

The Paradigm Initiative Story

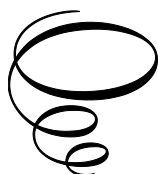
The Paradigm Initiative Story:

A Work in Progress

By

‘Gbenga Sesan

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-5517-0

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-5518-7

To Temilade

For challenging me to be better each day

For being there when the subject of this book almost died

And for making sure to speak life into PIN and me.

For confirming that this book project is worth it

And for reading the roughest paragraphs as they took shape.

You are my best decision!

To 'Ladi and 'Timi

For starting where we will stop

For the privilege of seeing you become

And for the endless questions that make me more human.

For enduring moments of video calls when I am not there

And for being avid readers!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	xiv
Chapter One.....	1
The Pre-1995 Years	1
Great Ife (1995–2001)	3
The Beginning	7
Chapter Two	11
Ashoka to the Rescue (2008–2009)	11
Testing, Testing, Testing (2010).....	15
Taking Off	17
Chapter Three.....	21
Building the Institution (2013–2017).....	21
Chapter Four.....	31
Going Regional: 2018–Date	31
Chapter Five	41
Strengthening Oversight and Accountability	41
Chapter Six.....	51
“In the Beginning Was a Dream”: Recollections of the People Who Laid Paradigm Initiative’s Foundations	51
Chapter Seven.....	69
Real People, Real Stories: The People Building Today’s PIN.....	69
Chapter Eight.....	80
Getting Hands Dirty	80

Chapter Nine.....	88
Learning From Others.....	88
Chapter Ten.....	99
The Seventeenth Year.....	99
Chapter Eleven.....	109
The Next Seventeen Years: People, Principles, Policy, Places, Priorities	109
Chapter Twelve	119
Charting the Future: Collaborations for the Global South	119
Closing Digital Divides	122
Expanding Inclusion	124
Fostering Rights-Respecting Digital Spaces.....	125
Advancing Responsible Data Governance.....	126
Making Artificial Intelligence Work for the Good of All.....	127
Conclusion	128
Index.....	131

FOREWORD

I first got to really know ‘Gbenga Sesan in 2022 when he was appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, to the Leadership Panel of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). On further research, I discovered that he and I have been on the Nigerian Internet Society information distribution list since at least 2012. His connection to the IGF goes back to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) conferences of 2003 and 2005. That history notwithstanding, his book has greatly enhanced my esteem for ‘Gbenga and his work.

This book is a story of determination, commitment, successes and failures. It is told in a personal way that makes it all the more compelling. It is a pragmatic story filled with concrete observations about the trials that all nonprofit organisations face. In the case of the Paradigm Initiative (PIN) story, the challenges are all the more complex given inflationary considerations that make financing all the more difficult.

‘Gbenga takes us all the way back to 1991 just as the World Wide Web is emerging, and the internet has been in operation for just eight years. We learn about his first exposure to computers in Idoani at a federal government college in southern Nigeria. He takes us to 2007 when what we now know as PIN was born. The PIN story is, of course, the main thread that holds this book together. The style in which ‘Gbenga writes is mirrored by my experience in our conversations about internet governance. He is open and frank, not afraid to confront hard problems head on. It is this attitude that makes the book poignantly credible. We get to learn along with ‘Gbenga about the hard challenges of leadership and the decisions that leaders have to make.

It was especially heartwarming to learn that he had connections with Google’s Policy Fellowship Program in Africa and with Stanford University where I was an undergraduate and, eventually, joined the faculty and began work on the design of the internet. Among the very important lessons that we learn from this book is that the most important resource of any organisation is its people. We also learn the inestimable value of unrestricted funding that can support salaries and other operational expenses that keep an organisation afloat. ‘Gbenga references the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, two key players in philanthropy, as critical sponsors. With their support, as well as the support of many others, PIN was

able to build a solid base and to expand its complement of employees and collaborators.

One lesson that I have also learned is that to do anything big, you need to get help, preferably from people who may be even smarter than you are! Of course, you also need to learn to articulate your aspirations and ideas well enough to convince others they want to do what you want to do. This is sometimes called salesmanship. Some engineers look down on salesmanship as a sort of lesser art, but I remind my engineers that if the salespeople don't succeed, the engineers won't get paid. This helps to put the importance of selling your ideas into concrete perspective. 'Gbenga clearly understands these principles as the story of PIN unfolds.

'Gbenga also reinforces the value of mentorship and mentions one particular mentor, the late Dr. James A. Sotomi, who played an outsized role in enabling Sesan's success. One of my good friends and mentors reminded me once that SILENT and LISTEN are anagrams, and they teach an important lesson for leaders. Plainly, 'Gbenga has learned that lesson. He is assiduous about acknowledging many individuals who have materially contributed to the success of PIN. I took away the important point not to forget where you came from and who helped you get to where you have ended up.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have. It is a story of passion, growing competence and aspiration, pragmatic commitment and a great desire to pay it forward. Regardless of the specifics of your own interests and desires, there are valuable insights to be found in these pages, and I commend them to your attention.

Vint Cerf

VP Chief Internet Evangelist, Google

Woodhurst

November 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A single tree—no matter how tall it is, or how wide its roots spread—can never be referred to as a forest. Just like its subject, Paradigm Initiative (PIN), this book is a testament to the unwavering support, dedication, and contributions of so many incredible individuals and organisations. Without each of you, this journey would have been incomplete.

