



Nigeria Diaspora Policy Challenges and the Transformation Agenda

Your Excellency; Members of the Diplomatic corps; Chiefs and all titled men and women, distinguished Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Washington DC and to this great institution-Howard University. I am honored and humbled to speak for the hosts- the Diaspora Nigerians Network, Inc. (DNN) and E. Franklin Frazier Center, School of Social Work, Howard University. We have gathered here this afternoon not only to welcome you on your first official visit to the United States of America, but to congratulate you on your recent appointment as the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Jonathan GoodLuck. We also applaud President Jonathan's administration's transformation agenda priorities which are Rebuilding the economy, attracting investments and creating jobs- even though we remain skeptical due to our past history of non performing regimes..

As a result of these unabated non-performing regimes, we have had to endure disrespect due to

- Corruption
- Disdain and disrespect of citizens by officialdom
- Lack of fairness in policy implementation- man-know-man run amok!
- Inadequate infrastructure to communicate, identify and facilitate enduring partnerships with the Diaspora
- Insecurity at home
- Brain Drain
- Insufficient recognition and celebration of Diaspora accomplishments
- Disenfranchisement – no voting rights
- Inefficient and almost dysfunctional consular services

Hence most Diaspora Nigerians tuned off Nigeria.

You are seeing so many of us here today, I believe, because of your accomplished background and pedigree, making us believe there is still hope. That you also asked to meet us where we reside outside the comfort of our embassy is a testament to your new approach. The last time we witnessed this was during Joe Garba's era. It is a good first step in the right direction. We encourage you and your staff to do a whole lot more of it, if you must reestablish trust and respect between us. It is also mind boggling the lack of investment by our government to cultivate, reap and attract the vast resources and potential of Nigerians in the Diaspora. Without prodding, as reported by the World Bank, Nigerians in the Diaspora remitted \$18.6 billions to Nigeria- which accounts for official remittances only. With sound policies and incentives we believe the Diaspora Nigerians have the capacity to infuse over \$100 billions per year into Nigeria's economy- more revenue than we would ever generate from oil!

It is worthy of note, that for most countries of the world, small or large, about 1% of the total Federal budget, or about 12 cents a day is spent on each of its citizens abroad. This small investment is key to maintaining Nigeria's leadership of its citizens in Diaspora, thereby promoting and protecting the interests of her citizens and that of Nigeria, as a whole!

DNNs mission and vision are focused on enhancing the quality of life of all Nigerians, particularly the underprivileged. If you truly share these ideals and willing to fight for them, we will be willing partners with your office and the Federal government in finding solutions and building a better Nigeria.

Lessons from other countries that have implemented Diaspora public policy, in addressing economic development and nation building that is worth mentioning here are China. India and nearer home-Ghana. In the case of China, they created institutional apparatus, targeting her Diaspora citizens and created the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), which demonstrated that overseas Chinese issues were now a national matter. This national recognition encouraged all the provinces and municipalities to set their own OCAO. It further created All China's Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC) with the mission of tapping the financial and human resources of her citizens abroad. The Chinese Peoples Congress has an Overseas Chinese Commission, whose mission is to conduct research and provide recommendations for guiding policies concerning her Diaspora citizens. To date, with all these institutions, there are more than 11,000 laws and regulations concerning overseas Chinese. (Barabantseva 2005, 11). Chinese constitution recognized Chinese overseas returnees as a special group. In 1990, the Protection Law guaranteed the protection of overseas Chinese' family and economic interests, and encouraged them to come back home through granting them special legal and economic privileges. (Thuno 2001, 917-20). There is no question that China's investment in her Diaspora spanned off an unprecedented economic growth of our time.

The case of India, their Diaspora consists of the Non-resident Indians (NRIs - these are Indian citizens who live abroad), and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs - individuals with no Indian passport but of Indian descent) (HLC 2001, viii). The Indians first strategy to engage their Diaspora was to introduce legal and tax incentives, to attract NRIs financial resources and to create a PIOs card. The PIO card is a long-term 20-year visa that allowed them to have property or access to education system in India. In addition, the government created a High Level committee on the Indian Diaspora, charged by the Ministry of External Affairs to issue a report on the role NRIs and PIOs can play in India's development. The committee's recommendation led to the possibility of a dual-citizenship to some PIOs.

Within the last decade, the Indian government has shown significant interest in the Diaspora and established a number of Diaspora policies. India's increasing interest in its Diaspora has three major factors.

