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NIGERIA'S APPROACH TO DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT AND BRAIN DRAIN MITIGATION

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine Nigeria's approach in engaging its diaspora as part of its response to the challenge of brain drain within the migration and development paradigm. Brain drain, characterised by the large-scale migration of highly skilled professionals from one country to another, has long been seen as undermining Nigeria's human capital, particularly in health, education, and research. Drawing on the push-pull theory, human capital theory, and contemporary concepts of brain circulation and brain gain, the study situates Nigeria's brain drain within the broader global and African migration context. The literature indicates that brain drain is driven by economic uncertainty, poor governance, poor working conditions, insecurity, and a lack of career prospects, whereas the demand for human resources and robust welfare systems in destination countries are strong pull factors for brain drain. On the other hand, Nigeria's diaspora is an important development partner, remitting more than $20 billion annually. The paper discusses Nigeria's developing infrastructure for diaspora engagement, such as the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, migration policies, labor policies, diaspora bonds, as well as sectoral programs in health, education, and innovation. However, these programs face limitations in their effectiveness in curbing brain drain due to factors such as institutional fragmentation, lack of data, policy incoherence, infrastructure deficit, and economic volatility. According to the study, diaspora engagement is not enough in curbing brain drain in Nigeria unless coupled with domestic retention strategies and governance reforms. For example, a new national talent strategy for Nigeria could encompass aspects such as institutional coordination, diaspora digital platforms, productive investment mechanisms, and circular migration. The conclusion argues that Nigeria could use the brain drain as a development chance by incorporating the engagement with the diaspora into a comprehensive national development strategy instead of considering it a separate action.

Keywords: *Diaspora Engagement, Brain Drain, Mitigation**,** Educated, Skilled.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research on movement, development strategies, and the administration of national human capital comprises the ideas of brain drain and diaspora engagement. The emigration of educated and skilled people from their home countries is known as brain drain, or human capital flight. The term brain drain was introduced by Britain in the 1950s when scientists and academics moved to the U.S. The term has been widely adopted to study the professional exodus from developing countries, particularly Africa (Gaillard, Gaillard, & Krishna, 2015). This phenomenon is explained by push-pull forces, an absence of professional or economic opportunities in the origin country, and an abundance of opportunities in the destination country (Yarhere et al. 2023). On the contrary, diaspora involvement is the systematic engagement of home governments with their diaspora communities with the objective of maximizing their contributions to national development through financial remittances, knowledge and investment transfer, political involvement, and the creation of social capital (Gaillard, Gaillard, & Krishna, 2015).

Improved development in many low-and middle-income countries has come from the contributions of the diaspora as well as the remittances. In 2024, developing countries received 685 billion dollars in remittances, which is greater than the amount of official international aid received by developing countries. This shows the significance of financial remittances from the diaspora. It must be noted, however, that remittances are not only financial in nature. Diaspora communities also engage in initiatives for the transfer of knowledge and skills, combining the skills of the diaspora with the developmental needs of the recipient countries. As a result of the importance of the diaspora for development, countries have started to design specific policies to engage them. The policies include mechanisms like matched funding, diaspora bonds, strategic partnerships, and structured return or virtual financing. South Asian, Middle Eastern and African countries have started to use the institutional method of diaspora engagement for development.

The phenomenon of migration (including brain drain) in Africa has very deep and historical roots. By the turn of the 21st century, millions of highly trained professionals, particularly health care workers, engineers, academics and technicians from Africa had migrated to North America, Europe and the so-called 'developed' countries. As an example, in addition to the large number of African-born professionals in Europe and North America, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw approximately 65,000 African-born doctors and 70,000 African-born nurses working in developed countries. The same phenomenon continued in subsequent decades.

