

A F F O R D

African Foundation for Development



**Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development:
Proposal to create channels of communication between
representatives of African governments in the UK and
African communities in the UK**

AFFORD
31/33 Bondway
London SW8 1SJ

t: +44 (0) 20 7587 3900
f: +44 (0) 020 7587 3919
e: afford@afford-uk.org
w: www.afford-uk.org

CBCAfricaRecruit
18 Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5LU

t: +44 (0) 20 7024 8200
f: +44 (0) 20 7024 8201
e: info@aficarecruit.com
w: www.aficarecruit.com

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

Introduction

This brief concept paper makes a proposal for the opening of channels of communication between diplomatic representatives of African governments based in the UK and segments of the UK's increasingly diverse African communities, including civil society groups, businesses, faith communities, etc. Boldly stated, the proposal is to initiate an ongoing series of informal dialogue sessions between African diplomats and the African diaspora with a view to deepening the understanding of different sides' respective viewpoints and perspectives. The presumption is that we are bound by shared visions for Africa's long-term, self-reliant, self-sustaining and autonomous development as a key player in an increasingly globalising world. A key aim, surely, has to be the strengthening of Africa's institutional capacity at all levels of society. To that end, the first challenge is to overcome hurdles created by misperceptions, distrust, lack of understanding, and at best sporadic communication and exchanges.

Although some such channels do exist between individual African nations and their nationals in the UK through the diplomatic missions, this paper makes a case for a more pan-African approach within the emerging context of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the newly formed African Union (AU).

The paper sets out the context within which this idea has germinated, the challenges undermining enhanced African government-diaspora co-operation, the aim of an initiative to overcome these challenges and the proposed modalities for moving forwards. Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie, Executive Director of the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD) has written this proposal following discussions and ongoing collaboration with Dr Titi Banjoko, Chair of CBCAfricaRecruit. We intend this proposal to be no more than a call for the start of a conversation about taking the idea forwards. We have not, as yet, discussed this specific idea with colleagues among other African organisations in the UK nor do we claim to represent them. However, the idea of dialogue with African diplomats and government representatives has been floated on several occasions in the past and we are confident of likely support for this initiative among African diaspora organisations.

The term African diaspora generally refers to people of African origin or heritage – whether of recent origin through emigration or distant origin through, say, the Atlantic Slave Trade – living away from Africa who have some “memory” of Africa as home or point of original departure. Thus the African diaspora generally includes people of African-Caribbean origin living in the UK, African Brazilians, African Americans, etc as well as Nigerians, Tanzanians, etc living abroad. We take an inclusive approach to an understanding of the African diaspora although we recognise that African nationals (and those with dual citizenship or whose (grand)parents emigrated from an African country) are most likely to form the bulk of the constituency that engages in this process of dialogue.

Context

A contextual assessment of the situation must take into account the African diaspora's growing size, capacity and influence; changes in the climate within which African development is pursued, including a fresh impetus to pan-African and regional integration strategies through the AU and NEPAD; and the increasingly intensifying pressures of globalisation that present both challenges and opportunities for Africa's development.

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

African diaspora's growing influence

When most people think of an active diaspora working diligently in support of its country of origin, their mind turns to the Jewish diaspora and Israel. However, significantly, over the last few years the African diaspora has been a growing influence in African affairs, most notably via remittances rather than concerted political lobbying or influence wielding. Indeed, the World Bank's 2003 Global Development Finance report shows that remittances sent home to developing countries in 2002 by migrant workers far exceeded finance from commercial banks or bilateral and IMF/World Bank assistance finance. Officially recorded migrants' remittances reached \$80 billion last year, up from \$60 billion four years earlier. Yet the real figure may be three times higher; migrants preferring, for reasons of speed, safety and cost, to remit savings through informal networks and relatives. President John Kufuor of Ghana has thanked Ghanaians abroad for the estimated \$1.3 billion the Bank of Ghana reckons they put into the Ghanaian economy last year. Similarly, President Yoweri Museveni has joked that Ugandans abroad are Uganda's biggest export as they send back home \$400m a year, more than the country earns from its biggest export commodity, coffee. Thus, it is fair to suggest that we Africans are our own biggest "aid donors" contrary to popular perceptions propagated by the mass media, western governments and international aid agencies.

