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Understanding the Brain-Drain in the African Diaspora: Focusing on Nigeria

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Introduction

The mass departure of Africa's intellectual and skilled population to Western nations, called the "Brain-Drain", has been one of the greatest obstacles to the development of the continent. Nigeria, in particular, is suffering from the shortage of professionals and skillful individuals necessary for the advancement of the nation's capital. A study performed by Oyowe in 1996 estimates that there are more than 21,000 Nigerian Medical Doctors practicing in the United States alone. Meanwhile, Nigeria domestically falls short of the minimum World Health Organization standard of 20 Physicians per 100,000 people. Put urgently, Nigeria is losing human resources necessary for its socio-economic growth. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the cause of the Nigerian brain-drain, the socio-economic impact, and determine ways to reverse the effects of the brain drain, thereby creating a brain-gain for the betterment of Nigeria.

With the use of secondary sources and data collected from surveys, small group discussions and interviews of Nigerians between the ages of 18-45, my research has achieved this purpose. In addition, my research has identified four strategies to reduce the negative impact of the brain drain in Nigeria.

1) Mobilization of Diaspora through virtual participation with global telecommunication networks
2) Formulating a National Diaspora policy between Nigeria's government
3) Economic share-ship utilizing the dual citizenship status,
4) Connecting Diaspora productively through temporary engagements in Nigeria.

It is my humble belief that these four approaches will help to reverse the negative current situation of the brain drain and go a long way towards a positive brain gain for Nigeria.

This paper is accompanied by a PowerPoint that has been slightly revised from my oral presentation at the Honors Program conference on May 4, 2010. The presentations I conducted at this symposium, along with an open forum I facilitated for African Week per request of the Student Alliance for Welfare of Africa, has generated intense discussions among the diverse audience concerning the significance of this project to the African as well as African American communities. Although this project is specific to Nigeria, the findings can be used to elicit a change in African Diasporas towards the entire African continent and encourage their contribution to its progress.

The Causes of Brain Drain in Nigeria

Studies indicate that the Nigerian brain-drain is the product of "internal" and "external" factors working simultaneously to push Nigerians out of their country and pull them into developed nations respectively. The two types of factors are mainly due to economic reasons, and also domestic social and political conditions. Nevertheless, Nigerian professionals are being influenced to

permanently relocate to affluent nations, where many have done their undergraduate and graduate studies, for personal and financial security far away from their place of origin.

Internal Factors

These factors includes the lack of jobs, low wages, no constant electricity, unsatisfactory living and working conditions, limited career opportunities coupled with the lack of an environment conducive for professional growth. In addition to these elements are poor social conditions, corruption and political instability worked collaboratively to drive people out of Nigeria. The Biafran Civil war in 1967-1970 caused a major exodus of educated Nigerians to Western nations for security reasons and thus began the brain-drain in Nigeria.

External Factors

These elements are juxtaposed to the internal factors, and consist of better job opportunities, flexible career paths, higher pay, satisfactory living and working conditions, and higher standards of living. Increased prospects for professional development combined with political stability are the brain-drain's largest pull to developed countries. Globalization has also increased the brain-drain with the mobility of highly skilled individuals from Nigeria at a lower price than Westerners would request. Many companies in affluent nations have recruiting programs and incentives to entice skilled professionals from Nigeria in order to decrease their employment budget, while increasing productivity for their business.

Subsequently, skilled and educated Nigerians are attracted to the Western's economic opportunities and what they believe to be an easy way of life. However, the destructive effects of the brain-drain problem arise when Nigerians choose not to return to their native country. After being established in the American society through education, employment and American partners, Africans especially Nigerians become "Americanized" and do not want to go back to the sufferable ways of life in Nigeria.

The reasons why Nigerians abroad do not return

After being established in developed countries, the choice not to return to Nigeria is based upon various reasons such as safety issues, loss of comfort zone, business and family relations abroad, and fear of persecution from the government and society. The most important deterrent in returning to Nigeria permanently is due to the feeling of frustration with the corruption and greed that has infiltrated the government as well as the communities.

