The Trajectory of the Nigerian Diaspora in National Development: An Insight into the Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

For many years now, Nigeria has been lamenting the loss of its highly trained intellectuals and skilled professionals to other countries of the world through different channels of international migration. Overtime, these pool of Diaspora Nigerians have built vast resources and capacity in their respective areas of expertise and making tremendous impact in their countries of residency. Though there has been much work on migration in extant literature, but the ones on the Nigerian Diaspora are mostly cultural oriented, and dealing with such issues as the survival of the African heritage in the New World or the process of Diaspora identity formation, at the expense of development. The major thrust of this paper, therefore, is to examine the nexus between the Nigerian Diaspora and national development. Using the theories of global modernity and cultural globalization as a theoretical framework, this paper argues that Diaspora expertise and financial remittances from diverse legitimate sources can be harnessed to build an economically viable and politically stable nation. The paper adopts a descriptive and qualitative method of inquiry to interrogate the subject matter and concludes by making some pragmatic recommendations that could be adopted into a policy programme by the Nigerian government to create a conducive atmosphere for positive engagement with the Diaspora communities for national development.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Foreign Policy, National Development, Remittance.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the link between migration and development has emerged as a distinct intellectual and policy field in academia and bureaucracy. The Nigerian Diaspora has increasingly been recognized as a significant asset in the nation's development discourse. With millions of Nigerians residing abroad, their socio-economic and political contributions have become the subject of both policy and academic attention. This current development mantra is more or less driven by the Diaspora and supported by the home government who are now beginning to appreciate the growing economic and human resource potentials of the Diaspora communities in different countries of the world (Alli, 2010).

According to the United Nations Population Fund (2024), there are about 15 million Nigerians living abroad, from Africa to Europe, Middle East, Asia, and North America to Australia. Majority of these groups are very young, vibrant, mobile, intelligent, educated and highly trained professionals who are making tremendous impact in their respective fields of human endeavors and within and outside their place of abode. Even more importantly, many of this

Nigerian Diaspora is willing and ready to contribute to the development of their home country if the right policy and institutional framework are put in place.

However, in a world in which identity politics and frequent recourse to ethnicity are regularly invoked, Diaspora as a term is seriously contested. Around the world today, many different ethnic nationalities, tribal affiliations and races often claim Diaspora identity for themselves. But as noted by Akinrinade and Olukoya (2011), the Nigerian Diaspora does not necessarily represent a single homogenous ethnic group, like the case of the Jews or Armenians; rather it comprises of a number of ethnic nationalities currently working or residing outside the country, but can trace their ancestry to a particular clan, community or state in Nigeria.

In their seminal work on the nexus between globalization, Diaspora and development, Mohan and Zach-Williams (2002) categorized these activities into three schemas: Firstly, "development in the Diaspora", which refers to the use of Diaspora capacity to foster socio-economic wellbeing in their immediate locality. Secondly, "development through Diaspora", this involves engaging local and global trade and investment networks for the benefit of the host country. While the third one, "development by the Diaspora" deals extensively with the role of the Diaspora community in the development of their ancestral homeland.

From the onset, though the Nigerian government had long acknowledged its Diaspora citizens as potential assets or agents of national development, but her efforts to constructively engage them, over the years, has hardly gone beyond cultural or historical reconnections (Jayasuriya, 2005). Indeed, until recently, and perhaps because of the diverse nature of the Nigerian Diaspora, there has been no appropriate policy or institutionalized platform to tap into the vast human and financial resources of the Nigerian Diaspora.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Diaspora: As a term, Diaspora was originally associated with the dispersion of the Jewish people beyond Israel, especially after the Babylonian and Roman conquest of Palestine. However, these days, the word Diaspora connotes a large group of people with a similar cultural or linguistic heritage who have immigrated to other places or regions but still keeps a historical, social, cultural, religious and financial link with their homeland.

Migration: In its generic term, migration could be defined as the seasonal movement of animals or humans from one place or region to another in search for greener pastures or other opportunities. But as regards human migration, this could be described as the movement of people from one location to another with the intention of settling down either temporarily or permanently at a new location.

Foreign Policy: Is a set of political goals that seeks to outline how a particular country intends to interact with other countries of the world. Generally, foreign policies are designed to protect and project a country's national interests in terms of security, ideology and economic assets. Most times, they are influenced by domestic and external variables and factors.

