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Explanations for African Immigration

By Kwaku Danso

Africa is a continent in crisis. Sub-Saharan Africa today poses the greatest development challenge facing the world today. Many of Africa's development programs have failed miserably. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have attributed this failure to inefficient internal economic policies pursued by African governments. These governments, on the other hand, blame failure on uncontrollable external factors in the world economy, such as international financial markets, worldwide recessions, declining commodity prices, protectionist trade policies against African exports, and the oil price shocks of the 1970s. While there is merit to each of these schools of thought, there is also increasing consensus that the level of human resource development and the limited supply of well-trained and experienced professionals to manage the continent's social and economic development programs accounts partly for the continent's appalling living conditions.

The continent spends over \$4 billion on technical assistance annually. There are nearly 100,000 foreign experts in Africa, more than at independence, which is a manifestation of the crippling shortfall in indigenous African capacities.¹ This shortfall has been the result, in part, of the immigration of highly-trained and talented professionals and technicians from Africa to the developed countries, particularly the U.S. According to the United Nations Development Program, some 60 percent of Ghanaian doctors trained in the 1980s are now working abroad leaving a critical shortage in Ghana's health service.² Hopefully, this essay will provide some of the theoretical explanations for African immigration; and help African policy makers formulate workable policies to stem the tide of the immigration of African-skilled personnel.

Causes of the Brain Drain

A survey of the literature on immigration shows an overemphasis of the theoretical model of "push" and "pull" in analyzing the dynamic nature of African immigration. Critics argue that this theoretical model tends to overstress the "instrumental motivation."³ The "push-pull" model fails to consider the possible complexity of the psychological and socio-cultural process that leads to the move or stay decision. Suffice to say, therefore, that it would be wrong to identify any single factor as causing immigration.

High on the list of "push" causative factors of the immigration in sub-Saharan Africa has traditionally been economic. Adherents to the economic school hold the view that people immigrate ultimately to improve their economic well-being.⁴ The economic stimulus can then rightly be seen as a response with some exaggeration, to



economic incentives emanating from disequilibria between and within sectors of the economy and between countries and regions.

Kenneth Ojo goes further, adding that these economic factors go beyond the personal element of salary to encompass the macroeconomic performance of the country and the extent to which it can provide the requisite infrastructure for trained experts to utilize their skills.⁵ The macroeconomic conditions at home should be significantly worse because people do not immigrate for the sole purpose of gaining a slight economic or professional advantage. The economic gains must be significant enough to outweigh the strong natural desire to remain at home.⁶

Let us take a look at the socio-economic picture of sub-Saharan Africa and how it might have contributed to the immigration. Sub-Saharan Africa has deep-seated and multifaceted socio-economic problems. For example, out of more than one billion people living in the developing world on less than \$375 per year, over 16 percent live in sub-Saharan Africa. This region is projected to have 30 percent of the world's poor by the year 2000. Whereas incomes of most of the world's poor living in East and South Asia rose in the 1980s, they fell in sub-Saharan Africa. Though infant mortality and school enrollment rates have continued to improve for most developing countries, this has not been the case for sub-Saharan Africa, for every major indicator of human development has either stagnated or declined for the poor in this region.⁷

Africa's debt has risen sharply since the 1980s to about \$315 billion, about two and a half times greater than in 1980. Sub-Saharan Africa's debt more than tripled during the same period. Debt servicing alone cost Africa over \$26 billion in 1991.⁸ Africa's terms of trade dropped by 10 percent in the latter part of the 1980s while its share in world markets has fallen by half since 1970. Sub-Saharan

Africa now accounts for less than 2 percent of all world trade. And Africa's share of foreign direct investments flowing to developing countries fell from 16 percent in the 1970s to 3.5 percent in the 1990s.⁹

The incidence of sub-Saharan Africa's poverty can be linked to the economic and political mismanagement in the face of unfavorable economic conditions resulting in inefficiency, low productivity, meager returns on investment and the concomitant low rates of economic growth which have not kept pace with population growth. Per capita incomes have declined from an average of \$600 in 1981 to \$340 in 1993.¹⁰

The growth of sub-Saharan Africa's agriculture by over 2 percent per annum over the past three decades notwithstanding, the population has galloped by 3.1 percent per year, doubling in about 22 years annually by 1988.¹¹ Sub-Saharan Africa's socio-economic problems have retarded the region's progress on all fronts exacerbating long entrenched problems of hunger, poverty, disease and illiteracy. As the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) noted at the Khartoum Conference on the Human Dimension of Africa's Economic Recovery and Development, an estimated 70,000 Africans with middle and high level skills had left the continent by mid-1987, up from 40,000 in 1985 due to the continent's socio-economic debility.¹²

