

I. Introduction

In the days following the sudden and unexpected death of Nigerian dictator General Sani Abacha in June 1998, the winds of change finally began to blow stronger in Africa's largest country, long the subject of repressive and stifling military rule. Abacha's replacement, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, quickly moved to revise and reschedule Abacha's program of transition to civilian democratic rule, the sincerity of which had been doubted by many Nigerians and international observers. The new timetable called for a relatively swift process of transition. It consisted of a series of elections with formal handover to civilian authorities to take place by the end of May 1999.

Unlike most Nigerian military rulers before him, Abubakar kept his promises. Presidential elections were held in February and Olesegun Obasanjo emerged as Nigeria's new civilian president-elect. His presidency was inaugurated on May 29th, 1999 marking the beginning of a new era in Nigeria, one in which the Nigerian people have invested tremendous hopes and expectations.

Canada and Canadians have long followed political developments in Nigeria with keen interest and abiding concern. The Government of Canada particularly distinguished itself in November, 1995 when it led a movement to have Nigeria, notorious for its human rights abuses, suspended from the Commonwealth for executing Nigerian poet and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other members of Nigeria's Ogoni people. In December 1995, Canadian church and secular agencies and Nigerian pro-democracy groups in Canada formed the Working Group on Nigeria (WGN), the purpose of which was to undertake collaborative initiatives to support the democratic aspirations of the Nigerian people. Among the WGN's successes was the creation, in partnership with CIDA, of the Canadian Democracy Fund for Nigeria. The Fund enabled Canadian NGOs to strategically channel money to civil society organizations in Nigeria that were working to develop the country's democratic culture and instill respect for human rights.

After the death of Sani Abacha, and invigorated by the optimism surrounding initiatives taken by General Abubakar, WGN members decided that it was time to plan for the post-dictatorship period. If Nigeria was indeed to become a civilian democracy by May, 1999 strategic support from donor countries like Canada would be required to help Nigeria's fledgeling democratic institutions take root, grow and develop. A conference was envisaged and a planning