To the mentors who have shaped my life in profound ways. The late James Sotomi, Pastor Tunde Bakare, Wole Soyinka, Pat Utomi, Titi Omo-Ettu, Chris Uwaje, Walda Roseman, Hamadoun Toure, Simi Nwogugu, Osayi Alile, and many others, your wisdom, encouragement, and belief in me and the vision of PIN have been a source of strength and inspiration. Your support made the subject of this book possible, and I am deeply grateful.

Paradigm Initiative would not be where it is today without the individuals who believed in its mission from the very beginning. Before PIN became an institution, Edward Popoola, Emmanuel Oluwatosin, Seun Olajide, Titi Akinsanmi, and Tope Soremi were the volunteer members of the founding group I eventually called Paradigm Initiative Nigeria. Ugo Nwosu and Oluwakorede Asuni, thank you for accepting to work with me when I could not fully describe what I was starting. Tope Ogundipe, Tosin Abolaji and Damola Adelusi, thank you for your hard work and commitment in laying the first set of building blocks of the formal structure known as PIN today.

Various generations of PIN team members laid the organisation's foundation and built structures that will serve us for a long time to come, and I am particularly grateful to Adeboro Odunlami, Adeboye Adegoke, Adesuyi Ajibade, Gabreal Odunsi, Judith Ogutu, Nnenna Paul-Ugochukwu, Oyinda Ohanugo, Rebecca Ryakitimbo, Rigobert Kenmogne, Thobekile Matimbe and Tunde Okunoye, who took the time to help me build an accurate story of Paradigm Initiative's early days by responding to interviews and jumping on calls to help with the research.

Peculiar Showale, your role as the interviewer was nothing short of remarkable. You brought these stories to life with your thoughtful approach, offering readers a unique and heartfelt glimpse into Paradigm Initiative's journey. When I sat with you and Nnenna to discuss the idea of this book, and the approach I would like to take, you went straight to work and came

back with a slide deck and materials that helped Nnenna and me decide on what would make it to the book, and not.

To Clarie Gor, thank you for editing the manuscript. Jemimah Dawutey and Lize Royalty, thank you for your tireless efforts, sharp attention to detail, and commitment to this project. I feel very blessed to have had the chance to work with you as book project assistants, helping with everything from getting the manuscript ready to making sure all book project t's are crossed, and i's are dotted. To Vint Cerf, thank you for reading the first draft of the book, agreeing to write the foreword, and getting it done in record time. To my publishers, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, your enthusiasm to work on this project with me is only matched by your professionalism.

I am deeply grateful to the organisations that believed in Paradigm Initiative's mission and stood by us, including those who continue to trust us with flexible and multi-year support. Ashoka, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, CIVICUS, CS Fund, Ford Foundation, Google, Government of the Netherlands, International Development Research Centre, Internet Society Foundation, Internews, Luminate, Meta, Microsoft, Mott Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Open Technology Fund, Rockefeller Foundation, Walt Disney Company, and Wellspring Foundation, your partnership has been instrumental in driving our impact in digital rights and inclusion.

To Paradigm Initiative's board members, your strategic guidance and steadfast support have been a cornerstone of our success. Thank you for the continued oversight, and for pushing me to aim for the big, hairy, audacious goals, Prof. Pat Utomi, Dr. Aida Opoku-Mensah, Dr. Jummai Umar-Ajijola, Dr. Seyi Adebayo-Olubi, Nick Jekogian and Moussoukoro Diop. And to every team member, past and present, thank you for living out our values of integrity, communication, creativity, and accountability every single day. Your dedication ensures that Paradigm Initiative's mission continues to thrive and inspire.

To my first mentors, Joshua Olaniran Sesan and Dorcas Bola Sesan, you have no idea how much of your instructions I soaked up! From daddy's "go for the highest mark obtainable and not the first position" to mummy's daily demonstration of service and impact through her work, I was set up for what I now do. To Lawrence Aderogba Agbaje, Veronica Adekemi Agbaje, Tunde Sesan, Labake Sesan, Niyi Oluwatosin, Jumoke Oluwatosin, Niyi Ogundipe, Tosin Ogundipe, Femi Oluyadi, Fola Oluyadi, Segun Oyewole, Debola Oyewole, Adewunmi Agbaje, and Ebun Agbaje, thank you for clothing me with the support of family!

To my beloved crown, Temilade, I write this with a lot of emotions. *Òró pò! 1743!* Your love, patience, and unwavering support have been my

anchor. You have stood by me through every challenge, and I am endlessly grateful. Watching you write is a challenge on its own but each feedback on the many rough drafts always renewed my writing energy. To ‘Ladi and ‘Timi, thank you for your understanding and for giving me the space to pursue this dream, even when it meant sacrificing family time. Each time I hear you talk about your favourite books or see you sink into a new series, I remember to complete the next chapter of this project!

Finally, to the readers—whether you are just discovering these pages or returning to them for deeper reflection—thank you for engaging with these words and making them part of your story. This book is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you, all, for being a part of this journey and for making it extraordinary.

INTRODUCTION

Before the establishment of Paradigm Initiative Nigeria (PIN), as Paradigm Initiative was known at the time, the world was very different from what it is today. The journey towards establishing PIN began with a deep personal connection to the early struggles of accessing computers in Nigeria. The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time when computers were a rare commodity in Nigeria, accessible only to a fortunate few. In telling the story of Paradigm Initiative in chapter one of this book, I started the story from Idoani, a small town in southern Nigeria, where the introduction of two computers at Federal Government College, Idoani in 1991 was a significant event. This was also a time when computer literacy was not widespread, and schools did not prioritise technology education. These computers were a novelty, a source of awe and excitement among students, but access was restricted, and a section of the principal's office became the revered "Computer Room."

