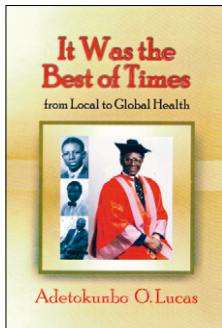


## Book

### From tropical medicine to global health—Ade Lucas’s journey



**It Was the Best of Times: From Local to Global Health**  
Adetokunbo Lucas.  
BookBuilders, 2010. US\$55.00.  
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*It Was the Best of Times* tells the human story of the emergence of global health through the eyes of a legendary participant, Adetokunbo (“Ade”) Lucas of Nigeria. Ade offers an insider’s account of tropical medicine, biomedical research, maternal health, and health policy rendered by an authority who has worked in all types of organisations, and whose reminiscences are unfailingly generous to a “who’s who” list of professional colleagues.

Written in a candid and often humorous style, the book describes Ade’s remarkable journey. Coming from a family that for three generations had obtained doctoral degrees from British universities, Ade pays homage first and foremost to his extended family—his father, a Reverend who was decorated with the Order of the British Empire; his mother who taught him reading, writing, and his life-long passion for the piano-organ; uncles, aunts, two sisters; and his wife, Kofo, whom he courted for 20 years before a marriage that produced four children and six grandchildren. But much of the book concerns Ade’s rich professional life.

The major phases of his career are vividly described, buttressed no doubt by his photographic memory and detailed record keeping. After 11 years in the UK at Newcastle, Belfast, and London for medical and clinical training, Ade returned to University College Hospital in Ibadan as a senior registrar in internal medicine. 2 years later he made the fateful decision, after much soul-searching, to switch to preventive and social medicine. The impact of this transition did not go unnoticed. Bernie Guyer, former chair of maternal and child health at Johns Hopkins and student trainee in Ibadan, told me that Ade was widely respected as a formidable clinician whose decision elevated overnight the low academic status of public health at that time.

Ade considers his decade as founding Director of WHO’s TDR programme (Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases) as the “best years of my life”. During his tenure, TDR invested about US\$200 million to combat malaria, schistosomiasis, leishmaniasis, leprosy, onchocerciasis, and lymphatic filariasis—achieving great success against the last three diseases. He recounts his struggle

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despite the odds to establish TDR, the innovations he introduced, and his navigation of the WHO environment—he is candid in describing the “intrigue, scheming, conspiracy and manoeuvring” at the heart of WHO’s politics and bureaucracy. Rather than seek complete autonomy for TDR, Ade developed a matrix structure to gain the essential cooperation of WHO’s disease units. TDR launched global networking in R&D, integrated social with the medical sciences, pioneered “sandwich training”, and partnered with the pharmaceutical industry—spawning the ivermectin donation programme for river blindness.

5 years each at the Carnegie Corporation and Harvard constituted Ade’s most recent work. At Carnegie, he exercised world leadership in the Safe Motherhood movement and his return to Harvard built upon his earlier masters degree: he was a recipient of the Harvard 350th Medal, appointed to a professorship, and is now an adjunct professor. During his time at Harvard, he was also a leading member of the (Evans’) Commission on Health Research for Development.

Upon reflection, Ade shows little anger about the blatant racism he endured as an African in Europe and

North America. He recalls how, in 1949, when he arrived in the UK at Norwich, he was refused accommodation—discrimination that he notes has passed into history. He has been held up at visa and custom control so many times that he cannot remember them all. When he was appointed as head of TDR, the then President of the World Bank raised questions about his “management capacity”. Ade avoids accusation, shrewdly allowing the reader to draw her or his own conclusions. His method of dealing with such insults is to file complaints through the proper channels. It was only after John Evans became World Bank director that the questioning of Ade’s management was shelved.

In the conclusion, Ade asks rhetorically “Did I make the best decisions?” He does his best to answer honestly, but leaves a few unanswered questions. He is surprisingly silent on his Yoruba ethnicity in religiously polarised Nigeria and offers little insight about the role of his Anglican faith. Nor does he comment on the failed economic and political development of Nigeria that eroded many of its great institutions, including the earlier world class Ibadan medical college. Reflective of his character, Ade is reticent about his important contribution to the emergence of global health, favouring an approach that faithfully records the events he witnessed in the transition from tropical medicine to international health to global health. Ade captures it all in his conclusion: “Now sitting in the departure lounge of life, ready to board when my flight is called, the overwhelming feeling is one of contentment...so far so good, sometimes very good!”

LC worked with Ade Lucas at Harvard and on the Commission on Health Research for Development.

Lincoln Chen  
lchen@cmbfound.org