**WELCOME ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF BUDGET AND NATIONAL PLANNING, SENATOR UDOMA UDO UDOMA, DURING THE FORMAL LAUNCH OF THE ERGP FOCUS LABS AT BANQUET HALL, STATE HOUSE, ABUJA ON 13TH MARCH, 2018**

Protocol

As we all know this Administration inherited a tough situation in 2015 – an economy that was rapidly deteriorating. We had to act decisively. And we did. We rolled out an expansive 2016 Budget designed to reflate the economy. Thereafter, and after extensive consultations, the President launched the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) in April last year. All analysts have hailed the plan as one that, if fully implemented, will restore Nigeria to growth and prosperity. Indeed, since that Plan was announced, confidence, both locally and internationally, has started to come back. We have exited recession and are back on the path of growth. The GDP performance numbers recently released by the National Bureau of Statistics shows that in the last quarter of 2017 the economy grew by 1.92%. And the good news is that all major sectors are now growing. The non-oil sector grew by 1.45%, the highest growth since 2015. We are therefore in a better place today than in 2015 when this Administration came into office. But we have much more to do to get us to where we want to be.

2. However, we are still in the first year of full plan implementation. As we continue to roll out more initiatives contained in the ERGP we willbe able to accelerate our rate of growth. Our target is to achieve a growth rate of 3.5% by the end of this year, and a 7% growth rate by the year 2020. Some have described these goals as too ambitious. But, we have no choice. We must do everything to achieve these targets. Indeed, with a population that is estimated to be growing at almost 3%, we have to achieve a growth rate of at least 4% to 5% for Nigerians to really feel the difference.

3. It will be recalled that during his campaign for the presidency, President Muhammadu Buhari promised to restore the health of the Nigerian economy. The ERGP sets out the programme to achieve this restoration. We cannot rest until that goal is fully achieved. We cannot rest until we achieve the ERGP’s vision of a new Nigeria. A Nigeria that is transformed from a consuming nation to a producing nation, from an import dependent nation to an export oriented nation, from a nation that survives on one single commodity to a nation that runs on multiple engines of growth. As the President has said, the ERGP is this Administration’s blueprint aimed at building a new Nigeria where “**we grow what we eat, consume what we make, and produce what we use**.”

4. And this explains why we are all gathered here today. We are gathered here to take another step in ensuring the faster implementation of the ERGP. We are gathered here for the President to launch an important implementation initiative of the ERGP, the ERGP Focus Labs. Successful execution of the Focus Labs will further drive quick delivery of some of the outcomes in the ERGP and contribute to accelerating the growth momentum of the country.

5. The President insisted on coming personally to launch this initiative because of his total commitment to the realisation of the goals of the ERGP. I wish to thank Your Excellency for your strong leadership which has been an inspiration to all of us working on the implementation of the ERGP. This is a government that is focused and committed to ensuring that it achieves what it promises.

6. I must also appreciate the support of His Excellency, the Vice President, who chairs the Economic Management Team (EMT), which exercises some supervisory role over the lab process, and has continued to give us guidance and support. I thank the leadership and members of the National Assembly who, when we briefed them about the focus labs, assured us of their support for any legislative intervention that might be required to remove any constraints to investing in Nigeria. I must thank the State Governors who have all indicated interest in working with the Federal Government to ensure the success of the lab process. I thank them all.

7. I thank all the members of the Federal Executive Council, and those of my colleagues who are serving as members of the Central Steering Committee for the very strong support to this initiative. I also thank, particularly, those six cabinet ministers who will actually be conducting the three labs. Without their enthusiastically embracing the lab concept, it would have been impossible to even contemplate embarking on this programme. To those of my cabinet colleagues whose Ministries are not direct participants in this first set of focus labs, I assure you that after this first set we will be conducting focus labs in other sectors. This is just the beginning of the process. The contributions of members of the ERGP Implementation Team and the core-working groups in the six ministries, are also duly acknowledged and much appreciated. Finally, I thank the investors who have shown confidence in the process by responding to our invitation to participate in the Focus Labs. I can assure you that the results will be worth the effort.