National Development: This is the process by which a country improves the socio-economic wellbeing of its citizens through the provision of some basic social amenities and

infrastructures (like good roads, healthcare facilities, quality educations etc.) that makes life more meaningful and enjoyable. National development usually encompasses progressive changes in the socio-economic and political life of a nation.

Remittance: This is a kind of non-commercial transfer of money or any other financial instrument by which a migrant worker or a member of a Diaspora community transfer funds to families and friends in their original homeland for a specific purpose or assignment. In the past few decades, these remittances have been growly rapidly yearly and now represent the largest source of foreign income for many households in developing countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For a very long time, the classical debate concerning the Diaspora community all over the world have always resonated around the concept of ethnicity which often reasserts group solidarity and communality. However, this perception of ethnicity alone might not be adequate enough to explain the theoretical construction of identity, especially in a plural society like Nigeria which has over 250 ethnic nationalities. It is against this backdrop therefore, that this paper adopts the works of Arif Dirlik (Global Modernity) and Ajurn Appadurai (Cultural Globalization) as its theoretical framework.

Dirlik (2007) in his postulation talked about the concept of "global modernity" as a way of understanding the contemporary world. He argues that in the last few decades or so, capitalism has influenced the socio-economic, political and cultural aspects of modernity in such a way as to produce a new-era of global capitalism. Therefore, following the collapse of its communist competitors in the early 1990s, globalization of capitalism has generated some sort of culturally-informed counter-claims to modernity.

On the other hand, Appadurai (1990) posits that the central problem of today's global integrations is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. In his view, we can no longer understand the global economy in terms of the existing center-periphery model alone; neither can we understand migration from the simple models embedded in the push and pull theory. Rather, the global economy in this age must be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that is submerged between culture, politics and economy.

Thus, the works of Dirlik and Appadurai, no doubt, are of great significance to the study of the Nigerian Diaspora and national development. Both scholars have provided insights into the character of migration, Diaspora and development in an era of globalization. In their respective arguments, they agreed that the logic of globalization and capitalism is locked in its homogenizing tendencies amidst an otherwise conflicting heterogeneous character of culture, identities and peoples.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE NIGERIAN DIASPORA

The study of the Nigerian Diaspora cannot be completely separated from the study of the African Diaspora itself. This is particularly so because, during these periods, no single Diaspora movement or monolithic Diaspora community could be studied unless traced back to certain historical experiences of majority of the pre-colonial African States. Therefore, as

articulated by Gomez (2005), when examining the Diaspora of different African countries, it would be difficult to ignore the following: (i) Africa as the land of origin, (ii) the period of enslavement, (iii) the fight against colonialism, (iv) struggle against racism and retention of their African heritage in the Diaspora, as well as (v) the quest for repatriation of their wealth to their motherland.

The Pre-Modern Diaspora

According to Palmer (2013), it is widely believed that the first African Diaspora community was a consequence of a great wave of movement which occurred within and outside Africa about two hundred thousand years ago. The "Out of Africa theory" is the most widely accepted model in the study of Palaeo-anthropology which describes the geographical origin and early migration pattern of modern homo-sapiens. Therefore, the first major wave of pre-modern Diaspora movement in Africa saw the exodus of a host of Bantu-Speaking People southward towards the Indian Ocean to inter-mix with the indigenous racial population in the Sub-continent.

The Trans-Sahara Trade Diaspora

Another stream of African Diaspora identified by Palmer is the trans-Sahara trade Diaspora which began around the 7th century A.D. The movement of these Africans was characterized by the massive passage of traders, merchants, slaves and conscripted soldiers to the Middle East, Europe and Asia through the trans-Sahara trade route. This Diaspora movement was said to have resulted in the creation of communities of people of African descent in Portugal, Spain, India, the Italian city-states and elsewhere in the Middle East even before Christopher Columbus ever set sail across the Atlantic.

The Trans-Atlantic Trade Diaspora

Perhaps, the most significant milestone in the history of the involuntary movement of Africans out of their homelands, across the mighty Oceans was the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As stated by Alusine & Maizlish (1996), documented records of migration in the territory later known as Nigeria today, shows that African interaction with European nations started in the 15th century with the Portuguese Empire. The Portuguese slave trade expanded from the Bight of Benin to as far as Angola. The Spanish, French and the British also played a significant part in the creation of modern African Diaspora with their shipment of millions of Africans to the New World. In his BBC documentary on Africa and the "Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," Adi (2013) remarked that about thirty percent of all slaves sent across the Atlantic during the 19th century came from Nigeria.