On the "pull" factors side of the equation, H. Myint posits that in underdeveloped regions like Africa, the immigration is a symptom of disequilibrium between the typical pattern of expansion of the educational system and its capacity to absorb its graduates.¹³ In sub-Saharan Africa, lack of effective manpower planning frequently contributed to oversupply of certain highly specialized skills. African educational expansion has been distorted since the independence era due to the reliance on the belief that economic development can be accelerated through increases in the training of technical people. These people, when trained, cannot be supported materially nor given adequate remuneration, consequently they abandon their homes for so-called "greener pastures." The ease of entry of African professionals into the international labor market has been facilitated by the non-indigenous nature of African educational and training institutions. These institutions, largely inherited from colonialism, prepare students for foreign-oriented qualifications.¹⁴ Additionally, this access to graduate schools and other fields of specialization in the developed countries has often led to overspecialization which in turn leads to the professionals' inability to secure challenging jobs upon their return home.¹⁵

As A. Speare suggests, international immigration cannot be explained in solely economic terms. He states that political factors, which fall under the "push" end of the spectrum, are frequently more important than economic.¹⁶ Studies such as Kofi Apraku's support the role of political factors in the immigration decision. In the African context, political instability has been the factor which forces trained and skilled personnel to immigrate.¹⁷

Political instability has manifested in frequency and abrupt changes of government, the personalization of political power and the gross abuse of human rights.¹⁸

Sub-Saharan dictators, with their massive, ubiquitous and intimidating security services sometimes unleash the most unthinkable violence on their people. In 1988 former President Siad Barre of Somalia ordered his military to drop bombs on his people causing the deaths of over 50,000 people. In the 1970s, former President Iddi Amin slaughtered a record of 150 civilians a day.¹⁹ The necessity to suppress the people accounts for the large military budgets of sub-Saharan African states. Political persecution resulting from personal philosophical incompatibility with political authority increases the desire to immigrate.

In several sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana, Togo, Mali, and Nigeria, there is the growing student dissatisfaction with the political direction of their countries. Failure on the part of governments to address these concerns has led to political unrest resulting in frequent student strikes and sporadic violent clashes with security personnel.²⁰ These governments respond with closures of the universities making the pursuit of academic work impossible. Professors and students who become politically and philosophically incompatible with authorities find it necessary to immigrate in order to avoid political persecution.

Another political factor is deliberate attempts made by government authorities to fill public sector jobs with specific ethnic groups. In Kenya, this process was referred to as "Kikuyunization" and in Uganda, it was "Kakwanization" in reference to the dominant ethnic groups in the two countries. Highly-skilled individuals who belong to other ethnic groups and are denied jobs or promotions leave the country. This was the case in Kenya where a sizable number of its senior professors together with other highly skilled individuals were lost to international organizations in the immediate post-independence period.²¹

An important factor that is often left out in discussions on the causes of immigration is the prestige associated with foreign travel especially, to developed countries. During the colonizing of Africa, the colonialists sent selected candidates—mostly children of supportive and friendly chiefs and other allies—to metropolitan countries for further studies. These individuals returned to their respective countries to occupy some of the best positions and displayed lifestyles with much higher status than those of locally-trained people. The perception developed, therefore, is that in order to "make it" in society, one had to go aboard.

Factors which could be categorized as "pull" from the developing countries include the demand for manpower in such specialized fields as engineering, medicine, and computers in the industrialized countries. Immigration allows these countries to save on expansion costs in the industrialized countries' universities.²² Ironically, the small West African country of Togo has sent more physicians and professors to its former colonial master,

France, than France has sent to Togo.²³ It is with object of making it easier for the skilled manpower to immigrate to the developed countries that immigration laws in developed countries are designed to favor these individuals.

Karadina Oscar hypothesized the “the higher the level anomies found among professionally trained individuals sharing the same success goals as the world scientific community and having innovative responses, the greater the likelihood that they will leave their home country to work abroad.”²⁴ Oscar argued that exaggerated bureaucratization, lack of resources, and lack of institutional support are sources of frustration and anomie. Studies have shown that in some developing countries, highly-trained and specialized personnel are sometimes supervised by people with much lower levels of education and knowledge. Promotion is therefore based upon extra-professional criteria. Such professional and skilled personnel who have these experiences often fall into highly unsatisfactory situations. They then begin to look for other ways of reaching their goals, especially traveling abroad. African professionals, skilled personnel and scientists who accept the success-goal identified by the world scientific community, but do not have the wherewithal to achieve it in their own countries, tend to immigrate. These individuals, as D. M. Chorafas found out in the case of European immigrants, are still proudly African but because they have no hope of proper recognition and progress in their respective countries, immigrate.²⁵

To these individuals, the economic factors that pulled them out of their societies are justified.