For many students, the limited access to these computers marked the beginning of a fascination with technology and a determination to learn against the odds. However, the lack of encouragement from educators, coupled with the theft of the school's computers, exemplify the significant barriers to technological education at the time. Moving forward to 1994, a broader societal recognition of the importance of computer literacy began to take shape. The term "computer literacy" was becoming part of the educational discourse, signalling a shift towards valuing technology skills. Yet, opportunities to acquire these skills remained limited, and many students had to seek alternative means to learn—which is exactly what I had to do.

This period of struggle and limited access to technology laid the groundwork for my deep-seated resolve to democratise computer education in Nigeria. The challenges faced and the determination to overcome them fuelled my desire to ensure that future generations would not face the same obstacles. This personal journey of overcoming technological barriers set the stage for the establishment of Paradigm Initiative Nigeria, set up to bridge the digital divide and empower young people with appropriate technology skills. The pre-1995 years highlighted the need for broader access to technology and the importance of creating an inclusive environment where all young people could learn and thrive in the digital

age. This context of challenges and the drive to overcome them would ultimately shape the mission and vision of Paradigm Initiative.

I discuss the role of the Ashoka Fellowship in the emergence of PIN in chapter two to demonstrate the importance of early support to the survival of institutions. Depending on who you are listening to, between 30% and 90% of nonprofits in the United States—one of the countries with the best forms of funding support for nonprofits—fail within the first ten years of their establishment. Ashoka's support helped address one of the reasons that could have made this happen to PIN in our first ten years of existence, and it set us up for organisational support because the founder was taken care of and therefore had only one job—to keep the lights on!

In addition to this, our first big cheque from Microsoft's Community Technology Skills Program, the platform provided by AITEC Africa to talk about Paradigm Initiative's early work, direct introductions to potential partners by the British Deputy High Commission's United Kingdom Trade and Investment (UKTI) unit, the multiple learning opportunities from 2008 through 2010, and that \$10,000 grant from a Silicon Valley-based philanthropist that listened to my elevator pitch at Santa Clara University's Global Social Benefit Incubator (GSBI) programme, laid a solid foundation for PIN. All of these happened with support from Ugo Nwosu, Oluwakorede Asuni, Tope Ogundipe, Tosin Abolaji and Damola Adelusi. If they ever get to read these lines, I hope they pause and smile in the knowledge that they helped lay the foundation for today's successes and tomorrow's bigger impact.

Chapter three details how the foundation of institutional building was deliberately laid between 2013 and 2017. It draws attention to the role of team members and how I consciously hired people to oversee elements of Paradigm Initiative's work that I led on a daily basis—operations, project management, communications, financial management and others. This freed up my time to focus on more institutional capacity building and resource attraction. I also talk about how transforming the social media campaign, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids (CTFK), from a personal consultancy to an organisational project created a template for an income strategy that would take me from personally taking care of PIN to being properly taken care of while overseeing the organisation's vision. By the time my Ashoka stipend ended, PIN was able to pay me a small salary, and between then and now, all the benefits that colleagues get also accrue to me, so I am not complaining.

It was during this period that we got \$500,000 from Rockefeller Foundation to scale our work beyond Lagos, into the South East and North West regions of Nigeria. We were able to attract new talent and make them

offers that allowed them to resign from the private sector to pursue their passion in the civil society space. During this period, we experimented a bit more and even though many ideas failed, a few that were developed at the time went on to form the core of the work we do today. Six years after our first three-man retreat at my home in January 2008, we picked up again the culture of annual retreats. They are rotated across locations in Africa (and now, beyond) with the primary objective of reviewing the ending year and planning a new year of work at PIN. In 2017, after my failed attempt at exiting as executive director of PIN, we pivoted from a national nonprofit to a regional institution.

In chapter four, I discuss the need for expansion, lessons from our first attempts at hiring remotely and how Google's flexibility with their policy fellowship fit right into our strategy at the time. This is why I say that luck is a factor in success, and even though it is often explained away as preparation meeting opportunities, sometimes you happen to be at the right place, at the right time, having the right conversation. The deliberateness around our expansion strategy is informed by the need to build a sustainable people base that can serve our expanding programmatic needs across the Global South, and while much of our hiring is focused on Africa, as of July 2025, Brazil and India seem like the two countries we are likely to hire our first set of non-African team members from. It is no surprise that these two countries were very well represented at the 2024 and 2025 editions of the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum in Accra, Ghana and Lusaka, Zambia respectively.

This chapter also lays out how we grew our fundraising from small and micro grants, to building the capacity to attract multi-year large grants, including information on how exactly we got certain resources and from which funding partner. With increased resources came additional responsibilities but we had laid a solid foundation of accountability, transparency and effective use of resources from the very beginning, and that helped. We were also very deliberate about not making fundraising the sole responsibility of the executive director, and even though it is still my primary responsibility to keep the lights on, every member of the team contributes by doing excellent work, communicating work done, discovering potential funding, working on proposal submissions, and more. It helps that we are transparent with how much resources we attract internally and externally, because, for example, when team members protested low wages at our 2019 retreat, transparency was why we were able to start the journey of compensation improvement—a process that continues with our Best Place to Work initiative.

