

# Reversing brain drain in Africa by engaging the diaspora: contending issues

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*The impacts of brain drain in Africa are phenomenal. In the 1st five decades of the continent's political history, political and economic factors have collectively acted as push factors in the migration of young Africans from the continent. As such, reducing, reversing and mitigated the effects of emigration from Africa have been a tall order. This paper examines the net effects of brain drain on the continent against the backdrop of the global environment. Its data base was drawn from both archival materials and contemporary literature. It discovers that to effectively mobilize the abundant talents and resources need for the continent's development, Africa diaspora must be collectively engaged. This policy prescription would avail the region the much needed succor in its march towards development.*

**Keywords:** Brain drain, Africa, African diaspora, public administration, political science, University of Benin, Benin city, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Brain drain, also known as human capital flight, refers to the large-scale emigration of individuals with technical skills or knowledge. An international migrant worker or skilled emigrant is defined by the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990), as a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national. There is a growing alarm over the impacts of the above stated phenomenon on the African continent. Although data on brain drain in Africa is scarce and inconsistent, statistics show a continent losing the very people it needs most for economic, social, scientific and technological progress.

Estimates have it that between 1960 and 1989, some 127,000 highly qualified African professionals left the continent and Africa has been losing at least 20,000 professionals each year since 1990 (Tebeje 2005). Thus, development experts decry the adverse impacts of brain drain on the region. Even as at the turn of the millennium, brain drain was reported to have cost the continent over \$4 billion in the employment of an estimated 150,000 (mostly from the West) expatriate professionals annually (BBC News 2001).

Certainly, there are arguments for and against the effects of brain drain in Africa. The thrust of this paper is on the effects of brain drain on the continent. In essence, special emphasis is laid on African diaspora and their collective expertise needed for the development of the region. This will be factored into the process of governance for effective service delivery. The paper starts with a brief introduction, which is followed by theoretical perspectives. The major issues are analyzed subsequently, while the concluding note is on how to move the continent forward.

## Theoretical perspectives

This paper adopts the trans-nationalist approach. The import of this school lies in the interconnectivity between people and the receding economic and social significance of boundaries among nation states. This perspective argues that while it is wrong to assume that states are the key actors in international relations, other key actors like International Organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations which provide policy initiative and implementation are composite stakeholders (Joerges, Inger-Johanne & Gunther 2004). Also, this perspective is commonly seen as an alternative to power politics or idealism (Adams & Page 2005). According to Nardon & David (1992), idealism has provided a counter point to realism. Thus, the long tradition of idealism in inter-state relations holds that morality can form the basis for international relations. Given that human nature is not necessarily evil; peaceful and cooperative relations amongst states are possible. In essence, states can operate as a community rather than merely autonomous self-interested agents.

However, with the benefits of globalization flowing ordinarily to the developed world and as we enter the new age of mobility, people will move across borders in ever-greater numbers. African professional tend to migrate to Europe and North America. Many are dissuaded from returning home by the economic and political crises that have ravaged the continent over the last few decades. This human migration hits the continent particularly hard as a high percentage of educated Africans live abroad.

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The sticky point has been whether brain drain has positive or negative impacts on Africa. Migration studies conducted on the continent to assess the impacts of intellectual migration have produced quite contradictory results. There are two schools of thought in this respect. The divergent paradigm examines the brain drain from the perspective of the highly detrimental effects arising from the loss of the brightest minds in the continent, thus weakening the capacity for development. The belief here is that the flight of health workers, scientists, and teachers hinders the continent's development. According to Hanson (2008:1), 'it will be impossible to achieve an Africans renaissance without the contributions of the talented Africans residing outside Africa'. This is because the continent needs to harness the full potentials of its citizens regardless of geographical boundaries.

Contrarily, the convergence school of thought argues that the problem of brain drain is over-dramatized and is less critical than it is usually portrayed (Adepoju 2003). This perspective tends to emphasize the benefits of migration for both Africa and the receiving countries. In line with the aforesaid, recent research in migration of skilled workers tended to conclude that brain drain might, through remittances and the return of talented workers, be good for Africa. In a paper presented in March 2008 by economists William Easterly and Yaw Nyarko, it was stated that remittances to Africa were largely undercounted, but that each African country received a substantial average of its foreign aid in the process (cited Hanson 2008:14). In some cases, talented Africans are even returning to their home countries to work or start businesses, thus triggering a phenomenon called brain circulation – a situation where entrepreneurs start new companies but maintain links with their adopted countries.

