmoil of doubts that his mother intervened.

"You've come too far to give up now," she said, her voice firm but gentle. "We'll find a way."

The resolute remarks of her kindled the desire in him anew. Azimi started working in many part-time jobs after school for he did everything right from carrying loads at the market to assisting the village folk in their farming. The extra income was not lot but it devised a sufficient amount to continue, so he stayed on. He spent his nights reading under the light of a kerosene lamp whose flames he was as stubborn as. The continuation program not only enlightened Azimi but also introduced him to influential role models who helped him or her form perspectives toward life. Among his teachers who took a special interest in him was called Mr. Eze, a man who possessed so much wisdom and was so passionate about his work although he despised so much the vices, which the developing society's education system was replete with.

"Azimi," Mr. Eze said one afternoon after class, "you are one of those with a special gift not only in the classroom but you have the potential to view life more broadly." This system is your enemy, don't let it dictate how far you can go."

These words are very profound to Azimi. Mr. Eze introduced education to the young man, not as an escape from poverty (something he well understood), but as a life- and community-changing tool. After school, we would linger and discuss topics ranging from

our crops to our rights. During these conversations, Azimi shared his future plans, and his visions gradually became reality.

As he excelled academically, Azimi also became more involved in his community. He started teaching younger children basic reading and arithmetic, often using the notes he had painstakingly copied during his own lessons. These informal classes, held under the open sky, became a source of pride for the village. Parents who had once dismissed education as a luxury now began to see its value through the progress of their children. Azimi's growing reputation extended beyond his village, drawing the attention of local leaders and administrators. One day, he was invited to speak at a regional education forum, an event that brought together students, teachers, and policymakers to discuss the challenges facing the continuation program.

When the candidate was on the stage, he or she could feel the nervous and the thrilled at the same time as Azimi. He made some recommendations with regard to the program success and failure stories. He narrated his neighbours' past and present and their success and failures, he spoke on how more funding needed to be given to support education for children no child should be left behind. Instead, when he finished his speech, the auditorium rose to their feet to show their appreciation by giving him a standing ovation, and some participants came to his table to congratulate him and others to express that he was brave to have to say something like that. There was one from the School of Agriculture who advised him to apply for this school. This meant that chances of attending such a reputable university were out of the equation, but Azimi was more than willing to take a chance. Getting a position with the company was not easy because it demanded not only documents that proved academic achievements but also a written statement of intent and goals in the company. Azimi worked all night to compose a confessional-style essay detailing his story and his plans for the future. Weeks later, he received the news he had been waiting for: he had been accepted. It was an emotional time when Azimi finally decided to visit School of Agriculture. People came out in droves and saw him off with what can only be described as pride; gifts of yams, coconuts and crafted bits. His mother extended her arms towards him and there were tears, love and encouragement flowing from her lips.

The transfer to the School of Agriculture I think was quite thrilling and at the same time stressful. It comprised of an armed security personnel and had large, well designed modern structures compounded by beautiful gardens and equipment. It was a world away from the continuation program and as Azimi strolled across the college grounds he couldn't help but wonder at the change. However, the ordeal was still not over. Azimi also recalls that the taught curriculum was challenging, and, at times, he could barely compete with learners from richer schools, many of whom went to competitive secondary schools. The social relations were also challenging: being from the rural area he suffered from interpersonal

discrimination from those who saw him as inferior because of his background.

To these challenges, Azimi said the same tenacity that saw him complete the continuation program prepared him for everything. He studied many hours in the library in textbooks and research papers and asked instructors if he had a problem. His commitment was rewarded and despite the additional hours that he was spending studying he became one of the best working students of his batch.

In addition to academics, Azimi made himself very active within the school. He was able to join several student associations since he wanted to surround himself with fellows who were engaged in issues of social justice and change. Together they initiated workshops for the farmer's multi-crop cultivation, literacy campaigns in villages, and lobbying for the better sort of grants for education.

One of the most transformative experiences of Azimi's time at the School of Agriculture was his participation in a leadership development program. The program, led by renowned educators and industry leaders, challenged students to think critically about the role of leadership in addressing societal issues. Through interactive sessions and real-world case studies, Azimi honed his skills in communication, collaboration, and strategic thinking.

The goals and dream of Azimi for the future gradually defined over the period of months and years. He developed the psychology of a student who is able and willing to contribute positively and transform the society positively. His transition from the grounds of his village to the catalogued School of Agriculture represented the story of hope in face of many odds.

This means that Azimi's graduation was more than just the climax of his journey, but of all those who came along side to help him through the tough times. His mother who was beaming with pride watched him graduated as he went forward to receive his diploma. The loud applause of the auditorium resonated more than a success story in terms of his education; it was about his hard work, persistence and rising above the odds. Since Azimi take the diploma in his hands and was standing on the stage, he realized the full sense of gratitude and the mission he had. He could only realize that there was a long way to go. Within the realms of the campus gates, there were issues awaiting a solution but outside there was a wealth of potential in bringing about change. After gaining his education Azimi felt quite hopeful and ready to begin a new life, he saw that he had to get up from the ashes and face the future.

Chapter

3

LEADERSHIP IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

A lot of preparation for the leadership positions that Azimi has held goes back even before his joining the School of Agriculture. It was war born of effort, it was steel moulded by determination and it has character distilled by ambition. From his village, in the fields, and especially in the continuation program, something had taught him well the conditions of the deprived and the unprivileged elite. What he understood leadership to be is not about position, status, glamour, or glory, it's about service, honesty and the ability to speak the truth to power.

When the time for the elections for the presidency of the Student Union Government (SUG), Azimi was not interested to run. He had witnessed how vile the position was, which used to be a noble ground for humanity cause. Previous presidents of the union had an indelicate habit of considering the funds of the organization as their own and using the cash to butter up a key bureaucrat or to pay for other personal trappings. Of course, Azimi quickly rationalized that he could be of more help to his fellow students by simply preparing himself academically and mentoring others on the side. However, other learners had different plans in mind. They had seen Azimi deal with all that was wrong with student culture and leadership on this campus with courage and determination, fighting for justice even when he was the only one left standing. Whenever controversies emerged concerning the distribution of classrooms, or unequal grading system, they seek the assistance of Azimi. That and the fact that he was good at listening and was always cool headed made him a leader even if he wasn't the captain.

One evening Azimi was studying under a mango tree that single complements the entire compound of the campus, looking at his lecture notes, there approached a group of students. As I expected their representative didn't take their time to make their stand, their representative was a young and passionate woman named Bola. "We have threats, Azimi, we need you to run," she said her voice strong enough but full of concern.

Azimi looked up, startled. "Run for what?"

"For president," Bola said. "In my opinion the union needs an actual representative for the students, a person who will not betray the students the minute he or she enters the office." The group looked happy, hopeful, and with understanding as they nodded at each statement made. Azimi was a thoughtful man and, for a moment or two, he considered what they said as opposed to the thoughts he was harbouring. So, in fact, the presidency was not only a source of power; it was a war zone. He would be surrounded by people who would be unhappy with change because they profited from the current system, and leadership entailed giving what many could not afford to give.

As he saw the group of students in front of him, the faces of which could embody the fight and dream of a larger society, he found the change within himself. These were the same people he had been learning with in class, the same people who stood through

overcrowding in hostels and constraint in resources. In what way could he stamp down for them when they had helplessly entrusted themselves in his hands?

And by the time the group dispersed, Azimi soon made his decision. He would run not for the title but for being part of the service.

The campaign was like something Azimi had never seen in terms of publicity before. This information eventually reached the ears of students all over the campus; they took it as a topic of discussion in classes as well as in hostels. His rivals, who had supporters from some influential administrators, ridiculed him as an ignorant about the realities of the political power game. But Azimi was undeterred.

His campaign slogan was basic yet profound. He did not favour fairly large posters and colourful slogans, utilizing captivating imagery; instead, he opted for the student mass. He wandered for hours in hostels and the cafeteria, and attended late night study sessions. His message was clear: leadership should not be identity based but being a servant.

One evening Azimi found himself on the stage in front of a full house during debating event of an electoral committee. His opponents started making their proposals, which included radical upheavals and vast construction projects. During her turn to speak, Azimi closed his eyes, breathed deeply then ventured to open them and speak. "I will not lie to you and claim I can deliver things I know I cannot," he started in a strong calm tone. "What I can promise you is this: The issues that I will champion should I be elected include, transparency, accountability and fairness. You will be able to express your concerns and be assured that will be attended to in detail. Leadership is not self serving; it is giving back in the best way possible.

The students clapped their hands, with his words seem to strike a chord to those students who were fed up with the lip service. At the end of the debate, one could tell that Azimi was on to something. This election day the students' attitude in the campus resembled a bee hive. Students moved forward to vote and as they were doing so the conversation ranged from one telling the other what they thought will happen. Azimi when his name was announced later that evening let out loud cheer from the audience. He had triumphed overwhelmingly, which could be seen as the confidence people of students vested in him.

His victory was celebrated with a modest gathering of friends and supporters, but Azimi's mind was already racing with the challenges ahead. The union's finances were in disarray, with missing records and unpaid bills casting a shadow over its operations. Relations with the administration were strained, and student morale was at an all-time low. Azimi knew that he was stepping into a storm, but he was ready to face it head-on. From his first day in office, Azimi made it clear that his administration would be different. He began by conducting a thorough audit of the union's accounts, enlisting the help of trusted peers with

backgrounds in accounting and finance. The findings were sobering: years of mismanagement had left the union on the brink of insolvency. Azimi wasted no time in addressing the issue, implementing strict financial controls and prioritizing transparency in all transactions.

Nevertheless, these changes were not well received. The halves of the old order felt threatened by Azimi's efforts and started to spurn his efforts. There were letters on the notice boards of his campus alleging him to have embezzled some money belonging to the college and this triggered widespread rumors of his inefficiency at his work. It was to Azimi's credit that instead of getting angry, he reacted with urgency. He called for directly students' meeting, to show the financial information of the union and answer their potential inquiries. Facing all the critical audience, Azimi explained the results of the audit; the intended changes; and each of the questions posing in detail and in a concise manner. Finally, at the end of this meeting people themselves changed their side. Many of the students who had once questioned his capability stood up for him – all because of basic understanding of transparent accountability. Slowly but surely as the weeks merged into months changes in Azimi's administration started to appear. He bargained with the administration to hire new library items' and better hostel amenities' funds. He started a scholarship programme for the needy and mobilised finances through appeals to one and another alumnus and a would-be patron. And he created a programme where students in particular grade would be required to be grouped with students in a lower grade to make them feel like they are in a big family. However, the road was not without hurdles imposed by Black et al., (2002). In this way, Azimi's organizational integrity made him many powerful and well-connected foes in and out of the union. He had threats, intimidations, and even attempts to discredit his administration by making bureaucratic loops and reporting him fake cases. But at the same time, he was not willing to backing down, and strength from students he was helping.

Perhaps the most memorable of the considered episodes connected with the activity of Azimi as the president of the university took place on the occasion of the protest actions against the sharp increase in the tuition fees on the campus. The announcement had caused uproar among students, mainly because many of them were struggling to meet the current fees. Finally, as the situation worsens, Azimi was appointed to be at the middle of the conflict to manage tensions between teachers and students, as well as to maintain communication with the university management.

Azimi appealed for reason in the students' protest repeating the message which says that the anger should be used constructively. He arranged some more meetings with the administration, providing data on the financial problems of students, and possible ways of overcoming them. This was possible when the administration agreed to stall the fee increment and instead look for other ways through which they can get more revenue. It was

a victory joyously celebrated across the campus and firmly established the leadership of Azimi as a man who could mobilise the faculty and get things done without resorting to a war of attrition. However, for Azimi it was partly a happy moment. He understood well that troubles waiting for the student body were only a reflection of much broader problems that went far beyond the campus perimeter. Coming to the end of his term, Azimi looked for insights to be gleaned from the experience. Executive authority, he said, applied was not about authoritarianism but about enabling. It was about talking but not only, it was about hearing, examining and if it is uncomfortable facing the mirror.

