

Brain Drain in Africa

Facts and Figures

“The emigration of African professionals to the West is one of the greatest obstacles to Africa’s development.”

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

“African governments have a great responsibility to ensure that brains remain in the continent; otherwise, in 25 years’ time, Africa will be empty of brains.”

Dr. Lalla Ben Barka
Deputy Executive-Secretary, ECA

“[By] failing to offer greener pastures for its own intelligentsia, [Africa] is committing suicide.”

Professor Edward Ofori-Sarpong
Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Ghana at Legon

The exodus of highly trained manpower from developing countries to industrialized nations is not a new phenomenon; however, the magnitude of the problem in Africa and its alarming increase presents a growing urgency for action as the consequences of brain drain threaten to stunt the overall development of the continent.

The Brain Drain in Figures: a Bleak Picture

Statistics on the brain drain from Africa are scarce but troubling.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Africa has already lost one third of its human capital and is continuing to lose its skilled personnel at an increasing rate, with an estimated 20,000 doctors, university lecturers, engineers and other professionals leaving the continent annually since 1990.

There are currently over 300,000 highly qualified Africans in the Diaspora, 30,000 of which have PhDs.

At the same time, Africa spends US\$4 billion per year (representing 35% of total official development aid to the continent) to employ some 100,000 Western experts performing functions generically described as technical assistance. For example, 90% of private firms in Gabon are managed by expatriates.

Emigration of Skilled Africans to Industrialized Countries (based on IOM and ECA estimates)		
Time Period	Average Annual Rate	Total Number
1960-1974	1,800	27,000
1975-1984	4,000	40,000
1985-1989	12,000	60,000
Since 1990	20,000	--

Africa as a whole counts only 20,000 scientists (3.6 % percent of the world total) and its share in the world's scientific output has fallen from 0.5% to 0.3% as it continues to suffer the brain drain of scientists, engineers and technologists.

The problem of brain drain has reached quite disturbing proportions in certain African countries, with Ethiopia ranked first in the continent in terms of rate of loss of human capital, followed by Nigeria and Ghana.

Over the past 10-15 years, about 50% of Ethiopians who went abroad for training did not return after completing their studies. According to the IOM, Ethiopia lost about 74.6% of its human capital from various institutions between 1980 and 1991. While Ethiopia has 1 full-time economics professor, there are more than 100 Ethiopian economists in the United States.

According to the estimates of the Presidential Committee on Brain Drain set up in 1988 by the Babangida administration, Nigeria, between 1986 and 1990, lost over 10,000 academics from tertiary education institutions alone. Total estimates, including those who left public, industrial and private organizations, are over 30,000. 64% of Nigerians in the United States aged 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree.

In 1997 only, more than 1,000 professionals left Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe National Association of Social Workers estimates that 1,500 of the country's 3,000 trained social workers left for the United Kingdom over the past 10 years.

Basically, African countries are funding the education of their nationals only to see them end up contributing to the growth of developed countries with little or no return on their investment. In Kenya, for example, it costs about US\$40,000 to train a doctor and US\$10,000-15,000 to educate a university student for 4 years.

Health Services: a Particularly Dire Situation

As serious as the consequences of brain drain are for the overall development of the African continent, the health sector is particularly affected; indeed, the desperate shortage of health professionals is the most serious obstacle as Africa tries to fight AIDS and support other health programs.

In several countries, including Kenya and Ghana, the brain drain of medical professionals is threatening the very existence of the countries' health services.

Kenya loses on average 20 medical doctors each month.

The minimum standard set by the World Health Organization (WHO) to ensure basic healthcare services is 20 physicians per 100,000 people. While Western countries boast an average of 222, 38 countries in sub-Saharan Africa fall short of the minimum standard and 13 of these have 5 or fewer.

Ghana lost 60% of its medical doctors in the 1980s and between 600 to 700 Ghanaian physicians are currently practicing in the USA alone, a figure that represents roughly 50% of the total population of doctors in Ghana.

The 1993 UNDP Human Development Report indicated that more than 21,000 Nigerian doctors were practicing in the United States alone while Nigeria suffers from a shortage of doctors. If we were to add

the number of Nigerian doctors in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Europe, Australia and those in other African countries, the figure would be close to 30,000.

One third of Ethiopian medical doctors have already left the country. According to Randall Tobias, the United States Government's global AIDS coordinator, there are more Ethiopian-trained doctors practicing in the city of Chicago alone than in Ethiopia.