The need to strengthen oversight and accountability became more important as we got more support and also worked to improve workplace conditions. It was initially easy for me not to earn a salary and fix remuneration for other team members but as I began to earn a salary from PIN, it was important to bring in the board for compensation proposal review and approval before implementation by the human resources and finance and administration managers. This is what chapter five discusses, including how I met the first two board members who remain trustees of Paradigm Initiative to date. The lessons from my first attempt at setting up a board based on name recognition alone continue to shape our strategy that now combines expertise, potential contribution and other considerations with inevitable name recognition. We now have a stable board meeting schedule with active participation, with nearly 100% attendance recorded for most meetings.

Chapters six and seven focus on the real people behind the PIN story, from those who are no longer on the team to those who are literally building today's PIN. Feedback from previous team members was very encouraging, and it was great to see that many of the details shared during their exit interviews have led to improvement at PIN. It was also great to hear from current team members, including leadership team members, on why they joined the organisation, how their journey has been so far, and what they believe the future of PIN holds. In Chapter eight, I lifted the veil on many behind-the-scenes experiences that shaped what we have today at PIN, including tough lessons from managing people—and growing as a leader. I also discuss my first exit attempt and how that moved from a personal exit to a corporate double-down on the expansion of our scope. The chapter also touched on our various stages of team development, from walking on eggshells (forming) to having our first fights (storming), getting to know each other better (norming) and moving on to do great work together (performing).

It is impossible to build anything, much less an organisation, without significant input from others. In Chapter nine, I focus on the lessons I learnt from others and how they helped shape the Paradigm Initiative we have today. The lessons from Simi Nwogugu, Osayi Alile, Tunji Lardner, YZ Yau, Edetaen Ojo, Lesley Agams, my peers, and proteges—who thought the lessons were only one-way—shaped a lot of my leadership journey at PIN. My leadership journey builds on earlier mentorship from the likes of the late Dr. James Sotomi, Pastor Tunde Bakare, Prof. Wole Soyinka, Prof. Pat Utomi, Eng. Titi Omo-Ettu, Chris Uwaje, Walda Roseman, Hamadoun Toure, and many more. I am a product of diverse leadership experiences,

and I learnt quite early to draw various shades of lessons from various individuals to achieve a wholesome learning experience.

Chapter ten is the chapter of details and numbers, with information on how exactly we went about implementing our Best Place to Work strategy around compensation and team welfare, as well as our fundraising journey from 2007 to date. The chapter also discusses our 2023 employee satisfaction survey, the many lessons learnt from that process, and the corrective actions that were started immediately. Chapter 11 takes things forward by focusing on the next 17 years—people, principles, policy, places and priorities. The chapter describes the profile of PIN team members, the kind of people who would help us inch closer to our vision, and the policies that help us ensure that we have the right people in the right seats on the bus to keep it moving in the right direction.

Chapter 12 focuses on the future, Paradigm Initiative's commitment to collaborations, the issues that will define the next few years and why we are a work in progress. I wrote extensively about how Paradigm Initiative's work will contribute to the *Pact for the Future* adopted by United Nations member States on Sunday, September 22 2024, with a focus on the *Global Digital Compact*. The chapter discusses how PIN is working to close digital divides and what we could achieve through strong collaborations among Global South organisations. It also discusses Paradigm Initiative's work on expanding inclusion, what we must do to accelerate this need, how fostering rights-respecting digital spaces will help us achieve this, the need for advancing responsible data governance, and making artificial intelligence work for the good of all.

As I typed the last words of the chapter, I felt the weight of what the future holds for PIN as a work in progress, my role in it and how we must take bold steps to address challenges and maximise the opportunities presented by the times we live in.

Now, let's start from the beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

The Pre-1995 Years

It was not a typical day in Idoani, a small, quiet town tucked away at the edge of one of Nigeria's southern states, just beyond hills that seemed to serve no other purpose than to announce the proximity of the school to approaching visitors and students at Federal Government College, Idoani.

On this day in 1991, the school played host to visitors who came bearing gifts. Whatever the gifts were, every student knew they were special because as soon as the vehicle made its way through the school gate, the principal went to the school gate to meet the van and then walked the entire 200m stretch as the minivan negotiated the right turn towards the administration block, escorting the van.

It wasn't long before the news spread around the school that we were now proud owners of two computers! While they technically belonged to everyone, the school's cool new shiny gifts found a home in the second half of the principal's office, a space specially reserved for this gift that was more important than the most feared man in the school. At that time, an invitation to the principal's office was not something any student hoped for, but the more secure half of the office—the computer room—instantly became a pilgrimage.

A few days later, I left my class to go on the coveted journey to the computer room because rumour had it that some students had been there to play games and do magical things while the principal was within earshot! But the teacher in charge literally looked down at me and said, with an air of arrogance about him, "computers are not for people like you; you can't understand how to use them."

Those words almost crushed my 13-year-old spirit because a classmate and his brothers, whose father was a professor of mathematics at the University of Benin, had been to the same computer room and said they had access to one even at home.

I don't remember anything beyond crying and wiping my tears as I returned to the junior secondary three block. I probably forgot all about it almost as soon as the tears dried up. Still, I believe that the distance between the administration block and my class laid a foundation for my career and what eventually became Paradigm Initiative. I was made to feel

small, and as a way of avenging that terrible experience, I decided to learn how to use computers and to teach every young person so they could also go to any computer room without being turned back.