When he retired and stepped down to make way for his successor, Azimi was doing it with passion and meaning. He also re-established credibility of union and made a generation of students feel that something can actually change at their university. When he was closing the door to the office which he associated most with one of the most difficult periods, he moved out with the confidence that his story was still far from over.

Chapter

4

A NEW WORLD,

OLD STRUGGLES

Azimi's return to Nigeria is a sweet home coming, albeit a sweet smell of success. On the plane, there had been so many things that he was looking forward to and so much thinking to do, his heart pulled in so many different directions by the sheer weight of what was being expected of him. He had lived in enigmatic United States for the years, accumulating knowledge and strategies to execute the changes. As seen, it was easier to anticipate hardships when seated in an airplane than when the actual facts hit one's face as soon as he or she alights in Lagos for instance when the person steps out in the streets of Lagos what meets the person's raw senses are the hot weather, noise of hooting cars, businesspeople and pedestrians rush through. It was the precise opposite of the highly disciplined, almost clinical lifestyle that he had known in the West. But this was home—the soil that had moulded him, the people who had put determination in his chest cavity, and the land whose strife gave purpose to him.

The first place his visit took him was his village, which, he noticed was much as he had left it. The red colour of the roads I saw, the kind of noises I heard from children playing shoeless, the sight of women carrying baskets of crops on their heads all made me recall that country I visited sometime ago. His mother hugged him tightly as she cried with gladness most of her finger tips were occupied with thorns from farm works. Years of bitter storm had struck on her but there still remained a building; a house of compromise. The next few

weeks, Azimi was sleeping to regain his senses and to reconnect with his Iranian background. He toured the farms around the area, saw the plight of the villagers, and listened to them. The challenges were as he remembered; fluctuations in climatic conditions, poor access to seeds and inputs, and an economic market structure that was not good on the middlemen. The elders discussed these questions in a sort of fatalistic manner, while the young men and women, after a short and impatient glance at Azimi, whose ideas they could hardly follow but whom they accepted as their leader, listened with curiosity and a certain mistrust.

This was something that shocked the man after getting used to living in the United States a reality of getting around in rural Nigeria. Whereas he had spent the past few days wading through conservation agriculture and Bill Gates' economic theories, these farmers were still struggling to represent voice to their problems as simple as accessing water to irrigate their crops, accessing markets to get reasonable price for their produce, and surviving off season. This placed into work context had never left a profound impact as it did now that you watch a system in practice that is far from your work as a theoretician; Azimi awoke from his reverie and he knew that change would take more than just knowledge, it will take time, and faith and most importantly understanding of the system that needs to be changed.

Three years prior to the Turkmenistan contract, their first work under Azimi was a relatively minor but meaningful endeavour. He enlisted a team of farmers to help him practice one he has been learning from his study tour in another country. This system was unique, cheap, and orientated to accomplish the maximum of the water potential. First of all, farmers were sceptical, annoyingly used to approaches from people like the outsiders proposing them solutions to issues which have always been with the farmers. But Azimi wasn't an outsider, he was one of them for him to be received with such coldness. He understood them and their challenges and undertook the project with an openness nobody else did.

The results were encouraging. After few months of experimenting they gain better yields on their farming activities. It was possible to plant during the dry season because of the better irrigation system; which ensured them of income throughout the year. Some of the farmers from the neighbouring villages heard about the project, and later, many farmers from the region came to get advice from Azimi. However, when success happened, it came with its troubles. The improvement of yields pulled the eye of middlemen desiring to benefit from the enhanced farmers' returns. From the experience, Azimi could not notice the effective solve of agricultural issues, the chain has to change completely. He engaged other leaders to form cooperation for farmers, which would combine their resources and get better prices of their produce. The reason why Azimi was able to make some attempts towards reform was because the people who gained profit from the former kind of rule were aggressive towards any changes. He had empowered teams and groups to innovate and the corrupt

officials as well as the unscrupulous traders viewed his efforts as an intrusion to their ill gotten wealth. They accused him of being an agent of the foreign power, conducting his projects in order to carve out power. Azimi could not agree more to these arguments, though he did not seem to have any worries at all. He knew only too well that rare indeed is the revolution that is popular, and that an attempt to challenge the status quo is almost by definition going to provoke an adverse reaction.

The difficulties were not limited to these ones. The social pressures were very high. Nigeria's previous administration which suffered inefficiency and corruption issues lagged in his support. A lot of the funding and infrastructural development pledges were never realized thereby making Azimi work with very meagre support usually provided by the goodwill of the community. Nevertheless, he did not lose the view of the goal despite all these barriers.

One of the turning points in Azimi's journey came during a visit to a neighbouring town. He had been invited to speak at a community meeting about his work with the farmers. As he addressed the crowd, sharing stories of success and lessons learned, a young woman named Fatima stood up to speak. Fatima was a widow with three children, struggling to make ends meet through farming. She spoke of the challenges she faced, from securing loans to accessing markets, and pleaded for solutions that would empower women like her. Her words struck a chord with Azimi, reminding him of his mother's resilience and the countless sacrifices she had made.

Fatima's story inspired Azimi to broaden the scope of his work. He launched a program specifically aimed at supporting women in agriculture, providing them with access to training, resources, and microloans. The program quickly gained traction, empowering women across the region to take control of their livelihoods and contribute to their communities.

The impact of Azimi's work began to ripple beyond the local level. Journalists and NGOs took notice, and his initiatives were featured in national newspapers and radio programs. Invitations to speak at conferences and workshops poured in, giving Azimi a platform to share his vision and advocate for systemic change. Despite these successes, Azimi knew that the road ahead was long. The challenges facing Nigeria were deeply rooted, and progress was often slow and uneven. Corruption remained a pervasive issue, sapping resources and undermining trust. Infrastructure gaps continued to hinder development, and the education system struggled to prepare the next generation for the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Another cost of the study was evidently the human toll of health risks to Azimi. They discouraged independent thinking, constantly made him travel long distances, keep awkward hours and work without any time to recover. Sometimes, he felt that he didn't do

enough to make a difference; that sometimes the load was too heavy to be borne. But in these moments of doubt he remembered those farmers whose income increased two and more times, those women who started their own business, those whom the family could send to schools because they have money for that.

Azimi was one evening at his family home watching the sunset over the fields when his mother arrived to find him. She looked at him with pride and touched his shoulder with her hand.

“I have done so much more than I ever thought possible,” she said. But remember, the journey is not for the destination. Nice, it means it is about lives you make along the journey.”

This stopped him immediately, and her words rang in his head – it was those words in fact which reminded him why he did this in the first place. Azimi realized that the work he was doing was not mere patching up of systems or ticking off of the box as many organizations and leaders do; it was to leave a legacy of hope for the people of Afghanistan; a hope that they could farm and feed their dependents. Azimi gazed over the fields, indeed a lot greener and more productive than before, and felt renewed. He was not the boy who once walked miles attending a continuation program, the student who was trying to figure out the world after he landed in a foreign country. He was a chief, an innovator and a mediator between two time zones.

The challenges of this new world were many, but Azimi was ready to face them with the same resilience and determination that had carried him through every struggle. He knew that his journey was far from over, but he also knew that every step forward brought him closer to the vision of a better future—a future where old struggles gave way to new opportunities, and where the seeds of hope he had planted would continue

to grow for generations to come.

Chapter

5

TURNING PAIN INTO PURPOSE

Soon the work of Azimi instigated organizations started to expand throughout the region and Azimi's days became chock full of activities. The hardships were unrelenting but the frustrated taught him that there was no time to lose in his work. Each farmer happily holding his harvest, each family that had been pulled out of the hell of poverty, each child at school satisfied him. Yet, for all his achievements, Azimi couldn't ignore the lingering question: Was this enough? He often did this when dogs didn't bark and cocks didn't crow, when the

night was yielding to the morning and he was alone with his thoughts at the front door of his family home, drinking tea. These were moments for self evaluation not only to measure what he has become but also why he was doing it. The answers always brought him back to one spot—the hurting.

Azimi had spent much of his life wrestling with the weight of systemic failures: the funeral of his father, the suffering of his mother, war for education, and loneliness as an alien in a distant country. He said that all these experiences had helped to shape him but did not really get a hold of him. But he had been able to turn his pain into work and to change his suffering into motivation for work. This alternative owes the program for women in agriculture he came up with after meeting Fatima, which had expanded so much further than he imagined. Beginning with a few workshops in his home village, he had managed to set up training workshops and microloan schemes in other states. Women who initially found themselves in challenges of sourcing for meal for their families now were operating business, offering employment to other and educating their children.

One of these women was Amina, 40-year-old widow, with four children had been at the verge of losing her small farm to which the intervention of Azimi's team prevented. By training and a small loan, Amina was able not only to expand the kind of crops that she was cultivating; but also, to improve irrigation; and, access other markets outside the village. In one year, she doubled her income, cleared her loan balance, and empowered young mothers in her neighbourhood. Worthy of note here is that although Azimi saw Amina's success as a victory, it was also a constant reassertion of how other people like Amina were being constrained by the social structure. While success stories like Amina's exist, there were many more women who continue experiencing marginalization and getting ensnared in further vulnerability to poverty. Azimi was well aware of the fact that to increase the reach many folds, the problem has to be resolved at its core – corruption, inequity and lack of resources.

Azimi's work led him many times in to confrontation with influential power actors at the local and national level. Those in office view such activity as a direct threat to their authority as middlemen, who benefited from exploitation of farmers, resisted his attempts at change. The culture of intolerance towards Azimi included smear campaigns, threats, and even attempts to scuttle his projects. But he was not new to it as Azimi had faced many challenges. He used the previous experience, recalling that he had never been a weak-willed man and that he had always come through the tough times. He built himself a great team of hardworking people who had similar ethos as him, meaning that no matter how much resistance was faced, he continued his course.

One of the most significant challenges Azimi faced was the lack of infrastructure. Roads, storage facilities, and reliable electricity were critical for the success of his initiatives, but

these were often in short supply. Azimi began advocating for infrastructure development, using his growing platform to draw attention to the needs of rural communities. He worked with local governments, NGOs, and private sector partners to secure funding and resources for key projects, often navigating complex bureaucracies and political dynamics to achieve his goals. Despite the challenges, Azimi's work began to gain recognition on a national and international scale. His innovative approach to community development, combining grassroots engagement with evidence-based strategies, earned him invitations to speak at conferences and participate in global forums. He used these opportunities to amplify the voices of the communities he served, sharing their stories and advocating for systemic change.

Many people thought Azimi had a big plan of changing the face of agriculture alone but he saw it otherwise. He embraced education as the bedrock of the ground-breaking development and was fully persuaded that the next generations simply ought to be empowered out of poverty. For this reason, he initiated a scholarship fund that would educate and mentor young people in eligible disadvantaged groups.

Tunde was one of the lucky beneficiaries of this scholarship; this is a shy, intelligent girl from a very remote village who wanted to study engineering. Fortunately, with the help of Azimi's financial support, Tunde went to an excellent secondary school where he quickly got very good grades and the confidence to go for his dreams. The outcome in Tunde's case was a clear demonstration of how education has the potential of changing lives for the better and as such his story was motivation to anyone willing to listen in his community.

With the growth of his activities, Azimi's knowledge of the challenges of change at the system level increased as well. He understood that poverty and inequality cannot be attended by solving only through programmatic and policy intervention, but organising cultural change. What this entailed was a questioning of existing paradigms and practices that continued to fuel structures of marginalisation and oppression, whether based on gender, ethnicity or status, down to practices of corruption. And for this reason, Azimi started mobilising traditional authorities, religious representatives, and local elders to campaign for change from below. Many of these dialogues were difficult because they involved the confrontation with prejudice and, therefore, framed decisions that were taken over time. However, about these discussions, Azimi was polite and personal, he knew that meaningful changes could only be realized through convincing and cooperation.

Azimi's journey was not without personal sacrifices. The demands of his work often left little time for rest or relationships. His friends and family worried about the toll it was taking on him, both physically and emotionally. But Azimi was driven by a sense of purpose that outweighed the costs.

