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WOMEN ON THE GRID HUB

FROM CANDLELIGHT TO MEGAWATTS: NIGERIA'S NEW ELECTRICITY PLAYBOOK

By Barr. Jumoke Delano

Once upon a time and not so long ago, a tailor in the outskirts of a popular Nigerian city had a dream. A small workshop, a few apprentices, and steady power supply to run his machines. But the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), or its newer cousins: the Distribution Companies (DisCos), had other ideas. So, every day, the tailor would turn to his faithful friend, the generator. Costly, noisy, and smoky. But at least it worked.

Across Nigeria, millions of citizens share this frustration. That is why the government has launched a bold new roadmap: the National Integrated Electricity Policy (NIEP). It's not just another document. It is a fresh start, a plan to shift Nigeria from energy poverty to energy prosperity.

The NIEP does not just focus on more power, it focuses on better, more cost-effective power. The policy supports Nigeria's just transition to solar, hydro, wind, and clean gas. It ensures that the journey to energy access also aligns with climate goals because lighting homes shouldn't mean polluting the air.

The NIEP will be implemented through the Strategic Implementation Plan that is being developed. Implementation of the NIEP is crucial to realising the intended impact. Let us examine the key issues that are covered in the NIEP.

The BIG PICTURE

The NIEP explains how Nigeria will achieve affordable, reliable, and sustainable electricity for all. It aligns with the Constitutional Amendment and Electricity Act 2023, which empower States to build and manage their own electricity markets.

The policy lays out what each stakeholder must do, from government to regulators to private investors, so that the tailor at the start of this piece and millions in the same position can stop relying on generators to power their growing businesses.

THE PATHWAY THAT LED TO THE NIEP

Since 2001, Nigeria has restructured its power sector through various reforms: unbundling NEPA, establishing Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC) and encouraging private investment.

Despite some progress, power supply remains unreliable. The Electricity Act 2023 changed the game by decentralising power literally and legally. NIEP responded to this change by providing a structured, national strategy for all actors to follow.

NIGERIA'S ELECTRICITY POLICY OBJECTIVES

The goals, which emphasised quality service, investor confidence and long-term sustainability are:

a. Universal access to electricity
b. A financially viable power sector
c. A transition to a cleaner, low-carbon economy
d. Stronger State and local participation

SAME OBJECTIVE DIFFERENT ROLES

Electricity is not just about wires; it is a system with players, especially with the emergence of State Electricity Markets and this is reflected in the NIEP. These players include:

a. The Federal Government which handles policy, grid oversight, and coordination,
b. State Governments that develop and regulate subnational markets,
c. SERCs (State Electricity Regulatory Commissions) that license market participants and enforce regulations,
d. Generation Companies, the National Transmission Service Provider, Distribution Companies, Energy Retail Companies, Independent Power Producers, and other operators deliver the goods.

Clear roles mean fewer overlaps, fewer turf wars, and better service.

THE 'PEOPLE' ANGLE

No reform works without people. NIEP calls for extensive training and upskilling, especially for State regulators, Ministry, Department and Agency staff, engineers, and service providers. It is about building strong institutions, not just infrastructure.

NIEP insists that women, the poor and rural communities must not be left behind. Whether it is through microgrids in off-grid villages or fair tariffs for low-income households, the policy aims to make electricity a tool for equity and empowerment. NIEP supports local manufacturing, innovation, and home-grown solutions. It also strengthens commercial and legal frameworks to ensure that investments are secure, contracts are respected, and everyone knows the rules.

All the above mean that there is a real opportunity for improved coordination in the Power sector, with more pathways to provide electricity for people who did not have access before. This also helps lower the costs of doing business and creates a healthier environment.

In this context, the real power is not just electricity; it is the power to build, create and to thrive.