### **Brain drain and Africa**

Brain drain is common amongst developing countries, especially those in Africa. The share of Africans with college degrees that live outside the continent is certainly high. This has financial, institutional, and societal costs for the region, as young Africans who left for education purposes or opportunities overseas do not feel obliged to return home at the end of their studies or sojourn. There is a general belief that a brain drain tends to pull the best and the brightest from the continent; the very people most equipped to help improve living conditions in Africa. According to Chacha (2007), 'about 60,000 middle and high-skilled Africans emigrated from the continent between 1986 and 1990'. Corroborating the above, Fadayomi (2009) states that based on an Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the International Organization Migration (IOM) reports (2005), no fewer than 20,000 skilled Africans have been emigrating from the continent since 1990. According to him, an estimated 27,000 skilled Africans left the region for the more developed countries between 1960 and 1975, with the figure increasing to 40,000 between 1975 and 1985 (an increase of 60 percent within a decade).

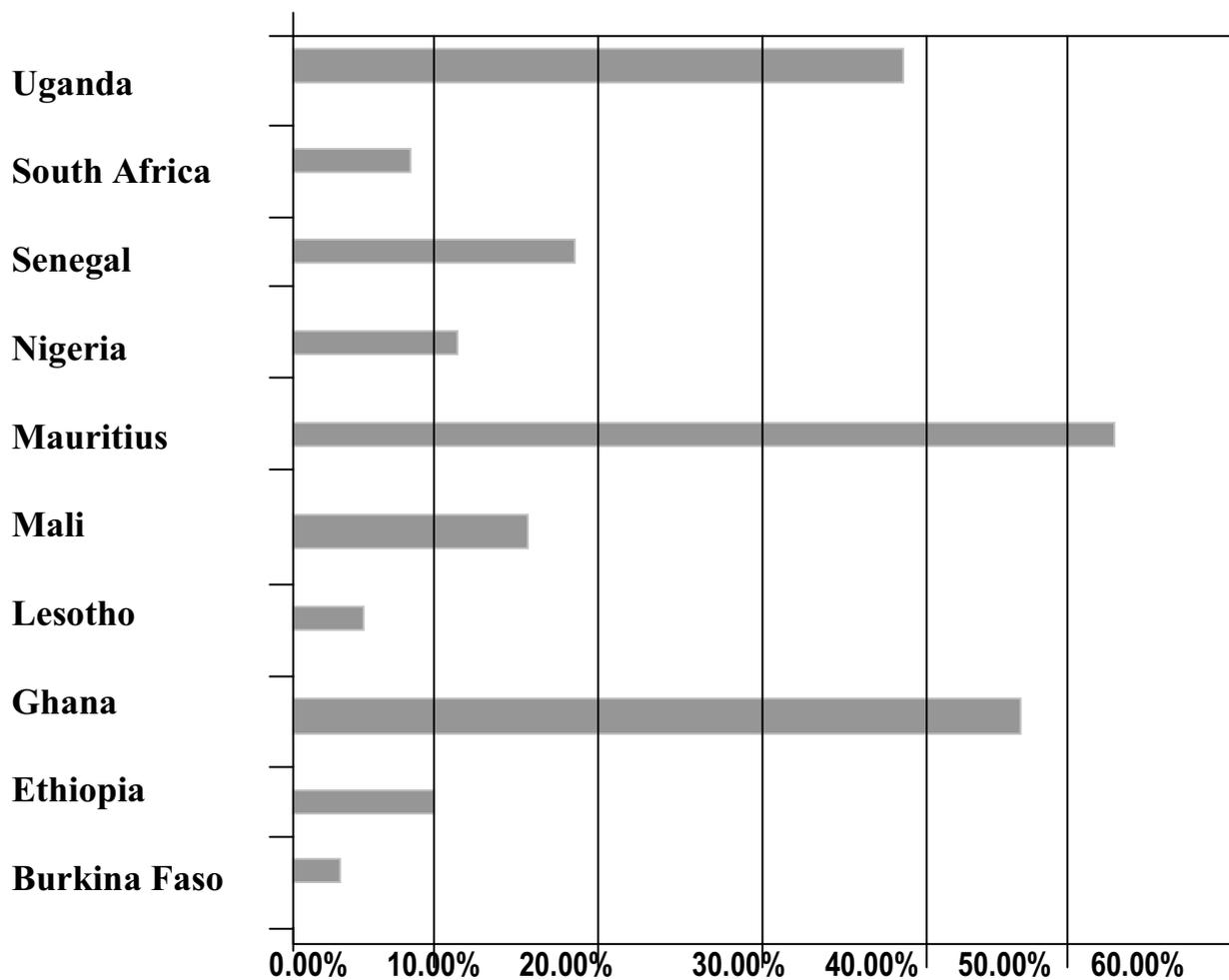
The brain drain phenomenon which involves the increasing mobility of educated and skilled Africans to more developed countries is contributing to the erosion of public and private sector service delivery systems of most African countries. This continuous outflow of skilled labour contributes to a widening gap in science and technology between Africa and other continents. According to Tebeje (2005), 'Africa's share of global scientific output has fallen from 0.5 percent in the mid-1980s to 0.3 percent in the mid-1990s'. This flight of professionals from the continent endangers its economic and political systems. IOM (2005) notes that the trend is depriving some African countries of a significant share of their skilled human resources, which they have often trained at considerable cost. For instance, in Nigeria it costs the Federal Government about two thousand one hundred and eighty-eight dollars (\$2,188) per session to successfully train a medical doctor in a federal university in terms of the unit cost per medical student and the subvention to cushion the tuition fees (Vanguard 2007).