One evening, during a rare moment of respite, Azimi's mother confronted him. "You've done so much, Azimi," she said, her voice tinged with both pride and concern. "But you can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself, or you won't be able to take care of others."

Her words stayed with him, prompting Azimi to reflect on the importance of balance and self-care. He began to carve out moments for himself, whether it was reading a book, taking a walk, or simply enjoying a meal without interruption. These small acts of self-preservation allowed him to recharge and approach his work with renewed energy and focus. As Azimi's impact grew, so did his vision for the future. He began to imagine a Nigeria where every child had access to quality education, every farmer could earn a fair income, and every community could thrive. This vision was ambitious, but Azimi was undeterred. He knew that the road ahead would be long and fraught with challenges, but he also knew that every step forward brought him closer to his goal.

Azimi's legacy was not just in the programs he created or the policies he influenced, but in the lives he touched and the hope he inspired. From the farmers who had doubled their yields to the students who had pursued their dreams, his impact was felt far and wide.

As he stood on the stage of an international development conference, addressing an audience of policymakers, activists, and academics, Azimi felt a surge of gratitude and determination. "Our pain is not a weakness," he said, his voice steady and resolute. "It is our strength. It is what connects us, what drives us, and what will guide us toward a better future."

The room erupted in applause, but Azimi's mind was already racing with ideas for the next phase of his journey. He knew that his work was far from over, but he also knew that he was not alone. Together, with the communities he served and the allies he had found along the way, Azimi was ready to continue turning pain into purpose and building a world where everyone had the opportunity to thrive.

Chapter

6

EMPOWERING

THE SILENCED

The sun was hot that day, particularly at about 3 PM, but the crowd that was gathering at the village square hardly paid a heed. All the genders, all the ages, from young boys to elderly men and women, were anxious and hopeful, standing in the room silently. Many embraced the sides of buildings that surrounded them, and some rested beside the

structures on the ground with looks of concern and wonder. In the middle of all these were Azimi, the mainspring of strength and leadership, dominating the others by influence if not by words.

This man had come back to this village for a reason—to learn, to analyse, and to establish. It was a place much like the one which he was from, which stifled voices behind walls of systemic apathy and tradition. Azimi understood that the problems here were as core as these old baobab trees in the ground yet it is also underneath the surface which remains unoccupied. He took his time to speak to the crowd; his voice sharp, but determined. This applies to the following end goal: “I am here today not to instruct you but to listen” You understand your challenges more than anyone in the world does. Collectively one can find a solution to this.

They stopped for a while and then one lady stood up and introduced her as Aisha. She was barely built but her voice had the timbre of age and struggle. “We start the day early and end it late, all to realize we get nothing in return. These middlemen reap most of our earnings while we are left with paltry amount of resource thus barely feeding our children. What can be done about this?”

Azimi did not argue, he simply looked earnest at the man. Aisha, your story is one that I have heard in many places but it is one I have realised can actually be changed. Now imagine if I told you there exists another approach that will help you regain that control and make sure you are the one to benefit from hard work in the end, and your family as well? In the audience, even the whispers began to increase volumes and expectance started to bloom. Azimi proceeded to clarify what a cooperative was, which is an organization through which the community Control Azimi described a cooperative as another entity that would enable members of the community to bring their resources together in order to buy products directly from sellers at reasonable prices and without resorting to the services of middlemen who only sought to take advantage of the community members. He mentioned other villages where such schemes run have actually changed lives, farmers who are earning double what they used to earn, women who are owning their own businesses. However, as we all know, not all of them were swayed into the bandwagon. An elder man known as Umar moved ahead of the other members, his face framed by deep lined wrinkles that testified of disbelief. Azimi, these are good ideas which look pleasant to our ears but we have heard many individuals come with such suggestions claiming to bring the change. Sir, how can we be sure this will not be

Azimi looked directly into Jamie's eyes while making his reply. “Umar, I can tell you that is may not be easy and that you are likely not going to get everything you want right away. What I can guarantee to you is I will stay with you these steps. This is not me alone; this is all of us making something that will last for long or exist for a long period of time.

The meeting ended with a tentative agreement to establish the cooperative, but Azimi knew that gaining trust would take time. He spent the following weeks living in the village, working alongside the farmers in their fields, and joining the women as they wove baskets and prepared meals. Through these shared experiences, he began to build relationships and earn the respect of the community. One evening, as Azimi sat by the fire with Aisha and a group of other women, the conversation turned to the struggles they faced. Aisha spoke of her husband's death and the burden of raising three children on her own. Another woman, Mariam, shared her frustration at being excluded from village meetings where decisions about farming and resources were made.

Azimi listened intently, his heart heavy with their stories. "You have endured so much," he said softly. "But your strength is undeniable. Imagine what could happen if that strength was channelled into leadership, into decision-making that benefits everyone."

The women exchanged glances, a mixture of doubt and intrigue on their faces. Aisha broke the silence. "Leadership? That has always been for the men. What place do we have in such matters?"

Azimi leaned forward, his voice filled with conviction. "Aisha, leadership is not about who sits at the head of the table—it's about who makes the table stronger. Your voices matter, and they deserve to be heard."

Believing in his words, slowly but sure, Azimi's ideas started to sink in. These women began meeting so as to deliberate on their ideas and devise on ways of handling any issue, this formed a collective that formed the core operational structure of the cooperative in question. They started barter trade with the local business people, initiated the formation of a saving sharing scheme for the purpose of financing petty businesses, and even started to sponsor the young women of childbearing age on how to earn an independent living in the village. There is a scene when once shy Mariam with difficulty finding her voice take a stand in front of the council to demand better rights to clean water. Kafka's was influential when it came to speaking, and as she passionately and logically made her argument she had the council bow to her decision. Success began to take place for Mariam and in a short span of time women all over the village started embracing themselves for jobs they have never dreamt of before. They do not only become members but powerful members, who take part in activities and outcomes which created positive changes in educational systems, in health sectors, and in infrastructural developments.

As the cooperative expanded, it was also a time when Azimi started to identify youth as a sector who was also denied their voice. It also became apparent that in most of the villages, the young people were regarded as mere beneficiaries of their elders' decisions since they were denied any chance to grow. Azimi wanted to change that.

He arranged training sessions through which young people could master skills such as: farming, computer literate among others. He also provided terrains for them to champion their opinions and be fully involved in organizational deliberation. Among the many young leaders who were being nurtured through such initiatives the most outstanding was Ibrahim; -a 17-year-old technophobe. Self-taught in repairing smartphones and always looking for the best solution to what he encountered, Ibrahim was a mechanical engineer. Ibrahim therefore under the tutelage of Azimi produced a mobile application that assisted farmers in gauging the weather as well as estimating the prices on the market; this grew to become famous in the region.

Azimi saw in Ibrahim a glimpse of the future he was working toward—a future where young people were not just recipients of change but active drivers of it. But the journey was not without setbacks. As the cooperative's influence grew, it attracted the attention of those who felt threatened by its success. Corrupt officials and powerful middlemen began to push back, using every tool at their disposal to undermine Azimi's work.

One night, as Azimi prepared to leave the village after a long day, he received an anonymous message warning him to abandon the cooperative or face the consequences. It was not the first threat he had received, but it was a stark reminder of the risks involved in challenging the status quo.

Azimi's response was resolute. "If we give in to fear, we let them win," he told his team. "This is not just about one cooperative or one village—it's about breaking a cycle that has held us all back for far too long." Despite the challenges, Azimi's determination never wavered. He continued to advocate for the silenced, amplifying their voices at every opportunity. His work began to gain recognition beyond the village, attracting the attention of national and international organizations.

One particularly memorable moment came when Azimi was invited to speak at a global forum on sustainable development. Standing before an audience of policymakers, activists, and academics, he shared the stories of Aisha, Mariam, and Ibrahim, weaving their experiences into a powerful narrative about the transformative power of empowerment.

"Our world is full of silenced voices," Azimi said in his loud voice making the others in the hall to hear him clearly. So when do we listen, when do we open the doors for those voices to be heard; we unleash a power that can transform everything. What I'm showcasing here may be credible work and can happen in any village if only we have the guts to believe in it.

People stood up as a sign of respect and appreciation to what Azimi had to say to them. Yet to Azimi it was not about the award, but it was about the people helped, about the communities which got their spirit.

This is exactly the scene that met Azimi as he got home – children at play on the school compound, women bartering goods at the market, youths undertaking projects that signifies hope to a better future. He stopped and just looked around; he had a perfectly content expression on his face with just the barest hint of a smile. Indeed, the trip had been all about testing the relationships strains and often times breaking them so as to rebuild them again all over, with an acceptance that there will always be hope for the better.

It was clear to Azimi that a lot remained to be done with the work at hand from one place to another. Nevertheless, controversy still continued, cultures still discriminated within equal platforms. Yet when he glanced at the vivid and developing civilized population lying in front of him, he felt he regained the needed strength.

“To empower the voiceless” is not just giving voices to He imagined himself saying the words “Empowering the silenced” is not only the act of granting them a say. It is as much about social justice and human rights as it is about just plain telling a story: It is about giving everybody a chance to be heard.

Chapter

7

THE BATTLE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The air in the village was thick with the scent of the season's first harvest. The cooperative had achieved what many once thought impossible—turning struggling farmers into thriving entrepreneurs. Markets that had once been controlled by exploitative middlemen were now flourishing under the collective power of the people. The schools that were once empty were now filled with the laughter of children who could finally dream beyond the limitations of poverty. But Azimi had always known that success was not an endpoint; it was merely another beginning.

At the heart of his growing movement lay a fundamental question: How do we ensure this lasts?

For the first time in years, he found himself struggling with doubt—not about the impact of his work but about its future. He had built something extraordinary, but could it stand the test of time? Would it still thrive long after he was gone? As the cooperative expanded across regions, new challenges emerged. Some were logistical—supply chain issues, price fluctuations, and gaps in infrastructure. Others were more dangerous—political resistance, corruption, and power struggles that threatened to undo everything he had worked for.

And then there was the most pressing challenge of all: dependency. Many communities had grown accustomed to Azimi's leadership. He was their strategist, their negotiator, their

voice when things went wrong. What would happen if he stepped away? Would the movement survive without him? He had built a system designed to empower, not to create reliance. And yet, his presence had become a crutch for too many.

The first real signs of trouble came when the cooperative in Kano began to falter. What had once been one of the strongest branches was now struggling with infighting and poor financial decisions. A heated meeting was called, and Azimi made the long trip to hear their concerns. Inside the packed hall, members sat on the edges of their seats, their frustration clear. The meeting began with small complaints—delayed payments, problems with distribution—but soon escalated into accusations.

A tall, imposing man named Gambo stood, his arms crossed tightly. “Azimi, we respect you, but this cooperative is failing us. The middlemen are coming back, and we are barely breaking even.”

Another voice chimed in. “We used to rely on you to negotiate the best prices. But now that you've expanded,

we're left to fend for ourselves!”

Azimi let their words sink in before speaking. “I understand your frustration,” he said carefully. “But tell me—was the goal for me to lead forever? Or was the goal for you to lead yourselves?”

There was silence. Some avoided his gaze, others shifted uncomfortably.

“You cannot build something sustainable if you are waiting for one man to fix all your problems,” Azimi continued, his voice measured but firm. “I will always fight for this movement, but I cannot carry it alone. It must outgrow me. It must belong to you.”

Gambo exhaled, rubbing his forehead. “So, what do we do?”

“We take back control,” Azimi said. “We restructure leadership at every level, train new negotiators, and build a system that does not depend on any one person.”

Over the following months, Azimi worked tirelessly with his team to reinforce the foundation of the cooperative. Decentralization became the priority. Every region would have its own governing body, its own local leadership, and its own financial autonomy. Workshops were conducted to train members in negotiation, logistics, and governance. The goal was clear—no one should be irreplaceable, not even Azimi himself.

