



Diaspora and National Consciousness: The Emergence of a New Africa

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Abstract

The twentieth century was a time of intense struggle by people of African descent against colonialism in Africa and racial discrimination in Europe and the Americas. People of African descent came together under a common consciousness forged by the understanding that their common condition was based on their common ancestry. The subsequent collapse of colonialism and other structures of racial oppression, like Jim Crow, ushered in a less-restricted age of globalization. A constant criticism of this latter iteration of globalization is that it has been skewed in favour of the developed countries. Meanwhile, fuelled by Diaspora consciousness, pan-Africanism, and nationalism, Africans in the Diaspora are returning to Africa with their education and training in the developed countries to spur development on the continent in sectors such as agriculture, education, health, music, and power supply. In this paper, using YouTube videos, we examine the achievements of these returnees as well as the challenges that face returnees and argue for a robust and visionary integration of returnees to bring about the emergence of a new Africa that will go from a developing to a developed continent.

Keywords: Diaspora, Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Returnees, Development

Introduction

The interplay between diasporic and national consciousness is a dynamic process that has far-reaching implications for the development of African nations. The African Diaspora, consisting of individuals and communities of African descent spread across the globe outside the continent, is becoming increasingly conscious of its ties to its ancestral homeland. Diaspora consciousness was on full display when *Black Panther* (2018), a film featuring people of African descent from a wide range of countries in Africa and the Diaspora, including Kenya, Uganda, Cote D'Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Tobago, Brazil, Britain, and America put the world on notice that people of African descent can work together around a common purpose, one that imagines Africa as a continent rising from its current dysfunctional state to become a major actor on the world stage. This article explores the ways in which rising diasporic and national consciousness, stemming from the rising consciousness of the youth in African countries and the increasing interactions between Africans on the continent and Africans in the Diaspora, are beginning to shape Africa's progress in crucial sectors such as agriculture, education, health, and the provision of electricity on the continent.

Diasporic Consciousness: Linking the Past and Present

African diasporic consciousness refers to the awareness of their African descent and connection to Africa, maintained by people of the African Diaspora. This consciousness arose from the historical events of the transatlantic slave trade, black slavery in the Americas, European colonialism in Africa, and racist structural formations, such as Jim Crow in the United States, as well as other forms of racial discrimination in the rest of the Americas, Europe, and around the globe. These shared historical traumas forged a strong sense of collective identity and solidarity among Africans on the continent and in the African Diaspora.

Diaspora consciousness did not start overnight; in the Americas, it took shape in the various communities of enslaved people, who, seeing that they were treated as the same people because they were Africans, irrespective of where they came from on the continent, came together to begin to identify themselves as Africans and not Mandingo or Yoruba or Igbo, even when they practised customs and traditions unique to their ethnic groups that they had carried across the Middle Passage. Gomez (2005, p. 176) writes: "[A]s early as Denmark Vesey and David Walker, black leaders of the highest

caliber have consistently displayed an awareness that the plight of their particular community was somehow tied to similar communities elsewhere." The early leaders of this pan-African consciousness include clergymen like Henry Highland Garnet, who, according to Gomez, was a Mandinka (2005, p. 176). This pan-African consciousness led to the formation of Liberia in 1822 and its independence in 1847. The return of Africans from America to form the nation of Liberia inspired the return of Africans from elsewhere, like Brazil and Cuba, to West Africa (Gomez, 2005, p. 144). Edward Wilmot Blyden was one of those who migrated to Liberia. Born in 1832 in the capital of St. Thomas, Blyden migrated to Liberia after an unsuccessful attempt to study theology at the Rutgers Theological College in New Jersey. After he was denied entry into the college on account of his race, Blyden sailed to Liberia in 1850, and quickly became a key member of the Liberian society, occupying key positions in the country, including Education Commissioner to the United States and Britain, where one of his tasks was to invite "Negroes back to the Fatherland" (Neuberger, 1985, p.152). Blyden wrote extensively on Africa and the condition of people of African descent under slavery. In his writings, we see a full flowering of the notion of

Diaspora, as he likened the condition of Africans in the Diaspora to the ancient Jews in captivity. However, Blyden was also an optimistic man. In his famous chapter, "Ethiopia Stretches Out Her Hands Unto God Or, Africa's Service to the World," in *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1888), he uses the words of Psalm 68:31 to talk about the dispersal of Africans from Africa and their return to the continent to build it with skills and resources that they had acquired from their sojourn outside the continent. He writes, "The Sphinx must solve her riddle at last. The opening up of Africa is to be the work of Africans" (p. 147). He goes on further to say, "In the Providence of God, it seems that this great and glorious work is reserved for the Negro" (p. 147).