Numerous factors can be identified when analyzing the causes of brain drain from Africa, including structural inequities, lack of opportunities locally, political instability, and challenges on the institutional level. ertainly, the Nigeria case provides the most accurate example of the impact of the diaspora on the economy of Africa; with the case of 2023, for example, the total remittances from Nigeria diaspora was 20 billion USD, a minor decline as opposed to 21 billion USD registered in 2022, yet the case also illustrated the robust economic advantage of the diaspora. All over Africa, remittance income from Nigerians remains pivotal. According to the report from the United Nations, for the year 2024, Nigeria was noted to have registered a remittance income of 20.98 billion USD, which was a decline as opposed to the registered income in 2023, yet it was a clear demonstration of the formidability of the remittance income all over Africa. Past studies have indicated the remittances to Nigeria`s diaspora, to be in excess of 5% of the GDP of Nigeria, which its own merits to the statistics. The statistics also illustrate the high level of dependence of the households in Nigeria, which in return, illustrated the even a more high level of dependence for the households in Africa as a whole. The phenomenon of skilled emigration, seems to be yet another of the multitude of challenges facing the developmental plight of Nigeria; the skilled flight problem exemplified in the case of Nigeria goes to show the plight of the less developed nations. While the global average is one physician for every 300 people, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Nigeria has one physician for every 5,000 – 6,000 patients (Yarhere et al., 2023). Between 2021 and 2022 alone, over 13,600 healthcare workers from Nigeria received employment-based visas for the United Kingdom. Furthermore, 79.5 percent of medical interns in Nigeria and 70.8 percent of resident doctors are planning to emigrate, demonstrating an ongoing trend of emigration of vital medical personnel (Yarhere et al., 2023). Between 2017 and 2022, over 57,000 nurses from Nigeria have left the country, emigration that furthers the scarcity of the country's medical personnel (Haruna, Abdullahi, Hamina, Teryila, Ali, Muna, & Muhammad, 2025)

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SKILLED MIGRATION IN NIGERIA

Colonial Legacy and Educational Migration

Nationalized skilled migration, starting in the colonial period in the 1940s - 1960s, is based on the entrenchment of Western learning as the mode of socioeconomic advancement in British Nigeria. In 1940, less than 10 secondary schools in Nigeria were providing high-level instruction, and there was no system of higher education. This situation forced the elitist stratifications in colonial Nigeria to go outside the country for their education (Nwoye, 2023). Although Yaba Higher College was established in 1934, it was the first establishment of higher education on the continent it was and still remains capable of providing only qualifications less than the first degree, thus requiring Nigerians to study abroad (Bashorun, 2022). The establishment of University College Ibadan in 1948, which was a constituent college of the University of London, increased the training opportunities for Nigerians (Nwoye, 2023). However, the situation of offering education beyond the Master's degree in Nigeria still subsisted, which necessitated migration for education.

During the years 1945 to 1960, as a result of the first wave of international educational migration, Nigerian students began travelling to the United Kingdom via colonial scholarships, missionary assistance, and civil service training programs (Bashorun, 2022). By the end of the 1950s, there were around 15,000 graduates in Nigeria, marking the beginning of the elite base in Nigeria's skilled manpower production (Nwoye, 2023). Concurrently, numerous Nigerians were enrolled each year in British universities, particularly in medicine, law, engineering, and education. This created the first transnational professional contacts for Nigerian elites to the British labor market (Bashorun, 2022). This international educational migration was designed as part of the professional development framework that colonial governance put in place, and the reason was not an economic crisis.

Nigerian colonial educational migration was impacted by Nigeria's regional imbalances, deriving from the colonial period's educational migration patterns. By 1960, the Southern region had over 70% of Nigeria's secondary schools, whereas the North lacked Western education due to prevailing cultural elements and colonial administrative frameworks (Nwoye, 2023). In the course of this educational migration from Nigeria during the colonial period, the Southern elites were dominant. At the moment of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's human capital formation was shaped by external factors as the training, certification processes, and the professional movement of her elites involved foreign institutions and organizations. The colonial educational system in Nigeria (Bashorun, 2022; Nwoye, 2023) provided the framework for Nigeria's post-independence skilled migration by embedding foreign education as a 'must' for the country's elites and, thus, making international migration a necessity for the country's human capital development.

Post-Independence Professional Migration

Since it attained independence in 1960, Nigeria has focused on building the country by investing human resources through building skills in different areas by way of training and education. Nwozor 2013 documents that from 1960 to 1975, there was a growing trend among Nigerians to study abroad, more in particular to government offered scholarships and trainings that were designed to boost Nigeria's technical and administrative manpower. Government sponsored trainings and professional development abroad, in the period 1960 to 1980, recorded more than 400 percent increase in the number of Nigerians in the UK, USA, and Canada (Nwozor, 2013). Over the years, these students, in what has become a trend, have decided to settle in these countries due to better pay, better work conditions, and better infrastructure.