First, India once had a closed economy that did not encourage foreign contributions, businesses, or investment. When the government liberalized the economy in 1991, Diasporas Indians became more useful as agents of trade, investment, and technology.

Second, Indian foreign policy began to recognize the value of the Diaspora in industrialized countries, especially the United States, for public diplomacy.

And third, only from the mid-1990s, ethnic Indians started surfacing as high-level executives of multinational corporations. The general success of the community, especially in the United States and Canada, and the community's positive influence on the overall idea of Indian qualities led successive Indian governments to take a more proactive approach.

Since 2003, the government has hosted an annual Diaspora conference that is designed to serve as a platform for interaction between overseas Indians, the Indian government, and interested segments of the Indian society, such as businessmen, cultural and charity organizations.

High-level political leaders, including the Prime minister, the President, and Union Ministers, address 1,000 to 1,500 overseas Indians on topics such as investment and philanthropic activities in India, as well as concerns of the Diaspora communities the world over.

Established in 2004, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs coordinates activities aimed at reaching out to the Diaspora. These include the "Know India Program" for Diaspora youth and annual awards for eminent Diaspora personalities.

The government also set up a Global Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, consisting of Diaspora scholars, scientists, politicians, and businessmen, in 2009.

With the financial resources of the Diaspora in mind, the government amended investment laws and established the Overseas Indian Facilitation Centre in 2007 to make it easier for Indians abroad to invest. In addition, the Reserve Bank of India has procedures in place so that NRIs and PIOs can invest in Indian companies.

Although there are no reliable statistics, anecdotally, there has been an increase in the number of Indians that have returned in recent years. Returnees can benefit their home countries by contributing enhanced skills, which can be used in the country of origin (human capital); access to business networks abroad (social capital); and financial capital and investment. The Indian information technology (IT) industry is widely regarded as a showcase for this triple-benefit formula. Figures from India's national software association NASSCOM, show that North America (predominately the United States) accounted for two-thirds of India's IT exports from 2004 to 2007. While the industry's success is attributable to other factors, the impact of the Diaspora and returnees from the United States particularly is believed to be important for three reasons.

First, several studies have shown that Indians who returned from the United States have founded and managed successful IT companies in India. Second, some Indians who founded companies in Silicon Valley have subcontracted work to companies in India. These entrepreneurs often serve as intermediaries between the markets. Third, the success of Indian IT professionals in the United States has created trust in the country's intellectual abilities abroad. It has been a major factor in branding India as a source of well-educated and hard-working professionals. This new "India brand" explains several countries' increased interest in recruiting Indian graduates and professionals. It also contributes to the willingness of the United States companies to collaborate with and outsource to India.

Coming close to home, there is the case for Ghana. Realizing the economic importance of the Diaspora, the Ghanaian government has sought to keep its citizens abroad engaged. The government organized a Homecoming Summit in 2001, which invited members of the Diaspora to the capital city of Accra, in order to promote their efforts in national development. A Non-Resident Ghanaians Secretariat (NRGS) was instituted in May 2003, to promote further links with Ghanaians abroad and to encourage return.

Data from the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) indicate that in 1998-1999, there were approximately 50,000 return migrants living in Ghana. This particular data set merges returnees from Africa, Europe, and North America. Research in this area has shown that migration can be a form of poverty alleviation as migrants tend to return with more capital and education than they had on departure!

Return migration can also be a path to job creation. In 2001, researchers from the UK-based Sussex Centre for Migration Research interviewed 152 Ghanaian returnees. Over 55 percent of those surveyed were self-employed on return, and the vast majority of these individuals employed other Ghanaians in their businesses (MPI 03, 2006).

In an interesting twist, which in some ways brings the Ghanaian migration story full circle, the government is reaching beyond its current citizens to all descendents of the African slave trade. The government plans to offer free land and a lifetime visa to members of the African Diaspora with hopes that people of African descent from all parts of the world, will travel to and perhaps re-establish roots in their ancestral homeland. This venture is enticing a lot of African Americans searching for their roots to come home and establish global businesses. Nigeria, we believe can excel in this kind of exercise, if she allows the Diaspora Nigerians the opportunity to help (Micah Bump, ISIM, 2006).

Based on the aforementioned experiences, we would propose as a matter of urgency the establishment of a Diaspora Opportunity Development Agency, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This agency will be charged with the development of and implementation of initiatives to unleash Diaspora potentials.

It is the belief of the Diaspora Nigerians Network that Nigeria can do better with a well thought out Diaspora policy. Once again, welcome and thank you for taking the time to meet with us.

Signed,

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October 29, 2011