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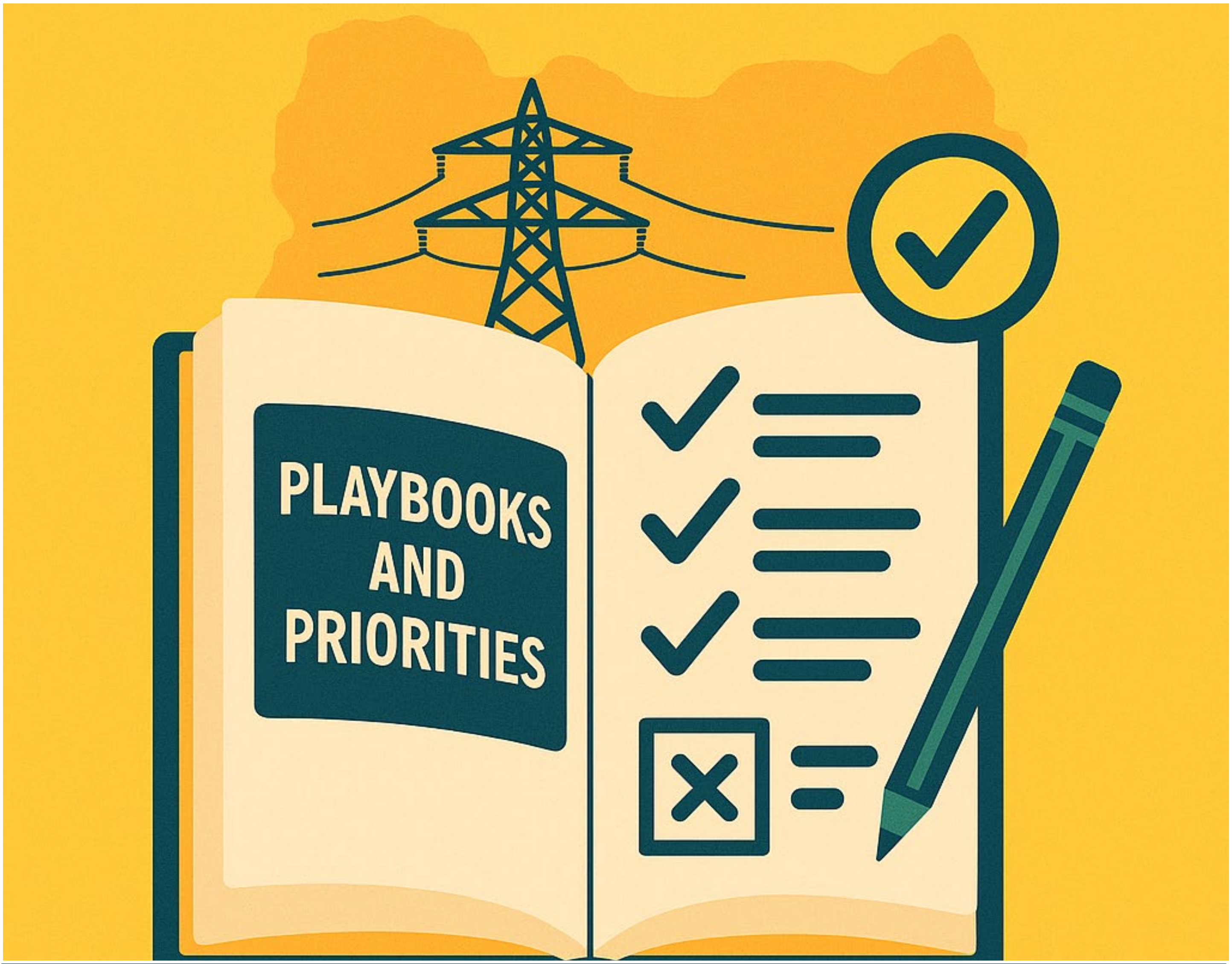

By Dr. Stella Odiase

When I started working in Nigeria's power sector, a colleague took pity on me and handed me the Electricity Power Sector Reforms Act of 2005 (EPSRA)—the sector's playbook at the time. I use the word 'pity' because sitting in Power sector meetings as a newcomer was painful. Technical jargon flew across the room, with terms like 'unbundling' (breaking up the power utility into separate companies) and 'legacy debts' (historical unpaid obligations) recurring constantly.

These seasoned engineers and private sector experts spoke what sounded like a foreign language, far removed from the 'development-speak' I was accustomed to. So, I set out to study the playbook, hoping to bridge this knowledge gap and contribute meaningfully to discussions. This journey into a challenging but fascinating world taught me several important lessons.

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING THE PLAYBOOK

First, it's crucial to read the playbook. Only then can one identify opportunities, assess whether they work in practice, and offer informed criticism. However, policymakers and regulators have a responsibility to make these playbooks accessible to all Nigerians—from senior technocrats familiar with industry jargon to the tailors mentioned in Jumoke's piece, and everyone in between. Each group needs to understand which playbook sections apply to their unique circumstances.

This accessibility promotes accountability in a context where policy playbooks sometimes become policy menus, with commitments treated as optional items that may or may not be implemented based on whoever is in charge at the time.

THE CHALLENGE WITH IMPLEMENTING THE PLAYBOOK

To Nigeria's credit, the EPSRA (2005) had thirteen parts, and twelve have been implemented to varying degrees. This deserves recognition for successive Ministers of Power, government bureaucrats, committees, private sector actors, and national political leadership who forged ahead despite daunting realities. It is also important to acknowledge the consistent technical assistance provided by programs like the United Kingdom Nigeria Infrastructure Advisory Facility (UKNIAF) and other international partners.

Key successes from the EPSRA playbook include establishing the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission (NERC) as outlined in Part III and developing frameworks for licensing and tariffs detailed in Part IV. However, Part VIII of the Act, establishing a Power Consumer Assistance Fund (PCAF) for low-income electricity consumers was never implemented.

I have often wondered why this section was overlooked while others moved forward. After engaging with sector experts, I received enlightening responses, but the development practitioner in me suspects that in "hard" sectors like Power, people-impact and commercial returns are often seen as parallel lines that never meet. The conversation about social outcomes either never starts or gets dropped in favour of 'more critical' issues, even when the playbook explicitly calls for concrete actions to deliver and measure people-impact.

It is easier to discuss social returns in "soft" sectors like health and education. But in the Power sector, concerns about 'socializing' what should be a commercial commodity make it rather challenging to have the conversation about balancing socioeconomic results with returns on investment. Notably, the PCAF provision reappears in the Electricity Act of 2023, the latest Power sector playbook, suggesting that there is still hope for its implementation, depending on whether there is the required interest in the policy space.

I recently heard President Tinubu's Special Adviser on Energy, Mrs. Olu Verheijen, address this 'socio-commercial' balance eloquently during a podcast I hosted for women in the Power sector. In her words: "As an investor you look out for returns, but as a public servant you must also look out for impact." This was refreshing to hear from someone working to make things happen from the government side.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The truth is that unless there are many more people in government who share this perspective and adopt it as part of an institutionalised approach to work, the people-impact sections of our policy playbook(s) will continue to read very well but not deliver.

The Power sector needs to have that conversation (maybe several of them) as to how commercial viability and social impact might reinforce one another as this will facilitate consensus around a few realistic steps in this respect. Otherwise, the 'people-centric' sections of the new playbook will again be left behind…along with the tailors in our cities and smaller villages, as well as all the other 'small people' that are struggling to eke out a living and contribute to the economy.