Mobilizing Africa's Intellectual Diaspora

Damtew Teferra

Damtew Teferra is assistant research professor and editor-in-chief of the newly launched Journal of Higher Education in Africa, at the Center for International Higher Education, Campion Hall, Boston College, 02467, USA. E-mail: teferra@bc.edu.

The effort to return African immigrant intellectuals to their homelands has been an uphill struggle—and also a disappointment. A new discourse to mobilize the intellectual diaspora communities to enhance the continent's social, economic, and intellectual progress without necessarily relocating them physically is gathering momentum.

It is encouraging that regional initiatives and institutions such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the African Union are seriously considering the African intellectual diaspora as development partners. The International Organization for Migration has also launched a new and more pragmatic program, called the Migration for Development in Africa, by drawing lessons from the organization's less successful program, Return of Qualified African Nationals.

A high-level meeting of African foreign ministers in May 2003 to discuss strategies to mobilize Africans in the diaspora is evidence of this growing interest. Even though results are mixed, national diaspora coordinating offices are also being established in many African countries. An effort to produce an exhaustive mapping database of the African intellectual diaspora and their expertise is also underway.

The Potential Value

The exact financial, intellectual, and political prowess of Africa's diaspora communities is hard to gauge as the variables are difficult to quantify and qualify. Yet, some figures indicate the communities' immense potential.

In direct monetary terms, conservative estimates indicate that in 2002, Africa earned more than U.S.$4 billion in remittances. In contrast with Latin America and the Caribbean, which are expected to remit U.S.$30 billion from the United States this year, Africans have a long way to go. Mexico alone, for example, received U.S.$13 billion from remittances in 2003—far surpassing the revenues from manufacturing and tourism and competing with petroleum as the country's top foreign currency earner. In many countries in Africa, remittances have also emerged as the single most important foreign direct investment, surpassing the dominant bilateral and multilateral sources.

The potential of intellectual capital can be estimated by analyzing the statistics of migrant knowledge entrepreneurs who are university professors, researchers, engineers, medical doctors, accountants, and high-level technicians. It is remarkable that one out of two African immigrants in the United States holds a college diploma. In a certain region in Canada, South Africans make up 20 percent of the migrant population of medical doctors.

Mobilizing the Diaspora

"How can we tap the diaspora communities to their fullest potential for nation building of their home countries?" remains an important issue of discussion and debate among migration experts. Before contemplating the possible mechanisms for mobilizing the diaspora, one needs to examine the implicit and tacit assumptions embedded in this question.

Gauging capital. What is the extent of the intellectual capital maintained by specific diaspora groups? What are the forms of capital manifestations?

Mobilizing platforms. How can intellectual communities in the diaspora—in their amorphous and unorganized form—be mobilized? What effective mechanisms need to be put in place to integrate them?

Government commitment. What is the extent of governments' interest and commitment to genuinely engage their intellectual diaspora—often considered fierce critics on social, economic, and political matters? To what extent could the intellectual diaspora cooperate with the very governments that many allege forced them into exile?

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Perception of home communities. To what extent are communities in home countries interested in and prepared to engage with the intellectual diaspora? What are the psychological, intellectual, and emotional attitudes of potential collaborators at home institutions? How is the intellectual diaspora perceived by colleagues at home? Are the dynamics of cooperation between the diaspora community and those at home well understood?

Inherent ecology. Are appropriate policies, infrastructure, and resources in place to involve the intellectual diaspora communities in national development initiatives?

Technical and logistical issues. What are the potential logistical and technical challenges that may be encountered in mobilizing and tapping the intellectual

diaspora? What strategies need to be put in place to circumvent these challenges that may undermine initiatives involving the diaspora?

Collaborative environment. Is the social, cultural, academic, and economic environment of the diaspora sufficiently compatible with the home country, so as to mount effective cooperative and collaborative engagements? Do avenues of interaction already exist between the diaspora communities and host countries? If so, what lessons can be drawn?

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Ways Forward

A multipronged approach to address the issue of massive intellectual migration from Africa seems to be at work. And yet, tapping the diaspora at its base has yet to capture the imagination of many African leaders who often complain about intellectual migration—brain drain—but lack the commitment and pragmatic policies to address it.

The collaboration and cooperation among various stakeholders to harness the intellectual diaspora are vital. Efforts to complement and integrate the commitment of the various parties should thus be exerted. International organizations, for example, are better endowed with technical and financial resources, expertise and experience in coordination and administration, and credibility and prominence. National governments provide a platform upon which initiatives are launched, and their role is deservedly paramount. In the absence of a full commitment from national governments and their officials, such initiatives may be difficult to pull off.

Various institutions, most notably scholarly and academic institutions, have to be actively and carefully engaged to implement such initiatives. By their very nature, scholarly institutions often tend to be conservative and change-resistant, which may attenuate such initiatives. Even if national governments embrace such initiatives, without the full support of these institutions—and their scholars—chances are that they may be thwarted. This is not of course a rationale to advocate that initiatives between the diaspora and institutions be channeled through government bureaucracy. In fact, it is better for local institutions to engage directly with the intellectual diaspora—either individually or in groups—without "controversial"

third-party interventions, such as governments. Of course, this is contingent upon the state of democratic rule, stability of a country, and autonomy and academic freedom of scholarly institutions.

