

**ENGAGING THE DIASPORA IN AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT**

**BEING A PAPER PRESENTED TO**

**THE ONE AFRICA INITIATIVES**

**BY**

**'KUNLE OJELEYE**

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## **Introduction**

1. Much of the discussions on the diaspora have focused largely on the importance of financial remittances to the sustenance of growth on the African continent. While it is acknowledged that diaspora contribution to the continent transcends financial remittances, lip-service has been given by African governments to harnessing the enormous potentials resident in this small but important population.
2. This paper briefly discusses the impediments to engaging the African diaspora in socioeconomic development, and examines the various ways One Africa Initiatives (OAI) can tap into a collective synergy as an effective tool for kick-starting a continental renaissance. This paper does not discuss the various theoretical framework or paradigm on development, migration and diaspora.

## **Conceptual Definitions**

3. A diaspora is formed by the organic process of movements of specific peoples from an ancestral land to several societies. These movements may witness settlement in new lands, and sometimes renewed movement and resettlement elsewhere. Of significant importance is the feature of such diaspora groups which includes among others: shared cultural background among members; ethnic and/or religious identity; an emotional attachment to the place of origin; and more often than not, an overwhelming desire to return to the home country someday. The African Diaspora may thus be defined as people or ethnic population that originated from countries in the African continent currently residing outside the continent, but maintaining a strong economic, political, social and cultural ties with their countries of origin.
4. Development on the other hand is subject to varying interpretation. For some, it represents growth, modernisation, social change, wealth creation, poverty alleviation, and industrialisation. For the purpose of this paper, development is succinctly defined as the ability of a nation to create a greater quality of life for its citizens through the alleviation of poverty and improvement in socio-economic living conditions, as well as the capacity to initiate appropriate solutions to both short term and long term challenges in the political, socio-economic and cultural facets of human endeavour.

## **The African Diaspora – Historical Background**

5. The dispersal of people of African descent outside the African continent can be placed into six main phases. The first three phases were in the prehistoric and ancient periods. The last three phases include the period of the slave trade up to the current exodus of peoples of African descent to various parts of the globe.

6. With the abolition of the slave trade in 1886, and the onset of the era of African colonialism, migration of Africans from the continent to the rest of the world may be argued to have entered the voluntary phase. This phase can also be distinguished by two distinct periods. The first was during colonialism when the promotion of western education and religion by missionaries witnessed the exodus of Africans from the continent to the western world to be educated. The second period coincides with the early 1980's which manifested in economic downturn for a large number of African countries. This era led to the exodus of African intelligentsia from the continent into Europe and North America, and gained notoriety as the age of "Brain Drain".

7. Various reasons may be adduced for the increased emigration of Africans from the continent. These include but are not limited to: economic recession; political instability; perceived insensitivity of leaders and governments to their civic responsibilities; decaying educational systems; dilapidated infrastructures; and in a number of cases, civil conflict and war. It can be surmised that the free labour and trade migrations of post-slave trade period have further encouraged the formation of new African Diasporas, with this trend accelerating and increasing during the twentieth century.

8. Migration has become an adjustment mechanism with enormous socio-economic and cultural implications for many African families. It has become a survival strategy for many African households, with communal decisions being made to send a member of the family to a foreign land, with express obligations to send money and goods back to those left behind. The recognition of this element of risk diversification and survival strategy, culminated in the initial emphasis by scholars on remittances as the main interplay between migration and development.

9. Modern pattern of migration out of Africa has continued along the lines of the historical and linguistic legacies of colonialism. For instance, the first country of consideration for an Anglophone African migrant is the former colonial country, the

United Kingdom or any English-speaking western nation. This trend is further encouraged by the fact that potential migrants, are encouraged by family and friends already outside the continent, who helps the new émigré to settle into the new environment on arrival in the host country.

### **The African Diaspora – Migration as a Half Full Glass**

10. The paper presented by H.E. Ambassador (Gen) Godwin George Umo OON rekindled the debate about the exodus of Africans from the continent as a half empty glass. Migration specifically out of the continent and especially of trained and skilled manpower is regarded as a loss to the continent and referred to as a “brain drain”.

11. In spite of the negative perception about migration flow from Africa, the diaspora has been engaged significantly on the continent through: financial remittances to support nuclear and extended family members, establishment of small businesses, financial contributions to community projects, stimulation of the construction industry through private building developments, and collaborative works with local actors to deliver improved services in the health and education sectors. Even though the reality is that most of these activities are on a private, informal and uncoordinated basis, these various means have been succinctly referred to as the social, financial and political capitals of the diaspora. As such, migration from Africa should be seen as a half-full rather than half-empty glass.

### **Previous Efforts at Engaging the African Diaspora**

12. While the financial power of the African diaspora is enormous and cannot be ignored, it has now been acknowledged that they do contribute in diverse ways to development rather than in monetary terms only. In partnership with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) through its’ ‘Migration For Development In Africa Programme’, many African governments began to formulate national policies through which the diaspora could be used to fill identified developmental gaps. A notable example of these initiatives was the setting up of the Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation (NIDO) in 2002 and the Nigerian National Volunteer Service (NNVS) by the Obasanjo regime to forge a mutually beneficial and constructive relationship between Nigeria and her Diaspora. One of the tasks that were set for the NNVS is the creation of a database

of Nigerian professionals abroad that could provide advisory service and partnership opportunities with respect to development policies and implementation of development programs in Nigeria.

