

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME MESSAGE.

On behalf of the Association of Esan Professionals (AEP), I am delighted to welcome all of you, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, to this year's Esan Economic Empowerment Workshop (E3W), the 13th in the series; holding at the historic town of Uromi, the political headquarters of Esan North-East Local Government Area.

From its inception in 2001, our Association has been driven by the sole objective to provide a common politically non-partisan platform for all Esan Professionals to contribute their quota to the socio-economic and cultural development of Esanland and its people. Since then, we have had cause to intervene in, and on several occasions, raised debates on matters, affecting the lives of Esan people.

SOME OF THE RECENT AND CURRENT MAJOR ACTIVITIES BY AEP

1. In 2014, the AEP established the AEP Education Trust Fund to enable the Association intervene in the area of needs in our public schools in Esanland and assist indigent and exceptional students to pursue their educational careers.
2. In 2015, we launched a two-year well researched DVD documentary on **“Esan Cultural Values and Practices”**, covering the 35 kingdoms in Esanland. This is to ensure that our cultural values and practices are preserved for posterity.
3. In 2016, at the 12th edition of the E3W, held at the Samuel Adegboyega University (SAU) Ogwa, in Esan West Local Government Area, with the theme: **“Esan Language: Is it on the verge of Extinction?”** we raised an alarm that Esan Language has become endangered and on the verge of extinction. Based on the contributions of experts, the AEP signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Samuel Adegboyega University (SAU), Ogwa, to enable us collaborate on a number of activities, including the promotion of Esan language. We have since engaged the Edo State Government on the need to re-introduce Esan language into our school curriculum. In addition, we have introduced an annual quiz competition in Esan language among secondary schools in which cash prizes are presented to the three best schools in Esanland.
4. AEP has acquired a large parcel of land at Usugbenu, Irrua, to establish a skill acquisition centre for our youths. When fully established, it will be a one-stop centre for the training of youths in various skills.
5. This year, AEP has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Management of the Petroleum Training Institute, Warri, to train Esan youths in welding and fabrication techniques and skills. The first phase of the programme has led to the selection of ten (10) trainees from the five Local Government Areas in Esanland who are currently undergoing a 9-month intensive training at the institute. The tuition fees alone (excluding training tools, students' kit, accommodation, etc) which was paid by the Association was in the sum of **₦14,700,000 (Fourteen million, seven hundred thousand naira)** for the training of 10 Esan youths in special technical skills.

- In June this year, we were coopted into the Planning Committee for the reception of the Oba of Benin. Besides contributing financially to the hosting, we also participated actively towards the success of the event at Ekpoma.

DRIVING ESAN DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPERITY THROUGH AGRICULTURE.

Our workshop this year, is centered on the theme: “**Modernising AgriBusiness in Esanland for Economic Empowerment.**” We need to state that this is not the first time we are beaming our searchlight on the importance of agriculture in Esanland. We had done so at previous workshops, particularly at the following workshops:

S/N	YEAR	HOST	LGA	THEME
1.	2005	At Uromi	(Esan North East LGA)	Agriculture for Economic Empowerment
2.	2006	At Irrua	(Esan Central LGA)	Implementing the Vision of Building Groups for Economic Empowerment Using Co-operatives as Tools
3.	2007	At Ubiaja	(Esan South East LGA)	The Nucleus Estate Initiative: Empowering people through Co-operatives in Esanland.
4.	2008	At Igueben	(Igueben LGA)	Co-operative Societies as Catalyst for Agro- Allied And Entrepreneurial Growth in Esanland
5.	2009	At Ekpoma	(Esan West LGA)	Positioning Esanland for Emerging Opportunities in Agro-Allied Industries.

AEP had concentrated its efforts on agriculture and related matters in 5 out of the 12 previous workshops because we believe that agriculture is an area in which Esan has a comparative advantage since it is blessed with arable land. Through these workshops we were able to capacitate our people in improved agricultural processes for higher yields. Thereafter, some of them were supported with soft loans by the Association, to help reduce youth unemployment, guaranty food security and ensure economic empowerment of Esan people.

Our choice of this year's theme, which centres on Agribusiness is deliberate. We have scanned the environment and found that recent reports from around the world indicated that soon, there will be a major shift from fossil fuel reliant economy to a

green one. That shift, will no doubt impact negatively on Nigeria because our economy's mainstay is fossil oil. We also found that the mantra of the current governments at both the Federal and Edo State levels is on agriculture and agribusiness development as an alternative to oil.

This year's workshop is therefore meant to sensitize Esan people on the new agricultural agenda. We are reinforced in our view that the development and prosperity of Esanland can be driven mainly through agriculture.

We have carefully selected a faculty, made up of accomplished scholars, policy makers, financial experts and agriculture practitioners to lead the discussions on the various thematic sessions at this workshop. It is our hope that at the end of the two-day workshop, the following issues would be addressed by the faculty and participants:

- Youth employment through agriculture
- Strengthening access to agricultural inputs.
- Strengthening access to agricultural products markets.
- Financial inclusion for farmers
- Women in agribusiness,
- Enabling policy environment and security challenges, as well as
- Address other critical barriers to value chain development and unlocking private sector investments in agribusiness

PLEA FOR MERCY ON THE DETHRONEMENT OF HRH, THE ONOJIE OF UROMI.

It would be remiss of us as AEP, if we do not take this golden opportunity to raise the matter of the dethronement of HRH, the Onojie of Uromi, the venue for this year's workshop. On behalf of Esan people in general, and Uromi people in particular, who are now like sheep without a shepherd, since the dethronement of their Onojie, we plead for mercy. We plead for the unconditional lifting of the dethronement order on the Onojie of Uromi by the Edo State Government. Without going into the merits of the case, we believe it is time to show mercy. To err is human, to forgive, divine.

We have no doubt that valuable lessons have been learnt by all concerned. We also strongly feel that the bitterness that was introduced into the otherwise peaceful and altruistic relationship among the near homogenous Edo peoples by the politics of the recent past in the State, must be laid to rest now, and the wounds healed quickly, to avoid distractions to the present Government in its developmental efforts in the State.

Ladies and gentlemen, once again, we welcome you all to this event, and look forward to your active participation in the discussions during the workshop.

Bha re bhe, Obokhian! Welcome!!

Barrister Matthew Egbadon
President, AEP.