We strongly believe that it is this ethos and practical demonstration of self-help that should form the kernel of Africa's development strategy. In saying so, we are not putting forward a new idea. The African diaspora worldwide, and in the UK in particular, has long been active in mobilising in support of Africa. Freed and escaped slaves such as Olaudah Equiano were active abolitionist campaigners in 18th century Britain. And historians credit the fifth pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945 that was led by the African diaspora as sounding the death knell for the British Empire and for colonialism.

The ties that bind Africans in the diaspora to their homelands are strong. Research conducted by AFFORD demonstrates that Africans in the UK organise primarily around allegiances and solidarity formed through their sense of identity, whether this be as a family member, a member of an ethnic community, as part of a geographic community, as a member of an alumni association, etc. Academics have coined the term social capital to capture the sum of the complex social relations – trust, obligation, duty, self-interest, etc – that underpin the sorts of motivations that drive diasporic engagement in their homelands. It is outside the scope of this brief note to discuss social capital in detail, contested as it inevitably is. However, it is worth stressing that while many Africans acknowledge and celebrate their national identity, much of their energy goes into organising at the sub-national, community level. For most people, the two forms of identification are not necessarily mutually exclusive but it is essential for national authorities and officials to appreciate and understand how and why many Africans organise the way they do.

Although the size of remittances is remarkable and increasing in significance, we need to be mindful of the full range of ways in which the African diaspora is or could be involved in supporting Africa's development. Thus if we see social capital as the glue that binds the diaspora in relation to Africa, then we can see that the diaspora mobilises financial capital, intellectual capital and political capital for Africa's benefit.

Financial capital includes remittances; direct development assistance; investment in social infrastructure and in support of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs); commerce in the form of trade and increasingly e-commerce (or electronic commerce). Intellectual capital includes efforts to translate the so-called brain drain into a brain gain, thus we are talking

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

here about return migration, schemes to tap into diaspora know-how, networks, ideas and contacts. Political capital takes in advocacy, campaigning, lobbying on Africa-related issues such as human rights, trade, debt, HIV/AIDS, immigration, etc.

| Form of “capital” | Mode | Example |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Social capital | Trust Identification Solidarity Self-interest | Social capital underpins other forms of diaspora engagement |
| Financial capital | Remittances | Direct to the household or community group for welfare support, access to social services such as education and healthcare, provision of facilities, consumption, etc |
| | Investment | To support entrepreneurs, grassroots enterprise development, SMEs |
| | Direct development assistance | To support welfare projects eg school buildings |
| | Commerce | To engage in trade, eg import of foodstuffs consumed by diaspora, purchase and viewing of movies |
| | Consumer buying power | Purchase of African fair trade coffee and tea |
| Intellectual capital | Return migration | Successful efforts by CBCAfricaRecruit to place hundreds of UK-based African job seekers in Africa-based posts |
| | Tapping into diaspora know-how and networks | Not everyone in the diaspora is willing or able to return in the short term, but many are still keen to put knowledge gained at Africa’s service, eg South African Worldwide Association, short-term consultancies, virtual teams, etc |
| Political capital | Advocacy, lobbying, campaigning | African Growth & Opportunity Act (AGOA) via US-based Constituency for Africa and other lobby groups; campaigns against water privatisation by Southern Links and other groups, etc |

Table 1: Dimensions of African diasporic engagement in Africa’s support

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

Table 1 above illustrates the different “capitals” of the African diaspora’s engagement in Africa’s development. However, while here we stress the positive elements of the diaspora’s engagement, we are not unaware or uncritical of negative modes of diasporic involvement in African affairs. For instance, examples do exist of African groups and individuals fuelling conflict, spreading hate or undermining the climate for progressive change within Africa. Nonetheless, we would assert that the balance of diasporic engagement is overwhelmingly positive.

Africa’s changing development climate

In spite of disappointing setbacks in Africa’s political climate caused by ongoing civil wars and strife, recent coups, etc when we step back and gain perspective, we can take courage from significant steps of progress and a generally positive trend in terms of democratic governance in Africa.