Blyden's writings on Africa and the condition of Africans as an enslaved people in the Americas taken away from their homeland and on the need for their return to Africa were the first sustained set of intellectual reflections on the idea that Africans outside the continent should remain connected to Africa. W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey were two of the influential leaders of African descent in the Diaspora that were influenced by Blyden. DuBois was not only the most influential Black intellectual of his time, but he was also, as Posnock (2000, p. 2)

writes, arguably, America's first public intellectual. He was a key figure in the Pan-African Congresses that brought Africans from Africa and the African Diaspora together. In 1900, he attended a Pan-African conference in London that was put together by the West Indian attorney of Trinidadian descent, Henry Sylvester Williams, and gave a speech. Subsequently, he helped to organize Pan-African Congresses in 1919, 1921, 1927, and 1945. As an American, he increasingly got dissatisfied with the pace of racial progress in the United States and, in 1960, renounced his US citizenship and "returned" to Africa to become a citizen of Ghana, where he died in 1963. Like DuBois, Garvey did his pan-African work through an organizational framework. He founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and was a huge proponent of the return of Africans in the African Diaspora to Africa. Like Blyden, he propagated the need for Africans in the Diaspora to always maintain a consciousness of themselves as Africans, to not give up the idea of returning to Africa, to reject any notion of racial inferiority, and to take pride in their African identity. And as did Blyden before him, he tried to establish a presence in Liberia, but the governments of the US and Britain opposed the project (Gomez, 2005, p. 178). As Blyden

influenced Du Bois and Garvey, so did they, in turn, influence many pan-Africanists, especially on the continent, the most prominent of them being Kwame Nkrumah, who, more than any other African leader of his time, kept the flame of pan-Africanism burning.

The intellectual works of Blyden, DuBois, and Garvey helped to lay the foundation for Black Studies and the current explosion of pan-Africanism and diaspora consciousness among young people in the African Diaspora, especially those who left the continent to study, live, and work. However, as Kim Butler (2001, p. 191) has deftly shown in her excellent work on African Diaspora studies, there is more to diaspora consciousness. Some of the major points that Butler has pointed out as part of what creates a Diaspora and keeps it going are relevant here: alienation from the hostland, idealization of return to the homeland, and ongoing relationship with the homeland.

Alienation from the hostland is caused by the continuing occurrence of racism and other difficulties in the hostland on the one hand, and the idealization of return to the homeland on the other. This encourages an ongoing relationship with the homeland, whether it is in the form of taking classes in Black Studies/Africana Studies/African Diaspora

Studies or making sure that one's children and one keep in touch with the continent. These factors are responsible for the ongoing wave of returnees, most of them young people, who are returning to play various roles in the development of the continent.

Returnees and the Development of Africa

The returnees are often highly trained, educated professionals who intend to make impacts on the continent with their education and training. They include health practitioners, educators, farmers, real-estate developers, electricity investors, tech experts, etc. This article highlights some of the returnees and their projects to show how the vision of the early pan-Africanists and those who promote self-conscious attachment to Africa by the African Diaspora have come full circle in the concrete work that the returnees are doing on the continent. In the various projects that they have embarked on all over the sub-continent, the returnees are translating the vision of the early visionaries and thinkers into reality. Because of the constraints of space, this paper focuses specifically on education, energy, agriculture, health, and music.