The Colonial Diaspora

The colonial era witnessed yet another wave of migration and the establishment of Nigerian Diaspora communities in the United Kingdom and other Territories and Dominions under the British Empire. With the British invasion and subsequent colonization of some Africa territories in the early 19th century, many able-bodied Nigerians with their families, migrated on their own to countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea in search of greener pasture. Indeed, according to Adepoju (2005), after WWI, some of these Nigerian migrants voluntarily stayed back in their respective countries of residency and subsequently formed the nucleus of what became known as the Nigerian Diaspora in Africa.

The Contemporary Diaspora

Mberu (2013) in her study of African migration, avers that while a significant percentage of migrant Africans who fled their home-countries, from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, due to political conflict, ethnic persecution and insecurity, could be aptly described as "refugees", however, many Nigeria do not fall into this categorization. Over the years, several push and pull factors have influenced the movement of many Nigerians out of the country, especially due to severe economic crisis and insecurity problem that has plagued the nation since the advent of the 4th Republic. According to Chief Ojo Maduekwe, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, there are over 15 million Nigerians in the Diaspora and many of them can be classified as "economic migrant" (Maduekwe, 2010).

Lastly, in his submission on the Diaspora debate, Kamolafe (2019) posits that most Nigerian migrants predominantly moves to countries where they can easily adjust to the language of communication, secure gainful employment, associate with family and friends from their ethnic background, as well as enjoy educational opportunities for their children. Consequently, since the early 2000s, the United Kingdom, Canada, United States of America, Australia etc. have been some of the most popular destinations for Nigerian migrants.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN MIGRATION, DIASPORA AND DEVELOPMENT

At the global level, the importance of the Diaspora as a driving force for socio-economic development has not gone unnoticed in contemporary academic literature. However, it was not until the second half of the new millennium that the nexus between migration and development began to gain formal recognition with the establishment of a UN initiated High-Level Dialogue on Migration and International Development. The awareness created, therefore, was as a result of globalization and increased integration in the economic and technological spheres. In the long-run, as noted by Adefuye (2016), the Diaspora debate has helped to draw attention to the positive contribution migration could make to national development in both the host countries as well as the receiving countries, provided the right policies are put in place.

At the continental level, recognition that the African Diaspora was fast becoming an important source of foreign exchange for Africa was first institutionalized by the African Union (AU) which designated the Diaspora as "the sixth development zone" in the continent; alongside its other economic blocs in West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and North Africa. According to Edozie (2016), the AU's definition of this sixth zone is very much tied to the contributions made by the Diaspora towards Africa's development. The AU has also gone as far as to extricate their identity as African Diaspora and merged it with their responsibility to the ethno-tribal communities their ancestors came from.

At the national level, Uche (2020) asserts that this day, it has almost become a pattern of foreign policy to incorporate the Diaspora in matters of economic development. The focus of such policy include attracting greater development and investment capital inflow to the home market, strengthening political and corporate governance structure, as well as building capacity initiatives that can effectively engage opportunities offered by globalization. Thus, for so many years now, one unenviable feature of the Nigerian government's engagement with its Diaspora communities abroad is the absence of a programmatized policy that can

provide a channel through which migrants could interact with their home government beyond cultural issues (Aditya, 2025).

In response to that lacuna, therefore, the Nigerian 7th National Assembly provided legislative support and encouragement to the country's Diaspora communities through the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Diaspora Committee in the House of Representatives. Indeed, the latter group was very unequivocal about the human and financial resources that could be tapped from the Nigerian Diaspora. As noted by Olowokere (2013), this further gave impetus for the National Assembly in 2016 to establish the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) to serve as a one-stop institution to manage Diaspora matters in and outside the country.

HIGHLIGHTS OF DIASPORA CONTRIBUTION

Though there are very few empirical literatures on the macroeconomic contributions of the Nigerian Diaspora to Nigeria's national development, however, for many decades now, Diaspora remittances has been a silent driver of the global economy. Over the years, Diaspora remittances have featured more as a cultural practice, than an economic policy, where expatriates transferred money back to their home countries for several developmental purposes. As reported recently by the World Bank (2023), the flow of migrant money into the Nigerian formal and informal economy, has increased to record high as more Nigerians joins the brain-drain syndrome on a daily basis.