8. But what exactly is a Focus Lab? The focus labs structure has never been used before in Nigeria, so I would like to give some explanation of how it will work. Basically, what will happen is that we have invited potential and existing investors, both foreign and Nigerian, who may be interested in investing in any of the three areas we are focusing on to attend the closed-door sessions. At the sessions they will have access in one location, to all the officials of government, including officials of state governments, whose support, or approvals, they might need to enable them to commit to an investment decision. In short, the focus labs will involve stakeholders from the public and private sectors working together in a single environment to think out practical and workable solutions for delivering the kind of results Nigeria needs. The central objective of the labs will be to bring in private capital to finance projects across the country. Our aim is, simply put, to raise the level of productivity in Nigeria. We want more things to be grown in Nigeria. We want more things to be processed and manufactured in Nigeria. We want more jobs to be created in Nigeria. That is what the focus labs are all about.

9. At this point, let me briefly explain how the labs will run.

(1) We will be having various economic agents (public and private) including industry leaders, subject matter experts, domestic and international funding agencies etc. interfacing in the labs to find practical solutions to the issues raised, breakdown silos, ensure alignments and secure commitment for financing and implementation.

(2) The Labs are workshop-style arrangements with intense open debates and an “all hands-on deck” approach, and with a number of syndications to arrive at radical, practical and innovative solutions.

(3)The initial labs will be conducted in three areas, namely, Agriculture and Transportation, Manufacturing and Processing, and Power and Gas. These are reflective of the execution priorities of the ERGP. The objective is to achieve new investments for critical projects and to resolve inter-agency problems that may inhibit, or slow down, private sector investments in the selected sectors.

(4)The process of the labs spans 17 weeks broken into three phases. The pre-labs phase was from the 15th January, 2018 and has now been completed. The labs themselves run from today to the 21st of April, 2018. The post-labs phase will run from the 21st April, 2018 to the 12th of May, 2018.

(5)We are targeting to mobilize at least US$25 billion, or its equivalent in Naira, in private investments and about 240 projects have so far been screened for the labs. Many have asked whether we are not being too ambitious in targeting US$25 billion. My answer is that we have no choice. We actually need multiples of US$25 billion, or its equivalent in Naira, of new investments to create enough jobs to address the high unemployment rate in the country. So, we will not stop after the first set of labs. After this first set of labs, we will hold more labs and more labs, and more labs, and we shall keep on addressing all the constraints to investment until we achieve the goals we have set for ourselves. The fact of the matter is that there is no silver bullet that will transform Nigeria. It needs continuous and sustained effort over a number of years to truly transform a country. And this we are determined to do.

(6)In the Labs, we will be focusing on delivering quick results by removing roadblocks so as to create an enabling environment.

(7)The next six weeks will be intensive and extremely busy and the labs process will start with setting the agenda and end with the final syndication and sign offs on the Entry Point Projects.

(8)The expected deliverables are, firstly, the identification of projects, followed by detailed implementation plans for each project with identified budgets and Key Performance Indicators.

(9) The governing structure is headed by Mr. President himself. The Central Steering Committee will be presenting monthly reports to the President. In addition, the Central Steering Committee will also be providing regular reports to the Economic Management Team headed by His Excellency, the Vice President. Each core working group will be chaired by the relevant Ministers, who will be the ones actually conducting the Labs. The Ministry of Budget and National Planning will be providing support and facilitating the whole exercise.

9. Mr. President, I assure you that we are committed to ensuring the success of the focus labs. This is a government wide effort. My Ministry is simple playing a facilitating role. After today’s formal event, we will immediately commence the Labs proper. A more detailed explanation as to how the labs will be conducted will be given at the technical session we will be having immediately after this formal launching. At the end of the labs, we hope to organize an open day where we will brief the general public about the outcomes of the labs.

10. Once again, I thank Your Excellency, for coming personally for this historic launching of the Focus Labs. I assure you that all of us involved in organising the Focus Labs will work hard to ensure that we achieve their intended goals so that our people may benefit. And, Your Excellency, we assure you, once more, that we shall not rest until our goals are achieved. Under your leadership, Nigeria must, and will, be transformed.

11. I thank you all for your attention.