Education

Education is universally recognized as the cornerstone of development. Critical

thinking and entrepreneurial skills are irreplaceable building blocks for the development and modernisation of Africa. One of the most inspiring stories in the establishment of a cutting-edge education system for the development of the continent is the story of Patrick Awuah, a former Microsoft Program Manager. Awuah, who studied engineering and Economics at Swarthmore University, left Microsoft in 1997 to obtain an MBA at the University of Berkeley to establish a university in his home country, Ghana. In a speech he gave at a Google Zeitgeist event, Awuah said that five years after he left Ghana for his undergraduate studies at Swarthmore, he paid a visit to the country and what he saw broke his heart. Social services in the country had broken down; students were studying in dysfunctional labs and learning by rote. And he was shocked to discover that computer science students were writing codes on paper. He said that he suddenly realized that in those students, he was looking at the future leaders of Ghana. The dire state of Ghana overwhelmed him, and he vowed never to return to Africa to work. However, this resolve changed when he had his first child and realized that he had to help create an Africa that would work for his children and their own children. This epiphany

made him leave his job at Microsoft to study for an MBA degree, so that he could return to Ghana to set up a university based on the liberal-arts education model, with emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership skills, creativity, empathy, ethical thinking, and grit. After its establishment, the university quickly developed into the best university in Ghana and one of the four hundred best universities in the world. According to Times Higher Education (August 6, 2023, par. 1), "Ashesi University's mission is to propel an African renaissance by educating next-generation ethical, entrepreneurial leaders and raising the bar for higher education in Africa."

The Power Sector

The return of the Diasporans to their homeland is vital for the development of critical infrastructure like electricity. According to data from the World Bank, in most of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, less than fifty percent have access to electricity (2023). In Sierra Leone, only 27.5% of the population enjoy electricity. However, one returnee from the Diaspora is doing something currently to change the situation; her name is Nthbiseng Mosia. She was born in Ghana in 1990. When she was seven years old, she moved with her family to South Africa, where

she went to school. She studied Business, Finance, and Economics at the University of Cape Town. In 2016, after working as a management consultant across Africa, she left for the University of Columbia in the United States to do a Master's degree in clean energy and financial policy. While in the Master's degree program, Mosia founded a solar-power company, named Easy Solar, with two of her fellow students, Eric Silverman and Alexandre Tourre, to provide affordable and reliable electricity in Sierra Leone, where they had done extensive field study to test the viability of the project. Easy Solar has turned out to be a success story, providing electricity to more than forty thousand people since its founding in 2016. To make the product affordable for its customers, usually from the poorest homes in the country, Mosia and her two co-founders established "lease with option to purchase" as well as "pay as you go" plans. They plan to expand into Liberia and Guinea, where electricity reaches only 29.8% and 46.8% of the population, respectively. Among Mosia's many awards, is the 2019 Social Entrepreneur Award.

Mosia's journey to becoming the co-founder of Easy Solar proves that diasporization does not always mean a movement out of the continent.

Sometimes, diasporization is internal, denoting a movement from one's country to settle in another country on the same continent. Such movements and the formation of the diasporic communities that follow in their wake have shaped developments on the continent. Mosia's parents moved to South Africa to give their daughter a great education. She is using her training to bring development to two countries that are neither her country of birth nor the country where she attained adulthood and developed into the professional who is now making a major contribution to the African continent. Her success story also highlights another important aspect of living in the Diaspora: members of the "education diaspora," who migrate to the West for study, can gain exposure to advanced technologies and forge partnerships for technology transfer, thereby fostering development and contributing to modernisation in the homeland. Such cosmopolitan partnerships, which is the ideal vision of the Enlightenment that should have been advanced in the contact between Europe and Africa, instead of colonialism, are likely to become increasingly common in the future, as cosmopolitan-minded youth forge bonds across race and geography to establish enterprises such

as Easy Solar to address the continent's developmental challenges.

Africans are already forging such partnerships within the continent, as highlighted in the story of the founders of Coco Planet. Coco Planet is the story of a Cameroonian, Joycelyn Nnane, and her two associates, from Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire, who came together to form a company in Cote d'Ivoire that engages in turning coconut husk into clean-burning charcoal. Nnane studied and resided in France. Her two associates worked in India and England; the one who worked in England obtained an MBA during his stay there. As social entrepreneurs, the founders of Coco Planet have three goals: to take coconut shells and husks off the street, to reduce deforestation resulting from cutting down trees for firewood, and to provide clean energy for the people. The charcoal from the coconut husk burns brighter, longer and cleaner. Equally important is the fact that it is affordable. Additionally, Nnane advances a significant point: that Africans should not only learn to produce what they consume but should also take pride in their products, rather than preferring foreign goods to locally made ones. She reiterates a salient point made by Frantz Fanon. He writes: "We go on sending out raw materials; we go on

being Europe's small farmers, who specialize in unfinished products" (1963, p. 152). If the African continent must industrialize and grow, Fanon avers that its middle class cannot turn itself into mere intermediaries—sending raw material to Europe and importing finished goods from there—when, it, too, can take on the role of manufacturers, inventors, and builders, in Africa.

