



Nigerian Journal
for
Strategic Research
and
Development

NJSRD

VOLUME 1 NO. 2, DECEMBER 2011

**NIGERIAN JOURNAL FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT (NJSRD)**

(A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL)

**VOLUME 1 NUMBER 2
DECEMBER, 2011**

PUBLISHED BY

**CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT
(CREMD)**

**16, ITEM STREET, OFF MBARI STREET, BEHIND UBA BANK, ICAB FILLING
STATION, IKENEGBU LAYOUT, OWERRI, IMO STATE, NIGERIA.**

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THE ROLES OF DIASPORA IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The contributions of Diaspora to national development in developing countries like Nigeria have been increasingly acknowledged in the past decades. This paper examines the roles and contributions of Diaspora to national development in Nigeria. It notes that Diaspora groups have been engaged in the development of their home countries for many years. The paper gives an appraisal of the contributions of Diaspora to national development in Nigeria. It also examines the hindrances to the contribution of Diaspora to national development. It suggests that there is urgent need for relationship building (that is effort) by country-of-origin government to consult with Diaspora groups when creating national development plans, and by acknowledging the contribution of Diaspora in development can increase communication between Diaspora and government potentially leading to lasting partnership for development in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Development, National Development*

Introduction

The past two decades have seen significant growth in the body of work on population movements generally referred to as Diaspora. Dialogue on Diaspora and their role in the development of the home country has grown in the last two decades and different countries have begun identifying ways they can engage their nationals residing abroad in this process (Minto, 2009). Interestingly, the progression of research across disciplines indicates not only the growing relevance of the area in and of itself, perhaps even more significantly, a recognition of both the real and potential effects a Diaspora can have on both the home and host countries (Minto, 2009). While a solid body of research exists on the positive economic impact of Diaspora, less attention has been paid concerning the potential role of Diaspora as meaningful change agents in the social, cultural and intellectual aspects of Development in a nation. Despite their promise, most development agencies have somewhat overlooked the potential role well-organized Diaspora could play as development partners (Joseph, 2008).

There is no doubt that Diaspora communities can stand outside any system (whether in the home or the host country) and assess how to use the baggage they carry to the benefit of the home country, particularly with respect to systemic change. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has identified the "diaspora option" – the mobilization of the skills and resources of Diaspora communities as an attractive developmental tool for home countries (cited in Johnson, 2007).

The contributions of Diaspora to development have been increasingly acknowledged in the past decades. The word, 'Diaspora' has taken a center stage in today's political economy discourse in Nigeria. In what appears to be a shift from what was formerly referred to as 'Brain Drain', with a negative connotation, the concept of Diaspora in its present usage and form, suggests a positive point of 'Brain Gain'! Indeed, recent events are in agreement with the axiom that 'nothing exists by accident'.

The category of Nigerians we today refer to as Diaspora, consists of icons in Science and Technology, journalists, social critics and human right activists, etc who were either forced to, or who voluntarily migrated to other continents of the world, namely Europe, America, Asia, etc; by the frustration of military dictatorship, unpardonable level of unemployment, insensitivity, injustice and insecurity, which characterized the era of military dictatorship in Nigeria. By the way, these were the human resources required for national development and whose exit resulted directly or indirectly to the quagmire the Nigerian nation was subjected to (Aliyu, 2010).

It is not so much the engagement of Diaspora groups that is new, but rather the interest of the Nigerian government in their potential contribution to national development. While the government has focused its hope on individual emigrants to invest, their associations are primarily ascribed a role in running and sustaining development projects (Minto, 2009). As part of the presidential dialogue with Nigerians abroad, the former President (Chief Olusegun Obasanjo) had meetings with Nigerians living abroad in Atlanta and London. The government has also established the NIDO (Nigerian in the Diaspora Organization), which has an office situated in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a vehicle for the mobilization of the Nigerians in the Diaspora, the Nigerians in the Diaspora Organisation (NIDO) is the focal point in the government's overall strategy of involving the Diaspora in Nigeria's development. NIDO has set up a network of branches in the Nigerian embassies abroad as well as destination country-specific websites. The official aims of NIDO are to encourage the participation of Nigerians in Diaspora in the affairs of the country; and provide a forum to organisations for the exchange of views and experience. Also, it aims at enhancing the image of Nigeria through networking; and building a database of Nigerians with professional skills and makes such database available for the benefit of government, the private sector and Nigeria's partners (Haas, 2006).