In his study on international migration and human capital development, Yang (2014), posits that at the household level, Diaspora remittance have the potential of stimulating entrepreneurial activity in the homeland. This is particularly true in the Eastern part of Nigeria where cultural roles and responsibilities generally require the more fortunate member of the family living in the Diaspora to provide financially for the poor ones at home. Most times, this kind of altruistic economic support system may come in the form of financial grant, credit facility, as well as business partnership to boost the entrepreneurial abilities of their siblings, friends, relatives or townsmen.

Also, apart from poverty alleviation and increase in household income, another area the Diaspora community has contributed to national development is in the educational sector. Through the activities of various school alumni associations, many Diaspora communities have rebuilt and equipped their alma mater and educational institutions in their villages (Eke, 2022). Some brilliant but indigent students have also been given full scholarship to study in reputable universities at home and abroad through Diaspora sponsorship. In the area of real estate and physical development, Babatunde & Martinetti (2010) reports that the Nigerian Diaspora are the real catalyst driving the sector, especially in major cities in the Southeast and South-South region of the country.

Lastly, in politics and governance circle, the impact of the Nigerian Diaspora cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, the Nigerian Diaspora played a pivotal role in the struggle for the return of democracy to the country, under the auspices of the Association of Nigerians Abroad. Apart from providing succor for many political and religious refugees, many Diaspora Nigerians contributed their resources, time and intellect to rebuild our image and

infrastructures after the military left. Also, since 1999, some prominent Nigerian Diaspora (like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Akinwumi Adesina, Magnus Kpako, Olusegun Aganga, Obi Ezekwesili etc) have served in various government positions availing the country with their expertise and experience (Hagher, 2013).

CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIAN DIASPORA

Looking at the big picture, especially from the conceptual point of view, it becomes clearer why the efforts of the federal government to harness Diaspora resources for national development have not yielded enough fruits as expected. The first major challenge of the Nigerian Diaspora is that of identity. Conceptually, as articulated by Keshi (2012), there is no such homogenous ethno-cultural group called the Nigerian Diaspora (as you have it in the Jewish Diaspora, Indian Diaspora or Armenian Diaspora); rather what exist is a collection of heterogeneous tribal associations that represent the different ethnic nationalities in the Diaspora and often working at variance with the national goal.

Similarly, there is also the problem of psychological attachment to their host country which makes it difficult for some Nigerian Diaspora to connect with the motherland. Many Nigerians in the Diaspora have taken up the citizenship of their host country, therefore, their loyalty and allegiance is first to their adopted country, rather than to the Nigerian state. Consequently, with over 250 ethnic groups scattered in different parts of the world and pursuing different goals and agenda, it has not been very easy to organize, engage, and convince them on the need to come back and contribute their quota to the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria.

Another major challenge that has militated against government's effort in attracting and engaging the Nigerian Diaspora towards her development stride, over the years, has been the issue of endemic corruption and lack of appropriate corporate governance policy in the country (Mercer, et al, 2008). Corruption and impunity have eaten so deep into our national psyche that many genuine Nigerian Diaspora investors are scared of investing their hard-earned money in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Even the few brave and patriotic Diaspora Nigerians that have ventured into one kind of business or the other in Nigeria have either be duped or frustrated out of the country.

In recent time, also, some segment of the Nigerian Diaspora communities in different parts of the world have repeatedly complained of official neglect and ill-treated by the Nigerian government, especially in their moment of dire need and assistance. Osaghae (2011) notes that this perception and situation often arises when our embassy officials, out of sheer ineptitude and corruption, abdicate their diplomatic responsibility, of protecting the interest of their fellow countrymen, to pursuing personal gains in foreign lands. Consequently, this negative attitude has exposed many Nigerians in the Diaspora to unwarranted xenophobic attack in countries like South Africa, Ghana, India, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Indeed, no right-thinking Nigerian Diaspora would want to identify with a country that cannot protect their rights and privileges abroad, let alone coming back home to invest in its economy.

Lastly, since the advent of the Boko-Haram terrorist insurgency in Nigeria, the issue of insecurity has dealt an incalculable damage to the corporate image of the country. In

particular, stories of kidnapping, banditry, armed robbery, terrorism and extra-judicial killings by security operatives in Nigeria that constantly floods the internet and Western news media is enough to discourage any Diaspora investor from coming into the country. Indeed, in the last few years, many multinational organizations and privately owned foreign firms have either relocated out of Nigeria or sold their stakes to local investors due to the prevailing insecurity in the country.