Nnane also stressed the need for Africans to collaborate across borders on the continent to support each other in developing the continent. Though Nnane and her co-founders see Coco Planet as a social enterprise, founded to help low-income earners, like her mother in Cameroon, get access to cheap, clean-burning coal, they also have plans to export their product to Europe, America, and the rest of the world. This is in line with what Fanon (1963, p. 150) has described as the "bounden duty" of the national middle class to meet the historic challenge of lifting the people out of poverty and building a modern economy through its resourcefulness.

Agriculture

The influence of Diaspora returnees on Africa's agricultural sector is evident in the many initiatives in farming and factory production that the returnees have set up on the continent. One of the

most notable stories in this regard is the story of Amma Mensah; born in London to Ghanaian parents. In 2020, she returned to Ghana to assume control of one of the largest organic farms and distilleries in West Africa—a 2000-acre farm, which was at the time on the verge of collapse. Within the first two years of her taking charge of the farm, she cut its losses by half and increased the salaries of the workers by 50%. In addition to growing organic cashew and sugarcane, she produces a luxury rum brand, known as Reign. She sees agriculture as the lifeblood of Africa and even the world.

Like Mensah, many other individuals and organizations are increasingly taking note of the importance of agriculture in the development of the continent. For instance, the African Diaspora Agrofood Network (ADAN) plays a very important role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge between Diaspora members of the organization and local farmers. This collaboration enhances agricultural productivity and food security, impacting positively on national economies.

Footbridge, the parent organization that created ADAN, was established in 2014 in Belgium. Through its conferences, it aims to highlight and promote "the African Diaspora input in the agrofood sector in

Africa and Europe" (Footbridge, 2016, par. 3).

The work of organizations like ADAN will make it easier for Africans in the Diaspora, who are interested in going into agriculture or helping farmers in Africa, to tap into networks of support that will considerably make their goals easier to attain. Africa has the potential to feed the entire world. It owns 60 to 65% of the world's arable land and 10% of its renewable freshwater resources. Between 2006 and 2016, Africa's agricultural output increased by 160%, well above the global increase of 100% (Plaizier, 2016, par. 2). Notably, few sectors keep pace with inflation as effectively as agriculture (BTC Bank 2024, par. 4). The sector's value also tends to increase over time. However, insecurity and poor energy supply remain significant threats to its development on the continent. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) projected that 25 million Nigerians would face food insecurity because of widespread insecurity in the country. In a press release, the organization said, "Food access has been affected by persistent violence in the northeast states of Borno, Adamawa, Yobe (BAY) and armed banditry and kidnapping in states such as Katsina, Kaduna, Benue, and Niger" (2023, par. 2). If the problem of insecurity

is resolved, the continent will not only be able to feed itself but also create significant economic opportunities. Dr. Akinwunmi Adesina, president of the African Development Bank, has made the poignant observation that "The future millionaires and billionaires of Africa will come from agriculture" (Adesina, 2018, par. 35). He has also estimated that the food and agriculture sector will be worth one trillion dollars by 2030. However, also worthy of note, is the projection by the United Nations, that by 2050, the world "will need to produce 60 percent more food to feed a world population of 9.3 billion. Doing that with a farming-as-usual approach would take too heavy a toll on our natural resources" (2012, par. 7). Thus, as the world population grows, so the demand for food will increase, which underlines the fact that Diaspora involvement in the sector is critical to the development of the continent.

Indeed, the collaboration of Africans in the Diaspora and those on the continent will play a key role in the development of the agricultural sector. As new ideas and knowledge come into the continent and the people acquire new skills, the sector will experience transformation and growth, as the stories of Mensah and the founders of Coco Planet show. The story of the Netherlands, for example, is smart

agriculture built on innovation. Through technological innovation, the country has become one of the biggest exporters of agricultural produce. Though it only has a population of 17.4 million, it is the 18th largest economy in the world. With a land mass of just 41,543 square kilometers, which is less than that of Niger State (76,363 square kilometers), it is astonishingly the world's second-largest agricultural exporter by value, due to technological innovation. It accomplished this by developing new technologies to produce more food per acre of land. The country exported \$111 billion worth of agricultural produce in 2017 (Whiting, 2019, par. 1).