Consequently, by the 1970s and early 1980s, Nigeria's professional emigration was a part of the country's development plan..Due to differential pay and the absence of local research and career development opportunities, the local workforce of physicians, engineers, professors, and researchers dried up (Nwozor, 2013). Sectorial specific studies show that for the period between 1970's and early 1990's, Nigeria was losing between 20 to 30 percent of trained physicians for a practicing career in the UK, US, and Gulf countries (Umar et al., 2023). The early signs of brain drain in Nigeria were the emigration of skilled professionals from these sectors. There were greater reliance of Nigerian public sectors on the existing staff as the experienced professionals, and in some cases, the entire professional team, was absent from the local labor market (Oyeniyi, 2011).

Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) Era Migration

In 1986, Nigeria launched its Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which marked a significant shift in the emigration of professionals in the country. Implemented in 1986, the World Bank and IMF-induced SAPs involved steep devaluation of the currency, removal of subsidies, privatization, and a significant cut in public spending (Oyeniyi, 2011). During the first four years of the SAP, the Naira's worth plummeted by more than 70 percent, while inflation remained above 40 percent, which severely diminished the purchasing power of salaried professionals (Oyeniyi, 2011). Between 1986 and 1993, the real wages of public servants, who are among the most educated members of the society, and work in the health, education and civil service sectors, and administration, are reported to have declined by between 40-60 percent (Oyeniyi, 2011). These macroeconomic conditions created push factors that motivated educated migrants to move to other countries.

Moreover, between 1986 and 1995, the federal government of Nigeria's real investment in the country's universities declined by more than 30 percent, leading to infrastructure decay, unpaid faculty salaries, decreased research output, and increased strike activity among faculty (Oyeniyi, 2011). During this same time period, there was a significant increase in the outflow of academic staff from Nigerian universities to the United States and Europe.

Historically, die to austerity measures during the SAP period, there were significant cuts to healthcare funding across the systems in place, which also amped the brain drain phenomenon impacting the migration of medical personnel. As the stats reflect over the years, the doctor-patient ratio in Nigeria has seen a steady decline across the historic spectrum where in the Nigeria of 1985, doctor-patient ratio estimates were 1:10,000, then it decayed to 1:4,000. By the mid nineties, Nigeria became a lead country in the migration of African medical personnel (doctors and nurses) to the UK, along with other countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), from which skilled migration became a phenomenon and not a rare occurrence.

Contemporary Migration Patterns

Nigeria has seen significant emigration of educated and experienced professionals in the health sector. Between 2008 and 2021, 36,467 Nigerian doctors moved to the United Kingdom, with yearly increments of 1,798 to 4,880 doctors migrating from Nigeria to the UK (Yakubu et al., 2023). In the same duration, 60,729 Nigerian nurses also migrated to the UK with annual increments of 1,393 to 5,543 nurses (Yakubu et al.., 2023). Even in the period between 2016 to 2018, 9,000 doctors moved from Nigeria to the UK, US and Canada (**Nwanyioma, 2025).** There is a trend of emigration of educated and experienced health professionals from Nigeria before the COVID-19 Pandemic Nigeria before exporting its highly educated professionals to other countries because of the pandemic.

When the COVID-19 Pandemic began, it aggravated the situation, which health care professionals faced in Nigeria, which led to more emigration of health care professionals and more shortages of health care professionals. The authors state that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, migration intentions were strong among the Nigerian healthcare workforce as 88 percent of Nigerian doctors and 50 percent of nurses were contemplating migration for better job opportunities (Lawal et al., 2022). Of the 42,000 nurses who left Nigeria between 2022 and 2024 for better job prospects, the majority moved to the United Kingdom, and as a result, Nigerian nurses have become the largest subgroup of Sub-Saharan African nurses in the NHS.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT AND BRAIN DRAIN MIGRATION