13. Ghana, as another example, leveraged on the revised 1994 National Population Policy, the Ghana Dual Citizenship Regulation Act, the 'Home Coming Summit' and the setting up of a Non-Resident Ghanaian Secretariat, the institution of a 'Non-Resident Ghanaian Fund', the issuance of 'Homecoming Bonds', as well as an 'Africa Recruit' programme as incentives to attract skilled Ghanaian personnel back to the country. Many other African countries also initiated policies towards an effective utilisation of the diaspora. However, as at today, most if not all, of these efforts have fizzled out.

### **The Challenges of Engaging the African Diaspora**

14. Many Africans in diaspora are willing to be involved in the renaissance of the continent through involvement in continental integration and development. However, this desire to be involved is negated by a number of factors which are highlighted below. Some of these factors led to the frustration that informed the decision to migrate in the first instance.

15. There is a perceived absence of commitment on the part of African governments to effectively utilise the knowledge skills and potentials of the diaspora. African governments are accused of wanting the hard earned cash of the diaspora through remittances, but refusing to follow their advice, guidance and suggestions on socio-economic policies.

16. Those left behind in the continent are accused of having contempt and resentment for diaspora initiatives and suggestions that can make a positive difference in the lives of ordinary Africans. These resentments emanate from a perception that the returning migrant is behaving as if he is better than those he left behind. This divisive, negative perception of "we and them" has not enabled cooperation and effective partnership working, which is dearly needed for growth on the continent. In place of focused constructive actions, what manifests is resentment, rivalry, envy and a feeling of competition. As such, many African

migrants are reluctant to risk leaving their zone of comfort outside the continent for the uncertainty of adequate reintegration at home.

17. Having lived in a “free” society where they are able to obtain information freely, and to comment as well as criticise government policies in their host countries without any fear of prosecution and persecution, many find the need to be mindful of their utterances, actions and inactions so as not to be seen as enemies of African governments, stifling for their creativity and ability to take initiatives in driving policies that would lead to growth and development on the continent.

18. The financial remuneration that African countries are often prepared to give the diaspora in exchange for returning home is not always commensurate to their earning power in the developed nations where they reside. The reality of everyday living for an African migrant with a family in Canada or the United States of America is that it is impractical to move the whole family at once, or to give up an entire livelihood that is certain and fairly guaranteed. Heading back to Africa means leaving behind enormous financial commitment that still need to be met – family to provide for, utility, mortgage bills and children’s school fees to pay. Regardless of how patriotic he/she may be, having to take a reduction in remuneration by returning to the continent with the added financial burden of maintaining a second home (and the extended family that is now in close proximity) is akin to committing a financial suicide. As such, many Africans are afraid to take the passionate risk of returning home to help the continent.

19. Many African migrants have expressed concerns about the security of lives and properties on the continent. They also complain about dilapidated infrastructures, as well as incessant modification or jettisoning of government policies as a result of regime changes which results not only in economic instability, but also the absence of any sustainable developmental plans and goals for the continent.

20. There exists a large number of second generation African diaspora. This group, in contrast to their parents, do not share the same level of allegiance to established social, political and economic hierarchy of individual African societies. As a result, there is always the tendency for conflict engendered by a generational divide in terms of orientation and thinking.

## **The Way Forward**

21. The paper presented by H.E. Ambassador (Gen) Umo also triggered the debate about technology transfer. My personal opinion is that even though the developed nations are not keen in handing over their technical knowhow, Africa is in a prime position to induce rapid development through technology without stealing any associated knowledge. Of significant importance is the positive exploitation of the intellectual capital of the diaspora. Simply defined, this is the process through which the knowledge, skills, and technological know-how already acquired by the diaspora by virtue of their sojourn and employment in the developed countries can be applied wholly or with adaptation to suit the developmental needs of African societies. For example, it is noted that Slovenians who were taken to Germany to work by the Axis powers during World War II became the channel for the establishment and growth of the modern high technology electrical and electronics industry on their eventual return to Slovenia, a factor in the emergence of the country as one of the leading economies in the European Union.

22. Many African migrants are engaged in high tech industries in the developed countries. These diaspora are placed in prime positions of acting as a vehicle of appropriating such technologies for the developmental needs of African states. Moreover, many international companies are keen to enter the African market, but would not do so as a result of an absence of local knowledge. Where such companies have found trustworthy African employees that have imbibed their corporate values, willingness to transfer appropriate technologies to African subsidiaries may be forthcoming, especially in cases where local development of such technologies may be at a high cost, with an absence of appropriate skills to do so.