Three years later, in 1994, I graduated from secondary school and noticed that everywhere you turned, people were talking about computer literacy: this new kind of literacy that was neither reading nor writing, and that was not taught in regular schools. “I would have been one of them if that teacher didn’t keep me out,” I thought, remembering my promise to myself in what had turned out to be one of my lowest moments in secondary school.

I was an intelligent child who others respected for his mathematical prowess and I had a way with subjects others considered to be tough but the one thing I had been unable to do was to lay my hands on a computer. It didn’t help that a few months after the gifts were housed in the most secure office on campus, gun-toting thieves visited our school and carted them away.

I fulfilled the first part of my dream by enrolling at Newlight Computers Limited in Akure, where I lived with my family at the time. I was shocked when I saw typewriters, and not computers, on our tables, but it was the stage of our learning where we would have to learn how to type by picking out the keys that were next to each other—*ASDF* to the left, *LKJ* to the right, in reverse—and no one was going to trust us with computers just yet.

As I toured the facility, peeping through slightly open doors and transparent window curtains, I saw computers and heard confident-looking teachers say things that made no sense to me at the time—BASIC, programming, shut down, DOS, and so forth. One of those days, after thumping away at the typewriter for what seemed like an eternity, I heard about three powerful buttons that could help restart a computer: Control, Alternate and Delete.

Before long, I had gained enough confidence to touch one of the computers that lay idle in the lobby, but things went downhill fast. The computer started with a high-pitched noise, and I froze for a moment and then remembered the Ctrl + Alt + Del combination. As I stood up to leave, basking in the glory of taming a crying machine, I realised one of the school’s owners was right behind me. In that moment, I would have preferred the rejection I experienced in 1991 to what I thought would happen next. But he took me into his office, and when he realised I was one of the students who were still confined to typewriters, he decided to spend weekends teaching me how to use computers properly to prevent me from destroying all the computers at the institute.

Great Ife (1995 – 2001)

I remember my excitement as I arrived at the Obafemi Awolowo University campus on a rainy Sunday afternoon in October 1995. I arrived just in time for the establishment of the university's Information Technology and Communication Unit (INTECU) that set up multiple networks of computers that were connected to the internet. Even though the vice chancellor did not walk the entire 2.5km connecting the school's gate to the senate building, just as it happened in my secondary school, the aptly named computer building became a popular destination among students who wanted to get online and do the many things that were now possible: send eMails, browse the web, search for any information using a search engine, and more.

Students were only allowed to use computers for 30 minutes at a time, maybe even per day, but it wasn't long before those of us who had made this our new home found a way around by using variations of our names on the sign-in sheets. I was 'Gbenga Sesan in the morning, Olabisi Sesan in the afternoon and Bisi Oluwagbenga when a night slot was up for grabs. I didn't have to do that for long, thanks to a series of strike actions that led to a year-long interruption to our studies. There was a six-month protest in 1996 by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) against the Nigerian government's violation of the agreement signed with the union and the dismissal of their colleagues by the Sani Abacha-led military regime. It was followed by other protests by students and other associations, such as the Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions (NASU).

While this meant an interruption to my pursuit of a degree in electronics and electrical engineering, it also meant there were fewer students on campus, which in turn meant there was no waiting list for the use of computers with internet access. My unhindered access to the internet during this long break and the hurt from being denied access to computers in my secondary school laid the foundation for the emergence of Paradigm Initiative. Two of my friends, Adeolu Ashaye and Titi Akinsanmi, also spent a lot of time on campus during the break, so we were regulars at the computer building. I remember deciding at some point to spend my nights with the lonely computers instead of making multiple long trips between where I enjoyed exploring the world and Angola Hall, my hall of residence 2.1km away.

The letter I wrote to my dad to inform him of my decision to stay back on campus and to promise that choosing computers over spending an indefinite amount of time at home with family would eventually make him

proud of me was delivered by my friend, Bayo Olotu, who also lived in Akure at the time. My first trip out of Nigeria wouldn't be until 2001 but spending that much time surfing the web was like travelling the world. A different person, a more global version of me, resumed H8, Angola Hall when school activities started again.

Naturally, at the end of my second year on campus, when other colleagues left to go complete their year two student work placement programme in various cities across Nigeria, I stayed back on campus again. It wasn't all computers and the internet this time. My friend, Deolu Akinyemi, and I started and delivered a successful stage play project called "Akere" during that period. This flair for drama, which dates back to my secondary school years, led me to the drama unit of the Evangelical Christian Union (ECU) group on campus, where I met Dr. James Sotomi, an alumnus who had just returned to Nigeria to establish a computing firm, Neural Technologies Limited. My six-month industrial attachment, a part of the compulsory Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) for fourth-year students, was completed at the firm.

Dr. Sotomi challenged me to learn the HyperText Markup Language (HTML) programming language. When I returned his manual after only three days, he immediately assigned me my first website design task. My friend, Tokunbo Fagbamigbe, who had just completed his Engineering Physics programme and was also a member of the ECU Drama group, was tasked with writing more complex code using Java and C++. I can never forget the day Dr. Sotomi asked me to present a website project at Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company (SNEPCO) because while I walked into the room with impostor syndrome, I came out feeling like I was ready to take on the world. He bet on me so early in my career, and now, when I get a chance to do that with colleagues and proteges, I am honouring the memory of the Late Dr. James A. Sotomi.