It is against the above background that the paper intends to examine the roles of diaspora in national development in Nigeria. To achieve this, the paper is divided into sub heads – clarification of concepts, contribution of Diaspora to National Development: An Appraisal, constraints, recommendations and conclusion.

Clarification of Concepts

To begin, it is difficult to define "*diaspora*" either historically or in current day usage. The term diaspora originally referred to the dispersion of Jews from Israel in the 5th Century BC, after being exiled from Babylon. For some, the term still implies a population that was driven out of their homeland, has become widely scattered, and has permanently settled in other countries. While some members of some migrant populations exhibit these characteristics, the vast majority do not. Indeed, many of the populations who are actively engaged in philanthropic investments in their home countries show quite the opposite set of characteristics (Johnson, 2007).

The term "Diaspora" has its beginning in the Greek word "diaspeirian" (to sow or scatter seeds), and was originally used to refer to Jews who were scattered beyond Israel. Its use has now been

extended to cover people generally who have moved from their homelands to dwell in another country (Minto, 2009). The concept of "Diaspora" is quite broad in that different disciplines tend to use it to mean different things. For example, sociologists and anthropologists sometimes use it to describe communities that possess certain ethnic characteristics regardless of whether these groups maintain any kind of relationship with their former homelands. The "African-American Diaspora" and the "Irish Diaspora" might be the best examples of this type of usage (Lahneman, 2005). The use of the plural reflects the diversity of populations that can be acknowledged as Diaspora and the diversity of strategies and links that people maintain individually or collectively with their homelands. Defining "Diaspora" raises tangible issues of time, place of birth and citizenship, as well as subtle questions of identity and belonging.

It is instructive to note that there is no single accepted definition of the term "Diaspora", neither is there a legal recognition of the term which consequently has given rise to many different meanings and interpretations. The term "Diaspora" conveys the idea of transnational populations, living in one place, while still maintaining relations with their homelands, being both "here" and "there". The word Diaspora refers to populations of migrant origin who are scattered among two or more destinations, between which they develop multifarious links involving flows and exchange of people and resources: between the homeland and destination countries (Ogbebulu, 2009). The term also refers to expatriate groups which, in contrast to "migrants", applies also to expatriate populations abroad and generations born abroad to foreign parents who are or may be citizens of their countries of residence. The term "diaspora" according to Johnson (2007) also suggests to some a fairly homogeneous and tightly knit group. In fact, diaspora populations most often include members with a diverse range of economic, social, and ethnic characteristics.

The overall development potential of the people referred to as Diaspora can reach significant levels, involving such areas as business creation, trade links, investments, remittances, skills circulations, exchange of experiences and even impacts on social and cultural roles of men and women in the home society. Chander (2001), for instance, defines Diaspora as "that part of a people, dispersed in one or more countries other than its homeland, that maintains a feeling of transnational community among a people and its homeland". What remains unclear from this definition is the extent to which group has to maintain this feeling of community in order to be part of Diaspora.

The difficulty in defining the term "diaspora" is something that governments also face when deciding who is entitled to citizenship – for example, with which generation should the right of citizenship and nationality end? Traditionally, research in the area was undertaken within a sociological and anthropological context, but it now increasingly spans a number of disciplines and intellectual traditions, including economics and politics. Indeed, the growing emphasis on diaspora studies is itself indicative of the increasing relevance, size and activities of diaspora communities. Robin (2004) thus identifies five different types of Diaspora:

- victim Diaspora (e.g., populations forced into exile such as the Jewish, Africa-Armenian Diaspora);
- labour Diaspora (e.g., mass migration in search of work and economic opportunities such as the Indian and Turkish Diaspora);
- trade Diaspora (e.g., migrations seeking to open trade routes and links such as the Chinese and Lebanese Diaspora);

- imperial Diaspora (e.g., migration among those keen to serve and maintain empires such as the British and French Diaspora);
- cultural diaspora (e.g., those who move through a process of chain migration such as the Caribbean diaspora).