It was a brutal transition. Some resisted the idea of greater responsibility, while others struggled to adapt. But as the months went by, the results began to show. In Kano, Gambo stepped up as a leader, proving himself as a sharp negotiator. In Maiduguri, a young

woman named Salma revolutionized financial management within the cooperative, ensuring that profits were reinvested wisely. Across the country, new leaders emerged, each bringing their own strengths to the movement. Azimi watched with a mix of pride and relief. The burden was shifting. Slowly, but surely, the movement was no longer just his—it was theirs.

But just as Azimi was beginning to feel hope for the future, a new battle emerged—one that threatened not just his movement, but his safety. The political elite had been watching. For years, Azimi's cooperative had been a thorn in the side of those who profited from corruption and exploitation. But as long as he remained a regional force, they had tolerated him. Now, however, his movement was national. His cooperative had disrupted powerful markets. His advocacy was influencing policies. His name was being spoken with admiration—and fear—in circles that controlled the country's wealth.

And then the threats began.

It started subtly—calls warning him to step back, veiled messages urging him to reconsider his expansion. But when he refused to slow down, things escalated. The first attack came in the form of a smear campaign. Government friendly newspapers published articles questioning his integrity, accusing him of using the cooperative for personal gain. Fake corruption charges were whispered among officials. Some of his key allies were approached with bribes, hoping to turn them against him. Azimi knew what this was: a warning.

The next move came more directly. One evening, as he returned home from a late-night meeting, he found a note slipped under his door. Leave this fight, or we will end it for you.

Azimi stared at the words for a long time. Fear settled deep in his bones, but it did not break him. He had seen corruption before. He had fought it in student leadership, in the markets, and in the villages. He had survived storms that were meant to destroy him. And he would not stop now.

But this time, Azimi knew he could not fight alone. He reached out to his allies—trusted government officials, international organizations, journalists willing to report the truth. He did not hide. Instead, he went public.

At a press conference, Azimi laid everything bare. The threats. The bribes. The attempts to dismantle the cooperative. He called out the corruption directly, daring them to take him down in the light of day. The backlash was immediate, but so was the support. Public outrage surged. People saw the attacks for what they were—a desperate attempt to silence a movement too powerful to control.

But the battle was far from over.

As Azimi sat in his office one evening, staring at reports detailing the latest political manoeuvres against him, he felt something shift within him. A realization. He had taken this fight as far as he could. If the cooperative was to survive, it needed more than just one man standing in front of the storm. It needed a system strong enough to withstand anything.

And so, Azimi made the hardest decision of his life.

He would step down from direct leadership.

At the next cooperative assembly, Azimi stood before thousands of members, his voice steady despite the weight of his words. “My friends, my family, we have built something that no force can destroy—not corruption, not threats, not even time itself. But a movement cannot be built on one man's shoulders alone. It must belong to all of us.”

A hush fell over the crowd as he continued. “Today, I announce my transition from leadership. I will always stand with you, always fight for you, but it is time for others to rise. It is time for the next generation to take the mantle.”

The silence stretched for a moment, then gave way to thunderous applause. Not of sadness, but of understanding. And as Azimi looked out at the sea of faces, he felt something he had not felt in years. Relief.

The battle for sustainability had been won—not through resistance, but through transformation. The cooperative stood strong. The movement had leaders who would outlive Azimi's time. The system had been fortified against the forces that sought to dismantle it. And as Azimi walked through the fields one last time as its leader, he knew, at last, that his work would endure.

Chapter

8

FIRES OF

OPPOSITION

The road to lasting change was never a straight path, nor was it without cost. Azimi had always known that challenging the status quo would invite resistance, but he had underestimated the sheer force of opposition that awaited him. For years, he had fought to uplift farmers, women, and young people—giving them the tools to stand on their own. He had built a movement that was no longer dependent on one man. Yet, for all the good he had done, there were those who saw his work as a threat rather than progress.

And now, they were coming for him.

It started with whispers—subtle warnings passed through back channels, old allies growing distant, and government officials avoiding his calls. Then, the pressure escalated. Bribes were offered to cooperative leaders, tempting them to abandon Azimi's movement in exchange for wealth and power. When persuasion failed, threats followed.

The battle lines had been drawn.

Azimi was no longer just an advocate for the people; he was a direct enemy of those who had long profited from the suffering of others. And they would do whatever it took to bring him down

The first major blow came unexpectedly.

It was a humid evening when Bala, one of Azimi's closest allies, arrived at his office with an urgent message. His face was tight with worry, his usual calm replaced by an edge of frustration.

"They're moving against us," Bala said, shutting the door behind him. "The government has frozen the cooperative's funds."

Azimi's hands tightened into fists. "On what grounds?"

"They're claiming financial mismanagement," Bala said. "Corruption charges. They've planted fake audits, forged documents—everything to make it look like we've been siphoning money."

Azimi exhaled, a slow, deliberate breath. He had seen corruption in many forms, but this was a coordinated attack—one meant to cripple the cooperative before it could solidify its influence.

"They want to starve us out," Bala continued. "Without those funds, we can't pay our workers, we can't invest in infrastructure, and we certainly can't expand."

Azimi stood, his mind already racing. "Call a meeting. Tonight. I want every regional leader on that call."

The meeting was tense. Leaders from different parts of the country joined via video call, their faces grim.

"This is an act of war," Salma, the financial director from Maiduguri, said. "They're not just freezing our funds. I've heard reports of harassment—our suppliers are being pressured to stop working with us. They're trying to strangle us from every direction."

“What's our next move?” Gambo, the cooperative leader from Kano, asked. “If we don't act fast, this could destroy everything we've built.”

Azimi looked around at the faces before him. They were frustrated, exhausted, but most of all—they were afraid. Fear was a powerful weapon, and their enemies knew how to wield it.

“We will not break,” Azimi said, his voice steady. “We've fought too hard to be silenced now. They want to starve us? Then we adapt. We build alternative funding streams, we mobilize public support, and we make sure the world knows what they are doing.”

“But what if they escalate?” Salma asked. “What if this is only the beginning?”

Azimi met her gaze. “Then we fight harder.”

The attack on the cooperative spread rapidly. Government backed media outlets began running smear campaigns, branding Azimi as a fraud—a leader who had manipulated the people for his own gain.

Newspapers carried fabricated reports, painting him as a power-hungry opportunist who had built his empire on deception. Government officials gave speeches about “restoring integrity” to agricultural reforms, using Azimi as their scapegoat.

The people who once hailed him as a hero were now conflicted. Doubt crept in. If the media, the government, and powerful voices were all saying the same thing—could it be true?

Azimi's allies urged him to stay silent. “Let it pass,” Bala advised. “The people will see through the lies in time.” But Azimi refused to stay silent.

One evening, he gathered journalists for a press conference. The room was filled with tension—microphones lined up before him, cameras flashing as he took his seat.

Azimi took a deep breath, then spoke.

“For years, we have fought for dignity. For fairness. For a system that uplifts, rather than exploits. And now, because we have succeeded, they seek to destroy us.”

His voice was calm but firm. “They tell you I am a fraud, that our cooperative is corrupt. But look around you—who has gained from this movement? The farmers. The women. The youth. We have built roads, schools, and

marketplaces—not for profit, but for the people.”

He leaned forward, locking eyes with the cameras. “But ask yourselves this—who stands to gain from silencing us? Who profits when the farmers return to poverty? When women are

stripped of their power? When young people are left without opportunity?"

A hush fell over the room.

"They have declared war on us," Azimi continued. "But they forget one thing: we are not afraid."

The next day, his words were everywhere. Social media exploded with messages of solidarity. Protesters gathered in multiple cities, demanding the unfreezing of cooperative funds. International human rights organizations released statements condemning the attack on his movement. For every lie they told, the truth fought back.

But his enemies were not done.

One night, as Azimi sat in his office, his phone buzzed with an urgent call from Leila, his Kenyan ally. Her voice was sharp with panic.

"Azimi, you need to leave the city. Now."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I just received word—an arrest warrant has been issued for you. They're coming for you, Azimi."

His stomach tightened. "On what charge?"

"Money laundering, conspiracy, fraud—you name it," she said. "They don't care if it's true. They just need you off the board."

Azimi remained silent for a long moment. He had prepared for many things, but this? This was something else entirely.

"Listen to me," Leila pressed. "Get out. Lay low. Regroup. If they arrest you, you'll disappear into their system, and they'll bury you in bureaucracy and legal nightmares."

Azimi closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. Every fiber of his being told him to stay and fight—but if he was imprisoned, how could he lead?

He grabbed a bag, stuffing in a few essentials. For the first time in his life, he ran.

The next few weeks were a blur. Azimi moved between safe houses, his location known only to a handful of trusted allies. His public appearances ceased, but the movement raged on.

And something incredible happened.

Without him at the helm, others stepped up.

Gambo led protests in Kano. Salma mobilized legal teams to challenge the freezing of funds. Bala coordinated media campaigns to keep the truth alive.

For years, Azimi had feared that his movement was too reliant on him. But now, in the face of their greatest battle, they proved him wrong.

Azimi's exile lasted three months. During that time, pressure mounted on the government. International leaders called for his safe return. The protests grew larger. The cooperative, instead of collapsing, expanded.

And then, in a dramatic reversal, the government dropped all charges. Azimi's arrest warrant was revoked, the frozen funds were released, and the attacks ceased.

They had tried to break the movement, but instead, they had strengthened it.

When Azimi returned, it was to a hero's welcome. Thousands gathered to greet him, their cheers filling the air.

But as he stood before them, he realized something.

This was no longer about him.

It never had been.

The fires of opposition had tested them, but they had emerged stronger. The movement belonged to the people now.

Azimi smiled, stepping back as his leaders—his family—stood before the crowd. They didn't need him at the center anymore. And that was exactly as it should be.

Chapter

9

SHADOWS OF DOUBT

Azimi sat alone in the dimly lit room, the quiet hum of the ceiling fan the only sound breaking the stillness. Outside, the village slept under the watchful gaze of the moon, unaware of the war raging within him. He stared at the papers on his desk—reports from the cooperative, letters of support, legal documents detailing the battle they had just won.

It should have been a moment of triumph.

Instead, all he felt was exhaustion.

The cooperative had survived the worst attack yet. The corruption charges had been dismissed, the funds unfrozen, and the movement had proven its resilience. His enemies had failed to dismantle what he had built. And yet, despite all of this, a deep sense of unease settled in his chest.

For the first time in his life, Azimi was asking himself a question he had never dared to entertain: Was it all worth it?

His body bore the scars of sleepless nights, of long battles fought in courtrooms, streets, and boardrooms. His mind was heavy with the weight of decisions that never seemed to end. And for the first time, doubt whispered in his ear.

How much longer could he do this?

Would he ever find peace?

And worse... had he sacrificed too much?

The exhaustion had been creeping in for months, slowly tightening its grip around his spirit. He had ignored it, convincing himself that his purpose was greater than his weariness. But now, in the quiet of the night, it could not be ignored.

Azimi's phone buzzed, pulling him from his thoughts. It was Bala. He hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Azimi," Bala's voice was warm but firm, "you've gone quiet. We need to talk."

"I'm fine, Bala," Azimi replied automatically, though even he didn't believe his own words.

"No, you're not," Bala sighed. "You've been carrying this fight for too long. It's time to let others carry you for a while."

Azimi leaned back, rubbing his temples. "I can't afford to

rest, Bala. There's too much at stake."

"There will always be something at stake," Bala said. "But if you burn out now, what happens then? You've given everything to this cause—your time, your energy, your life. But at what cost?"

Azimi closed his eyes. He didn't have an answer.

The question of cost haunted him over the following weeks.

The cooperative continued to expand. More regions joined, more leaders stepped up, and more policies were being influenced by their work. His absence during his time in hiding had proven that the movement could survive without him at the center.

Yet, Azimi could not shake the feeling of something missing—something slipping away from him.

One evening, as he walked through the village, he found himself stopping in front of his family home. The same home where his mother had raised him, where he had once dreamed of a future beyond the poverty that had defined his childhood.

His mother was inside, sitting by the fire, her once strong hands now frail with age.

She looked up when he entered, her eyes lighting up with warmth. “Azimi,” she said softly. “It’s been too long since you sat with me.”