The dual nature of brain drain, depending on the *de*relational nature of the migrant's continued affinity to the home country, has been studied as a continuum *de*relational brain gain, and circulation (positive, return, remote) (World Bank, 2023; Kurokawa, 2025). In this regard, the research has noted that possible transformation of emigration into development financing, human, or institutional, especially considering the sevice gap (missing health, education, and other professional personnel) caused by their home country diaspora, has framed the importance of diaspora engagement (African Development Bank (ADB) & International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2024; World Bank, 2023). Most research has focused on the causes of skilled migration. Quantitative cross-country research has shown that the emigration rate is high where there is inequitable economic growth and underdeveloped public services, legal order, and stable politics, and that such conditions not only worsen retention of professionals but reduce the capacity to integrate diaspora knowledge and human capital (Vega-Muñoz et al, 2025). This explains the “double losses” source countries suffer from the absence of personnel and the lack of institutional capacity to exploit diaspora contributions.

The World Bank, in their research, shows that policies centered on movement restrictions are not as effective as “development-friendly mobility” policies which are centered on encouraging Diaspora and return mobility (World Bank, 2023). Another research area of interest is the Diaspora's role in development. Apart from remittances, the Diaspora is said to contribute to development through documented investments, entrepreneurial activities, and professional networking, as well as visiting fellowships, documented technology transfers, and remote mentoring and coaching which enhance productivity/innovation (World Bank, 2023).

However, the World Bank (2023) cautions that "remittances are best seen as a stabilisation tool for individual welfare rather than as a driver of macro-development which, in the case of the remittances, is dependent on the strength of the financial systems." Additionally, current theorization suggests that return and contribution motivations are interdependent.

Research pertaining to the intentions of return migrants who have received education shows that return intentions are influenced by the presence or absence of career opportunities, feelings of social integration, and the potential for social and economic contribution; this demonstrates that policymakers must focus on developing multiple, and more effective, labour market opportunities and contribution frameworks (Kurokawa, 2025). Additionally, literature demonstrates that the design of the institution is of utmost importance, whereby specific frameworks for diaspora, skills matching and registration, sectorial (i.e. health, higher education) and circular mobility initiatives are proposed to mitigate brain drain and optimize knowledge transfer (IOM, 2024). Brain drain has a highly variable developmental impact, and the context of the country in which the brain drain occurs is important. Factors such as a country's labour market structure (i.e. rigidity) or compression of public sector wages, and the presence or absence of research infrastructure, career advancement opportunities (World Bank, 2023). In the presence of such conditions, the emigration of skilled personnel is likely to decrease the delivery of services and national development.

The report states that migration could be viewed positively when certain conditions like adequate policy regulations on circular migration, recognition of credentials, and involvement of diasporas are present (World Bank, 2023). Recent policies have considered diaspora engagement as a governance strategy, with IOM stating that, "engagement with diasporas needs institutional synergies, leadership, and development goals, as opposed to 'engagement' that is merely symbolic" (IOM, 2024). Some of the policy tools that have been described as effective include diaspora engagement policy instruments like diaspora registration, digital skills access/integration, temporary return and co-investment policies (IOM, 2024). Effective integration of diaspora engagement within national development strategies further strengthens the need for policies that regulate engagement and build trust between the government and the diaspora (IOM, 2024). Consultative reports on African states, including Nigeria, have suggested the need for the diaspora to shift focus from remittances to productive activities. NIDCOM (n.d.) engages with the diaspora to identify possibilities for technology transfer, entrepreneurship, and institutional reforms, especially concerning critical skill gaps. Those bridging the gap financially, appear to be using diaspora bonds and investment funds. Investors are using these bonds to fund infrastructure and industry, which are also financially and skill-need-impacted (Reuters, 2024). In the context of brain drain, OECD's International Migration Outlook 2025 has noted the declining, competing, and restricted trickle of skilled migrants to developing countries for employment due to the increased regulation of border-crossing. Underscoring the need to engage the diaspora, all voices stress the fact that managing brain drain effectively involves a comprehensive strategy, addressing gaps in local institutions and redesigning the diaspora as a development resource rather than a source of economic drain.