Consequently, the departure of health professionals has eroded the ability of medical and social services in many African countries to deliver even basic health and social needs. More so, the annual emigration of about 20,000 medical personnel (doctors and nurses) from Africa is aggravating an already precarious public health situation on the continent. As aptly captured by the United Nations (2005) in Table 1, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in 2003 stated that 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa were losing more than 15 percent of their skilled workers to Europe and America.

**Table I** Number of doctors trained in sub-Saharan Africa working in oecd countries and selected health indicators

Source Country	Population (thousands) <sup>a</sup>	Total number of doctors in home country <sup>b</sup>	Number of doctors working in 8 OECD recipient countries <sup>b</sup>	Percentage of home country workforce <sup>b</sup>	Selected health indicator in home country		
					Under-five mortality rate <sup>c</sup>	Life expectancy of birth <sup>b</sup>	Adult HIV (percentage of adults ages 15 – 49 <sup>c</sup> )
Angola	13,841	881	168	19	245	40.7	3.9
Cameroon	14,856	3,124	109	3	163	45.8	6.9
Ethiopia	68,525	1,936	335	17	172	47.6	4.4
Ghana	19,867	3,240	926	29	102	56.7	3.1
Mozambique	17,911	514	22	4	182	41.9	12.2
Nigeria	117,608	34,923	4,261	12	200	43.3	5.4
South Africa	45,610	32,973	12,136	37	74	49.0	21.5
Uganda	24,309	1,918	316	16	139	46.8	4.1
United Republic of Tanzania	34,763	822	46	6	164	46.0	8.8
Zimbabwe	12,595	2,086	237	11	117	37.2	24.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>369,885</b>	<b>82,417</b>	<b>18,556</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>--</b>	<b>--</b>

Source: United Nations (2005)

**Figure 1** Highly-Educated Emigration to OECD Countries, 2000 (Percent of highly-educated in source country)  
Source: Docaller & Marfouk (2004)

By mid-2000, there were more Malawian medical doctors practising in the mid-Eastland city of Manchester than in the whole of Malawi, and only 50 out of the 600 doctors trained in Zambia since independence are still practising in that country (GCIM 2005). In 1999, Ghana certified 320 new nursing personnel who graduated from their training schools, and lost the same number to emigration. The following year, the country lost twice as many and official records indicate that more than half of Ghana's nursing positions are unfilled (UNFPA 2006).

The World Bank study conducted in 2004 showed that the flight of highly-educated people from sub-Saharan Africa has been very severe. Table 2 shows that in Mauritius, 57 percent of college educated natives reside in industrialized countries, Ghana 48 percent, Uganda 37 percent, Senegal 18 percent and Mali 15 percent. In South Africa, Lesotho, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Ethiopia, the rate is about 10 percent.

