Brain Drain and Capacity Building in Africa

One potential solution to Africa’s brain drain is virtual participation. (IDRC Photo: Peter Bennett)

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“In 25 years, Africa will be empty of brains.” That dire warning, from Dr Lalla Ben Barka of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), reflects the growing alarm over Africa’s increasing exodus of human capital. Data on brain drain in Africa is scarce and inconsistent; however, statistics show a continent losing the very people it needs most for economic, social, scientific, and technological progress.

The ECA estimates that between 1960 and 1989, some 127,000 highly qualified African professionals left the continent. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Africa has been losing 20,000 professionals each year since 1990. This trend has sparked claims that the continent is dying a slow death from brain drain, and belated recognition by the United Nations that “emigration of African professionals to the West is one of the greatest obstacles to Africa’s development.” [See box: Some Statistics on Africa’s Brain Drain]

The costs of brain drain

Brain drain in Africa has financial, institutional, and societal costs. African countries get little return from their investment in higher education, since too many graduates leave or fail to return home at the end of their studies.

In light of a dwindling professional sector, African institutions are increasingly dependent on foreign expertise. To fill the human resource gap created by brain drain, Africa employs up to 150,000 expatriate professionals at a cost of US$4 billion a year.

The departure of health professionals has eroded the ability of medical and social services in several sub-Saharan countries to deliver even basic health and social needs. Thirty-eight of the 47 sub-Saharan African countries fall short of the minimum World Health Organization (WHO) standard of 20 physicians per 100,000 people.

This continuous outflow of skilled labour contributes to a widening gap in science and technology between Africa and other continents. Africa’s share of global scientific output has fallen from 0.5
in the mid-1980s to 0.3% in the mid-1990s. There are more African scientists and engineers in the USA than in the entire continent.

The flight of professionals from Africa endangers the economic and political systems in several African countries. As its middle class crumbles and its contributions to the tax system, employment, and civil society disappear, Africa risks becoming home to even greater mass poverty.

**In search of solutions**

Throughout four decades of Africa losing its best and brightest, the world debated the semantics of the issue and focused almost solely on remittances, overlooking the implications of brain drain on human resources, institutional capacity, and health/social services.

Efforts to stem Africa’s brain drain focusing on repatriation strategies were discouraging. Studies have shown that repatriation will not work so long as African governments fail to address the pull and push factors that influence emigration. Moreover, the relationship between African governments and the African Diaspora remained a major barrier to finding solutions.

**Virtual participation**

One potential solution to Africa’s brain drain is virtual participation. Virtual participation is participation in nation-building without physical relocation. It also shows promise as a means to engage the African Diaspora in development efforts. Mercy Brown of the University of Cape Town notes that virtual participation “… sees the brain drain not as a loss but a potential gain… Highly skilled expatriates are seen as a pool of potentially useful human resources for the country of origin… the challenge is to mobilize these brains.”

Questions remain, however. Will virtual participation work in a continent where government–Diaspora relations are adversarial, and information technology almost nonexistent, and where development needs are complex and require a sustained commitment?

**The Diaspora as stakeholder**

Recent developments in government–Diaspora relations show positive signs of change. A recent study, *Semantics Aside: the Role of the African Diaspora in Africa’s Capacity Building Efforts*, revealed emerging Diaspora efforts to assume a more active role in Africa’s development. The study, conducted by the *Association for Higher Education and Development (AHEAD)*, a Diaspora group based in Canada, was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). *Semantics Aside* examined the potential of virtual participation to facilitate an effective and sustained Diaspora commitment to Africa’s development efforts. The study concluded that virtual participation has tremendous potential to channel the untapped intellectual and material input from the African Diaspora. Moreover, it recorded a growing awareness among the African Diaspora of its moral, intellectual, and social responsibility to contribute to Africa’s development efforts.

Africa has shown a growing will to reconcile with the African Diaspora. Both the *New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD)* and the *African Union (AU)* have formally recognized the African Diaspora as a key player in the development agenda of the continent. In 2003, the AU amended its Charter so as to “… encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of the continent.”
Virtual linkages

Another potential area where the talents of the Diaspora could be channelled is virtual linkages. Virtual linkages are independent, non-political, and non-profit networks facilitating skill transfer and capacity-building. These networks mobilize skilled Diaspora members’ expertise for the development process in their countries of origin. To date, 41 virtual networks in 30 different countries have been identified. Six of these are African, including the South African Network of Skills Abroad (SANSA) with members in 68 countries.

Individuals of the Diaspora also contribute through virtual networks, as visiting scholars, by investing in companies, and assisting in joint ventures between host and sending countries. According to author Damtew Teferra, Africa lags behind: “… This pattern of contributing to scientific and technological development is repeated for many Third World countries, though not… for most of Africa.”

In 2001, IOM launched the Migration for the Development of Africa (MIDA) “to develop the potential synergy between… African migrants and the demand from countries by facilitating the transfer of virtual skills and resources of the African Diaspora to their countries of origin.” Based on the notion of human capital mobility through temporary, long-term, and virtual participation, IOM works with African and host countries and Diaspora members. MIDA has launched pilot projects in a number of African countries.

Next steps

In November 2004, AHEAD, in collaboration with IDRC, organized an international Stakeholder Roundtable on Mobilizing the African Diaspora toward Development Efforts in Africa. The roundtable, held in Ottawa, Canada, brought together key stakeholders, including the IOM, Canadian government agencies, African missions, non-governmental organizations, and Diaspora groups to discuss brain drain in Africa and potential strategies for mobilizing the African Diaspora. Some of the issues identified included the need to recognize the African Diaspora as a key stakeholder in the current dialogue and efforts to address the issues of brain drain and capacity-building in Africa. Effective and sustained Diaspora engagement will require policy and resource commitments by key stakeholders, including international organizations, African governments, and host countries.

The emerging Diaspora movement to become more active in Africa’s development efforts, the growing political will in Africa to recognize the Diaspora’s potential contribution, and the possibilities created by information technology show that the African Diaspora is not, after all, a total loss to the continent.

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Some Statistics on Africa’s Brain Drain

Since 1990, Africa has been losing 20,000 professionals annually.
Over 300,000 professionals reside outside Africa.
Ethiopia lost 75% of its skilled workforce between 1980-91.
It costs US$40,000 to train a doctor in Kenya; US$15,000 for a university student.
35% of total ODA to Africa is spent on expatriate professionals.

Source: International Organization for Migration (IOM)