At the end of my fourth year on campus, I was expected to complete my industrial attachment programme with Neural Technologies and return to school for the final year. I signed my SIWES logbook to demonstrate that I had completed the programme but also asked Dr. Sotomi to allow me to continue as an unpaid staff of the company so that I could continue to learn and implement projects for the company on campus. I also wanted to secure my employment future by adding at least a year of experience and locking a job opportunity in before my graduation. Once I got back to campus, armed with introductions from Neural Technologies, I pitched website design projects to Obafemi Awolowo University Press, the university's printing company, and the Department of Dentistry.

The Electronics and Electrical Engineering Department of the university had an opening for a student to serve as the chairman of the Electronic Club which oversaw the computers in the department, so of course, I wanted to be chairman. At this time, I had returned to the idea of using my knowledge of computing to help other students so it would be an opportunity to prepare myself and my classmates for the challenges ahead of us after graduation.

On the day Musa Aibinu and I presented our manifesto for the role of chairman of the Electronic Club, a classmate was tasked with reading my profile. “Gbenga Sesan went to Omolere Nursery and Primary School, Akure,” he started, and everybody clapped. He continued, “He was also a student at St. Peter’s Demonstration Primary School, Akure” and everybody clapped again, laughing. By the time he had said, “He attended Federal Government College...” and everybody shouted “Akure!” for a school that is in Idoani, I had gotten the message. I needed to assure my classmates that this Akure boy had his sights firmly set on the whole world. I started introducing myself differently, assigning meaning to my initials. “Listen, I might be an Akure boy now, but I will be a global person in the future. My name is ‘Gbenga Sesan, GS, for Global Synergism.”

My competitor showed off his engineering skills and was hailed by many, but I won because I focused on the one thing no one knew much about—the future. I relied on my newfound love for website design, on computing and the internet as the future. I got to work immediately by contacting Philip Emeagwali, who was one of the most popular Nigerians at the time and had been referred to as one of the founders of the internet, and asking him to come to speak at our annual Electronic Week event. He replied and connected me with Chris Uwaje, who was then president of the Information Technology Association of Nigeria (ITAN).

In addition to my work at the department, one of the first things I did when I returned from my industrial attachment programme was a web page design training called Web Page Design (WPD) 2000. It was my first time training other people and I did it for a fee of 2000 naira each. My roommates, Ogemdi Ike and Tope Soremi, teamed up with me to advertise the training, sign up students, deliver the training and turn what we had into a small business. We used my knowledge of HTML, Ogemdi’s knowledge of computers and Tope’s people skills to digitise yearbooks for student groups, departments and campus fellowships. The more we talked to our clients about how computers and the internet were changing everything, the more I gravitated towards creating a platform that could help me connect young people with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills.

The idea of digitising yearbooks was not original to us. We were building on the work done by Kayode Ayodele and Isaac Inyang, who were a year ahead of me in the Electronics and Electrical Engineering department. When one of our lecturers, Professor G O Ajayi asked Kayode and Isaac's class if they knew anyone who could write on the subject of "ICT, Youth and National Development," they both came to see me in the hostel and said, "Prof wants to see you." I was always talking about how ICTs could be used for personal development, nation-building, regional cooperation and global participation. So even though my name hadn't been explicitly mentioned, to them I was the obvious choice.

I wrote the essay and handed it to Prof. Ajayi, not knowing he was turning it in as an entry for a United Nations (UN) competition. After what seemed like a very long time, on July 16 2001 Prof. Ajayi responded to my eMail enquiry with: "Dear Gbenga, Congrats. You are successful and you have been selected. I advise you [to] obtain a Nigerian passport as soon as possible. As soon as I know the details you will be informed. GO Ajayi."

At about the same time, I won the Most Promising Web Developer Contest sponsored by The Executive Cyberschool (TEC), whose CEO, Engineer Titi Omo-Ettu, was on a mission to provide young Nigerians with affordable ICT training. Apart from the ₦100,000 prize and being named Nigeria's Information Technology Youth Ambassador, the company sponsored my ICT training campaign around Nigerian universities. That was the moment Paradigm Initiative Nigeria was born.

On October 30 2001, I wrote to inform my volunteer group of friends and a few others of my announcement as Nigeria's Information Technology Youth Ambassador. The eMail read, in part:

Hi everyone, I was on the bus on the way to work this morning... my mind was at work and I had to slow down a little. I picked my pen, opened my jotter and let go... your names came to my mind, your addresses to my jotter and... folks, I need you, Nigeria needs you...the Future of Nigeria beckons!...I have worked with you at one time or the other, on whatever small scale it might be, and I know that you are a worthy vessel when it comes to National assignments... Sometime in January 2002, I will be honoured as Nigeria's I. T. Youth Ambassador. That is an open door that will help carry out some long-time dreams that I'm sure you share. Sometime earlier, I designed www.blackpioneers.htmlplanet.com in anticipation of change, and here is a door... Please save this mail... stay in touch and get ready... Nigeria will not be the same again!

Inspired by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Fellowship convening that brought together about 108 fellows from all African countries, I started an online group, Black Pioneers, that morphed into

the eNigeria mailing list that predated the first time I would use the name, Paradigm Initiative Nigeria (PIN), in 2001. At the time, PIN was a channel of expression that connected my various volunteer efforts and allowed me to work with other young people on various ICT projects. Before it became an organisation, PIN existed as a volunteer group that included my friends—Tope Soremi, Seun Olajide, Emmanuel Oluwatosin, Titi Akinsanmi and Edward Popoola—who all went on to build amazing careers for themselves.