23. Furthermore, in tapping the unquantifiable and enormous wealth that Africa has in its diaspora, lessons can be learnt from two other major models of diaspora-triggered development. The first is the Chinese model where the Chinese Diaspora used their considerable business experience and network connections to establish subsidiaries of major western technological companies in China. The second model is the India model where the business and scientific acumen of the diaspora was engaged actively not only in knowledge and technology transfer between India and the developed world, but also

in significant business deals resulting in technology and outsourced business call centres in India.

### **What One Africa Initiatives (OAI) Can Do**

24. Research on India and Asian countries points to the evidence that in the longer term, appropriate exploitation of “lost brains” by countries of origin results in enhanced financial, human and social capitals that can lead to what is termed “migration-induced regional development”.

25. Any discussion of the agency, place and role of the diaspora on the African continent has to stem from the availability of a “good, detailed and secure” database of African migrants. One of the recommendations made by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in 2000 is the setting up of a data reservoir of diaspora expertise from which African nations could tap from. Sadly, this is yet to be implemented by a number of countries. This paper has put emphasis on “good and detailed” because buried in each diaspora member are skills and potentials that goes beyond just asking about their educational qualifications and/or professional certifications. A coordinated action by OAI across the continent for a database of the diaspora would be cheaper, beneficial, and less burdensome in cost than the individual projects which several countries have failed to implement.

26. OAI can also engender coordinated efforts across the continent formulate and implement a continental action plan of resurgence and renaissance. Regardless of the nature, background, size and shape of individual African states, we all share a common goal – peace, growth and sustainable development. What binds us together is far more than what differentiates. As such, there is a need for a central co-ordinating body or agency that can harmonise plans, mechanisms, processes and actions, through fostering cooperation and understanding, whilst whittling down bureaucratic as well as institutional boundaries.

27. Ambassador (Gen) Umo’s paper also ignited the debate on enticing the diaspora back home. A large number of African skilled migrants were enticed away from the continent by the developed countries through selected policies that favours and rewards the migrants’ talents. If there is reversed engineering, reversed brain drain can surely take place. The strategy of attracting the best diaspora intellects back to the continent



can also be complemented by the establishment of a continental fund which would facilitate short term volunteering by the diaspora to transfer technological knowhow and knowledge to home based compatriots. Subsequent mentoring of the home based colleagues can then take place on a virtual basis with minimal cost to the community. Projects successfully carried out in one pioneering country can then be adapted to the needs of others for replication across the continent.

28. Earlier in this paper, I pointed out the challenge of engaging the younger generation of migrants in the diaspora. In the last ten years, the entertainment industry has positively impacted this specific demography. Neither do they speak their indigenous language nor have they been to Africa. Yet, it is no longer strange to end up in clubs or parties of these second, third and fourth generation of migrants, to find them singing, dancing with karaoke to Davido, Olamide as well as many other African artists. OAI should look at mechanisms that would also attract this younger diaspora pool back to the continent through initiatives such as volunteering, internship and mentoring schemes. Even though this demography can be further incentivised by enabling them transfer any financial gains of engagement on the continent back to their country of residence, the long term strategy and vision must be to keep African capital largely on the continent rather than facilitating its exit to already rich western nations.

29. It has been suggested that schools teaching African languages could be an answer towards increasing the interest of the younger generation of migrants in the continent. I see a completely different path. The family unit as well as the home environment are the first and most important line of culturalisation for every child. What children see the parents do would majorly influence their direction in life. Paediatricians have confirmed this. The much cited Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Chinese diaspora with the natural bilingual capability of their younger generation has nothing to do with language schools. From the time the children were born, they were spoken to in indigenous languages at home with an awareness that they would pick up the language of the host country when they are outside or attending school. They were fed on indigenous meals, and learnt to observe traditional and cultural nuances from older family members.

30. Culturisation of the younger generation of African migrants must therefore start, and be rigorously formed, in individual homes and families. A key area I would love to see OAI focus on, in partnership with colleagues in the entertainment industry, is in

early learning programmes, children cartoons, television programmes, learning shows, android and iOS applications, etc. that introduces as well as teaches African knowledge, culture and languages from the very early age to our children in diaspora. The earlier we Africanise them, the better for the future of the continent.

31. Not all diaspora will return or take part in development activities on the soil of the African continent. Globalisation, modern technological advancement and COVID-19 have proven that the talents and skills of the African diaspora can be made use of without the physical presence of many on continental soil. Medical doctors are known to have guided colleagues thousands of miles apart, to carry out delicate and intricate surgical procedures through video conferencing. As such, if there is one thing African countries must invest in, it is providing high speed internet access to their citizens. OAI must be at the forefront of increasing the capacity of Africans to effectively utilise Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The exponential advantage is the unrivalled opportunities that would be created for collaborative enterprises to take place beyond the barriers of physical movement. In so doing, knowledge and technology transfer can actually take place between the continent and the diaspora on a virtual rather than physical basis.

31. Given the enormous potentials of the African diaspora, it is important that the push factors that significantly gave rise to mass exodus from the continent are addressed. In doing so, conditions that makes returning to Africa highly desirable for the diaspora can be created, resulting in a ‘pull effect’ that would turn Africa’s ‘brain drain’ to ‘brain enhancement’ as well as a ‘brain gain’.