Azimi swallowed, guilt settling in his chest. He knelt beside her, taking her hands in his. “I know, Mama. I’ve been... busy.”

She smiled knowingly. “Busy saving the world?”

He let out a small chuckle. “Something like that.”

His mother studied him for a long moment before speaking. “And who saves you, my son?”

Azimi looked away, his throat tightening. He had no answer.

She reached up, brushing a strand of grey hair from his forehead. “You carry so much,” she whispered. “But even the strongest tree must rest its roots, or it will fall.”

Azimi’s chest ached at her words. He had spent his entire life fighting for others, but somewhere along the way, he had forgotten to fight for himself.

As the weeks passed, Azimi tried to push forward, but the weight in his heart only grew heavier.

At the cooperative’s next leadership meeting, he sat silently as Salma, Gambo, and the others discussed expansion plans. He was proud of them, of the way they had stepped up. Yet, he felt more like an outsider than ever before.

Bala was the first to notice. After the meeting, he pulled Azimi aside. “You’ve been distant,” he said. “What’s going on?” Azimi hesitated before speaking. “I don’t know if I can keep doing this, Bala.”

Bala's expression didn't change. He had known this was coming. "Then don't," he said simply.

Azimi blinked. "What?"

"Don't keep doing it—not like this." Bala exhaled. "You've given more than anyone ever could, Azimi. But you are still a man. A man who is tired."

Azimi remained silent. Bala placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take a step back. Breathe. Let us take this from here for a while."

The idea felt foreign to Azimi. How could he step back? Wasn't this his responsibility? Wouldn't stepping back mean... failure?

Or was it the only way to finally be free?

That night, Azimi made a decision.

For the first time in decades, he allowed himself to stop.

He delegated more. He let others lead. He left meetings early. He spent time with his family, sitting in the fields where he had once worked as a boy.

And something incredible happened.

The world did not fall apart. The cooperative did not collapse. The movement kept going.

It was the proof he had needed all along—the proof that his work was bigger than him.

For so long, he had feared that stepping back meant abandonment. That slowing down meant weakness.

But in reality, it meant something else entirely. It meant he had succeeded.

Months passed, and Azimi found himself feeling lighter. The doubts that had once haunted him had begun to fade. He no longer felt like a man fighting alone—he was part of something greater.

One evening, he sat by the river, watching the sun set over the horizon. Bala joined him, sitting silently for a while before speaking. "So, what now?" Bala asked.

Azimi smiled softly. "Now, I rest."

Bala grinned. "About time."

Azimi chuckled. But then, his expression grew more serious. “And after that?” Bala shrugged. “You’ll know when the time comes.”

And for the first time in years, Azimi believed him.

The shadows of doubt had threatened to consume him. They had nearly convinced him that his work had been for nothing.

But now, he knew the truth.

His legacy was not in the speeches he gave, the battles he fought, or even the victories he won.

His legacy was in the people who continued the fight, long after he had stepped back.

And that would never fade.

Chapter

10

A NEW GENERATION RISES

The morning air was crisp, carrying with it the scent of damp earth after an early rain. The cooperative headquarters was alive with activity—farmers loading produce onto trucks, young people bustling between meetings, and new leaders emerging to take responsibility for the future. Azimi stood at the balcony, watching the scene unfold beneath him. It was a strange feeling, watching something he had built move without him at the center of it. For years, he had been the heartbeat of this movement, the one everyone looked to for decisions, for guidance, for reassurance. But now, things were changing.

And it was time for him to change too.

For the past few months, he had been slowly stepping back, shifting his role from active leadership to mentorship. It had not been an easy transition—for himself or for those who had followed him for years. Some worried that without him, the movement would weaken. Others questioned whether the new generation was ready.

But Azimi knew this was the only way forward. If the cooperative was to truly last, it had to live beyond him.

The new generation of leaders was different. They were bolder, more technologically savvy, and driven by ideas that sometimes challenged the very systems Azimi had put in place.

One of the most promising young leaders was Tunde, a sharp-minded economist who had returned from university abroad with a vision of turning the cooperative into a self-sustaining business model. His ideas were controversial—he wanted to introduce private investors, expand the digital marketplace, and modernize agricultural techniques. At one of their first meetings, Tunde stood before the leadership council, his confidence unwavering. “We cannot rely on international grants forever,” he said. “We need to think about long-term profitability.”

Azimi listened carefully, arms crossed. “Profitability is important, but we built this cooperative to serve the people first, not corporate interests.”

“I understand that, sir,” Tunde said, his tone respectful but firm. “But sustainability means more than survival. We must thrive, not just exist.”

The room was divided. Some nodded in agreement, seeing the necessity of modernizing their economic model. Others exchanged sceptical glances, worried that too much change would compromise their values.

Azimi sat quietly for a long moment before speaking. “Tunde, do you believe in what we built here?”

Tunde straightened. “Of course, sir. But I also believe we can make it stronger.”

Azimi let out a slow breath. He saw himself in the young man. Passionate, determined, and unafraid to challenge the old ways. He wasn't wrong—change was necessary. But how much change? And at what cost?

The transition to new leadership was not just a shift in power; it was a battle between tradition and innovation.

In another meeting, Fatima, one of the cooperative's most respected female leaders, argued fiercely against Tunde's economic proposals. “If we start bringing in private investors, they will eventually control us,” she warned. “The cooperative must remain in the hands of the people.”

Tunde countered, his voice calm but forceful. “Then let's make sure the people are also the investors. We create a community-driven stock system where members have stakes in our growth. That way, we never lose control.”

Azimi listened to the debate unfold, watching how these young leaders challenged each other, tested each other, and ultimately grew stronger through the process.

This was what he had fought for.

Not to be the only voice in the room. Not to be the one everyone relied on.

But to create something greater than himself. But passing on leadership was not just about ideas and policies—it was about trust.

One evening, Azimi invited a select group of young leaders to his home. The fire crackled in the background as they sat together, eating roasted yams and drinking tea. The atmosphere was casual, but the weight of the moment was not lost on anyone.

Azimi took a sip of his tea before speaking. "I've spent my life building this, but the truth is, it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the people. It belongs to you."

Fatima, sitting across from him, frowned. "You're talking like you're leaving us."

"I'm not leaving," Azimi said gently. "I'm stepping back. There's a difference."

Tunde, who had been quiet, finally spoke. "Do you trust us, sir? To lead this?"

Azimi met his gaze. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Tunde nodded slowly. "Then we won't let you down." And in that moment, Azimi knew the movement was safe.

But not everyone embraced the change so easily.

Among the older leaders, there were murmurs of doubt. Some feared that the younger generation was moving too fast. Others felt that stepping aside was a sign of weakness.

At a meeting with senior cooperative members, an elder named Musa voiced his concerns. "Azimi, you built this from nothing. Are you sure these young ones are ready? What if they destroy everything we've worked for?"

Azimi leaned forward, his voice steady. "Musa, when we started this, people doubted us too. They said we were dreaming too big, moving too fast. But look at what we have built."

Musa sighed. "But what if they make mistakes?"

"They will make mistakes," Azimi admitted. "Just as we did. But that's how they will learn. That's how they will grow."

Musa studied him for a long moment before nodding.

"Then we will watch over them, as you watched over us." Azimi smiled. "That's all I ask."

Months passed, and with every passing day, Azimi felt lighter.

The cooperative was evolving. New projects were being launched, new strategies being implemented. Some ideas succeeded; others failed. But the movement kept going.

For the first time in decades, Azimi no longer felt alone in the fight.

And then came the final test.

At the next National Farmers' Summit, where the cooperative was expected to present its five-year strategy, Azimi did not speak.

Instead, Tunde and Fatima stood at the podium.

They outlined their vision—how they would expand the cooperative's reach, integrate technology, and ensure sustainability without compromising their values.

Azimi sat in the front row, watching as they commanded the stage.

Not once did anyone look to him for approval.

Not once did anyone ask him to take over. They were ready.

And as the applause filled the room, Azimi felt something he had not felt in a long time. Peace.

The night of the summit, Azimi took a quiet walk through the fields. The land, once barren and struggling, was now full of life. It was a reflection of what they had built together—something that would outlive them all.

Bala found him sitting on an old wooden bench, watching the stars.

"You did it," Bala said, sitting beside him. "You finally let go."

Azimi chuckled. "Not let go, Bala. Just stepped aside."

Bala smirked. "And how does it feel?"

Azimi smiled softly. "Like I can finally breathe."

They sat in silence for a while, the weight of the years finally lifting.

"I think," Azimi said, "the next chapter of my life starts now."

Bala grinned. "And what will you do with this new chapter?"

Azimi exhaled. "Teach. Mentor. Write, maybe." He looked out at the fields, his expression calm. "But mostly, I'll just live."

And for the first time in his life, that was enough. The new generation had risen. And Azimi could finally rest, knowing that the world he had fought for was in good hands

Chapter

11

CROSSING

NEW FRONTIERS

The invitation arrived in the form of an email, but its significance could not have been greater. The United Nations had invited Azimi to speak at the Global

Development Summit in Geneva. The theme was Sustainable Growth and Community-Driven Change, and they wanted him to share the cooperative's success story on an international stage.

Azimi had spoken at conferences before, but this was different. This was the world watching. As he read the message, his mind drifted to the journey that had led him here. From a boy in a struggling village to a leader of a movement that had transformed entire communities. And now, the world wanted to listen.

Bala, sitting across from him, sipped his tea and smirked. "So, are you finally a global superstar now?"

Azimi chuckled, shaking his head. "Not quite. But it seems the world is paying attention."

Bala leaned back. "Well, you better be ready. They'll want more than just a speech. They'll want you to show them how to replicate this model across borders."

Azimi exhaled slowly. He had spent his life fighting for his people, his land, his country. But was he ready to take this movement beyond Nigeria? Beyond Africa?

Could he?

Or was this a challenge meant for the next generation?

Arriving in Geneva was surreal. The towering glass buildings, the neatly paved roads, the quiet hum of an efficient system—it was a world away from the red earth and bustling markets of home. But Azimi had never been one to be intimidated by grandeur. He was not here to admire buildings. He was here to change minds.

The conference hall was a marvel—high ceilings, elegant lighting, and a sea of faces from every corner of the world.

Politicians, CEOs, humanitarians—all gathered to discuss the future of global development. Azimi's session was scheduled as a keynote address, following a presentation by an economist from Europe who spoke in broad, academic terms about “macroeconomic strategies for sustainable development.” The speech was informative but distant—more theory than reality.

And then it was Azimi's turn.

He stepped onto the stage, feeling the weight of every farmer, every young leader, every woman who had fought beside him. He did not begin with figures or statistics. He did not start with charts or projections.

Instead, he told a story.

“I come from a small village,” he began, his voice steady. “A village where my mother worked from dawn to dusk, yet struggled to put food on our table. A village where the brightest children never finished school, where hardworking farmers remained trapped in cycles of poverty. A village that, for years, was forgotten.” He paused, letting the words settle.

“But today, that village is thriving. Because people took control of their future. Because they worked together—not waiting for handouts, not waiting for policy changes, but standing up for themselves. And what we have done in my village, in my country, can be done anywhere. The question is not whether it is possible. The question is whether the world is willing to listen.”

The hall was silent. Not because they were bored, but because they were listening.

Azimi spent the next thirty minutes explaining how people led movements could change the economic landscape of any developing nation. How cooperatives like his could be replicated in Latin America, in Asia, in underserved communities in wealthy nations.

He spoke not as an academic, but as a man who had lived the reality. And when he finished, the applause was not just polite—it was thunderous.

But the real work began after the speech.

Over the next few days, Azimi was approached by officials, business leaders, and NGOs—all eager to explore partnerships. Some wanted him to consult on agricultural policies. Others wanted to invest in his cooperative. A few even suggested he enter politics.

Azimi shook hands, exchanged contact information, and promised to consider each proposal. But the truth was, he did not need more projects. What he needed was a way to make sure this movement could spread without him.

One night, at a formal dinner hosted for the summit's key speakers, Azimi found himself seated next to Dr. Helena Moreau, a French development strategist who had worked on economic programs in West Africa.

