



National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS)

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Office of NANTS President

...Propagating trade justice and economic development

PRESS RELEASE

ADDRESSING THE MENACE OF ILLEGAL IMPORTATION OF FOOD ITEMS IN NIGERIA

The National Association of Nigerian Traders (NANTS) notes with dismay that Nigeria has remained a large food importer in spite of the massive available arable land across the country and further frowns at the fact that the country is spending over 1 trillion Naira annually on major food commodities such as rice, wheat, sugar and frozen foods.

Although a welcome development that the gains recorded in the agricultural sector of late in the area of rice production has significantly reduced the importation of rice into the country and has greatly reduced the import bill, nevertheless, we are saddened that foreign rice from India and Thailand as well as banned frozen food items are still dominating the local markets and consumer shops thereby creating a concern for stakeholders on the future of food production and food marketing in the country.

On this premise, NANTS therefore lauds the setting up of a Committee by the Honorable Minister of State for Agriculture and Rural Development to address the challenges of illegal importation of Rice, Frozen fish and poultry products through the land borders. As a National umbrella of traders, we testify to the fact that huge consignments of rice and other food items are being smuggled through the borders with various Nigerian neighboring countries such as Togo and Republic of Benin. It is further regrettable that most of these items find their ways illegally into the Nigerian markets evading payable duties. The fact that some of these commodities are sub-standard with attendant health hazards, makes Nigeria loose from multiple ends.

As the nation seeks solution to these embarrassing losses, NANTS commends the vision of government through the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) in organizing a multi-stakeholder interactive session to identify and proffer solutions to these multi-layer problems that have grave consequences for Nigeria's food security, trade policy, economic integration and political sovereignty.

1- NEC-

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The Union of Nigerian Traders, Small Scale Business and Entrepreneurs, Domestic Traders and Economic Development through Fair Economic Rights.

Indeed, while we commend the FMARD particularly with regard to expressly initiating inclusive sectoral problem solving dialogue, we however encourage the federal government (and other tiers) to make a bolder statement of genuine interest in deepening the campaign for patronage and consumption of ‘made in Nigeria’ products by taking the lead. In this regard, government must show example by ensuring that public events and procurement priorities as well consumption patterns in government circles must change right from the Villa to all Ministries, Departments and Agencies/Parastatals. The volume of imported items and consumables including funds allocated to feeding which goes to foreign products cannot help the development of the country. In addition, the roles of mega hotels and high profile consumer shops such as Shoprite, NEXT etc. in tacitly or covertly supporting/encouraging the menace of illicit trade in food items must be thoroughly investigated.

Secondly, is the need to equally demonstrate preparedness on the part of government to expose illicit activities of smugglers who masquerade themselves as Traders. This is against the backdrop that some of these unscrupulous traders are either government officials or those who in one way or the other have the background support/facilitation of some officials in government. The need for comprehensive sieving and the enforcement of strong sanction mechanism becomes imperative so as to ‘separate the genuine wheat from the chaff’ and provide the correct vision for proper navigation of trade and agricultural policies.

Thirdly, while protecting the domestic markets and small-scale farmers from undue competition accessioned by the high influx of foreign agricultural goods (particularly rice, poultry and fishery products), which is commendable, government must further strengthen the resolve to protect the livelihoods and health of ordinary Nigerians. The escalation of health issues such as cancer and the likes cannot be dissociated from such unguarded imports. This therefore knocks directly at the doors of Security and Regulatory Agencies such as the Nigeria Customs Service, Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON), National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), Consumer Protection Council (CPC), Biosafety Commission, etc. Specifically, proper coordination and synergy among these agencies are still far away, while trade infrastructure like scanning and laboratory facilities are either non-existent or obsolete and must therefore be put in place to contribute in ‘fencing’ our porous borders.

Fourthly, is the low level of literacy and awareness of Nigerian trading community especially in terms of identification of legal goods and or items that are not prohibited. For the average Nigerian trader, almost everything is tradable, and this is not so in the eyes of our national trade policies. While we continue to contribute our quota as a national body in educating our constituency in this regard, government must provide complimentary efforts in this direction so as to increase knowledge of the implications and withdrawal from dangerous transactions termed trade among Nigerian traders. Such knowledge would go a long way to igniting patriotism among Nigerian traders for dealing more in locally produced goods.

Fifthly, is that the foregoing brings on board the absence of a National Trade Policy for a great country like Nigeria. It is embarrassing that Nigeria’s last trade policy was in 2002, and since then, the country is yet to provide herself a policy that gives direction of trade and transaction flows navigation which is key to the linkage and nexus with agriculture, industry, monetary and fiscal policies. The rather staccato operations of Nigeria’s trade policy has widened the window for smuggling and unbridled importation, and this must be addressed with urgency.

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Thick and Thin: Trade, Small Scale Business and Entrepreneurship, Domestic Trade and Economic Development through Socio-Economic Rights

Sixthly, while the country is engaging in purging the trade arena to encourage agricultural development, the benefits of Nigeria's membership of and commitments to ECOWAS must be well considered. Our actions must avoid throwing away the baby with the bathwater and recognize that some of Nigerian neighbours such as Niger, Mali, Chad, etc, are located within the Sahel region (desert and land locked), and therefore depend to a large extent on Nigeria for imports of agro-produce such as grains and other food items. To this end, Nigeria benefits from duty-free exchange of agricultural goods and other manufactures under the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) Protocol which incentivizes increased productivity from our local farmers. We must therefore take full advantage of the huge market of about 350 million population in the region and become a major food exporter.

More so, regional programs such as the DFID supported West-African Food Market (WAFM) and the activities of ECOWAS ETLS Task Force must be given adequate support and accorded due collaboration, taking into account the huge volume of informal trade across these regional borders and the need to formalize such transactions and facilitate effective data collection to aid proper policy approaches.

NANTS further notes that the demand for foreign products (foods) is sometimes created by the lack of supply; therefore, government must intensify efforts in supporting farmers to increase production so as to cover the yawning gap in food supply, especially against the backdrop that insurgency and insecurity in the North East and other parts of the country have created vacuum in the Nigerian food supply market. To this end, the complimentary efforts by International donor projects such as the IFAD Value Chain Development Programme (VCDP) should receive adequate commendation and support of government particularly in the area of counterpart funding by the 6 operating States.

In conclusion, NANTS under the edges of the Voices for Food Security (VFS) and the CAADP Non State Actors Coalition (CNC) commits to supporting this brilliant initiative of the government aimed at protecting the farmers markets as well as the health and well-being of citizens.

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