The importance of information and communication technologies to create and maintain active virtual scholarly communities that mobilize the intellectual diaspora cannot be overemphasized. These virtual communities have shown significant growth in the last half decade or so.

Conclusion

As the issue of intellectual mobility—often known as brain drain—garners momentum, African governments and their representative organizations are attempting to promote the issue in the international arena. The involvement of national governments in this initiative is critical as they have a vested national interest and responsibility for social and economic progress. Whereas the effort is admirable and praiseworthy, it is important to note that some of the approaches need close examination and frank debate.

In some countries, such as South Africa, governments are genuinely committed and are making efforts to address problems associated with the mobility of the intellectual community. These governments and their leadership deserve recognition and praise from the international community.

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On the other hand, many repressive governments are simply "talking the talk" surrounding these issues and in fact are arguing in favor of introducing new international measures to restrict the mobility of their nationals. What is ironic is that these governments, which are in one way or another responsible for the exodus of most intellectuals, are unashamed of having mistreated their intellectual elite. A large body of literature affirms that these same regimes have yet to ease their grip on intellectual and academic institutions at home.

Lest it be assumed that what really matters in the mobilization of the diaspora is the interest and commitment of the community, I will leave readers with a recent grim remark by Professor Augustine Esogbue, a renowned NASA engineer from Nigeria, who spoke

with the incumbent president of his native country. He writes: "I have spoken to President Obasanjo and he is aware of my capabilities, but some suggestions I gave him were channeled to people who were supposed to implement the next step, but did not. . . . There are many Nigerian experts in different fields in the Diaspora, who are willing to offer their expertise. I had offered mine freely, but there are *too many red tapes; there are so many people who feel threatened by our presence"* (emphasis mine).

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Partnership for Higher Education in Africa Publications

The Partnership for Higher Education in Africa—founded in 2000 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation—is a reaffirmation of the belief that higher education can help to create a vibrant intellectual environment in Africa that nourishes social, political, and economic transformation. The Partnership has commissioned a series of case studies on higher education, three of which were published by James Currey in 2003: *Higher Education in Mozambique: A Case Study*, by Mouzinho Mário, Peter Fry, Lisbeth Levey, and Arlindo Chilundo; *Higher Education in Tanzania: A Case Study*, by Daniel Mkude, Brian Cooksey, and Lisbeth Levey; and *Makerere University in Transition 1993–2000: Opportunities and Challenges*, by Nakanyike B. Musisi and Nansozi K. Muwanga.

A fourth volume—*National Policy and a Regional Response in South African Higher Education*, by Nico Cloete, Pundy Pillay, Saleem Badat, and Teboho Moja—is in press. Additional studies are expected later this year, on Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya; as well as a second case study on Uganda, which is an examination of the entire higher education landscape in that country. The series will conclude with a monograph that sums up overarching issues and lessons learned.

All Partnership publications will be found on its website: http://www.foundation-partnership.org. A limited number of free copies of these publications are still available, with preference for requests from Africa. For further information, contact: Lisbeth Levey, Facilitator, Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, 239 Greene Street, Room 324, New York, New York 10003, USA. E-mail: lal9@nyu.edu.

Higher Education in Afghanistan
Fred M. Hayward and Sara Amiryar

Fred M. Hayward is a higher education specialist and consultant to the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and Sara Amiryar is associate director of affirmative action programs at Georgetown University and a consultant to AED. E-mail: hayward.fred@att.net and Amiryar@georgetown.edu.

In an effort to obtain a sense of public perceptions and attitudes about higher education in Afghanistan after 25 years of war, we conducted 14 focus groups in Herat, Kabul, Kapesa, and Kundoz provinces during June and July 2003, as part of a project conducted for the Ministry of Higher Education by the Academy for Educational Development funded by the International Development Agency. The focus groups included high school and college students, parents, college and university instructors, school teachers, business people, and women professionals. They were led by an experienced facilitator in local languages.

In spite of the tremendous loss of life, widespread destruction, and years of war, most respondents were remarkably positive and hopeful. People were eager to rebuild their lives, expressed a sense of urgency about reconstructing higher education and a willingness to "make sacrifices" for it. Most of them believe that education is the key to success and without it the country will continue the cycle of violence and instability**.** A student in Kundoz said: "If education is not valued, encouraged, and enhanced the country will be again the center for terrorism and drug trafficking." A teacher commented: "The need for education is greater than the need for food."

Hope was tempered, however, by concerns over the challenges facing higher education**,** in particularly those Afghans who do not value higher education and some who militantly oppose it for women. Most participants felt that education was being hindered by both cultural and religious conservatism.

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Major Problems
One of the most frequently cited problems was low quality. One respondent argued: "It is important to receive higher education—but quality education. If we compare today's education [in Afghanistan] with the world, our quality of education is substantially lower." Students were concerned that low quality would hinder their chances for employment and a better life.