Majority of the people living in Nigeria have accepted corruption as the norm. Greediness and the quest for power and wealth are traits not only to be tolerated, but also encouraged, especially in the government officials. During my interview with Mr. Victor Adewusi, director of Oasis

International, he recalled an experience he had in Lagos, Nigeria last year while on the public bus. The bus was stopped by a policeman carrying a machine gun, who asked the bus driver to pay him 10,000 naira, which amounts to approximately $70. When the bus driver asked what he did wrong and why he had to pay what seems to be a large amount of money in Nigeria, the policeman had no rational explanation, but insisted the bus driver pay or he wouldn't let him go free. Instead of assisting the bus driver, the passengers yelled and attacked the bus driver, demanding that he pay the policeman so that they can go on their way. Adewusi remembered being ashamed of the passengers' behaviors, himself included for being silent during the ordeal.

Like Mr. Adewusi, many Nigerians in the African Diaspora consider themselves to be worldly and having an understanding of how hard it is to attain true wealth, respect and power, they become frustrated with the average Nigerian's mentality and way of life. Unfortunately, some of the Nigerian Diasporas are aware of the debilitating effect their migration to the Western nations has had on Nigeria's socio-economic conditions, but they still choose not to go back to compensate for the damage. Thus, the brain-drain continues to increase with about 23,000 professional individuals leaving Africa annually as estimated by the World Bank report in 2007.

Socio-economic Impact of Brain Drain in Nigeria

Ainalem Tebeje, vice president of Association for Higher Education and Development in Canada writes that "there are more African scientists and engineers in the USA than in the entire continent". This continuous outflow of skilled personnel continues to contribute to a widening gap in science and technology between Africa and other continents. From outdated technology to increased unemployment, the average Nigerian laborer makes $30 a month in wages. Although the economic impact of the brain drain is highly publicized due to loss of intelligent and skilled individuals with various technical expertises, the social impact is also very important.

Nigeria has the largest oil and gas reserves in all of Africa, but about 60% of the citizens are living below the poverty line as estimated by the CIA-The World Factbook. The social effects of the brain drain is depicted through the establishment of a two class society with no middle class consisting of doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, and other professionals. Instead, Nigeria as well as most parts of Africa has a massive underclass society that is largely unemployed and very poor. Meanwhile, the few very rich people are mostly corrupt military and government officials. The brain drain will continue to give rise to poor leadership and corruption in Nigeria, unless Nigerians in the African Diaspora especially in my generation decide to lend a helping hand to our beloved country.

Four strategies to diminish the negative effect of the Nigerian Brain-Drain

The insurmountable negative impacts of brain drain outweigh the only positive impact of brain drain: remittances. People in the Nigerian Diaspora, who give back money to relatives in Nigeria such as my family, are assisting the people for a short time period, but that has no lasting result. Instead we need to develop ways to help people in Nigeria become more educated and self-sustaining. The main goal of all these methods to combat the effects of the brain-drain is to compensate via the transfer of knowledge, skills, talents, and resources to Nigerian citizens.

1) Mobilization of Diaspora through virtual participation:

Virtual participation refers to the involvement of the African Diaspora in Nigeria's capacity building without requiring any physical relocation. The usage of global telecommunication network in this 21st century allows for an interactive, networking community between African Diasporas and people in Nigeria. The sharing of information between the Diaspora and Nigerian citizens such as political news, social, intellectual and cultural events could occur in an accurate and timely manner. Without any physical transfer, Nigerians living abroad will be able to assist by sharing their knowledge and talents through this multi-dimensional medium. This concept "has tremendous potential to channel the untapped intellectual and material input from the African Diaspora" (Ainalem).

The opportunities for e-learning, online teaching across the ocean, collaborations with institutions on research and developmental projects and other services can be rendered through programs such as virtual linkages. According to the International Development Research Center, "virtual linkages are independent, non-political, and non-profit networks facilitating skill transfer and capacity-building" to mobilize skilled Diaspora's expertise for the development process in Africa. This particular strategy targets Diasporas that are willing to contribute their skills and knowledge, but are not willing to travel to Nigeria.

