

The African diaspora in Europe – Standing up to be counted

A background document submitted to the working group preparing for the 1st meeting of ACP Ministers responsible for asylum, migrations and mobility - Brussels, April 11-12

Vincent Okele, African Axis

Introduction

This background document is presented as a contribution to working group preparing for the ACP migration ministers meeting of April 11-12 in Brussels. The document attempts to outline areas where the African diaspora could make an effective contribution to the continent's development prospects. It draws on the perspectives and experience of AFRICAN AXIS, a Brussels-based pan-African diaspora organisation that provides a platform for the African diaspora in the Benelux area to make positive contributions to the continent. A presentation of the activities of this organisation is included in the annex to this document.

Challenge for the African diaspora in Europe

Abstracting from the statistics, or the relatively lack of it, it is a well-accepted fact that the African diaspora is playing an increasing role in Europe. With presence at the corporate, social and political levels, professionals from the African continent are making positive economic and social contributions to their destination countries in Europe.

To address the economic and demographic challenges (ageing population, skill and labour shortages, transformations of migratory flows, global competition for the highly-skilled) a number of EU member states are now touting a new set of overt and not so overt "selective migration" policy recommendations. This new "pull" from the EU, exacerbated by the poor economic conditions that still obtain in most African countries, means that the number of skilled migrants from the African continent set to join their counterparts in Europe will increase in the coming years. The African diaspora community in Europe, especially the skilled workforce, is thus set to grow.

The negative and the relatively positive impact of this on home countries' development prospects have been well documented. The damage caused by the brain drain on the continent's social and economic development is hardly offset by the financial and knowledge transfers made by this community.

The challenge is: What can Africans in the diaspora in Europe do in order to tip the balance in favour of a more positive impact on the continent?

It should engage with all stakeholders that have an influence on the development prospects of the continent and engage in actions and activities that will make positive contributions to this end.

Meeting the challenge

The diaspora community should be able to engage with policy makers, the private sector and the media in Europe and work in concert with the governments and the wider public in Africa.

1) Engaging with EU policy makers

While there exists a number of institutions in Europe that serves as “sparring partners” with EU institutions on African issues, most of them have been created and being supported financially by the EU. Given this state of affairs, one could reasonably argue that the negotiating position of such institutions will not be that strong. African diaspora civil society groups in Europe should assist these institutions in their relationship with the EU by playing effective advocacy role with the goal of influencing Africa-focused policy making at this level. In Brussels, there are over 100 groups that lobby the EU on a number of issues and interests. To our knowledge, there is no independently funded African-led and Africa-focused entity that strives to play such a role in the interest of Africa. The African multilateral institutions such as the African Union and NEPAD should support existing African diaspora organisations that strive to play such a role with a few of institutionalizing and supporting an African Union diaspora force with the capacity and resources to carry out this mandate.

2) Engaging with African governments and Africa

Most African countries have finally recognized the important actual and potential roles that their diaspora play in their development prospects. The ACP Ministers of migration meeting scheduled for April 2006 is a testimony of this long overdue recognition. These governments should be able to make use of their diaspora community in advancing their interests in Europe. The diaspora should be able to support the emerging enlightened and progressive African leadership, but at the same time be able to provide input in policy formulation and posit its viewpoint on agendas and actions undertaken.

African governments should be able to put in place schemes that will make it easier for Africans in the diaspora to take up temporary positions in their host countries. Such schemes might serve as the prelude to permanent return of some of its skilled workforce. For those who are unwilling or unable to return permanently, there is need to tap into their financial and knowledge resources through innovative schemes.

3) Engaging with the European and African Private Sector

It is now evident that “aid” from the international community, rather than helping, has constituted a stumbling block to the efficient functioning of most African economies, some of which depends on this for approximately 50% of their budget. It is also widely acknowledged that Africa’s development prospects can only be enhanced through the

establishment of a robust, vibrant and competitive private sector. The reality, however, is that the African private sector is dominated by micro to small-sized enterprises with no prospects of being able to move to the next level that could provide the avenue of absorbing Africa's unemployed youth. With their knowledge, financial and network resources in Europe, the diaspora community should serve as a catalyst for channelling investments into the continent. In addition to being able to invest into the continent in their own right, they need to seek out and facilitate investments by European firms in the continent's private sector.

A vibrant private sector made of medium to large-sized enterprises will go a long way in stemming the outflow of the continent's skilled workforce and would potentially serve as a trigger for the reversal of the brain drain.

To make this happen, investment promotion authorities and other trade promotion institutions in the different African countries should work in concert with representatives of the diaspora community.

4) Engaging with the media

The diaspora groupings should engage proactively and reactively with the European media in stemming and reversing the "ugly duckling" image of Africa being portrayed in Europe. It should be reactive in rebutting any item in the media which does not provide a balanced view of Africa and Africans. It should be proactive in making Africa's success stories available to the wider European public through the media and raise issues of importance that are being neglected by the mainstream media.

Conclusion

Despite all the negatives that surround the existence of a growing African diaspora community in Europe, it is vital for African governments to engage with this community for the contribution it can make in furthering the continent's development prospects. To be effective in carrying out this mandate, they need the support and encouragement of African institutions such as the African Union and NEPAD.

By mainstreaming its diaspora community in their relationships with the international and multilateral institutions (in the EPA negotiations with the EU for example), Africa will be conferring on them the legitimacy required to engage effectively with these institutions in furthering the interests of the continent.

Furthermore, a real dialogue should develop with the diaspora community in view of marshalling out avenues for channelling this potential resource to enhancing the development prospects of the continent. A starting point will be to work with the community in designing programs within the proposed intra-ACP migration capacity building facility framework thus tapping into their wealth of knowledge and experience in this domain.