We have democratically and popularly elected governments in an increasing number of countries, even with some transferring of power through the ballot box. States are gradually gaining legitimacy (although the harsh economic climate is greatly undermining the capacity of states everywhere to provide for citizens); the rule of law is taking root; different organs of the state – from legislature to judiciary to executive – are evolving separately and strongly; civil society is also evolving, maturing and taking its rightful place in shaping African societies in positive ways; and Africa’s fledgling private sector is slowly gaining strength and capacity to emerge as the powerhouse of jobs and wealth creation on the continent.

In sum, the environment is gradually evolving into one in which Africans in the diaspora can constructively engage with African governments (and vice versa). Indeed, individual African governments have taken the first faltering steps to engage more constructively with their nationals abroad. Ghana has initiated a series of Home-Coming Summits that bring the Ghanaian diaspora together with government officials and entrepreneurs in a bid to encourage greater investment and involvement, Sierra Leone has followed suit. Nigeria’s President Obasanjo has appointed a Special Adviser on the Nigerian Diaspora and has taken personal interest in encouraging the formation of a Nigerian diaspora organisation, NIDOE (Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation Europe).

Significantly, attention and interest in recent years has shifted back to the continental or pan-African stage and the regional arena through initiation of both the AU and NEPAD, officially billed as a project of the AU. Neither NEPAD nor the AU is oblivious to the diaspora’s potential contribution, judging by statements, declarations and expressions of intent and interest.

Pressures of globalisation

We do not need to dwell here in great detail with the question of globalisation, one that has been well documented in countless places elsewhere, whether from a pro, anti or agnostic perspective on the implications for Africa. However, two dimensions merit brief mention. The first is the notion of “bottom-up” globalisation that refers to the efforts of ordinary people to respond to the pressures and contradictions thrown up by this era of globalisation. Migration and the growth of the African diaspora in places offering reasonable economic opportunities is one such bottom-up response to globalisation. The second point relates to this first one and that is that as a result of globalisation we are seeing the distinctions between the

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

“local” and the “global” blurring in significant ways. David Held of openDemocracy puts it this way:

“There is no longer a clear separation between the political problems we face in the developed world and the political problems faced in the developing world. The public goods that we and our children will depend upon for our future security can now only be provided by recognising this interconnectedness. The public good of a safe environment and sustainable development cannot be provided by individual states acting alone. We must find new forms of international collaboration that improve the local everywhere.”

From an African diasporic perspective, the consequence of this blurring means that the problems facing an African living, say, in the London Borough of Southwark can no longer be confined to the borders of Southwark (if ever they could) and to the issues of, say, housing, schooling, garbage collection, etc. The welfare of many Africans here in the UK is inextricably bound up with what happens in their region of origin (we only have to ask Liberians living here what they have been through recently to affirm this). Similarly, the interests of Africans in Africa are bound up with what happens in the diaspora. Crudely put, one country’s internal affairs becomes another country’s external affairs. The growing role that Africans in the UK play in local and national politics here – Southwark’s mayor is a Sierra Leonean, for instance – creates an opportunity to rethink globalisation and perhaps see it in more creative terms as offering us new ways of responding to the challenges posed.

Challenge of relations between African governments and diaspora

If we have painted a generally optimistic picture of the promise of Africa’s development in collaboration with the African diaspora, it may be time to introduce a dose of harsh reality. In general, relations between African governments and the African diaspora appear to be characterised by distrust, distance, wariness, scepticism about each other’s motives, and sometimes outright hostility and antagonism. Communication and information flows between the two groups are sporadic and largely ineffectual. Encounters rarely allow for equal and effective exchange and usually revolve around significant, high-profile events and conferences that tend to encourage grandstanding, rhetoric and defensive posturing rather than meaningful conversation.