There is equally an enormous opportunity in the food processing sector that is significant enough to radically change the face of development on the African continent. This is one of the things that we learn from the story of Oluwaseyi Abolaji, a Stanford University graduate, who left a professional football career in America for Nigeria and started a lemon-juice-manufacturing company, Wilson's Juice Company, with just ten dollars. The company now makes several varieties of lemon juice, including alcoholic ones, and has enjoyed steady growth since it was established in 2010. Wilson's Juice adds several layers of value to the lemons it

uses to make its drinks. Abolaji and his workers learnt everything about their product—extracting juice from the lemon, pasteurizing, bottling, and packaging it for distribution—through how-to-do-it-yourself videos on YouTube and studying articles downloaded from the Internet. It is equally worth noting that the company now has an established network of low-income urban and rural suppliers, ensuring a steady income for these low-income earners. Startup companies like Wilson's Juice that pull several low-income farmers and traders into its orbit can dramatically change the lives of many and transform the shape of any economy. A good example is the woman at its local market, who became his first lemon supplier. Several years after supplying lemons to him, she proudly told him that she had been able to send her son to university from the money that she made from the business. It is also noteworthy that Abolaji has an entrepreneurial ambition that reflects the aspirations of many young startup founders, as he envisions expanding his products to international markets. Taking agro-produce from raw to finished goods, as Abolaji does, also helps to reduce the unnecessary waste that small-scale farmers, such as those who grow lemons suffer due to their inability to sell their produce on time. About one-third of

Africa's agricultural produce goes to waste every year (Chomba, 2022, par. 1). One of the ways of tackling waste, according to Sarah Kiyangi Kaweesa, a Ugandan, who turns banana fiber to biodegradable hair through her company, Bio Jigsaw Limited, is to make multiple products from a single crop. Based in Uganda and the United Kingdom, Kaweesa is already laying the groundwork for supplying her biodegradable hair in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. Her products are still not affordable to low-income Ugandans, like the farmers from whom she buys the banana fiber; but she hopes to change that with technology, by automating key aspects of the production process. As we have seen with the Netherlands, with the right innovation in agriculture to maximize food production, and with thinking outside the box, like Kaweesa has done, we can effectively change the face of agriculture and its-related manufacturing in Africa. Returnees from the Diaspora, like Mensah, Abolaji, and Kaweesa, are leading the charge.

Music

African music, particularly Afrobeat, has gained sudden popularity around the globe because of the works of African musicians in Africa and the Diaspora. In this paper, we want to specifically

highlight two musicians that contributed immensely to the global resurgence of African music. Afrobeat was born in Nigeria during the late 1960s. It is a creation of the late Fela Anikulapo Kuti. This music genre is a perfect blend of West African music and European funk, jazz, and soul. When Africans in the Diaspora left Africa, they did not leave their cultures behind. One of the African musicians who has contributed to making African music globally famous, following in the footsteps of Kuti, is David Adeleke (popularly known as Davido). He was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1992 to Adedeji Adeleke, a businessman, and Vero Adeleke, a university lecturer. In 2008, he returned to the United States to study Business Administration at Oakland University in Alabama. It was at Oakland University that he started his musical career. He bought musical equipment and started making music. However, it was not until 2011, after his return to Nigeria, that he released his first album, *Omo Baba Olowo*, a fusion of Afrobeat and hip hop. Davido's album, *Timeless*, a fusion of Afrobeat, Afropop, reggae, hip hop, highlife, and dance hall, which he released in March 2023, has achieved widespread success. In Nigeria, it topped the charts; while in the United Kingdom, it debuted at number 10 on the Albums Chart and reached number 2 on the

Official Hip Hop and R&B Album Chart. And in the US, it debuted at number 37 on the Billboard 200.