In Zambia, the public sector only retained 50 out of 600 doctors trained in the country's medical school from 1978-1999.

The flight of health professionals is not limited to doctors and affects nurses, pharmacists and social services personnel as well.

About 17 sub-Saharan countries have less than half of the WHO minimum standard for nurses of 100 nurses per 100,000 population (for example, Malawi has only 17 nurses per 100,000 people). In contrast, many Western countries have more than 1,000.

The loss of nurses, in particular, is a growing phenomenon, fueled principally by the shortages in developed countries. The United States has 126,000 fewer nurses than it needs and government figures show that the country could face a shortage of 800,000 registered nurses by 2020. Because of such shortages, industrialized nations have embarked on massive international recruitment drives, offering African nurses the opportunity to earn as much as 20 times their salaries.

Causes of Brain Drain

Push Factors

- Low and eroding wages and salaries
- Unsatisfactory living conditions, lack of transport, housing, etc.
- Under-utilization of qualified personnel; lack of satisfactory working conditions; low prospect of professional development
- Lack of research and other facilities, including support staff; inadequacy of research funds, lack of professional equipment and tools
- Social unrest, political conflicts and wars
- Declining quality of educational system
- Discrimination in appointments and promotions
- Lack of freedom

Pull Factors

- Higher wages and income
- Higher standard of living
- Better working conditions; job and career opportunities and professional development
- Substantial funds for research, advanced technology, modern facilities; availability of experienced support staff
- Political stability
- Modern educational system; prestige of 'foreign training'
- Meritocracy, transparency
- Intellectual freedom

Impacts of Brain Drain

Negative

- Reduces the already low quantity of skilled manpower available in African countries and needed for their development
- Reduces numbers of dynamic and innovative people, whether entrepreneurs or academics
- Increases dependence on foreign technical assistance
- Slows the transfer of technology and widens the gap between African and industrialized countries
- Negatively affects the continent's scientific output
- Money lost in income tax revenues and in potential contributions to gross domestic product

Positive

- Contribution of new skills when migrants return
- Remittances from skilled migrants boosts household welfare
- Remittances support the balance of payments

Best estimates suggest that Africans working abroad send home some US\$45 billion a year. While the importance of remittances for developing countries is not disputed, it does not make up for the social costs and adverse effects on developing economies of the outflow of skilled personnel in the form of brain drain.

The Diaspora Option

Strategies used in the past to attempt to reverse the brain drain include retention and the return of skilled migrants to their countries of origin. However, many African countries have acknowledged that efforts either to stem the emigration of highly skilled people or to attract them back to the home country are not always effective.

The Diaspora option (or, “virtual participation”) which encourages highly skilled expatriates to contribute their experience to the development of their country without necessarily physically relocating emerged in the early 1990s as a more realistic strategy to alleviate the consequences of brain drain.

There are some 41 expatriate knowledge networks in the world with the explicit purpose of inter-connecting the expatriates themselves and with their country of origin, 6 of which are linked to countries in Africa, including the Association of Kenyans Abroad; the Moroccan Association of Researchers and Scholars Abroad; the Association of Nigerians Abroad; the South African Network of Skills Abroad; and, the Tunisian Scientific Consortium.

Until recently, African governments had expressed little concern about the loss of skilled people, while development lending agencies often compounded the problem by obliging recipient countries to hire foreign expatriates, as part of the conditions attached to those loans. Moreover, politicians often portrayed countrymen who opted to work and live abroad as unpatriotic. But the African continent has witnessed a growing political will to formally include the Diaspora in its development efforts.

Thus, in July 2001, the Organization for African Unity – the forerunner to the African Union (AU) - adopted a resolution urging member States to “to develop strategies for utilizing the scientific and technological know-how and skills of the African Diaspora” for the development of the continent.

The AU went one step further by calling for the Diaspora to be considered the sixth region of Africa, after North, South, East, West and Central Africa. Heads of state who met for the African Union extraordinary summit in February 2003 agreed to amend the organization's charter to “encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of the continent....”

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) calls for the establishment of a reliable, continental database to determine the magnitude of the problem of brain drain and promote collaboration between Africans abroad and those at home. An important NEPAD priority is to develop Africa's human resources and reverse the brain drain. Under NEPAD, African leaders explicitly call for the creation of the "necessary political, social and economic conditions that would serve as incentives to curb the brain drain...."

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