Development on the other hand is a relative term. Development as a concept has become very important in the last two hundred years (Agagu, 2004); it has acquired greater importance since the end of the Second World War. In spite of its indisputable importance, however, it has equally acquired various meanings, orientations and values (Agagu, 2004). Awoyemi (1970) saw development as involving a departure from the past to the new situation, which is reflected in the economic, social, educational and political spheres of a nation. In the view of Ugwu (2003), development includes not only economic, social or political changes, but a broad and all-embracing transformation of the society. It connotes the totality of societal improvement, which of course starts in man himself. According to him, development involves the structuring of society in such a way that will improve the quality of lives as well as the satisfaction of psychological wants of members of any given area. Rodney (1971) perceived development as an increasing capacity to regulate both internal and external relationships. From political point of view, development connotes increase in the capacity of political agencies, political unification and political participation. In short, Fadeyiye (2005) argues that development should involve the active participation of all and sundry so as to bring about concrete and meaningful transformation in the lives of people in the community, state or even in the nation or the country at large.

National development therefore encompasses social and political development. It is the plan, usually initiated by the government, for economic social and political development of the nation. It could be seen as those positive and meaningful changes in the social, economic, political, educational and cultural spheres of life which usher in progress and enhance better quality of life for the overall benefit of the people or the entire population of the country.

Contributions of Diaspora to National Development: An Appraisal

Existing literature indicates that successful Diaspora involvement in development is more parochial in nature than regional or national. The issue of Diaspora and development have only recently been put on the agenda of the Nigerian government as well as development agencies. As stated by Obasanjo (2003) "Nigerians in the Diaspora are a formidable group of Nigerians that will play an indefatigable role in the search for viable solutions to the economic, political, social and technological problems retarding our national development".

In realization of the role of Diaspora in development, the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty (2009), states that:

The contributions of Diaspora to development have been increasingly acknowledged in the past decades. Diaspora are often involved in sending remittance to family members or other social relations in their country of origin, and these funds have been increasingly identified as an important source of external capital for developing countries, in many cases surpassing the amount of money they receive in overseas development aid or foreign direct investment. Beyond this, a number of Diaspora groups have become involved in development efforts through their own initiative by, for example, investing in country project in their country of origin.

Diaspora groups have been engaged in the development of their home countries for many years. Myriad activities have been initiated by Diaspora groups, resulting in impacts (both positive and negative) on socio-economic and political dynamics within their homelands (Mohamoud, 2006). These groups have been essential contributors and respond swiftly and effectively to the emerging needs of their homeland counterparts, through philanthropic remittances, emergency response following natural disasters, conflict, economic collapse, traditional technical assistance, business investments and trade, etc.

The myriad Diaspora groups established around the world have come to appreciate the expanded role they can play in helping to develop their homelands, beyond simply sending remittances. While mobilizing financial resources is an important Diaspora-development connection, an even more important factor is the knowledge and skills transfers from expatriates that are valuable in facilitating development. Additionally, members of the Diaspora are in the position of simultaneously valuing and understanding two cultures (home and host countries), making them ideally suited to offer an alternative, and perhaps more effective way of communicating the development message. They understand the local context and are able to identify specific challenges, as well as know how to adopt strategies to avoid them (Joseph, 2008).

Legwaila (2006), enumerates the contribution of Diaspora to development as;

- i. providing expertise in crucial areas; mobilizing financial resources for development;
- ii. private sector development;
- iii. advocacy for and on behalf of the continent; and
- iv. institution building and democracy.

According to him, Diaspora groups possess much unique strength, such as good knowledge of the culture and the specific needs of their countries and communities of origin, the ability to work in different settings, long term personal commitment to the development of their communities, and the ability to gain the trust of the communities.