Both the IOM and the African Union Commission recognize the importance of engaging with diaspora populations, as highlighted in the Africa 2063 development framework. The Africa Migration Report focuses on investments, knowledge, and technology transfers as priorities from the diaspora. Still, it points out the existing governance and coordination gaps in the effectiveness of African countries. The report cites underdeveloped labor systems and political instability as the major drivers of skilled emigration from Africa. Therefore, there is a need for addressing the issues from the domestic side as well as through the diaspora engagement framework. The rate of professional emigration in Nigeria is alarming. NiDCOM sees the diaspora as a "critical national asset" thereby fostering diaspora mapping, investment, and professional exchange initiatives (NiDCOM, n.d.). Brain drain in specific sectors is a major concern. The Federal Ministry of Health and Social Welfare reported that the migration of health workers severely affects the healthcare system, and as a result, the National Policy on Health Workforce Migration was developed to promote ethical recruitment, strategic planning, and collaboration with receiving countries (FMH&SW, 2024). From a global viewpoint, the policies of the countries of destination are equally important. The OECD notes that due to labour shortages in the developed world, the immigration policies historically have been more lenient, and consequently, there have been increased pulls for skilled migrants from the developing world. In the same way, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs maintains that, unmanaged brain drain can worsen inequality and, without purposeful management through policy frameworks, migration can thwart the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. The literature on institutions suggests that diaspora engagement can partially offset brain drain, given that countries of origin implement credible domestic reforms to improve remuneration, job and safety, and governance (IOM, 2024).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the oldest and most significant of the theories of migration patterns is the Push-Pull Theory. Its foundational concepts come from a set of publications from Ernst Georg Ravenstein titled "The Laws of Migration" from 1885 and revised in 1889. Ravenstein noted that, "the causes of migration are to be found in difficult conditions of residence in the areas of origin and in attractive residence conditions in areas of destination". "A Theory of Migration,\\" published in 1966, is the most often referenced work on the push-pull theory, and in it, Everett S. Lee further refined and popularized the theory. The essence of Push-Pull Theory is the combination of factors of migration. The adverse conditions that can drive people out of a particular location are termed "push factors, while the favorable conditions that can attract people to a destination are termed "pull factors". Examples of push factors are unemployment, low wages, poor working conditions, political instability, insecurity, weakened institutions, and limited career advancement opportunities.

As previously mentioned, pull factors consist of improved wage levels and living conditions, political stability and infrastructure, employment and career advancement opportunities, as well as improved access to international labor markets (Castles et al., 2014). In addition to the aforementioned pull factors, Lee identified "intervening obstacles" (e.g., immigration policies and the financial burden of migration) as well as "personal factors" (e.g., the perceptions and capabilities of the migratory decision-maker) and argued that the decision to migrate is influenced structurally as well as cognitively and behaviourally. Although there are limitations, the Push-Pull Theory is very applicable to the analysis of skilled migration and brain drain, especially in the developing world, Nigeria being the prime example. The strong push factors present in Nigeria (e.g. low salaries, insufficient funding for quality research, widespread violence, ineffective government, and insufficient opportunities for advancement) when combined with the strong pull factors resulting from developed countries actively recruiting citizens of Nigeria (IOM, 2024) explain the current brain drain situation in Nigeria.

An example of Nigeria's modified approach to engaging with the diaspora as a response to the push-pull factors is Nigeria's Diaspora Engagement Model. By engaging its diaspora for investments, skills transfer, and short-term returns, Nigeria attempts to circumvent the existing push factors and instead use pull factors for its development (NiDCOM, n.d.). This research paper uses the Push-Pull Theory as the primary framework to analyze the country's brain drain and defend its diaspora engagement strategy as a response. However, the theory's critics argue that it must be complemented with other political economy or institutional approaches to the structural causes of migration, as opposed to the symptoms.

5. NIGERIA’S DIASPORA ARCHITECTURE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

This includes institutional structures, legal and policy instruments, and strategic programmes and platforms. These are subsequently discussed.