The outflow situation of doctors and nurses in some African countries is alarming, as 69 percent of doctors trained in Ghana from 1995-2002 emigrated from the country (Bump 2006), while South Africa lost 13 percent of its skilled manpower annually during the 1990s (Bhorat, Jean-Baptiste & Cecil 2002). Uganda is said to have lost more than 50 percent of its professional and technical workers during the reign of President Idi Amin between 1971 and 1979 (Russell, Karen & William 1990). The exodus of Nigerian academics and students is attributable to the decline in educational standards in Nigerian universities. Thus, the country witnessed an outflow of highly-skilled professionals to the oil-rich countries in the Middle-East when the country's oil fortunes nose-dived with the fall of crude-oil prices in early 1980s (Black, Lynday & Claire 2004). In a nutshell, a brain drain makes it difficult to create a middle class consisting of doctors, engineers, administrators, and other professionals.

### **Intervening variables that tend to explain emigration**

Analyses of skilled migration from sub-Saharan Africa have been rooted in economic rationality, which corroborated by Todaro's (2009) work on rural-urban migration in which the decision or urge to migration to urban areas is informed by push-pull factors, especially wage differentials. However, Portes and Rumbaut (1990) have criticized the push-pull model on the premise that it shows an inability to explain why similar migration outflows do not arise from equally poor countries, and argued that major labour flows often emanate from countries at intermediate levels of development rather than the poorest countries, as implied by the push-pull model. They argue further that migration outflows of skilled personnel could be explained from geo-political influence, and not necessarily individualist rationality of migrants.

Baldwin (2003) states that by focusing on the individual, the push-pull model had the potential of devaluing the roles of institutions, like the State and supra-national institutions in generating and sustaining international migration flows. Focusing on the individual economic rationality has the tendency to exclude variations in national policy, especially the influence of states which are actors in the structure and operations of the global economy. For instance, the Philippines deliberately promote overseas employment, while countries like Canada, United Kingdom and the United States are actively seeking to admit skilled health workers from overseas.

States put policy in place to enable their citizens to take advantage of the remuneration and employment opportunities. Nurses trained in the Philippines earn about 200 dollars monthly in their own country, but could earn up to 4,000 dollars monthly in the United States. States could also employ differential tax regimes to promote migration (Baldwin-Edward, 2006). In Canada, taxation regimes have been acknowledged as a contributory factor in boosting the emigration of physicians to the United States. Barret (2001) reports that between 1995 and 1996, the average net income of US physicians was 269,000 dollars compared to 119,000 for Canadian physicians.

Programmes of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) pursued in the 1980s by most African states had directly impact on the availability of employment opportunities within these source countries which encouraged emigration. Reduction in public workforce, a corollary to SAP, also raised the tempo of emigration of skilled manpower in Nigeria, like in other African countries implementing the Structural Adjustment Programme set out by the Bretton Woods institutions.

The basic brain drain phenomenon has been driven also by social networks linking migrants in destination countries and potential migrants in source localities. Mattes & Richard (2000) note that the networks of social ties are drawn upon by newly arriving migrants, reducing the costs and risks associated with migration, which implies that once migration pathways are established, they will stimulate further migration. The influence of overseas nurse associations and other support networks in sending countries, like Nigeria, South Africa, Jamaica and Guyana are important elements in networks that foster further migration. The remarkable salary differentials between skilled professionals in Europe and America in comparison with Africa spur the desire of many skilled professionals to emigrate. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2003) reports that a skilled nurse earns about 11,000 dollars annually in South Africa's public service, 22,000 dollars in the United Kingdom, 35,000 dollars in Saudi Arabia, and over 40,000 dollars in the United States.

Other drivers of skilled migration include social pressures owing to large families, the availability of advanced facilities and professional contacts developed when studying abroad. The issue of violence as catalyst for emigration was highlighted by Mattes and Richard (2000), as Myburgh (2004) provided survey evidence that 50% of South Africans who formally indicate an intention to emigrate in exit polls recorded the reason of violent crime. Chacha (2007:1-2) 'cites state failure and poor state leadership as determinants in skilled emigration in sub-Saharan Africa'. He explains further:

the brain drain in Africa is as a result of the greed and Maladministration of Africa leaders. Africa has enough to sustain all Africans; that we actually don't have need to go Abroad ... The professionals' impulse to depart their native countries is very much that of man's primitive instinct for security: physical security, economic security and the assurance that one can age in a safe environment where food security and 'social security' are not luxuries ... Africans. Leaving Africa are not happy to be leaving. The brain drain is a result of corrupted governments leading African nations ... African governments don't care much about their own professional citizens as they pay big salaries to foreign expatriates for the same job their citizens can do.