She was direct, wasting no time with pleasantries. "Your model is one of the most successful I've seen," she said, sipping her wine. "But it's limited by geography."

Azimi raised an eyebrow. "How so?" "You've changed Nigeria," she said. "But can you change the world? The question isn't whether you can make a difference in one country. The question is whether you can make it last

beyond one generation, beyond one leader."

Azimi leaned back, considering her words. "And what do you propose?"

"A global framework," she said. "A formal network of cooperatives, based on your model, but adaptable to different regions. A system that does not rely on any one government, one funding source, or one person."

Azimi exhaled slowly. "That would take years to build."

Helena nodded. "Then we better start now." Returning to Nigeria, Azimi felt something shift within him.

For so long, he had viewed his work as a national fight. But now, he saw that the same struggles existed in communities all over the world.

He called a meeting with Bala, Fatima, Tunde, and other cooperative leaders.

"The work we have done here is only the beginning," he said. "We have built a system that works. Now, we must find a way to make it accessible to the world."

There was silence as they absorbed his words. Fatima was the first to speak. "You're talking about expanding beyond Africa." Azimi nodded. "Not just expanding. Creating a movement that cannot be erased."

Tunde grinned. "So, we're going global?"

Azimi chuckled. "Something like that."

And just like that, the next stage of the journey began.

In the months that followed, Azimi and his team worked tirelessly to build the foundation for a global network of people-led cooperatives. They reached out to community leaders in South America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. They formed alliances with organizations in Europe and North America that wanted to support grassroots economic development. The Resilient Futures Initiative was born—a blueprint that communities across the world could use to build their own sustainable economies.

It was no longer just about Nigeria.

It was about everywhere. One year later, Azimi found himself standing before another crowd—this time in Bogotá, Colombia, where the first international cooperative based on his model had been launched. Farmers, educators, and young leaders filled the room, eager to learn.

As he spoke, he felt something different. For the first time in decades, he was not fighting alone. This was not just his movement anymore. It belonged to the world. And as he looked at the faces before him, he realized something else.

His work was nearly done.

One evening, back in Nigeria, Bala found Azimi sitting outside, watching the sunset. “You’re thinking about stepping away,” Bala said, more statement than question.

Azimi sighed. “The movement is bigger than me now. It will survive without me. And I think... I think it’s time.”

Bala nodded, then smirked. “So, retirement?”

Azimi laughed. “Not quite. I still have work to do. Just... a different kind.” Bala grinned. “Well, whatever’s next, I’m with you.”

Azimi smiled, looking at the horizon. The world had changed, and so had he.

For the first time in his life, he was not looking at what needed to be done.

He was looking at what had been built.

And he knew, deep in his heart, that it would last.

The new frontiers had been crossed. The future was no longer in his hands—because it belonged to everyone.

C h a p t e r

FROM VISION

TO ACTION

Azimi found himself at the edge of the fields, the sweet smell of motor threatening to be subdued by the fog in the morning. The sky was just getting up, just near the line of the horizon to spill a golden light on the world he had been so dedicated to reform. His gaze looked at the thick lines of green, properly irrigated, properly sown, and properly managed crops. Every single one of the leaves was the representation of the spirit of survival, every stem represented hope. However, the visible signs of chancing ways there were still stark features of progress; Azimi's heart was troubled by what was to come. The structural obstacles, the endemic calumny, and the profound discriminant that characterized Nigeria would not be eliminated immediately. For years he had sown ideas of change but what was needed now was to bring those ideas to the greater population that will turn into a more massive change that will span generations.

He looked around when he heard someone coming. It was Bala – a usually young farmer from the neighbouring

village who had become one of the most valuable Azimi's friends. "Ah, that's "Faranee Bala standing beside Azimi again, a cup of hot tea in her hand, "You're up early, Azimi."

"Sleep is not possible right now Bala," Azimi said as he too began to wear a smile. 'Derek said for instance that there is 'too much work to do'."

Bala agreed, maintaining a frown on his face. "The community meeting is at the later part of today. All are attending sometimes even elders who used to doubt the technology previously. They simply want to know what your cooperative is going to look like."

Azimi sighed, sipping his tea. The cooperative was a bold idea—a regional initiative that would unite small-scale farmers, giving them collective bargaining power and access to markets and resources. It was an ambitious project, and while many were supportive, others were wary of change.

The community meeting was held under the shade of a massive baobab tree, its sprawling branches providing a natural canopy for the gathering. Farmers, traders, and village elders sat in a semicircle, their faces a mix of curiosity and scepticism. Azimi stood before them, his hands clasped tightly as he began to speak. "Thank you all for coming today. I know change can be daunting, but we stand at a crossroads. Together, we have the opportunity to create something transformative—a cooperative that will give us control over our future."

An elder named Musa, known for his stern demeanour and sharp tongue, raised his hand. "Azimi, we've heard promises before," he said, his voice steady but laced with doubt. "People like you come with big ideas, but when the challenges come, they leave. How is this different?"

Azimi met Musa's gaze, his voice calm but firm. "Elder Musa, I understand your doubts. But I am not here to make empty promises. This cooperative is not about me—it's about all of us. It's about ensuring that farmers are no longer at the mercy of middlemen and that our children have a future where they can thrive."

Musa stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And what about the risks? What happens if this fails?"

"We will fail only if we don't try," Azimi replied. "But if we come together, if we pool our resources and support each other, we can create a system that benefits everyone. The risks are real, but so are the rewards."

Bala stepped forward, his voice filled with conviction. "Elder Musa, I was one of those who doubted Azimi at first. But because of his guidance, my farm is thriving, and I've been able to send my children to school. This cooperative could give others the same opportunity."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd. Musa nodded slowly, his expression softening. "Very well, Azimi. You have my support—for now. But remember, trust is earned, not given."

Azimi inclined his head respectfully. "And I will work every day to earn it."

With the cooperative gaining traction, Azimi turned his attention to the larger systemic issues that hindered progress. He began traveling to regional capitals, meeting with government officials, private sector leaders, and international donors to secure funding and support for infrastructure projects.

The challenges were immense. Bureaucratic red tape, corruption, and competing interests often slowed progress, but Azimi approached each obstacle with determination. He understood that building trust and fostering collaboration were essential for achieving lasting change.

One of the most pivotal moments came during a meeting with a government official named Mr. Durojaiye, who controlled access to a critical funding source. The meeting took place in a sparsely furnished office, the air heavy with the scent of old paper and stale coffee.

"Mr. Koko", Durojaiye began, his tone cordial but calculated. "Your cooperative is impressive, and your vision is commendable. But as you know, securing funding requires more than just good intentions."

Azimi leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "I understand, Mr. Durojaiye. I've submitted all the necessary documents and outlined how the funds will be used. What more is required?"

Durojaiye chuckled, a hint of condescension in his voice. "Let's just say that processes like these often benefit from... incentives." Azimi's stomach tightened, his jaw clenching. He had encountered corruption before, but each instance was a reminder of the very system he was fighting to change. "Mr. Durojaiye," he said carefully, "I am committed to transparency and accountability. I will not compromise my principles, no matter the cost."

The official's smile faded, replaced by a look of irritation. "Principles don't build roads or fund projects, Mr. Koko.

Sometimes you have to play the game to get what you want.

Azimi's voice hardened. "And what happens when we perpetuate that game? What happens to the farmers who rely on this funding? I will not betray their trust for short-term gains. If that means finding another way, so be it." The tension in the room was palpable, but Azimi refused to back down. After a long silence, Durojaiye sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You're a stubborn man, Koko. Fine. I'll approve the funding—but don't expect things to be this easy in the future."

Azimi nodded, his resolve unwavering. "I never expected it to be easy, Mr. Durojaiye. But I expect it to be worth it."

With this funding, Azimi's cooperative started to grow its operation further afield. New storage facilities were put in place this saw development of roads and improved access to markets. Such were the wiping effects, which enabled different demographics pull out from the quagmire of poverty; creation of the feeling of togetherness. Azimi's success realized attention beyond geographical borders of the country of Nigeria. Speaking and moderating opportunities for him at international conferences began to unfold, and he found himself as a sought expert in matters touching on sustainable development and social entrepreneurship. However, the awards never changed Azimi and regardless of all the success he would continue to go back to the communities he was promoting. This was in the course of one of the conferences held in Nairobi where he came across a young activist and Kenyan by name, Leila. They talked about their dreams, and their challenges over a cup of coffee.

"Azimi, you are amazing," Leila said grinning with full admiration sparkling in her eyes. "But how do you remain positive when one confronts the other?"

Azimi smiled thoughtfully. So she smiled and told Leila: 'Hope is not something you look for. It's something you create. I've witnessed what happens when large groups of people gather; when they continue to fight instead of surrendering to grief. That's what keeps me

going.” Leila only nodded; her face kept a very serious look on it. ‘But do not you ever get the impression that there is something so immense, that no matter how you try, it will not be enough’

“Of course,” Azimi admitted. “But then I think of all the farmers, of the children, of the women that have been impacted by my efforts. It might not be sufficient to address all of those issues, but it is enough to change something. And that is worth fighting for.”

Leila looked at him, sitting back slightly, and digested these words. “You’re right, Azimi. They say if you want to see the change, you have to take baby steps. “Well, I hope you don’t mind me reminding you of that.”

Azimi reached across the table, his voice firm but kind. “And don’t forget, Leila. You’re not alone. We’re all in this together. Back in Nigeria, Azimi’s journey was far from over. The cooperative was thriving, but new challenges emerged with each success. As he stood before a gathering of farmers one evening, the glow of lanterns casting long shadows on the ground, he spoke from the heart.

“We’ve come so far,” he said, his voice carrying over the crowd. “But this is just the beginning. Our work is not just about crops or markets—it’s about building a future where every child, every family, and every community can thrive. Together, we can turn our pain into purpose, our struggles into strength. Let’s keep moving forward—step by step, hand in hand.”

The crowd erupted in applause, their voices united in hope and determination. As Azimi looked out at the sea of faces, he felt a surge of gratitude and resolve. The path ahead would be long and challenging, but he knew that together, they could achieve the impossible.

Chapter

13

LEGACY OF

RESILIENCE

The room was filled with a quiet hum as Azimi walked to the podium, the sound of murmured conversations and shifting chairs echoing faintly in the grand hall. The United Nations Development Conference he attended in Geneva was a different world than any other event Azimi had been to. People from all over the world were seated in their respective well-organized chairs, for countries, companies, and institutions. The backdrop displayed the conference theme: Sustainable Development: Pathways to Constructing

Future Inclusions. While fine tuning the microphone, Azimi is taken through a history that led him to the events of the day. This was one of many battles, wins, learnt lessons and losses. The work he had initiated in his village, that cooperative that left a stamp on many lives, youth programs that empowered a generation, and the vocalism for accountability others replicated his act formed a new movement beyond Nigeria's border.

“Good afternoon, distinguished delegates,” Azimi greeted, his voice, while calm, rang with passion. Today, I wanted to speak as an activist. I stand here as a farmer's son, as a person who seen firsthand the strength of people who HAD loss all and yet hope still remained alive, and as someone fully committed to believing in mobilisation change.

People in the room listened to Azimi intensely, and when he opened his mouth to speak, they could hear a rag of hope, hardship and opportunity. He spoke of lives that have been changed through the cooperative; the young people who have been empowered to go to school; and communities that pulling together in unity, can bring up a better society. This came all out during his speech in Geneva when he realized that he was completely alone. While he had never lacked passion for the task at hand, he could feel the weight of responsibility behind the words and face of a global audience. He left the conference feeling motivated but at the same time not unaware of all the efforts that remained

On his return to Nigeria, Azimi did not waste any time to move into the next part of his vision. The cooperative that had been established to promote farming and other agricultural related venture, started expanding it sectors of specialty to production and technology. According to Azimi, value-added industries were sternly needed to escape the vicious cycle of raw material dependence for parenthesis GROWTH. This expansion has, therefore come with some difficulties. Setting up the processing plants was capital intensive, technical and needed access to infrastructure. Azimi personally invested his time courting potential investors, orienting local employees, and seeking its support from the government for half a year. Unfortunately, many of his endeavours were met with disdain despite his perseverance substantiated by the possibility that the cooperative success can spur emulation by other regions.