In addition, the Diaspora has at its disposal a multitude of intellectual, economic and political resources through which it can make a significant contribution to development. Also, the Nigerian Diaspora' political-socio-economic groups campaigned and are still campaigning for democratic reforms as part of development in Nigeria. For instance, in 1990's the UK-based Nigerian Diaspora contributed to the formulation of the pro-democracy organization, the United Democratic Front for Nigeria-Abroad (UDFN). In addition, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO-Abroad) was set up as an external wing of NADECO in Nigeria which sought to coordinate the activities of pro-democracy movements in Nigeria and has been campaigning for the nation's constitution to be amended (Ogbebulu, 2009). There is a school of thought among Nigerians abroad that participation in the political-socio-economic reconstruction of Nigeria depends on the extent to which Nigerians abroad feel they have been encouraged and allowed to have stake in their home nation state as well as in the countries that host them. It is in realization of the crucial role of Diaspora' efforts to development that prompted the Obasanjo's administration to appoint a Special Adviser for the Diaspora.

Glaring examples abound of Nigerians who have proved to be worthy ambassadors of Nigeria in the area of science and technology, medicine, engineering etc includes; Professor Emeagwali often referred to as the 'Bill Gate' of Africa; Prof Augustine Esogbue, space expert of Georgia Institute of Technology and NASA, to mention but a few (Obi, 2006). The role of Diaspora in

the United Kingdom and other parts of the world in development and poverty reduction in Nigeria cannot be underestimated as these include conflict prevention, conflict reduction and post-conflict reconstruction which are all central to poverty reduction in Nigeria, with Diaspora in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe/United States and the rest of the world constituting the most sizable and tangible form of Diaspora contribution to development and poverty reduction (Ogbebulu, 2009).

Indeed, Pastor (1985: 19) says that remittances are “the most compelling positive effect of migration.” Estimates from organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations confirm that the level of remittances is significant, amounting to US\$80 billion in 2002, notably more than the amount of registered aid to developing countries. Remittances also have a multiplier effect in encouraging growth among the businesses where these funds are spent.

Nigeria as a nation has suffered from loss of thousands of highly educated professionals, but the Nigerian Diaspora provides a substantial contribution, especially by way of remittances to the Nigerian economy. Nigeria is one of the top 20 developing countries receiving remittances, estimated at over 1.2 billion dollars in 1999 (World Bank 2007). In addition to these transfers, there are several other ways in which members of the Nigerian Diaspora, contribute to poverty reduction and development in their homeland.

Another way in which Diaspora are involved in development in their homeland is through collective investment in community projects through hometown associations. Examples of the types of projects funded by diaspora organization in their home countries include literacy programmes, hospitals, schools, roads, plumbing systems and internet cafes. Not surprisingly, however, the scope of these associations’ contributions to development varies widely from one to another, and according to the size and wealth of the association’s membership (Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalization and Poverty, 2009). Diaspora thus can play a significant role in poverty and social relief since their departure arguably allows individuals in the home country to access goods and services. This social role is also visible in the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief provided by Diaspora in times of crisis (Minto, 2009).

Diaspora can help their home countries through the application of the skills, ties and wealth they have collected abroad. Diaspora are a potential source of skilled labour or expertise for their ‘home’ countries through return migration, including temporary or ‘virtual’ return. Wealthy members of Diaspora communities are also a potential source of foreign direct investment, and can sometimes provide links to opportunities in new markets. Diaspora’ also have a more direct impact on the economic development of the home country through such financial instruments as remittances. Beyond this, a number of Diaspora groups have become involved in development efforts through their own initiative by, for example, investing in community projects in their country of origin (Development Research Group, 2009). In his contribution to the role of Diaspora in national development in Nigeria, Aliyu (2010) states that;

Nigerians in the Diaspora have enormous capacity to make significant contributions to national development if given the right environment and stimulus. Indeed, the passion and commitment of the Diaspora to the Nigerian project is manifest in their overwhelming response to conferences and meetings, within and outside Nigeria, aimed at moving the nation forward.