Institutional Structures

The strategy used by Nigeria to engage with their diaspora while combating brain drain and managing their relationship with each other relies on several institutions which intersect with various aspects of migration policy, protection of Nigerians abroad, and managing the diaspora's economic contribution to the development of Nigeria. One of these institutions is NiDCOM, which was set up under the NiDCOM (Establishment) Act of 2017, and is intended to engage, manage and leverage Nigerians in the diaspora for socio-economic development (NiDCOM Act, 2017). NiDCOM has pioneered several initiatives aimed at coaxing the diaspora into the development of Nigeria, such as diaspora mapping, diaspora investment fora, and partnerships with diaspora organisations. These initiatives have enabled Nigeria to view diaspora policy as a development tool, instead of merely perceiving the diaspora as a brain drain (NiDCOM, n.d.). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also has a large part to play in the development of the impact the country’s engagement with the diaspora has on Nigeria. This Ministry handles the coordination of consular services, which are executed by Nigeria's embassies and high commissions, and are instrumental in assisting and protecting Nigerians abroad. Additionally, the Ministry engages with the diaspora through her bilateral relations and collaboration on issues concerning the diaspora. The National Diaspora Policy delineates the role of Foreign missions in coordinating diaspora activities and meshes this with the external policy of the country.

This suggests an alignment in the strategy for engaging diasporas and the foreign policy direction. The regulation of labour migration in Nigeria is an exclusive jurisdiction of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment through the National Policy on Labour Migration, which was enacted in 2014. The policy safeguards the migrant worker and also strengthens the coordination of intra labour migration policy protection among the different agencies (IOM, 2014). Though, it does not primarily target high skilled migration, it offers an example of how to structure the regulation of outward migration, how to better migration governance, how to address irregular migration, which in turn, tackles the brain drain and sustains the workforce, (ILO, 2020). The Federal Ministry of Education is also taking steps to convert brain drain in the sector to brain gain. The Diaspora BRIDGE Programme, which will begin in 2025, will facilitate professional collaborations between Diaspora Nigerians and Academic/research institutions in Nigeria for teaching, research, and innovation. This initiative signifies a shift from singular activities to systematic organized knowledge dissemination as part of contemporary national educational policies, especially to address the existing gaps in education and research.

Legal and Policy Instruments

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CHALLENGES AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Governance and Institutional Fragmentation

Nigerian diaspora engagement has been characterised by overlapping institutions and a lack of coordination. Several institutions in the country, such as the NiDCOM, the FMFA, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Federal Ministry of Education, and the Federal Ministry of Health, have overlapping responsibilities in diaspora-related activities (NiDCOM, n.d.; World Bank, 2023). Evaluations of these institutions show that the absence of a single, centralised governing body has led to disjointed strategies, overlapping activities, and fragmented interactions with diaspora organisations (World Bank, 2023). Disjointedness in diaspora engagement in Nigeria has led to a lack of accountability in monitoring diaspora activities.

Policy Incoherence

Nigeria's response to brain drain remains a challenge, especially considering the fragmentation of its policies. Several agencies, like NiDCOM, FMFA, Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, Federal Ministry of Education, and Federal Ministry of Health, implement independent and unsynchronized diaspora engagement strategies (NiDCOM, n.d.; IOM, 2024). Research shows that ineffective partnerships and ambiguous leadership are major factors of redundancies that in turn, lessen the impact of the diaspora engagement initiatives (World Bank, 2023). There seems to be poor strategic alignment concerning the integration of migration management, the labour market, and development frameworks.

Infrastructure and Technology Gaps

Insufficient physical infrastructure, particularly in electricity, remains a significant impediment to technological advancement in Nigeria and to its ability to retain its skilled workforce. As reported by the Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission, the average available generation on the national grid during Q4 2024 was approximately 5,296.89 MW, which marginally improved to 5,366.88 MW in Q1 2025. This is grossly inadequate for a country of Nigeria's size. Consequently, organisations, institutions, hospitals, and research organisations are forced to depend on their own private power sources, thereby increasing costs and decreasing productivity. The World Bank indicators also indicate that only 61.2 per cent of the population in Nigeria had access to electricity in 2023, thereby emphasising the energy poverty that continues to impede the inclusive use of digital platforms and technology-driven diaspora engagement initiatives.