PROSPECTS OF THE NIGERIAN DIASPORA

According to a recent UNPF report (2024), each year, approximately over 20,000 Nigerians trained or educated abroad (specifically in the UK, Germany, US, Canada, Japan and France) are willing to return home and use their financial resources and professional expertise to develop the country. Akwani (2017) observes that such reversed brain-gain or Diaspora tapping provides the rationale for the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Network (TOKTEN) program spearheaded by the UNDP. This, perhaps, explain why Jeter (2003) has consistently advised that the Nigerian Diaspora should be seen as a strategic asset worthy of meaningful and pragmatic engagement in the country's quest for development.

Another prospect of the Nigerian Diaspora is that both migration and Diaspora communities do have enormous potential for growth and poverty alleviation in both host and destination countries. As pointed out by Doyle (2018), modern migration allows workers to move wherever they will be more productive and their skills are better utilized, thus resulting in increase in output. In the long run, this translates into higher funds being sent to their families, friends and government for personal projects and national development. As at 2023, Nigeria retains the number one position as the country that receives the highest Diaspora remittance in Sub-Sahara Africa (World Bank, 2023).

Lastly, De Haas (2014) posits that any country that is desirous of engaging its Diaspora citizens, large or small, for developmental purpose, it must be ready to spend at least one percent of its total annual budget on its Diaspora community. This laudable investment is critical in order to maintain the cordial relationship that exists between the Nigerian government and its Diaspora citizens. In the same vein, Dubey (2007) concur by asserting that Nigeria can learn a lot from the experience of other countries, like Israel, India, Philippines, Italy and Ghana on how to engage and harness the potentials of Diaspora communities.

CONCLUSION

From our analysis in this paper, so far, it is obvious that the Nigerian Diaspora is historically rooted in recent and earlier migratory movements in Africa; just as they are psychologically attached to their new homes in their countries of residency abroad. According to Safran (2019), when compared to the forced movement of slaves and colonial-induced migration out of Africa; the present post-independence waves of migration, which is being propelled by the forces of capitalism and globalization, portend better opportunities and benefits to both the Diaspora communities and their country of origin.

Today, policymakers, diplomats and statesmen can no longer afford to treat Diaspora affairs as primarily a cultural phenomenon. The reality of today's world poses serious challenge to the hitherto held state-centric view of international politics and economics; and compels us to

begin to rethink our perception on national boundaries, mobility and financial inflow concerning states and citizens. Thus, as noted by Gibbons (1994), modern advancement in the information, transportation and communication technology have made global, national and local interactions easier and cheaper which eventually enhances the creation of Diaspora communities and citizens around the world.

Evidently, as noted by Rahman & Yong (2015), every Diaspora citizen has a large stake in the socio-economic and political development of his/her country. Over the years, data produced by the World Bank, and other international development agencies, highlights the magnitude of financial remittances to developing countries, which in part explains why government policies should be directed positively towards engaging the Diaspora communities. However, as regards the Nigerian case, this paper, to a great extent, has helped to answer the question surrounding the role of the Nigerian Diaspora in national development; as well as that of government's efforts towards winning their confidence of the Diaspora communities to invest in the Nigerian economy now and in the nearest future.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although countless studies have been commissioned, numerous workshops and conferences organized, and several reports and briefing papers published on the issue of African migration and development at local, national and international discourse, this writer make bold to suggest the following policy recommendations to further enrich the discourse:

(i) First and foremost, in view of current realities around the globe, it has become imperative for the Nigerian government to begin to rethink its current engagement strategies and approach as regards migration, Diaspora and development. The era of looking at the issue strictly from the prism of cultural affinity and affiliation alone is over. Now, emphasis should be on how to attract the Nigerian Diaspora in terms of their socio-economic and political benefit to Nigeria.

(ii) Also, there is a need for the Nigerian government to create more avenues or platforms for the engagement of her Diaspora citizens in order to be able to maximize their full potentials, capabilities and resources; as the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) alone cannot be saddled with the responsibility for everything concerning her citizens abroad.

(iii) Furthermore, competent, qualified and interested Nigerian Diaspora citizens should be allowed to participate in the country's political and economic processes without placing unnecessary encumbrances. This could be kick-started with the idea of allowing Nigerians living abroad to vote in Governorship and Presidential elections.

(iv) Lastly, a strong case is being made here for the upgrading of the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM) to become a full-fledge Cabinet Ministry of its own, in order for it to provide adequate policy and bureaucratic framework for the management of Diaspora affairs.

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