Additionally, expenditures for research and development are significantly higher in the productive/industrial and higher education sectors. In sub-Saharan Africa these expenditures tend to be higher in the general services sector. Hence, the skilled personnel who is deprived of a conducive environment for the performance of his/her research activity also becomes a prime candidate for immigration. The interesting point is whether or not these immigrants are allowed to put their skills to good use once they settle in the U.S.

Immigrant Empowerment

The major problem that African immigrants face once they arrive in the U.S. is finding jobs that are commensurate with their educational training and experience. The skilled immigrants succeed in securing lucrative and comfortable positions in academia, the medical profession, engineering, and private entrepreneurs. To these individuals, the economic factors that pulled them out of their societies are justified. To ensure community solidarity and social and economic empowerment, various African nationalities have formed national and community/ethnic associations to deal with

these kinds of problems. However, national associations have been weak due to people's preference for their ethnic groupings. For example, a continental organization, like the African Association of Georgia, is not receiving much support. On the other hand however, the Ethiopian community has been more successful at pooling their resources together to purchase gasoline stations, liquor stores, and restaurants.

Because these empowerment associations have been more of a social club, they have not been able to influence politics in the U.S. nor their respective countries. Although there are no reliable figures on the number of African immigrants in the U.S., estimates are said to be around one to two million.²⁶ Therefore, if this group was to be organized, it could be a potent force in U.S. domestic and foreign policy. However, problems ranging from finding the necessary support structures for themselves, their immediate families in the U.S. and Africa, do not permit these immigrants to engage in the kind of organization that will ensure group social, political, and economic empowerment. Attempts at group solidarity and empowerment have been hampered by a strong degree of individualism and the struggle just to maintain what one already has.

These problems notwithstanding, the African immigrant communities tend to display a strong sense of community solidarity in time of need, especially when death hits a member or when a member is in serious trouble. Traditional practices and cultural messages, such as outdoorizing a newborn child or mourning the dead, are utilized for mobilizing people, albeit more ad hoc, than permanent. A challenge for this community, therefore, is balancing a sense of powerlessness with a strong nostalgia for their home countries, while resisting acceptance in the new society.

Notes

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²UNCTAD Report of the Fourth Meeting of Governmental Experts on the Reverse Transfer of Technology (Geneva: United Nations, March 14-18, 1988).

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⁵Kenneth Olayinka Ojo, “International Migration of Health Manpower in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Society, Science and Medicine*, vol. 31 no. 6 (1990), 631.

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⁷Robert McNamara, “Africa's Development Crisis: Agricultural Stagnation, Population Explosion and Environmental Degradation.” Address delivered to the Africa Leadership Forum, in Ota, Nigeria on June 21, 1990.

⁸H. Myint, *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 238.

⁹Ignatius Ozoilo, “Colours of Hope,” *West Africa*, May 6-12, 1996, 714.

¹⁰Walter Adams, *The Brain Drain* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), 1.

¹¹McNamara, “Africa's Development Crisis.”

¹²Alex Danso, “The Debt Crisis and Africa's Maldevelopment,” *Southern Political Review*, Fall 1990, 75.

¹³Myint, *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Countries*, 250.

¹⁴Kofi A. Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States: A Missing Link in Africa's Social and Economic Development* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 10.

¹⁵Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States*, 10.

¹⁶A. Speare, Jr., "The Relevance of Models of Internal Migration for the Study of International Migration," *International Migration*, G. Tapinos (Ed.) Proceedings of a Seminar on Demographic Research in Relation to International Migration (Paris: CICRED, 1974).

¹⁷Apraku, *African Emigres in the United States*, 33.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹George B. N. Ayittey, "African Dictators," *Emerge*, April 26, 1991, 26.

²⁰Myint, *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Countries*, 249.

²¹Amos Odenyo, "An Assessment of the African Brain Drain with Special Reference to the Kenyan Mid-career Professional," *Issue*, vol. ix, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 47.

²²Britta Karlsson and Solveig Turner, "Practicality of Intermittent Ladder-Level Programs for Health Professional in the Middle East Africa." Paper presented at the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs in Boston, 1987.

²³Walter Adams, *The Brain Drain*, 2.

²⁴Karadina Oscar, "Anomie and the Brain Drain: A Sociological Explanation," (New York, 1982, mimeographed), 1.

²⁵D. M. Chorafas, *The Knowledge Revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968).

²⁶Daniel Hagan, interview by author, Embassy of Ghana, Washington, D.C., April 20, 1996.

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