Political Economy Barriers

The issues of weak governance and institutional effectiveness remain challenges Nigeria has yet to overcome. According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators presented by the World Bank, Nigeria's Government Effectiveness score declined from -0.79 in 2015 to -1.03 in 2023, ranking Nigeria in the bottom 20 per cent of countries globally, reflecting a lack of policy coordination and service delivery effectiveness (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, Nigeria's Regulatory Quality score was -0.86 in 2023, indicating inconsistent regulation, a challenge that is affecting diaspora investment beyond remittances (World Bank, 2024). In 2023, Nigeria was ranked 145th out of 180 countries globally, with a score of 25/100 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024). This ranking raises concerns among the diaspora about elite capture and a lack of institutional accountability.

6. STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT AND BRAIN DRAIN MITIGATION

Integrated National Talent Strategy

The Integrated National Talent Strategy (INTS) should begin with a holistic coordination structure that covers all aspects of the government. This structure should integrate diaspora engagement, labor market strategy, education policy, and industrial strategy within a unified strategic architecture. Evidence from Nigeria reveals that a lack of a unified mandate across different institutions hampers their effectiveness, thus requiring an integrated strategy that establishes a central coordinating structure, led by the NiDCOM, with formal links to the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, National Universities Commission, and other sectoral ministries. This would make it easier to establish a talent register that can map the skills in the country as well as those in the diaspora. By aligning the engagement with the diaspora with the priority sectors of health, education, technology, and manufacturing, the government can move from doing things in an ad-hoc manner to a predictable and rule-based system. This will make it easier to achieve outcomes.

Another pillar of the INTS would be retention and circular mobility, focusing on addressing the push factors of emigration and utilising the expertise of the diaspora population through return and virtual engagement strategies. This would include implementing competitive and transparent wage structures, merit-based promotion, adequate research funding, and safe working conditions. In this case, the use of diaspora engagement strategies, such as time-limited return fellowships, visiting professional programs, and virtual teaching and clinical services, would be institutionalised through the Federal Ministry of Education and the Federal Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. The strategy would therefore be more effective by avoiding permanent return and focusing on brain circulation, in which skilled Nigerians would be encouraged to contribute to the country's development without sacrificing their global careers, as brain circulation strategies have been shown to be more sustainable and cost-effective than forced retention and incentives.

The third pillar should instead focus on the productive integration of the diaspora into national development by linking talent initiatives to investment, innovation, and service delivery. This is achieved by linking diaspora bonds, innovation funds, and sectoral investments with the broader talent ecosystem. Partnerships with the Central Bank of Nigeria and the Debt Management Office can improve credibility, while Public-Private Partnerships can increase the scope of impact in the technology and health sectors. However, it is crucial that the monitoring and evaluation framework not only tracks the funds raised and the initiatives undertaken, but also the rates of retention, skills transfer, and productivity improvements. Thus, by linking the pillars of governance, labour, and diaspora into a single national talent ecosystem, Nigeria stands a chance of converting the brain-drain threat into a developmental imperative for sustainability.

Diaspora-Centred Development Model

Most diaspora models have considered not much more than remittances as a focal point of involvement of a given diaspora community. The Diaspora-Centred Development Model (DCDM) has been a departure from this norm by conceptualizing the role of the diaspora as strategic in the overall development of the country, even in the face of adverse skilled emigration. The DCDM seeks to establish policy frameworks in a country to incorporate the engagement of the diaspora into the developmental programmes of the country, as opposed to treating this involvement as a matter of international relations.

Another aspect of the DCDM is the role of brain circulation which is a result of a more flexible approach to the mobility and sharing of knowledge. Specifically, this model departs from the traditional thinking of brain circulation which is often long-term and focuses more on short-term, virtual engagement, dual role, and even project-type collaboration as means of diaspora contributions to a given country (Kennedy, 2020). A key pillar of the DCDM is the mobilization of diaspora resources and a trust-based governance system which is considered an essential element for the sustainability of the model. This involves the use of financial instruments like diaspora bonds, co-investment funds, and platforms for investments in specific sectors as well as transparency, sound project pipelines, and independent monitoring to avert political and macroeconomic risks. Without trust in the rules, the macroeconomic stability, and the accountability of the system, the engagement of the diaspora is effectively limited to remittances from consumption. This is in the face of a considerable trust deficit.