Of course, the transitions could not have passed without some sort of opposition. The cooperative was on the increase and this impacted the lives of people and as it expanded it became a thorn on the flesh of power elite who felt threatened. Azimi encountered campaign of calumny in media and obstacles which are bureaucratic in nature meant to slow down the projects.

A worst encounter according to Azimi was during a town hall meeting in the city of Kano where he went to champion the expansion of the cooperative. At the middle of his speech, some in the event venue, some of whom clad in trousers and hats, accused him of perpetrating scams with intention to enrich himself at the expense of the community. The

charges were unfounded since everyone knew that Azimi had done nothing wrong, but those who had listened to his speech earlier began to doubt his intention.

To this end, Azimi worked with policymakers to advocate for reforms in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. He collaborated with NGOs to develop comprehensive strategies for tackling issues such as gender inequality and environmental degradation. These efforts were often slow and fraught with setbacks, but Azimi approached each challenge with the same resilience that had carried him through his earlier struggles.

One of Azimi's most ambitious projects was the establishment of a digital innovation hub in Lagos. The hub, named "Resilient Futures," was designed to serve as a platform for young entrepreneurs to develop and scale their ideas. It provided access to funding, mentorship, and state-of-the-art facilities, creating an ecosystem that fostered innovation and collaboration.

The launch of Resilient Futures was a milestone in Azimi's journey, symbolizing his belief in the power of technology to drive development. The hub quickly became a vibrant space, buzzing with activity as young innovators worked on solutions to some of Nigeria's most pressing challenges.

Among them was Ada, a computer science graduate who developed an app connecting small-scale farmers directly with buyers, eliminating the need for middlemen. The app, aptly named "Farm Link," revolutionized the agricultural market, increasing profits for farmers and reducing costs for consumers. Azimi saw in Ada's work a reflection of his own journey—a commitment to using knowledge and innovation to uplift communities.

Despite these successes, Azimi remained acutely aware of the personal sacrifices his work demanded. The long hours, constant travel, and relentless pressures left little time for rest or personal relationships. Friends and family often urged him to slow down, but Azimi found it difficult to step away from the mission that had become his life's purpose.

One evening, as Azimi sat alone in his modest office, reviewing reports from the cooperative, he received a call from Leila, the Kenyan activist he had met years earlier at the conference in Nairobi.

"Azimi," Leila said, her voice warm but concerned, "I've been following your work. It's incredible what you've accomplished. But tell me—when was the last time you took a break?"

Azimi chuckled softly, leaning back in his chair. "You know me, Leila. There's always more to be done."

"I know," she replied, her tone serious. "But even you need to recharge. The work will always be there, but you won't be

if you don't take care of yourself."

Her words struck a chord, and for the first time in months, Azimi allowed himself to pause. He took a weekend off, retreating to the serene hills of Jos, where he spent hours walking, reading, and reflecting. The break reminded him of the importance of balance, and he returned to his work with renewed energy.

Chapter

14

BRIDGES

ACROSS BORDERS

The airplane banked slightly, giving Azimi a clear view of the sprawling city below. The lights of Johannesburg stretched out like a glittering web, a stark contrast to the quiet rural villages he had left behind in Nigeria. As the plane descended, Azimi's thoughts drifted to the purpose of this trip—a conference on African economic development where he had been invited to speak. This was not Azimi's first international engagement. Over the years, his work had gained recognition far beyond Nigeria's borders, earning him a reputation as a tireless advocate for sustainable development and grassroots empowerment. But this particular trip held a special significance. It was not just about sharing his story; it was about building connections that could amplify his impact. As the plane touched down, Azimi felt a surge of anticipation. The conference would bring together leaders, activists, and innovators from across the continent, each of them working to address the unique challenges and opportunities facing their communities. Azimi knew that the conversations here could lay the foundation for partnerships that would transcend borders and transform lives.

The conference hall was abuzz with energy as participants mingled, exchanged ideas, and prepared for the sessions ahead. Azimi was greeted warmly by the organizers, who escorted him to a panel discussion titled *From Local Solutions to Global Impact*.

Taking his place on the stage, Azimi listened as his fellow panellists shared their insights. A woman from Kenya spoke about her work in water conservation, while a man from South Africa discussed efforts to combat youth unemployment through skills training. When it was Azimi's turn to speak, he leaned forward, his voice steady and measured.

"In my village," he began, "there was a saying: 'A single thread cannot weave a cloth.' This wisdom has guided me throughout my journey. The challenges we face—poverty, inequality, climate change—are too vast for any one person, organization, or country to tackle alone. We must work together, weaving our threads into something stronger, something lasting."

Azimi shared stories of the cooperative he had built, the women who had risen to leadership, and the young people who had become agents of change. He emphasized the importance of collaboration, not just within communities but across borders, and outlined his vision for a network of initiatives that would connect local efforts to global resources and expertise. The audience responded with enthusiastic applause, but for Azimi, the real work began after the session ended. He spent hours engaging with attendees, exchanging contact information, and exploring potential partnerships. Among the people he met was Leila, the Kenyan activist he had befriended years earlier, who had since become a prominent advocate for youth empowerment.

"Azimi," Leila said as they sat together during a break, "your work has inspired so many, including me. But I've been thinking—what if we could create a platform that connects grassroots leaders like us across Africa? A space where we can share resources, collaborate on projects, and support each other?"

Azimi's eyes lit up at the idea. "Leila, that's exactly what we need. A bridge that not only connects our efforts but also amplifies them. Let's make it happen."

Over the next few months, Azimi and Leila worked tirelessly to bring their vision to life. They launched the African Grassroots Alliance (AGA), a digital platform designed to connect community leaders, NGOs, and social entrepreneurs across the continent. The platform provided tools for collaboration, access to funding opportunities, and a space for sharing best practices.

AGA's launch was met with overwhelming enthusiasm. Within weeks, leaders from more than 20 countries had joined, sharing stories of their challenges and successes. Azimi was particularly moved by a message from a woman in Uganda who had used the platform to secure funding for a community health clinic.

"This is what it's all about," Azimi said to Leila during one of their regular calls. "Giving people the tools they need to create change in their own communities."

But building bridges was not without its challenges. The platform faced technical issues, and there were moments when disagreements among members threatened to derail progress. Azimi approached these challenges with the same resilience and determination that had defined his journey, working closely with his team to address concerns and foster

a spirit of collaboration.

While AGA continued to grow, Azimi's work in Nigeria remained at the forefront of his efforts. He began exploring ways to connect the Nigerian diaspora with local communities, recognizing the untapped potential of this global network.

One of the first steps was organizing a summit in Lagos that brought together members of the diaspora with leaders from rural communities. The event was a vibrant exchange of ideas, with discussions ranging from investment opportunities to cultural preservation.

Among the attendees was Dr. Ngozi, a Nigerian-American entrepreneur who had built a successful tech company in Silicon Valley. During a panel discussion, she spoke passionately about the need for diaspora members to contribute not just financially but also intellectually.

"We have the skills, the knowledge, and the networks," she said. "But we must remember that true impact comes from listening to and learning from the communities we aim to serve."

Azimi found her words deeply resonant. After the panel, he approached her to discuss potential collaborations. "Dr. Ngozi," he said, "your perspective is exactly what we need. How do you feel about working together to create a mentorship program that connects diaspora professionals with young people in Nigeria?"

Dr. Ngozi's face lit up with excitement. "Azimi, I'd be honoured. Let's turn this idea into reality."

The mentorship program, aptly named Bridges of Wisdom, quickly gained momentum. Diaspora professionals volunteered as mentors, sharing their expertise in fields ranging from engineering to finance. The program paired them with young Nigerians, fostering relationships that were both educational and empowering.

One of the most inspiring stories to emerge from the program was that of Tolu, a university student studying agriculture. Through her mentor, a Nigerian-British agronomist named Funmi, Tolu developed a business plan for an eco-friendly farming enterprise. With guidance and support, she launched her venture, which not only provided sustainable livelihoods for her community but also gained recognition at national competitions.

"Tolu's success is just the beginning," Azimi said during a program review meeting. "There are countless young people like her who simply need the right opportunities to thrive."

As Azimi's initiatives expanded, he found himself increasingly in demand as a speaker and advisor. He traveled to countries across Africa and beyond, sharing his experiences and

advocating for policies that supported grassroots development. Each trip reinforced his belief in the power of connection and the importance of bridging divides.

During a visit to Ghana, Azimi met Kofi, a community leader working to combat deforestation. Over dinner, the two discussed their respective challenges and discovered shared goals.

“Azimi,” Kofi said, “I’ve heard about the cooperative you started in Nigeria. We’re facing similar issues here with farmers. Do you think it could work in Ghana?”

“Absolutely,” Azimi replied. “The model is adaptable. Let’s work together to tailor it to your community’s needs.”

This conversation marked the beginning of a cross-border partnership that brought Azimi’s cooperative model to villages in Ghana, further solidifying the bridges he was building across the continent. Despite the successes, Azimi remained acutely aware of the challenges that persisted. Infrastructure gaps, political instability, and systemic inequality were constant hurdles, but he refused to let them dampen his resolve.

He often drew strength from the stories of those he had empowered—the farmers who had lifted their families out of poverty, the women who had become leaders in their communities, and the young people who were shaping a brighter future.

One evening, as Azimi reviewed progress reports in his office, he received an email from a young man in Cameroon. The message read:

“Dear Mr. Koko,

Your story has inspired me to start my own initiative in my village. We’ve created a community garden that provides food for families in need and generates income for local schools. Thank you for showing us what’s possible.”

Azimi smiled, his heart swelling with gratitude. This was why he did what he did—to ignite a spark that could light countless fires of change.

As Azimi stood on the stage at AGA’s first annual conference, held in Nairobi, he looked out at the diverse crowd before him. Leaders, activists, and innovators from across the continent had come together, united by a shared vision of a better future.

“Today,” Azimi said, his voice strong and clear, “we celebrate not just what we have accomplished but what we have yet to achieve. These bridges we are building are not just connections; they are lifelines. They remind us that we are stronger together, that our shared struggles and shared hopes bind us in ways that transcend borders.”

The audience rose to their feet, their applause a testament to the impact of Azimi's work. As he stepped down from the stage, Leila approached him, her eyes bright with pride.

"We've come a long way, Azimi," she said.

"And we still have so far to go," he replied, a smile spreading across his face.

But for the first time in a long time, Azimi felt that the bridges he had built were strong enough to carry not just him, but generations to come.

Chapter

15

THE WEIGHT OF THE MANTLE

The night was still, the kind of stillness that made every sound—every rustle of leaves, every distant bark of a dog—feel amplified. Azimi sat alone in his modest study, his head bowed over the desk. A single lamp cast a warm glow over the stacks of papers and notebooks that surrounded him, the remnants of a lifetime's work. His hand rested on a worn photograph: his mother, his siblings, and himself as a boy, standing in front of their small, weather-beaten home. The faces in the photo were etched with both hardship and hope—a reflection of a journey that now seemed both distant and ever-present. Azimi exhaled deeply, the weight of decades pressing down on him. The years had been kind to his vision but less so to his body and spirit. The relentless pace of his work, the constant travel, and the never-ending demands of leadership had left him weary. His hair, once a deep black, was now streaked with grey. Fine lines creased the corners of his eyes, not just from age but from sleepless nights and countless worries.

Leadership, he had learned, was not a title or a position—it was a burden. And while it was a burden he had carried with pride, it was also one that had exacted a price.

Azimi's work had grown far beyond what he had ever imagined. The cooperative had expanded to dozens of regions, touching the lives of tens of thousands. The mentorship programs, the digital innovation hubs, the international partnerships—each had flourished, creating ripples of change that extended across continents. Yet, with every success came new challenges.

The weight of expectations was perhaps the heaviest burden of all. People looked to him not just for guidance but for answers, for solutions to problems that often felt insurmountable. Every decision he made was scrutinized, every misstep magnified. The trust and admiration of the people he served were both a source of strength and a constant reminder of the stakes.

