

CALLOUSNESS WITH THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: WHOSE PERCEPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS?

The Premise

Everywhere in Africa information is awash about the African diaspora, virtually every African country grappling with the size of its diaspora wherever, its attributes and its contribution, real or imagined to homeland development. The press in Africa has covered such stories, including diaspora conferences that have recently mushroomed in the developed North, with a few of them in the homelands. Donor agencies in the developed world – the World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the French Cooperation, to name but a few – have commissioned or supported research on ‘diaspora and development in the migrants’ countries of origin. To bring African states together, the African Union (AU) and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) have convened meetings on the subject and are busy creating desks to handle it; and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), through its Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) initiative is involved with the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) in its endeavour to convert Africa’s ‘brain drain’ to ‘brain gain’, to return to the continent where possible and to engage the African diaspora in the region’s development. Literature on the subject is too vast even to review successfully; nonetheless, it boils to several issues that beg pertinent questions, which this address tries to answer?

- What is the African diaspora?
- Do you we know their perceptions of and aspirations for their homelands?
- What obligations do they have to develop the homeland when globalisation is engendering tran- nationalism?
- How should African governments and institutions engage with and incorporate the African diaspora in homeland development?
- What is the way forward in view of palliative measures seen in diaspora conferences?

These are very broad questions, each in fact requiring a different address or paper altogether. In trying to address them, I shall draw from lessons in Latin America and

Asia where the diaspora has at long last demonstrated the independence of those regions and the fears they are already creating in the developed North.

- **What is the African diaspora?**

The term 'diaspora' has become so commonplace that many of us have become presumptuous both of its initial and current meaning and, of course, misinterpretation in various circles. Clearly, there can be no unanimity on a concept that denotes people so described on the basis of widely ranging criteria and one that African governments and institutions tend to oversimplify as 'people from a given country of origin with inalienable commitment to it'. Yes and no: yes, because normally the diaspora consists of those with ambivalent disposition: to foster their solidarity in the country of destination on the one hand, and to sustain the nostalgia of the homeland and how to improve it with time; and no because a few of them, in particular, those who fled, who were born or decided to remain in the countries of destination after education, might have severed links with their home countries .

The word 'diaspora comes from two Greek words – *diaspeirein*', which means to 'disperse' and *speirein*, which means to 'sow, scatter'. The World English Dictionary defines it as the scattering of language, culture, or people: a dispersion of a people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place. This explains why the Jewish, Chinese, Indian and Japanese diasporas have become classical examples of the concept, even when people seldom delve into the circumstances that led to them. Cohen (XXXX), well known scholar of diaspora defines it as >>>>>.

Is this really what Africa is claiming in the contemporary world? Anyone of African ancestry, now resident in North and Latin Americas as a victim initially of the slave trade and slavery? An African former student in the United States or Canada who decided to become a naturalised citizen or just a permanent resident and who broke links with the homeland? The African brain drain in the developed North who have taken advantage of the region's aging population and, therefore, the need for younger, well-trained African labour? An undocumented immigrant in the another African country or in the developed North who migrated clandestinely into the country of residence and who only maintains links with the homeland through informal means to

conceal his/her presence? Or an African woman illegally trafficked or smuggled through the Maghreb to Europe to become a sex or domestic worker or both? An African child moved in a similar fashion to engage in invisible juvenile labour? These questions relate to African immigrants who in the first place had no say in their emigration and who therefore have the latitude to not maintain of sever links with the countries of origin; highly educated, well-trained, semi-skilled and unskilled workers out there to sell their brains, skills or brawn for remuneration packages that are either commensurate or lower than their qualifications; illegal persons who might be engaging in illicit undertaking including drug-trafficking, arms dealings and contraband goods or just desirous of bare existence having emigrated from failed states or those without runaway unemployment; 'willing buyer-willing seller' or trafficked/smuggled persons in the sex industry; and children illegally utilised as labour in societies where the practice is actually criminalised.

The foregoing underlines the complexity of the concept that is now at the heart of theoretical constructs, empirical excursions, and that has become the source of hope for all African countries even when they do little to bring their diaspora on board their development policies and strategies. In developing the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and frameworks for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), most African countries either left out their diasporas or brought them into the fore for cosmetic purposes or at the insistence of donors; the 'non-performing' Dream Team' in Kenya's effort to turn around its economic fortunes in the mid-nineties is a sad experience in country where the team would ahv achieved much if their hands were freed to perform as deemed fit.

References

World English Dictionary XXX.