The career of the Senegalese American musician, Akon, has been even more impressive. He was born Aliaune Damala Bouga Time Puru Nacka Lu Lu Lu Badara Akon Thiam on April 16, 1973, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Mor Thiam, a musician, and Kine Gueye Thiam, a dancer. He released his first album *Trouble* in 2004. Since releasing his debut album, he has achieved several feats, including being the first solo artist to hold the number one and two spots simultaneously on two different occasions on the Billboard Hot 100. He has collaborated with both the icons of pop music and rap music. In 2006, he collaborated on the pop/hip hop single "Smack That" with Eminem. In 2008, he collaborated on "Hold My Hand," an R&B song, with Michael Jackson. And in 2010, he collaborated with Dr. Dre and Snoop Dog on the hip-hop single, "Kush." Akon's music career has been so successful that he is planning to build an ultra-modern, futuristic city, called Akon City, in Senegal. He has said that his purpose in life is to rebuild Africa.

Health Initiatives

Returnees from the Diaspora have also contributed significantly to health

initiatives through funding, knowledge sharing, and the establishment of health facilities. In this regard, there is, perhaps, no story as inspiring as the story of Jackson Nahayo. In 1993, he was only six years old when civil war broke out in Burundi following the assassination of President Melchor Ndadaye. Nahayo became a refugee, moving from country to country until he ended up in Zambia, where a Canadian couple took him off the streets, adopted him, and took him to Canada for high school, after his primary school education. At the age of seventeen, he discovered that his parents and even his sister, whom he had last seen bleeding to death after being shot in his presence, were still alive. This discovery prompted a visit to Burundi, where he resolved to make lasting contributions to the country. Since then, he has established farms to support local food security, but his most significant achievement to date is arguably the health facility he built on the very site where his sister was shot. The health facility, a clinic, has gained international attention, owing both for its crucial role within the community and his story as a former child refugee and street kid, who returned from the Diaspora to help in his country's healing and reconstruction. In an interview with Wode Maya, Nahayo emphasized that his twin initiatives have

saved the lives of children, who might otherwise have died from easily treatable illnesses such as malaria. He explained that although medications were available, many children could not retain them because they were taken on empty stomachs.

Many African countries are short of quality healthcare, creating a situation where scarce resources are spent on medical tourism. The Nigerian newspaper, *The Guardian* (December 22, 2022 par. 1) states that "For many years, Nigeria's healthcare system and infrastructure have been consistently ranked one of the poorest given the size of its economy and earnings from resources." It goes on to recount that "The Federal Government recently said that Nigerians spend between \$1.2 and \$1.6 billion on medical tourism yearly but was silent about how much of that is borne by taxpayers on behalf of [the] political elite. It is estimated that in Uganda, the funds spent to treat top government officials abroad every year could build 10 hospitals" (*The Guardian*, December 22, 2022, par. 2). Diaspora returnees have stepped in to fill this gap, building specialist hospitals to take care of more complicated ailments and treatments. In this regard, the stories of the efforts of Diaspora Africans in improving healthcare

provision in Africa will not be complete without mentioning the impressive vision and work of Dr. Rodney Armstead, an African American and the president of Lucca Health in Ghana. He has brought together doctors from Ukraine, Greece, the United States, and first-generation Diasporans from Ghana and Cameroon to work with him. He is a member of Blacklvy, a company that wants to build "enterprises on services and goods across sub-Saharan Africa—Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana" (Maya, 2000, 2:50). Projects such as Dr. Armstead's will go a long way in solving the problem of medical tourism in Africa. This, in turn, will improve the continent's GDP, as money spent on such tourism would be spent locally.

Diasporan Return

Africans in the Diaspora are returning in significant numbers, bringing with them invaluable skills and financial resources that contribute meaningfully to the continent's development. Most African countries have abundant labour force, yet they are still deficient in skilled workers for highly technical jobs. Despite its enormous young population, Africa lacks enough skilled labour to embark on rapid industrialization. This is a key reason why diaspora return is so critical to the development of the continent. Diaspora return does not necessarily require

physical relocation to make an impact. For example, World Bank (2023) estimates that the sub-Saharan African Diaspora remitted approximately \$54 billion in 2023.

Challenges and Opportunities

Though the interplay of diasporic and national consciousness holds immense potential, it is not devoid of challenges. Overcoming historical traumas and bridging ideological gaps between different segments of the Diaspora are crucial steps to realizing this potential. Hence, let us consider the following factors.