The Beginning

Between 2001 and 2003, I was touring Nigeria to train students and participating in UN-led conversations on how ICT was changing our world. The UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was going to hold two major meetings—one in Geneva in 2003, and another in Tunis in 2005—but regional consultations were already underway in 2002. The ITU invited me to speak about the role of young people in the global Information Society debate at a regional meeting hosted by the UN Economic Commission for Africa in Bamako, Mali, in May 2002. I had been keeping a website, NigerianWebmaster.tripod.com, that had information on everything I was doing at the time so it wasn't a surprise when Nick Moraitis, an Australian youth development expert, and Terri Willard, an International Institute for Sustainable Development project manager who was working on coordinating youth input into the WSIS process, read about my involvement in the process and reached out to ask that I join the youth caucus that would be meeting at a WSIS preparatory meeting ahead of the main event in December 2003.

As the global meetings convened in Geneva and Tunis, I joined preparatory meetings in Bamako and Accra since my focus was on young Nigerians. The WSIS Youth Caucus was also central to the Youth Creating Digital Opportunities project that was put together by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (where Terri worked at the time), TakingITGlobal (TIG), and the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP). With support from the Canadian government, the National Youth Information Society Campaigns kicked off in more than ten countries, including Nigeria. Titi Akinsanmi and I led what we called the Rural Youth National Information Society Campaigns (RYNICS) for Nigeria, which provided another opportunity for me to tour Nigeria with the gospel of ICTs.

In ten months, we trained young people in eight states across Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. Across Abuja, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Lagos and Oyo states, we trained more than 400

young Nigerians on ICTs, explained the WSIS process to them and got feedback that we would take to Geneva and Tunis. The work done by the group of volunteers is documented in the book, *Global Process, Local Reality: Nigerian Youth Lead Action in the Information Society*, published by Paradigm Initiative Nigeria and sponsored by Heinrich Boll Foundation. I edited the book and co-authored it with Adeolu Ashaye, Ayo Oladejo, Ayobami Olutuase, Edward Popoola, Kola Osinowo, Nwanneka Akabuike and 'Tope Soremi.

I kept a full-time job at Junior Achievement of Nigeria (JAN) along with these volunteer efforts.

I had invited Simi Nwogugu, the executive director of JAN, for the Electronic Week I hosted on campus and stayed in touch with her once I learnt that JAN's work was focused on youth. JAN was going to nominate me for the 2002 Hewlett Packard Global Business Challenge (HPGBC), but I was about a year above the cut-off age, so I couldn't participate but kept following JAN's work. I had seen a brochure describing a proposed partnership between JAN and Microsoft when I visited their offices with my friend, Deolu Akinyemi, while we were raising funds for the Electronic and Electrical Engineering Student Society, where he served as President, and I as chairman of the Electronic Club. That sealed the deal for me. I wrote to Simi asking to intern with Junior Achievement immediately after my final examinations.

My presentation at the December 2000 ITAN Expo had gone so well that Lanre Onasanya, who worked for Microsoft, mentioned my name to Simi as a possible nominee for the competition. When the HPGBC opportunity fell through, I exchanged a lot of eMails with Simi, including one that read, in part:

Also, after going through the annual report, I discovered that Junior Achievement might just be the right organisation to work with in carrying out my dream of helping youths in our nation overcome the information barrier and conquer the looming Digital Divide. I would really be glad to work with you on the training and would also like to know if there's any opportunity for NYSC postings with you. I am working towards serving in Lagos and would like to know if Junior Achievement has room for such. I'll be through with school in April and would like to begin serving the nation immediately.

After a few eMails, one reminder and a physical note sent through a friend to the JAN office in Lagos, Simi replied:

Hi 'Gbenga, I'm out of the office until the middle of next week so why don't you plan to come to the office in Lagos sometime during the week of

May 7? We can plan the details then...Plan to begin work with JAN around May 15. You will be a program assistant and work with Mrs. Osayi Oruene, the program coordinator, in implementing our elementary and secondary school programmes starting in May. When you come to the office in two weeks, we will iron out the details. Thanks. Simi.

I started at JAN in June 2002 and by January 2003, I was leading what would become the Lagos Digital Village, a project funded by Microsoft, implemented by JAN and enjoyed the support of the Lagos State Government.

While working at JAN during the week, volunteering across Nigeria most weekends, and getting permission to travel for global conversations from time to time, I got invitations to many schools and communities to train young people on ICTs. The Lagos Digital Village project provided free ICT training for young people who couldn't afford the exorbitant fees charged by computer schools. Still, it was based only in Ebute Metta, Lagos and anyone who needed such opportunities had to come to us for training.

I started spending more time with communities that I felt needed such opportunities, so when I was invited to Ajegunle by my friend, Praise Fowowe, who led a group called the Uncommon Man Network at the time, I was quick to say yes. Not only did I visit Ajegunle, but I also fell in love with its youth's perspective and thirst for knowledge. After each training session, I got questions like, "Can this computer knowledge help me make money so that my younger sister can also go to school?" and not the usual "Can this one on the lap do the same things as the computer on the desk?"

After six years at JAN, I knew it was time to move on. Right after I turned in my resignation letter, on February 13 2007, I travelled to South Africa to join the second cohort of the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Leadership Fellowship. The intensive programme was very personal because I had just left my comfort zone and was planning to use the \$4,000 I had saved from my salary and consulting work to help young people realise the power of ICTs.