### **Impact of skilled emigration on countries of origin and destination**

In 2003, Commonwealth countries' health ministers raised an alarm over the increased migration of skilled personnel that is now undermining health system delivery in the developing countries, and adopted a position thus:

in recent years, international migration, fuelled by many factors, has grown to such proportions that it is affecting the sustainability of health systems in some countries. While both developed and developing countries are experiencing the negative impact of loss of skills, such loss is more keenly felt in developing countries, which are finding it increasingly difficult to compete for skilled human resources in the existing global market (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2003:1 cited in Baldwin 2006).

This perspective held by developing countries has been challenged by liberal capitalist thinking, which has pushed the discussion from "brain drain" to "brain circulation" or "brain overflow". From this new perspective, it is argued that the world economy gains from a more efficient allocation of human resources, and that it was better to have "brain drain" than "brains in drain" (IOM 2005).

This is further supported by five arguments:

- Firstly, in a more networked global economy with increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the belief in a straight forward brain drain is now getting out-dated in such countries as India (Khadria 2002).
- Secondly, there is a strong belief that migration of highly-skilled personnel is beneficial to both countries of origin and destination because of the emergence of transnational communities that link the diaspora to the home communities, thus stimulating investment and entrepreneurship (Saxenian 2002).
- Thirdly, migration is often more temporary than in the past, like forced slave trade, enabling countries to attract migrant return, especially in the case of India, providing a new leverage for investment (Bach 2003).
- Fourthly, skilled emigrants from developing countries are expressing their individual's freedom of movement and the right to market one's talent in the world market (IOM 2005).
- Fifthly, regardless of their stage of development, countries with an unfavourable political, economic and human rights environment tend to experience outflows of skilled personnel or professionals or scientists, academics and high-level researchers as they cherish intellectual freedom, which the developed economies provide (Gubert 2005).

However, African nations are seriously worried about the sustained loss of their best talents and professionals to rich countries which implement selective immigration policies for skilled workers, especially in the wake of globalization with fast evolving technological change, increase in knowledge – and skill – based service industries, and market competition. The implications of skilled emigration or brain drain on countries of origin, in the developing world, have been found to include the following.

Firstly, long-term emigration of skilled personnel amounted to a loss of the huge amounts of public funds directly or indirectly invested in training such professionals. For instance, South Africa claims to have spent 1 billion US Dollars on the education of health workers who emigrated, which is about 30 percent of all development aid received by the country between 1994 and 2000 (Hass 2005). In Ghana and Zimbabwe, 70 percent of all doctors leave within a few years of graduating from medical college (*Financial Times* 2004). Nigerian professionals in the US alone were estimated at about 300,000 (Chacha 2007). The full picture of the financial losses in training these professionals cannot easily be seen, but the gains to the receiving countries have been put in perspective. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that for each developing country, professionals aged between 25 and 35 years, 184,000 US Dollars in training cost is saved by developed countries. Taking into consideration that the 27 members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have a workforce of approximately 3 million professionals educated in developing countries, this could result in a huge 552 billion US Dollars savings for the OECD (Myburgh 2004).

Secondly, skill emigration or brain drain depletes the tax revenues of countries of origin, but boosts that of the countries of destination. By implication, developed countries aggravate global inequality through their selective immigration policies aimed at draining scarce and expensively-trained human resources from developing nations. For instance, the one million Indians living in the US accounted for 0.1 percent of India's population but earned the equivalent of 10% of India's national income. In India, their income would have been less, but they would still have been in the bracket of the highest tax payers (IOM 2005).

Thirdly, brain drain exacerbates poor workforce planning, by encouraging shortages in critical areas of human resources in the economy. The shortages throw up challenges in different sectors, creating imbalances in the deployment of professionals in countries of origin for skill emigration (Zuru 2002).