2) Formulating a National Diaspora policy involving the Nigerian government

Dr. Yohannes Woldetensae, a member of the Association of African Universities, writes: "the lack of well-formulated and applicable policy is a barrier to Diaspora engagement". By creating clear guidelines for interactions between the African Diasporas and Nigerian Institutions in terms of assistance, this decreases chances of improper exchange of information and resources. The policy framework is essential to link national development needs with Diaspora recourses, and serves to guide the activities more systematically. The policy could also be utilized to pursue the return of Nigerian expatriates with incentives. The involvement of the relevant stakeholders such as Diaspora communities, local institutions, non-governmental organizations and Nigerian policy makers are necessary to establish and implement a system that would benefit all and alleviate any misunderstandings.

This national policy is inclusive to contractual agreements between an individual Diaspora and Nigerians back home for short term relocation to America for educational and training purpose only. This contract should mandate that after the training period, the visitor must return to teach others what he/she has acquired abroad. Dr. Funmi Olopade, at Pritzker School of Medicine in Chicago, Illinois, has developed a program to recruit responsible Nigerian Medical Doctors for temporary assignments at this institution in a research facility and teaching Hospital in order to expand their knowledge in the healthcare field. Such policies should be promoted to help facilitate the concept of direct knowledge transfer from one Nigerian to another, which could result in a cascade effect.

3) Economic share-ship utilizing the dual citizenship status

Remittances have been institutionalized in the Nigerian communities living abroad for the last decade, "accounting for about 5-20% of gross domestic product in Africa" (UNECA). However, this does not substitute for the adverse effects of the outflow of skilled personnel and brain drain. The mechanisms in giving back financially can be improved upon with modern technology utilizing direct transfers to bank accounts. The simplification of remittances transfers with fast and reliable services along with a rational currency exchange rate would make it more accessible to the people in need. Monetary support is also a wonderful way to invest in both public and private enterprises, enabling an increase in business ownership among Nigerian citizens and more employment opportunities. By contributing directly to the Nigerian economy, Individuals with the dual citizenship are better able to exercise their civil rights in social and economic aspects through supervisory positions, business ownership as well as voting for decent political officials essential for Nigeria's growth.

4) Connecting Diaspora productively through temporary engagements in Nigeria

Traveling to Nigeria, even for a short time period, is one of the most significant methods for direct knowledge transfer to the citizens. Not only are professional trainings and skills learned, but so are the American culture, the belief in social justice and civil rights, and the humanitarian perspective of many people in America. One on one interaction with the citizens helps to create a connection with the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria and get a great feel for what it is like to be a Nigerian. This creates the perfect opportunity to immerse oneself in the culture and heritage and hopefully grow as an individual. The cooperation and support of many international organizations such as Peace Corps, UNESCO, UNDP, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank are available for the African Diaspora to be a viable human resource for Nigeria as well as other developing countries in Africa.

Conclusion

The increase of Nigeria migration to developed countries equals a slow death for Nigeria socially, economically and culturally. Although I have learned a lot of disappointing facts about my homeland and the perceptions of the older generation of Nigerians living in the New England area, I am not deterred in my plans of contributing to the betterment of my beloved Nigeria. It is encouraging to know that there are thousands of people concerned about the welfare of Nigeria with the formation of Nigerian National Volunteer Service and Nigerians in Diaspora Organizations in 1999. The latter group focuses on igniting conscious participation by Diaspora in Nigeria's development (Akwani). I am also very hopeful about the future of Nigeria, as well as Africa, due to the positive response that this research has received from many African Diasporas in my generation to counteract the effects of the brain-drain and convert it into brain-gain. Out of over 50 Nigerian youth that I surveyed, 85% are optimistic concerning Nigeria's progress in the future and 95% are willing to venture back home for service projects in their chosen career field. With the opportunity provided for Nigerian youth Diasporas to be proactive in these efforts, the brain-drain problem could be slightly diminished by my generation and hopefully the future generations will continue to strive for the same goals.

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