Institutional Coordination Architecture

Sustainable institutional coordination can only be built if there is a mandate, harmonisation, then a central authority. Empirical reform evidence shows that governance of migration, and engagement of the diaspora is most efficient when one dominant agency encapsulates the strategy, the data, and the implementation of diaspora engagement across all ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs); while the vertical ministries, as the sectoral actors, carry out the service delivery. In Nigeria, one of the approaches to cope with absence of a coordinating authority among the diaspora institutions is the enhancement of the Nigerian Diaspora Commission's coordinating role by empowering her to convene all MDAs, harmonise engagement, and monitor engagements to reduction of fragmentation of diaspora engagement. IOM reports suggest that countries with inter-ministerial diaspora councils, and a dedicated diaspora engagement legislation are able to better integrate and align diaspora investments, skills, and return programmes with the national development priorities, and mitigate brain drain.

The next pertinent components of the coordination framework focuses data integration and programme alignment across sectors. Research demonstrates that poor systems for data collection on migration and diasporas weaken the formation of evidence-based policies and lead to fragmented and duplicated intervention programmes. The third element is the formation of accountable institutionalised public-private-diaspora partnerships. Lessons from the OECD and developing countries illustrate that effective diaspora engagement strategies require cross-sector partnerships involving governmental bodies, diaspora communities, the private sector, and academia and professional networks. To ensure that trust among diaspora communities is not eroded by elite capture, an institutionalised partnership model must be created.

Digital Diaspora Infrastructure

An example of a positive strategy to sustainably engage a diaspora community is to build a digital infrastructure system that interlinks data, communications, and engagement technologies for comprehensive, streamlined system access across the diaspora's communication and engagement digital architectures. Research shows that the absence of integrated data on the engagement and policy focus of the diaspora community is a major detriment to the successful diaspora engagement. A digital national diaspora registry that is integrated with embassies, professional bodies, and specific ministries would allow for real-time diaspora skill sets and facilitate supply driven engagement for investment, research, and short term cash return engagements. Provision of a digital diaspora engagement system in Nigeria, similarly to the digital engagement systems in Rwanda and India, would effectively engage the Nigerian diaspora communities through the NSTP digital communication infrastructure and build a community engagement trust within a transparent and commercially-framed diaspora engagement structure in Nigeria (Chukwueme, 2026).

Financing and Investment Mechanisms

An essential component of Nigeria's diaspora community's sustained engagement hinges on the mobilization of diaspora capital. This involves the design of diaspora bonds, foreign-currency savings products, and securitization of infrastructures related to diaspora Nigerians. When harnessed in conjunction with the Central Bank of Nigeria, these products can manage the more than 20 billion dollars in annual remittances to Nigeria, shifting their use from consumption to the development of the manufacturing, health, education, and technology sectors, d encouraging the diaspora community to financially engage with Nigeria by offering attractive returns, partial sovereign guarantees, and tax incentives. This financial engagement can reduce the causes behind the emigration of Nigerians with skills. Another avenue could be the engagement of Diasporas in knowledge-based sectors through venture capital and blended finance instruments. The government can see to it that there is engagement in these sectors. The third pillar focuses on the sustainable reintegration and investment in the human capital of Diaspora. With blended public-private funding and philanthropy, Diaspora skills funds can facilitate return fellowships and missions, whether in research or medical/technical spheres, under specific targeted performance goals. If integrated with national development goals and applicable long-term financing prospects, they could facilitate the formalisation of return migration as opposed to using short-term incentivisation.

7. Conclusion

This study indicates a connection between brain drain and diaspora engagement within the migration-development nexus. Historically, skilled migration in Nigeria began with educational and certification flows during the colonial period, then shifted to post-independence professional brain drain. Later, it developed into a survival strategy in the context of the Structural Adjustment Programme. Currently, skilled migration in Nigeria has accelerated, particularly in terms of health and higher education, with push factors such as wage compression, poor research environment, poor infrastructure, insecurity, and poor governance, coupled with strong pull factors such as global talent war, better welfare packages, and recruitment efforts of destination countries. There is no doubt that Nigeria's diaspora continues to be an important contributor to national development. The point is that there is a crucial recognition of a dual reality in Nigeria. The reality is that skilled emigration can undermine national service delivery and productivity, but diaspora engagement can partially offset these impacts when it is well-designed, legitimate, and aligned with national goals

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