Fourthly, the countries of origin of brain drain could benefit indirectly from remittance sent home by these emigrated professionals to their siblings and other dependants at home. Despite the difficulty in tracking the scale of remittances through informal channels, some of the remittances have contributed to the national income of some major countries like India (11.5 billion US Dollars), Mexico (6.5 billion US Dollars) and Egypt (3.5 billion US Dollars), among others (IOM 2005).

For the destination countries, especially the developed nations, the brain gain boosts their abilities to meet the staff requirements and address staff shortages. For instance, the relative ease with which the United Kingdom government achieved its 2004 target to increase the nurse workforce by 20,000 would probably not have been achievable without the sustained increase in overseas nurses employed in the country (Baldwin 2006). The destination countries save costs that would have been sunk into training skill manpower or professionals needed in key sectors of their economy, with the availability of already trained personnel who arrive in such countries for employment. Besides, the destination countries boost their tax revenues from the emigrants with skills, and also gains by ensuring that overseas workers are often employed in posts that could be hard to fill because of geographical locations, especially in the rural areas of the destination countries.

### **Engaging the African diaspora**

Many Africans living abroad are reluctant to return home due to the economic and political crises that have engulfed the continent since the epochal year of 1960. Failing economies, political instability manifested in high unemployment, armed conflicts and lack of adequate social services such as health and education, are some of these factors. Throughout the said period, the region has lost its best and brightest. Analysts debate the semantics of the issue and have focused almost entirely on remittances, overlooking the implications of a brain drain on human resources, motivational capacity, and health-social services.

In the past, efforts to stem Africa's brain drain by focusing on repatriation strategies have yielded few results. Studies also showed that repatriation will not work so long as African states fail to address the pull and push factors that influence emigration. Thus, the relationship between countries in Africa and the African diaspora remain crucial to finding the right solutions.

When the African Union declared the African diaspora the 'sixth region' of the continent in 2003, another chapter was opened to usher in diaspora involvement in capacity building on the continent; not only in terms of kinship affinity but because they wanted to help those in need (Dallas 2005). Through church missions, adopt-a-child programmes or individual donations to families linked to them, the African diaspora has provided what could be considered remittances. Also, this category has created business in African countries or invested in African exchanges.

The African diaspora could help reverse brain drain on the continent through a programme called 'virtual participation'. This involves diaspora participation in nation-building without physical relocation. According to Tebeje (2005:52), 'It ... shows promise as a means to engage the African diaspora in development effort'. The challenge here is how to mobilize this capacity on a continent where government-diaspora relations are peripheral. Thus, African leaders need to rise to the occasion as this could encourage emerging diaspora efforts to assume a more active role in the region's development. It could also facilitate an effective and sustained diaspora commitment to Africa's development efforts as it has tremendous potential to channel the untapped intellectual and material inputs from Africans living overseas.

Furthermore, with a growing awareness amongst the African diaspora of its moral, intellectual, and development efforts, Africa must develop a collective strategy to engage them. In the past, there was no meaningful attempt to do the above and no institutional connections existed. As such, African diaspora groups generally relied on ad-hoc, disparate and small-scale programmes to assist in the development of the continent. The growing need for African expatriates to become active in the region's development efforts couple by the willingness by Africa to accept and accommodate them as veritable stakeholders is a positive step towards addressing the issues of brain drain and capacity building in Africa.

## Conclusion

The focus of this paper was on brain drain and its impacts on African development. The analytical variables of the paper were premised on the asymmetrical perspectives of the divergent and convergent schools of thoughts. While acknowledging the importance of these approaches, we believe that a coordinated approach to the issues under discourse would be proper to the continent's developmental challenges. Also, there is a serious need to enhance diaspora involvement in capacity building in Africa. To achieve this, the paper calls on African leaders to create the enabling environment meant to guarantee the necessary inputs from Africans living abroad. This, in effect, could reduce and possibly reverse the brain drain phenomenon in the continent.

Also, since the present socio-economic conditions on the continent serve as a springboard for would-be emigrants to flee the region, it is our firm belief that the provision of social amenities like constant electricity, good healthcare services, quality education, efficient transport systems, etc, by government, would go a long way to reverse the current trend. After all, these facilities are a basic minimum in the countries of their sojourn.

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