No doubt a few notable exceptions might contrast with this generally bleak picture, but even there, the emphasis is on the national level, with representatives of individual African governments engaging only with their own nationals resident in the UK. In the context of the NEPAD strategy, this is arguably inadequate. Research recently conducted by AFFORD saw us interview 140 young Africans between the ages of 18 and 30 living in the UK to explore their attitudes towards the new AU/NEPAD initiatives. In spite of their passion for and commitment to Africa’s progress and even, arguably, a shared vision with the initiators of the AU and NEPAD, these young Africans are under-informed about what is actually going on in Africa today, although they are keen to learn and hear more, particularly about whether and where they fit into the grand schemes for Africa’s development. Now in their mid-20s, such young Africans may lack the in-demand skills today but will soon acquire them. NEPAD’s narrow focus on the brain drain overlooks this important resource for tomorrow. But tomorrow may be too late – the no-longer young Africans may by then have diverted their attention elsewhere. This loss will be a double whammy for Africa as neither their skills nor their money will be forthcoming from such a disconnected diaspora.

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

Case for dialogue

Not only is the time right for enhanced and effective dialogue between African government representatives in the UK and the UK-based African diaspora, the imperatives of today's circumstances demand it. We use the word dialogue carefully and deliberately and reflect on its roots to get at the essence of what we propose. According to William Isaacs, director of the MIT Dialogue Project, the word dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* (meaning "through" or "with each other") and *logos* (meaning "the word"), suggesting that dialogue implies "meaning flowing through". Isaacs argues:

"Dialogue is not merely a set of techniques for improving organizations, enhancing communications, building consensus, or solving problems. It is based on the principle that conception and implementation are intimately linked, with a core of common meaning. During the dialogue process, people learn how to think together – not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together."¹

We urge that the framework for dialogue extend beyond each African country's individual national boundaries and reflect the regional and pan-African dimensions of Africa's new development strategies. In essence, we are proposing that Heads of African Diplomatic Missions work collectively to dialogue and engage with a collective of African civil society and business groups. Initially, our aims should be modest: to create and use channels of dialogue, to deepen understanding of each other's perspectives. In the long-term we should aim to arrive at common understanding and collective action. The ultimate prize has to be the strengthening of Africa's institutional capacity.

Suggested modalities

We hope that African Heads of Missions and their staff will read and consider this proposal. We request that the matter be added to the agenda of a forthcoming meeting of African Heads of Missions (who we understand meet regularly). If invited, we would be delighted to meet with Heads of Missions to discuss modalities face-to-face. If we can launch a dialogue series, we would suggest that the meetings be kept small, informal, with a loose agenda and strictly managed expectations on both sides. In the interests of transparency we would expect to distribute notes of meetings for public consumption (under agreed rules, such as Chatham House rules, or some comments being off the record). Given the range and number of African groupings in the UK we would envisage that we would return to our framework suggested above to ensure that different dimensions of the African diaspora were present at each meeting, reflecting the different modes of engagement in African affairs. However, participants on both sides would take responsibility for disseminating key points widely to ensure that those not present do not feel completely left out of the process. Nonetheless, those present would not be representing the entire African community in the UK or speaking on behalf of others. Although participation at dialogue sessions might be by invitation only, we would expect that participation might rotate. After a period of between six and nine months, with, say, three dialogue sessions having been completed we would propose a review to consider the merits of the exercise, whether it should continue, be amended, and so on.

¹ Senge, Peter et al (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, London: Nicholas Bealey Publishing, p358.

Diplomats and diaspora dialogue for development

We believe that the small size and informality of the dialogue sessions should help to keep costs to a minimum. With inputs limited to use of a venue (provided pro bono by one of the participants), light refreshments, and notes taken by a civil society participant, we are confident that the costs will not be onerous in either staff time or cash terms.

Conclusion

We have been instrumental in establishing a structured channel of dialogue between the Department for International Development (DFID) and members of the black and minority ethnic communities in the UK, including Africans. This new structure, called Connections for Development, has signed a Strategic Grant Agreement with DFID and will soon be fully operational. It would be ironic if we end up in more frequent and fruitful dialogue with DFID about Africa than with representatives of African governments based in the UK. The time has come to develop a more constructive relationship between African government representatives and the African diaspora at a time when the demands on both camps to better serve Africa's developmental needs are inevitably increasing. Historically, the African diaspora has been instrumental in emancipating Africa from the bonds of slavery and colonialism. In the 21st century, the challenge is no less pressing in ensuring that as Africans we control our own destiny. This proposal for dialogue is but one modest contribution to putting in place one small piece of the jigsaw.