1. *Historical Traumas and Identity Complexes*

A major challenge in navigating the relationship between diasporic and national consciousness lies in the historical traumas that continue to shape the African Diaspora's connection to the continent. The legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and post-Reconstruction Jim Crow in the United States have left enduring scars, creating a complex interplay of emotions that range from aspirations for reconnection to lingering resentment. For example, while Vanessa Williams, actress and former US beauty queen, openly identifies with her Africanness, the legendary boxer, Floyd Mayweather Jr.,

has said that he is not an African American. He is simply an American. Historical wounds sometimes result in identity crisis for Diasporans, where feelings of both belonging and detachment are simultaneously present, as illustrated in Mayweather's monologue. This complex emotional landscape can hinder the development of a unified and cohesive diasporic engagement with African nations.

2. *Ideological Divides and Fragmented Engagement*

The diversity within the African Diaspora can lead to ideological divides and fragmented engagement with the continent. Different segments of the Diaspora may hold varying perspectives on issues related to Africa's development as well as the most effective strategies for engagement with the continent. Political, cultural, and generational differences can contribute to divisions that dilute the impact of diasporan efforts. Overcoming these divides requires intentional efforts to foster inclusive dialogue and collaboration that transcends ideological differences.

3. *Disconnect between Diaspora and Local Realities*

Despite the genuine desire to contribute to the development of their countries of origin, Africans in the Diaspora, who were

born on the continent before migrating, often face challenges in understanding emerging realities at home due to the several years or decades they have spent outside the homeland. The differences between the lived socioeconomic and cultural experiences of these Africans in the Diaspora and what they encounter on their return to the homeland can hinder effective engagement, while misaligned expectations and uninformed initiatives may lead to well-intentioned efforts falling short of their intended impact. Bridging this gap requires open channels of communication and a willingness to listen and learn on both sides.

4. *Political and Governance Obstacles*

The often-marked differences in the political dynamics and governance structures in the Diaspora and African nations can present obstacles to effective collaboration. When those in the Diaspora come with expectations of experiencing the kind of efficient delivery of goods and services that they enjoy in the Diaspora to the homeland, but experience bureaucratic hurdles, inconsistent policies, and corruption, their frustrations with the system may impede the implementation of their initiatives. Diasporans frequently encounter challenges in navigating legal frameworks and barriers to investment

and participation that they had taken for granted when they embarked on the journey to make a difference at home. Building strong partnerships between African governments from the national to the local government level, on the one hand, and Diaspora organizations and civil society, on the other, is necessary for a seamless relationship between the two sides.

5. *Sustainability of Initiatives*

Sustaining Diaspora-led initiatives poses a challenge, as members of the Diaspora often rely on the commitment of family members and friends to do the day-to-day work involved in the implementation of projects in situations where they still live in the Diaspora. In such situations, difficulties may arise if the family members and friends choose to do things differently, inefficiently, or misappropriate the money meant for the projects. As such, institutional frameworks to ensure proper oversight and capacity building in diaspora projects are highly needed.

6. *Neocolonial Tendencies*

Diaspora engagement, while driven by a desire for positive change, can inadvertently perpetuate neocolonial tendencies. Projects initiated by Diasporans might unintentionally reinforce power dynamics and

dependencies, replicating historical patterns of external influence and control. To counter these tendencies, Diaspora-led efforts should prioritize collaboration, empowerment, and the recognition of local agencies.

7. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Cultural and linguistic barriers can hinder effective communication and collaboration between returnees and Africans on the continent in cases where returnees are not familiar with the mores of local communities. In such cases, efforts should be made to bridge the gap through language programs and cultural initiatives to foster a spirit of oneness.

Government Participation

Governments of African countries should not only come up with policies for Diaspora involvement and integration in the implementation of projects for national development but should also put in place very robust follow-up plans for implementing such projects. At the continental level, institutions such as the African Development Bank (ADB) should be strengthened, and programs like the ADB's Africa Connect Initiative—designed to strategically engage diasporan communities for high-level technical and entrepreneurial contributions—should be embraced by governments across the continent.

African governments should prioritize engaging Africans in the Diaspora by establishing not just an advisory commission but a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs that can independently create policies to meet the needs of Diasporans. Just as African governments provide incentives to attract foreign investors, they should extend similar incentives to Diasporans to facilitate investment and sustainable growth. On the flip side of this, as stakeholders, Diasporans should also work actively to influence what happens in their homelands. This can be achieved by ensuring the existence of effective governance through participation in democratic processes and by ensuring that governments in their homelands implement sound economic policies that encourage growth and development.