The development of Diaspora networks, expatriate knowledge networks, and scientific communities that transcend national borders allow Diaspora groups to link their home country into a global network through which ideas and innovations can be accessed and transferred. They also perform a social role in home countries, not just through donations and remittances but through the function of migration itself.

Constraints of Diaspora groups in contributing towards National Development

While Diaspora groups do have a significant role to play in the social, economic, and political development of their home countries, their efforts at times may be hindered. A number of Diaspora groups in existence today are not legal entities, which can further complicate the issue of funding – in particular, prospective financial backing from multilateral and/or bilateral donor agencies (e.g, World bank, International Monetary Fund, Paris Club, etc). Typical funding models initiated by such donors are fairly clear-cut when the Diaspora group is an official body. Unofficial groups, however, may not meet eligibility requirements (Joseph, 2008).

The Diaspora's return or willingness to contribute to the home country's development may also be influenced by the incentives or initiatives aimed at attracting its members, and by the rules and regulations of the host country – for example, schemes to assist entrepreneurs within the Diaspora to engage in business activities in the home country (Minto, 2009). Measures aimed at making the Diaspora more inclined to use its capacity for national development must extend beyond the symbolic.

This calls for a greater role for the home government in establishing the institutional framework within which the Diaspora can be encouraged and coordinated to maximize its developmental impact.

Conclusion

Nigerians in the Diaspora have no doubt proved to be worthy ambassadors of Nigeria, especially in the areas of science and technology. The literature on Diaspora is vigorous and growing as the new discipline of Diaspora Studies continues to gain acceptance and its membership grows. Nigerians in Diaspora have been contributing to the nation's political and economic development and the constitution should be amended to allow the Diaspora to vote so as to give these Nigerians a high sense of belonging and patriotism.

Recommendations

Nigeria would better profit from the know-how of its Diaspora if a more **intense transfer of knowledge** were to take place. To this end, government shall have to pursue a **policy** that would make it easier for well-educated Nigerians living abroad to employ their knowledge and skills in Nigeria. Government should therefore create the political will that will encourage large-scale investment by Nigerians in the Diaspora.

Nigeria needs to take a close study of the strategies of emerging Asian and European economic powers, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, China, Turkey, United Arab Emirate (UAE), etc. Applying what criminologists would call 'eclectic' but coordinated approach, Nigeria needs to engage the services of the Diaspora with relevant experience in all fields, namely; security, especially in the area of civil policing; in order to inject the right tonic into the police in Nigeria.

Others include social security; mortgage systems and schemes; banking; manufacturing; Information and Communication Technology; education; agriculture; etc.

In order to achieve national development through the participation of the Diaspora, Nigerians must entrench a new culture of doing business to earn confidence of Nigerians in the Diaspora as well as to attract the private sector, especially foreign direct investments; the country must entrench the rule of law; security, law and order, while transparency, accountability and stake holders inclusiveness must be the guiding principles. Nigeria must articulate, propagate and practice the principles of servant leadership: where the people are the masters who are entitled to be served diligently with respect and honour (Aliyu, 2010). There is need for government in creating the enabling environment through appropriate legislations for the establishment of the requisite institutional frameworks to ensure the proper grounding of good governance which will encourage the Diaspora in participating in national development.

There is urgent need for relationship building. That is, effort by the government to consult with Diaspora groups when creating national development plans or to acknowledge the contribution of diaspora in development can increase communication between diaspora and government, potentially leading to lasting partnership for development. Appreciating the indispensable strategic position occupied by the diaspora which enables them to build up social, economic and political network through which it can directly channel wealth, information, innovative ideas, intellectual capacities and skills and creative business practice from the West to Nigeria.

Nigerians in the Diaspora have been contributing to the nation's political and economic development and the constitution/electoral act should be amended to allow the Diaspora to vote, as all Nigerians abroad cannot be full time politicians but would still love to perform their civic duties in their respective abode to choose their leaders.

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