

Praise for AN IMPERFECT STORM

“This book presents a unique account of Nigeria’s fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. NCDC emerged from that experience as a beacon of hope in our nation’s darkest hours. This book provides a narrative of resilience, diplomacy, and the collective effort against a common challenge. It serves as a reminder of the highs, lows, and unwavering spirit that enabled our country’s response to an unprecedented global crisis. I am left with even deeper admiration and respect, for those at the frontline of our country’s health security.”
—**Yemi Osinbajo GCON**, *Vice President of Nigeria (2015 – May 2023)*

“This book provides a compelling narrative of Nigeria’s COVID-19 response, as told through Chikwe’s unique lens as DG of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. I commend this book for its exploration of Nigeria’s resilient response—a true testament to collaborative efforts, leadership, and the unwavering spirit that influenced an entire nation facing a global crisis. I recommend this book to leaders across the world aspiring to strengthen their country’s health security, as it provides valuable insights to navigate health challenges.”

—**Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, *Director-General of the World Health Organization*

“*An Imperfect Storm* is a riveting account of the battle against COVID-19 by one of Nigeria’s frontline heroes in that battle, Chikwe Ihekweazu and his wife and partner Vivianne. But the book is much more than that. It is also a fascinating journey through multiple facets of the national and global public health landscape. Told through a personal and biographical lens that weaves in the couple’s love

story, it is a read that once started is difficult to put down. I strongly recommend it to all those seeking to learn more about infectious disease control and management whilst enjoying a compelling narrative.”

—**Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala**, *Director-General, World Trade Organization*

“*An Imperfect Storm* is an excellent playbook on leadership in an African context and a powerful guide to building a resilient African institution. It should be mandatory reading for anyone grappling with either. But more than anything it’s a testament to Chikwe’s incredible love for country and his strong and uncompromising sense of duty. We owe him.”

—**Moky Makura**, *Executive Director, Africa No Filter*

“*An Imperfect Storm* is such an apt title for the heroic efforts of a few patriots like Chikwe Ihekweazu who had to guide Nigeria through what many feared would be a monumental COVID-19 crisis. Books like this must be written in order to help capture the capacity of some professionals like this author to impose and maintain standards against all odds.”

—**Atedo Peterside CON**, *President & Founder of Anap Foundation & Chairman of the Anap Foundation COVID-19 Think Tank*

“I cannot think of anyone whose life will not be enriched by reading this book, a classic in every sense of the word. What a debt we owe Chikwe and Vivianne for sharing their stories with the world!”

—**Ike Anya**, *Author, Small by Small: Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria*

**AN
IMPERFECT
STORM**

**A PANDEMIC AND THE COMING OF
AGE OF A NIGERIAN INSTITUTION**

A Memoir

Chikwe Ihekweazu

With **Vivianne Ihekweazu**



MASOBE

First published in 2024 by Masobe
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria
Tel: +234 903 097 1752, +234 701 838 3286
Email: info@masobebooks.com

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ISBN: 978-978-60488-9-5

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Jacket design by Anderson Ofuzim Oriahi

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To our sons Ginika and Barack (BBFL)
and our parents, Umelobi and Edith,
Lawrence and Azuka.

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FOREWORD

I still remember that phone call from Chikwe in February 2020. His tone, usually composed and measured, carried a sense of urgency as he conveyed the news—the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

As the former leader of the Africa CDC, I had the privilege of observing firsthand the remarkable journey of Chikwe Ihekweazu at the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). From the onset in January 2017, as we commenced the process of operationalising the Africa CDC, I had the opportunity to collaborate closely with Chikwe as he had a similar task but at a national level shaping NCDC. In addition to the necessary work interactions, Chikwe and I developed a close allyship and brotherhood as we sought each other's counsel and support on critical issues, while never breaking the trust and confidence that came with this. Chikwe's narrative in this book is not just an individual's story; it encapsulates the very essence of transformation and resilience that we, as public health leaders, aspire to foster and cultivate across the continent and globally.

Amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, NCDC's journey stands as a testament to leadership, resilience, and the capacity for transformation in the face of adversity. When Chikwe was appointed to lead NCDC in 2016, little did he know that he was steering towards a challenge that would redefine his role and chart a new course for public health in Africa's most populous country.

An Imperfect Storm written by Chikwe with the support of his amiable wife, Vivianne takes readers on an intimate journey of Nigeria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a deeply personal narrative of their experiences and the intricate challenges they faced. This book is not merely a memoir; it is a compelling chronicle of leadership, enterprise, and service in the heart of Africa, breaking the mould of commonly portrayed stories and unveiling a narrative that's often left untold.