Suggestions for Diaspora and Homeland Engagement

The convergence of diasporic and national consciousness has the potential to drive the emergence of a new Africa characterised by progress and development. While it is incontestable that the African Diaspora would play a crucial role in this process, it is important for various African governments to know that their support is critical to achieving Diaspora-engagement initiatives. The

following are ways in which African governments can advance their support.

1. *Policy Formulation and Implementation*

African governments have a pivotal role in shaping the policy landscape to facilitate effective engagement between the diasporan community and the homeland. By formulating policies that recognize the value of Diaspora contributions, governments can create an enabling environment for collaborative initiatives. Policies related to investment, remittances, dual citizenship, and skills transfer can be used to incentivize Diaspora involvement and ensure that it aligns with national developmental agendas.

2. *Diaspora Engagement Frameworks*

Governments can establish formal frameworks for engaging the Diaspora as well as ensuring structured and sustainable collaboration. National Diaspora engagement strategies should outline clear objectives, mechanisms for dialogue, and channels for collaboration. Such frameworks can provide a roadmap for governments and diasporan communities to jointly address challenges and leverage opportunities.

3. *Creating Investment Opportunities*

African governments can play a significant role in encouraging Diaspora

investment in critical sectors for development. By offering incentives such as tax breaks, investment guarantees, and simplified bureaucratic procedures, they can attract Diaspora capital towards areas such as agriculture, real estate, infrastructure, health, education, and technology. These will not only drive economic growth but also strengthen the bond between the Diaspora and the homeland.

4. *Cultural and Educational Exchange Programmes*

African governments can promote cultural and educational exchange programmes that facilitate meaningful interaction between the Diaspora and the homeland. These programmes will not only bridge cultural divides but also foster a stronger sense of African identity in Diasporans and mutual understanding between Diasporans and the homeland. Additionally, internships and exchange initiatives for young people getting their education in the Diaspora will enable them to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the homeland while they are still in training in the Diaspora as well as give them a better sense of the skills and technical competencies that the homeland needs, so that they can seek answers for them while they are still in school in the Diaspora.

5. *Addressing Legal and Administrative Barriers*

Governments should take proactive steps to address legal and administrative barriers that hinder Diaspora engagement. This includes measures to simplify processes related to dual citizenship, property ownership, and business registration. Removing these barriers will not only encourage Diaspora involvement but also signal the government's commitment to creating an inclusive environment for collaboration between Diasporans and the homeland.

6. *Supporting Diaspora-Led Initiatives*

African governments should provide financial and logistical support to Diaspora-led initiatives that align with national developmental priorities. By offering grants, seed funding, and logistical assistance, governments can amplify the impacts of Diaspora efforts.

7. *Fostering Cultural Heritage Preservation*

African governments have a responsibility to protect and promote cultural heritage, an essential aspect of diasporic and national consciousness. By investing in heritage preservation projects, museums, and cultural festivals, governments will contribute to the preservation of their countries' cultural heritage and history.

This will foster a sense of pride and belonging in Diasporans.

8. *Promoting Inclusive Dialogue*

Governments should create platforms for inclusive dialogue that facilitate conversations between the Diaspora and local stakeholders. Roundtable discussions, conferences, and workshops could provide spaces for sharing ideas, experiences, and best practices. Such dialogues could help build mutual respect, understanding, and trust, which are vital for effective collaboration.

9. *Promoting Social and Economic Inclusion*

African governments should take steps to ensure that Diaspora engagement leads to broader social and economic inclusion; these include policies that address economic inequalities and promote equitable development, ensuring that the benefits of Diaspora involvement reach marginalized and underserved communities.

Conclusion

The involvement of African governments is indispensable in harnessing the transformative potential of diasporic and national consciousness for the emergence of a new Africa. While the African Diaspora plays a crucial role in this process, the active involvement and

support of African governments is equally essential. Africa stands on the brink of rapid economic, technological, and cultural development. Today, the world is a global village where Diasporans can transfer various knowledge and technical competencies that they have acquired in their host countries to their homelands. African governments should exploit this historic and beneficial development.

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