I left the programme feeling better about my decision because that week in Mont Fleur opened my eyes to the gaps in African leadership and the role that each individual must play as a catalyst. It affirmed that even without formal titles, one could lead from their place of expertise. I scribbled some ideas on the flight back and decided it was time to move the name Paradigm Initiative Nigeria (PIN) from just one used to anchor various volunteer efforts to the name of the institution I hoped to build. Naturally, the place to start would be Ajegunle.

Fortunately, Ugo Nwosu, a young ICT enthusiast who was volunteering with PIN had made the decision to work with me full-time, so I was not alone on what I called the AjeGUNle.org project. The name was styled after the popular dot-com nomenclature, but for social impact, hence the dot org. Ugo helped with the administration of the baseline study that I designed to ascertain the community's real needs before designing the final version of the project. I visited AjeGUNle often between April and July 2007, to lay the foundation for our planned start date.

The day before my 30th birthday, on July 26 2007, I welcomed four young Koreans to Nigeria as part of the Korean Internet Volunteers scheme. Ilryoung Lee, Eunkyong Kim, Dongjin Seong and Minhyun Lee came to work with PIN to train the first set of students that had signed up for the AjeGUNle.org project. Their arrival meant that Ugo and I needed an office, so my rented apartment—18 Akinbola Street, Ilupeju, Lagos—became Paradigm Initiative's first office. To make the space feel more like a workplace, I ordered cane furniture from craftsmen because I thought we could also help market their product to the world through caneVillage.com—a project that I invited Korede Asuni to lead. They failed to deliver on time, and even though the project never took off, Korede and Ugo continued to work for PIN.

CHAPTER TWO

Ashoka to the Rescue (2008–2009)

Paradigm Initiative Nigeria's new chapter was started by a Facebook message from Jennifer Fry, who worked as Europe integrator for Ashoka, and follow-up conversations with Lesley Agams. Jennifer saw updates of our work online and asked if I knew about Ashoka, the organisation that identifies and supports leading social entrepreneurs across the world. It was my first time hearing about them, so I did some research ahead of the first conversation with Lesley, the country manager of Ashoka in charge of Cameroon, Ghana and Nigeria. The only other person who had called me a social entrepreneur before this time was Prof. Bolaji Aluko, a professor of chemical engineering at Howard University, when he was nominating me for the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Leadership Fellowship.

By the time I received the Ashoka application form, I knew there were many questions I had not answered about Paradigm Initiative Nigeria, and the fellowship selection process—which is known for being rigorous and highly competitive—forced me to think, write and lay a solid foundation. I had hardly been named a fellow when Lesley told me that one of the first things to do was to hire an accountant who could help keep the records and maintain a clear distinction between my money and the organisation's. She was spot on because one of the most common mistakes founders make is to get income and expenses mixed up, especially when they start out footing all of the organisation's bills.

On April 28 2008, almost a year after PIN started implementing a training programme in Ajegunle, I submitted an application form towards my Ashoka Fellowship. It would be the organisation's first endorsement for its potential impact on a scale bigger than Ajegunle, the first community we served. The idea that I submitted to Ashoka was Community.org because even though the first project was called Ajegunle.org, I had a dream of expanding beyond the community to other areas. I listed Ito-ku.org and Abraka.org as likely follow-on projects, and while we never got to work in Ito-ku nor Abraka, the project went on to become national in scope. It is now offered as a pan-African programme run in partnership with several organisations in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

In my application to Ashoka, I wrote, “The Ajegunle.org project is a train-the-trainer capacity building initiative that uses a relay training model and positive peer pressure concept to transform a notorious slum in Nigeria, as a model intervention for other underserved communities.” I was basically trying to recreate my own opportunity path for other young people, having moved from being denied access to a computer in secondary school to building a career in the use of the same tool. Speaking of a 2004 training for youth in Ajegunle, and a 2007 baseline study that convinced me it was the perfect location to start my work from, I wrote in the application, “That was a defining moment for me, and after a few years of the encounter, I resigned from paid employment to pursue this laudable life mission!” The 14-page submission included information on the idea, my personal information, my educational background, my hobbies, my understanding of the problem I was trying to solve, the proposed strategy, how my personal history connected with the proposed idea, and photos and newspaper articles that featured the work done so far.

Pat Utomi, a professor of political economy, had been one of my interviewers on the Ashoka panel, and his questions got me thinking more about the role that the organisation could play within the complex web of problems that my primary target audience, young people, suffered from. When I decided to officially register PIN as a nonprofit organisation in Nigeria, I invited Prof. Pat Utomi, a popular supporter of young people’s ideas, and Dr. Seyi Adebayo-Olubi, someone who I had seen leading a huge technology and entertainment project in Lagos, to join me as trustees. They were my mentors, and they understood what I was trying to do with PIN. The registration process was completed in December 2008 when we were issued a certificate of incorporation. Not being registered hadn’t stopped Ugo and me from implementing the project but lessons from the Ashoka interview process made me understand the place of corporate governance better.

Coincidentally, my first professional training in social entrepreneurship happened right after my Ashoka interview in June 2008. I went on to the Stanford University Graduate School of Business for the Executive Education in Social Entrepreneurship course, supported by the Youth Education Scheme scholarship from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). It was supposed to be a scholarship for the postgraduate admission I got at the University of Nottingham in 2007, but I managed to convince the ITU to allow me to split the money between an April 2008 Harvard Kennedy School of Government Executive Program in Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, and the Stanford programme. I was convinced that between a PhD and PIN, the latter needed more of my attention.