As you go through the pages, the story of Nigeria's response to the pandemic emerges. Chikwe's narrative illustrates a tale of transformation and growth—from a medical student with aspirations in surgery to a leader navigating the complex world of outbreaks across the UK, Germany, and South Africa. His unexpected transition to the helm of Nigeria's national public health institute and the subsequent response to the pandemic narrate a journey teeming with challenges, strategic partnerships, and decisive leadership. It also reflects on the growth of NCDC, an exemplar national public health agency for the region.

This book stands not only as a testament to Chikwe and Vivianne's resilience and leadership but also as a blueprint for public health officials and leaders globally. It sheds light on the intricate decisions, the weight of leadership, and the importance of investing in public health infrastructure—offering invaluable insights and lessons for navigating crises in any corner of the world.

An Imperfect Storm is a beacon of hope in the darkness, sharing untold success stories from Africa. It not only sheds light on Nigeria's experience but also serves as an invaluable resource for understanding the decision-making processes during pandemics, accessible to a diverse audience—from scientists and public health professionals to students and the broader society. This book offers us a window into a world of hope and possibility—a world where competent leaders are empowered to lead. We are privileged to

witness a story of transformation and hope within these pages, a story that demonstrates the potential of Africa when given the opportunity to shine.

I invite you to embark on this enlightening journey through “An Imperfect Storm” and hope that like I did, you will find a profound appreciation for the uncharted successes and potentials of the African continent. It is a reminder that even amidst the most challenging times, the hope for a brighter future continues to shine on our continent.

John Nkengasong

Former and Inaugural Director,

Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

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ALIGNMENT

Every decision we made in light of our changing circumstances evolved into the stars that perfectly aligned to form the narrative in *An Imperfect Storm*. Chikwe's appointment to head NCDC may not have been "on the cards," yet a convergence of events that started many years earlier, led to an important and transformative journey for us. Now, it appears as if those sequences of events were just waiting to unfold.

While writing this book, we reflected on how seemingly unconnected events and decisions we made along the way brought us back to Nigeria and Chikwe to NCDC. There was no five- or ten-year plan, we were always aligned in our desire to move back to Nigeria and contribute to its evolution and development. Little did we know at the time that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience (we hope).

If conventional wisdom had prevailed and the doomsday prediction had played out, this book would have been one of self-pity. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we confronted a perfect storm of challenges, including our health infrastructure, large and crowded urban areas and severe socioeconomic challenges. However, Nigeria emerged, demonstrating that we did not capitulate in our moment of dire straits.

However, at the onset of the outbreak, the fundamental elements of the response began to take shape, helped by decisions and

choices made prior to the response, throughout the long process of establishing the country's public health institute, with its daily trials and tribulations.

It is now evident how incisive decision-making can shape one's destiny. Each decision we took over the years, influenced the trajectory not only of our lives together, but of the challenges we would face in the course of our lives. We first met on the university campus in Enugu, Nigeria. The stars (must have) aligned on that day, because although it felt like a chance meeting, it was meant to be.

The convergence of chance, decision, and circumstance were already in motion. Our lives have undergone many shifts over the years, none of which were planned with any precision. That is why this book is so important to us. It is a testament of many dreams, hopes, challenges and triumphs—for Chikwe and me as partners in love and life—but also of a nation in crisis.

Much has already been written about the COVID-19 response, but the common thread running throughout this story is that this experience was a test of resilience, and an opportunity for self-discovery and a reflection for ourselves and the country at large. The imperfect storm revealed hidden strengths and highlighted areas where we needed to strengthen our resolve. We discovered that some of the most profound lessons we learn in life, emerge when we are most challenged, and that resilience is built in the face of adversity.

Like many others, we found ourselves having to deal with the unpredictability of life, and it was in those moments of intense pressure and heightened vulnerability that we were able to uncover undiscovered aspects of ourselves. The unexpected turns and uncharted territory forced us to confront uncertainty and navigate through the turbulent transitions. Whether it is the upheaval of a family like many others during the pandemic or supporting Chikwe in his leadership role of the national public health institute, or simply being a citizen during a period of profound uncertainty.

We emerged from the storm a little changed, but stronger. The recollection of that imperfect storm became a testament to a chapter in our life when the stars aligned. It was never going to be plain sailing, but it was a test that reshaped and elevated our lives. Through the difficulty, we discovered a narrative that was distinctly ours, but also shared, woven with threads of resilience, growth, and optimism.

Vivianne

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