There were moments, late at night, when doubt crept in like an unwelcome visitor. Was he doing enough? Were the changes he had fought for truly sustainable? Would the systems he had built withstand the test of time, or would they crumble once he was gone?

One evening, during a rare break in his schedule, Azimi found himself sitting by the fire with Bala, his long-time friend and ally. The two men had grown older together, their bond forged through shared struggles and victories.

"You've done more than anyone could have asked for, Azimi," Bala said, his voice quiet but firm. "Why do you still carry this weight as if it's all on you?"

Azimi stared into the flames, his expression distant. "Because it is, Bala. Every life we've touched, every promise we've made—it all rests on my shoulders. If I falter, if I fail..." He trailed off, unable to finish the thought. Bala placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You've carried this burden for so long that you've forgotten it's not yours alone. You've built a community, Azimi—a movement. Trust them to carry the torch with you."

The words lingered in Azimi's mind long after Bala had left. Trust them to carry the torch. It was a simple idea, yet one that he had struggled to embrace. Leadership, he realized, was not about holding on but about letting go—about empowering others to take ownership of the vision.

It was this realization that led Azimi to focus on succession planning, ensuring that the systems and structures he had built would endure beyond his lifetime. He began mentoring a new generation of leaders, young men and women who shared his passion and commitment to change.

One of these leaders was Ibrahim, the tech-savvy young man whose innovations had revolutionized farming practices across the region. Another was Fatima, a woman whose courage and determination had transformed her community's approach to education and healthcare. Azimi saw in them the same spark that had driven him all those years ago, and it gave him hope.

At a leadership retreat, Azimi addressed the group of emerging leaders, his voice steady but filled with emotion. "You are the future," he said. "The work we've started is not mine alone—it belongs to all of us. Carry it forward, not as a burden, but as a privilege. And never forget that the strength of a leader lies not in what they achieve alone, but in what they inspire others to achieve." Despite his efforts to prepare the next generation, Azimi could not entirely silence the inner doubts that haunted him. One day, during a meeting with his closest advisors, he voiced his fears.

"What if everything we've built falls apart?" he asked, his tone uncharacteristically vulnerable. "What if it wasn't enough?"

Aisha, one of his earliest allies and a pillar of the cooperative, leaned forward, her gaze unwavering. "Azimi, look around you. The lives you've changed, the systems you've created—they are living proof that it was enough. You've shown us what's possible. And even if challenges come, we will face them together, just as you taught us."

Her words brought tears to Azimi's eyes. For so long, he had shouldered the weight of his mission alone, forgetting that he was not alone in his fight.

The years continued to pass, and Azimi began to step back from the day-to-day operations of his initiatives. He took on the role of an advisor, offering guidance and support while allowing others to lead. This transition was not easy, but it was necessary—for both him and the movement he had built.

One of the most poignant moments came during a ceremony to mark the 20th anniversary of the cooperative. The event was held in a large open field, the same place where Azimi had first addressed the community all those years ago. Thousands gathered to celebrate, their faces reflecting the joy and pride of a shared journey.

Azimi was invited to speak, and as he stepped onto the stage, a hush fell over the crowd. He looked out at the sea of faces, his heart swelling with gratitude and emotion.

"I stand before you today," he began, "not as a leader but as a witness to what we have accomplished together. This cooperative, this movement, is a testament to the power of resilience, hope, and unity. It belongs to all of us, and it will endure because it is built on the foundation of our collective strength."

The applause was thunderous, but Azimi's mind was calm. For the first time in years, he felt a profound sense of peace.

In the quiet months that followed, Azimi returned to his roots, spending time in the village where his journey had begun. He found solace in the simple pleasures of life: walking through the fields, sharing stories with old friends, and watching the children play under the shade of the baobab tree.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Azimi sat with his mother on the porch of their family home. She was older now, her movements slower but her spirit as strong as ever.

"You've done well, my son," she said, her voice filled with pride. "Your father would be so proud."

Azimi smiled, his heart full. "I only did what you taught me, Mama. To work hard, to never give up, and to always believe in the power of people."

She placed a hand on his, her touch warm and reassuring. “And now it's time for you to rest, Azimi. You've given so much. Let others carry the mantle.”

The weight of the mantle, Azimi realized, had not disappeared—it had simply been shared. And as he looked out at the horizon, the fields bathed in the golden light of dusk, he felt a deep sense of fulfillment.

The journey had been long and arduous, filled with moments of doubt and triumph, pain and joy. But through it all, Azimi had held onto hope, resilience, and the unwavering belief that change was possible.

As the stars began to emerge, twinkling in the vast expanse of the night sky, Azimi whispered a quiet prayer: “May the seeds we've planted continue to grow. May the bridges we've built endure. And may the voices we've empowered never be silenced again.”

And with that, Azimi rose, his head held high, ready to embrace whatever the future held—not as the sole bearer of the mantle but as part of a legacy that would live on for generations to come.

E p i l o g u e

THE PATH FORWARD

It was that year when they had to wait for many months for the rain but when it started, it rained cats and dogs on the field. He turned his attention inside and out to hear the patter of fresh water on the roofs, on the earth and farmers young and old emerging from their dwelling to see what blessings the day brought. Azimi was in one of those fields, he was at the farthest end, leaning on his walking stick. The neatly planted rows of crops were observable and their green emerging shoots could easily be seen under the grey colonial sky.

Azimi was 67 years old man, heavily built, but who in a past moved with the delicate step of a man who had been through many miles. He has retired from politics long ago but his spirit was alive in every Co-op assembly, every vibrant market and every young man who applied his principles in governance.

This was one of those days that makes you feel all sorts of things at once. It may be organized a ceremony in his honour and Amos realized it would be more than a tribute to him: it would be tribute to a movement. However, Azimi said when he was during the rain of Kurdish field, he did not care of that much, but thinking on how he came to that point, and what he has to come.

The story of Azimi Koko was more or less a folklore. Listed were the stories of the boy who scooped several kilometres on foot to attend school; the youthful man who had dared to stand against university corruption; the outstanding leader who had tickled the spirit of Nigerian and other Nigerian women, youths and farmers, including all the hopeless billions. However, there was one thing that was clear for Azimi: the goal and achievements, the recognition and scale of the change —it was not about all that the point was that he had seen and done many things that changed him.

He thought of his mother, who had carried their family through the darkest times with quiet strength and unyielding love. He thought of the farmers who had trusted him with their livelihoods, the young people who had looked to him for guidance, and the countless unsung heroes who had fought alongside him to create change.

These memories reminded Azimi of the simple truth that had guided his life: true leadership was not about standing at the forefront but about walking beside others, lifting them up, and creating spaces where their voices could be heard.

When the sky began to get bright, Azimi left for the community centre where the function was to be held. The constructed building occupies certain aesthetic characteristics of a postmodern structure, and the members of the cooperative have a long way to go. Inside I saw people from the region and others from other countries; the farmers, the teachers, the businesspeople, and even the government.

Once Azimi appeared everyone leapt to their feet giving him a well-deserved round of applause. He nodded the acknowledgement and smiled frankly but without arrogance having been raised a hand. Sitting in a chair at the front of a class, people spoke about his accomplishments and achievements that he has made throughout his life, with every story, being a part of his story.

Ibrahim was one of the speakers and he was the young innovator whose agricultural technology had brought change throughout the farming activities in the region. Ibrahim was in his thirties and looked every bit the articulate leader he was, obviously passionate about development.

“Let me quote Azimi 'change is not in boardrooms and government offices, change is in fields, villages and in the people like us,' ” Ibrahim said. “He made us understand that it is not about having everyone reporting to you but it is about serving people and the greatest power of everyone is work collectively.”

Ibrahim went on that: Azimi's pride was rising to hear the words he said. This he considered success: accomplishment not for self but for the power one had to make others be successful.

Later, as the ceremony concluded and the crowd dispersed, Azimi found himself sitting on a bench outside the community center, watching the sun dip below the horizon. A young woman approached him, her expression a mixture of nervousness and determination.

“Mr. Koko,” she said, her voice steady despite her evident shyness. “My name is Zainab. I’m a student at the university, studying agricultural science. Your story has inspired me so much, and I want to follow in your footsteps. But sometimes I wonder—how do you keep going when the challenges feel overwhelming?”

Azimi studied her for a moment, seeing in her eyes the same spark that had driven him so many years ago. He leaned forward, his tone gentle but firm. “Zainab, the challenges will always feel overwhelming—that’s the nature of the work. But remember this: every step forward, no matter how small, is a victory. And you’re never walking alone. Surround yourself with people who share your vision, and never forget why you started.”

Zainab nodded, a smile breaking across her face. “Thank you, sir. I’ll remember that.”

As she walked away, Azimi felt a deep sense of hope. The path forward would not be easy, but with young people like Zainab leading the way, it was a path worth traveling.

Many things happened during those years which I am not going to discuss but they have all taught her about the strength of never giving up. He had been a man who at some points in his life wished he had never been elected, when pressures and responsibilities of the office had overwhelmed him. However, in those periods, he had somehow escaped somehow – through people’s help, through faith and the hope that even dropping a pebble into a pond can cause a wave.

Such gains, Azimi recollects, made him feel all the more relevant to his organisation after giving much thought to those lessons. As far as leadership is concerned, Ika was not only different, but he emphasized on fostering other people as greatly as before. He remained a consultant to the cooperative, a visionary, and a trainer of young people as well as championing policies for the enhancement of grassroots advancement.

But he also found time to pamper himself for he realized that rest was also strength, not a show of weakness as most people would want to believe. He got to have time with family strolling the fields with his grandchildren and was seen telling stories round the fire with friends.

This notwithstanding, one of the most emotional stories of Azimi during his waning days was during a world fellowship for sustainable development in New York. He was asked to give the final speech, which was actually called a keynote speech and kind of shocked him, making him somewhat philosophical.

Standing on the stage, looking out at an audience of world leaders, activists, and innovators, Azimi began his speech with a simple question: "The definition of Leaving a legacy"

He paused, letting the weight of the question settle before continuing. "A legacy is not about monuments or accolades. It is about the lives we touch, the seeds we plant, and the bridges we build. It is about creating a path forward for those who come after us, so that they can go further than we ever dreamed."

Azimi's voice grew stronger as he spoke, weaving stories of resilience and hope, of failures and triumphs, into a tapestry that captured the essence of his journey. He concluded with a call to action that resonated deeply with the audience:

"The path forward is not one that any of us can walk alone. It is a path that requires us to listen, to collaborate, and to believe in the power of people. Together, we can build a future where every voice is heard, every potential is realized, and every community thrives. Let us walk this path, not as individuals, but as one."

The applause that followed was deafening, a standing ovation that brought tears to Azimi's eyes. But as he stepped off the stage, he felt not pride, but gratitude—for the people who had walked with him, for the lessons he had learned, and for the opportunity to contribute to something greater than himself.

Back in Nigeria, Azimi continued to live simply, his days filled with quiet reflection and moments of connection with the people he loved. He found joy in watching the fruits of his labour flourish, in seeing young leaders rise to meet the challenges of their time, and in knowing that the path forward was in capable hands.

One evening, as the stars filled the sky above his village, Azimi sat with his grandchildren, sharing stories of his journey. They listened intently, their eyes wide with wonder and admiration.

"Grandpa," one of them asked, "what was the hardest part of your journey?"

Azimi smiled, his gaze distant. "The hardest part," he said, "was believing that I was enough—that I could make a difference, even when the challenges seemed too big. But once I understood that change starts with one step, one voice, one act of courage, everything else followed."

The path forward, Azimi knew, was not a straight road. It was winding and unpredictable, filled with obstacles and opportunities. But it was a path worth walking—a path that carried the hopes and dreams of generations past, present, and future.

And as Azimi looked out at the horizon, the fields stretching endlessly before him, he felt a profound sense of peace. The journey was far from over, but the seeds had been planted, the bridges had been built, and the torch had been passed.

For Azimi Koko, the path forward was not just a legacy—it was a promise.