



AFRICA'S HOME-GROWN SOLUTION

After civil wars, famines and AIDS, Africa now battles the scourge of a brain drain to the West.

ARGUMENTS, A15

STOPPING THE BRAIN DRAIN FROM AFRICA

Their loss, our gain

Many of Africa's best-educated people have left the continent to live in the West while other Africans suffer back home

BY AINALEM TEBEJE
AND CLYDE SANGER

Africa is losing its human capital at such an alarming rate that some observers say the continent is dying "a slow death from brain drain." Others have warned that, by doing nothing to stop or reverse the brain drain, Africa is "committing suicide." In more measured language, the United Nations has called the brain drain "the most serious threat to the economic development of sub-Saharan Africa." It has, in fact, reached such a level of crisis that it is being compared to the effect of famines, civil wars and even AIDS.

According to the International Organization for Migration, a UN agency, Africa has already lost one-third of its human capital. Of the estimated 3.6 million Africans in the diaspora, spread all over the world, the IOM believes that more than 300,000 are highly qualified professionals. More than 30,000 of these professionals have PhDs. For more than a decade now, Africa has been losing about 20,000 skilled professionals every year. As a result, there are more African scientists and engineers in the United States than there are in Africa.

For more than three decades, academics have been engaged in a futile debate about whether the emigration of highly skilled professionals out of Africa is good or bad for the continent. On the one hand, the "brain drain" school maintained that Africa was losing the very people it needs to fight poverty, under-development and disease. The other school, in the meantime, argued that this exodus was simply "an overflow of excess skill" that the African economy could not absorb.

It was thus better, they said, for African scientists, engineers, doctors, professors, entrepreneurs and senior managers to be out of the continent. Such people would otherwise be unemployed, underemployed, under-utilized and perhaps persecuted in Africa. Outside, they can work at prestigious hospitals, universities, laboratories, institutions and companies in the West, contribute to global scientific and technological progress, earn a decent income and send remittances to Africa. This way, they will not only support their poor families back home, but also contribute to the gross domestic product of their countries through remittances that come in foreign currency, of which Africa is permanently short.

Certainly, Africans in the diaspora are major contributors to Africa's economy. For example, 4.1 per cent of Nigeria's GDP comes from remittances, while Eritrea gets some 16.7 per cent of its GDP from this source. Remittances are particularly important since they go straight into the pockets of individuals and families who use the money for basic necessities.

However, the myth created around remittances has for long masked the real cost of brain drain to Africa. Africa employs 150,000 expatriate professionals at a cost of \$4 billion U.S. a year to replace the departing



SAYYID AZIM, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FATAL LOSS: The exodus of highly skilled professionals from Africa and their more costly replacement by foreigners threatens the very existence of health-care systems, social services and key industries in many African countries.

African professionals. In other words, for every two African professionals who are outside, Africa employs one expatriate at a much higher salary. Worse, Africa gets little return from its investment in higher education since the graduates who emigrate give little or nothing back to their societies. For example, in Kenya it costs nearly \$40,000 U.S. to train a doctor and \$10,000 to \$15,000 to educate a university student for four years. This has led some to say that Africa's budget for higher education is actually a large subsidy to the education budget of Western governments that receive these graduates.

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Given its remarkable survival skills, Africa might show its ability, once more, to deal with yet another crisis. During the last two decades, African governments and institutions have launched several programs and offered incentives to slow down or even reverse Africa's brain drain. In both cases, the results were disappointing. Few returned, and many continued to leave.

It cannot, therefore, be left to those in Africa to deal with this problem by themselves. This belief was the spur for a group of Ethiopian professionals who immigrated to Canada a decade or more ago to plan what they have come to call "virtual participation" in their land of birth. We define virtual participation as participation in nation building without physical relocation.

The Association for Higher Education and Development (AHEAD), based in Ottawa, has for several years supported medical students back in Ethiopia with scholarships and sent medical books to university libraries. Recently, with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), its members conducted a study among the wider Ethiopian diaspora with focus groups in three Canadian cities, to learn their attitudes about engagement for development purposes in their homeland. AHEAD also organized focus groups that gathered in three Ethiopian cities, asking about the usefulness of this involvement. We also gathered data about the brain drain from other African countries.

The findings were more shocking than we had expected. Africa's institutions have become increasingly incapable of responding to Africa's economic, health, social and political challenges, since its professionals with track-record experience and a corporate memory are replaced by fresh graduates with limited expertise or by expatriates who know little about the societies to which they come.

In particular, Africa's health and social services are crumbling as skilled professionals leave in droves. The Kenyan Medical Association is warning that the brain drain is threatening the very existence of the country's health services. One-third of Ethiopia's medical doctors have already left the country. Zambia had 1,600 doctors not too long ago; today only 400 remain. In the 1980s, Ghana lost 60 per cent of its graduating doctors.

The story is no better in other spheres. Zimbabwe's respected mining industry has lost one-third of its skilled manpower. South Africa, which has benefited from the arrival

of professionals from other parts of Africa, is losing many of its own — and the rate of exodus may well increase. Ms. Lala Ben Baraka, deputy executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa and an IDRC governor, has even said, "Africa will be empty of brains in 25 years."

In September, AHEAD presented its findings in a study entitled "Semantics Aside: the role of the African Diaspora in Africa's capacity building," with Ethiopia as the case study. The study allows the diaspora voice to be heard for the first time. Its thesis is that the international community has wasted valuable time debating about the brain drain, and set the diaspora on the sidelines for far too long. The study argues that the African diaspora must be recognized as a key stakeholder and be engaged in the dialogue and efforts regarding Africa's brain drain. Further, the African diaspora has not only moral responsibility to pay back the people who gave them education, but has tremendous potential to become a major player in Africa's capacity-building efforts.

For its part, the African diaspora seems to be willing, after almost 20 years of indifference, to engage in this dialogue. In Canada and the United States, groups from Africa have started to mobilize their communities in an effort to raise awareness, co-ordinate efforts and channel resources towards development efforts in Africa.

The next step for AHEAD is to organize a stakeholders' round-table with representatives from African embassies, the IOM and civil society, to discuss African capacity building and practical moves in "virtual participation."

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