

# AFRICAN DIASPORA AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN AFRICA

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**Abstract:** The study assesses the strategic position of African Diaspora in addressing the seemingly intractable problem of poverty in Africa. It is generally believed that the African Diaspora is in a position to positively influence the overall development in Africa considering its sizeable presence in the economic and political power centres in the West. The African Diaspora interventions that hinge on poverty alleviation range from promoting good governance practices, financial remittances, direct investments, voluntary development projects, boosting local economy to entrepreneurship and capacity building. The milestones achieved in these areas as well as the constraints and challenges faced by organizations, foundations and business enterprises established by African Diaspora in the continent are examined. The study adopts Group theory as framework for analysis. This theory is built around the proposition that men and women with shared interests can organize, interact and seek goals which influence or redirect public policies. It is argued that since Africans in Diaspora have formed potent networks in cities where they live in Asia, America, Europe and elsewhere around the globe, such economic and political powers can be effectively leveraged to address the poverty conundrum in Africa.

**Keywords:** African Diaspora, Development, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation

## Introduction

The issue of poverty in post-colonial Africa has caused increasing global concern and represents a major policy problem. This is in spite of the fact that Africa has all it takes, in terms of human and material resources, to become one of the strongest and leading economies in the world. It is a common knowledge that African labour and products (raw materials) built the American industrial complex and stimulated European economy. As Akani (2007: 21) rightly observed, Africa made epochal contributions to knowledge and civilization which formed the bedrock for successive human advancements but is, regrettably, still 'wobbling and wallowing in stinking poverty'. In fact, Akani noted that in all departments and definitions, Africa is 'poor, adrift, rural and cannot compete with its counterparts in terms of human development index and human security'. Putting the problem in a proper perspective, Nimibofa (2009:13) asserts that Africa presents a paradox. The continent is rich in natural resources but majority of the people wallow in 'disgraceful misery index'. This is heart-wrenching for a continent reputed to be the cradle of civilization.

The anatomy of Africa's problems shows that poverty is at the continent's underdevelopment conundrum. Issues of poor governance, weak institutions, decrepit physical infrastructure, inadequate social safety nets, short-life expectancy, ethno-religious conflicts etc, plaguing Africa are not only tied to poverty but are symptomatic of a poor political and economic structure. According to Omotola (2011:34), Africa's doldrums stem largely from failure of successive governments in most countries, over the years, to boldly address the issue of poverty which has stymied development. The pervasiveness of poverty, despite several policy interventions, attests to the failure and ineffectiveness of Africa's development plans and initiatives. The *magna carta* interventions made to redirect the development fortunes of Africa and alleviate poverty under the auspices of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) replaced by African Union (AU) are the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).

The Lagos Plan of Action, with its core driving concept of collective self-reliance, had progressive eradication of mass poverty and fair distribution of income and benefits of development among the populace as one of its cardinal objectives. Similarly, New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) is seen as a blueprint for the holistic development of Africa, particularly an initiative that would eradicate poverty, and place African countries, individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development (Charles, 2007: 114). NEPAD acknowledged that promotion of democracy, good governance, peace and security, development of human and physical resources, allocation of appropriate funds to social sector, etc, are effective means to tackle poverty (Thisday, July 9, 2002: 30). In spite of these seemingly laudable blueprints for poverty eradication in Africa, the Commission for Africa established by former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, described African poverty and stagnation as the greatest tragedy of the present civilization. Imisim (2005:21) quoted a member of the Commission, Fola Adeola, as commenting that ‘the continent is the only single regional bloc in the world that is not participating in the rapidly expanding global economy of a time there has never been greater wealth in history of mankind’. Even former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, once declared that, ‘the problem of the Africans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the problem of poverty, underdevelopment and marginalization’.

Analyses of poverty and Human Development Index paint a dismal picture in Africa. Using multiple dimension of poverty, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its 2009 Human Development Report shows that 22 out of 24 nations identified as having ‘Low Human Development’ were in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, 34 of the 50 nations on the United Nations list of least developed countries are in Africa. Many nations in Africa are also saddled with debt burden. Clean water and sewage treatment system is rare in most parts of Africa leading to diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery, polio, etc. Infant mortality is high, while life expectancy, illiteracy and education are all low in Africa (Wikipedia, retrieved on 2014- 8- 27). The direct consequence of these ‘misery index’ in Africa is low standard of living and quality of life.

The picture of Africa is that the political economy is largely characterized with features of a rentier state (massive inflow of rents from oil and other extractive resources). A notable feature is poverty induced by turning the state apparatus, including both politics and the bureaucracy, into a rent – distribution machine. In other words, the focus of the state action shifts from service delivery to allocation tussles and consumerism (Roll, 2011: 11). Arising from the above, poverty, conflict, corruption and other symptoms of bad governance often thrive in such an environment. This, probably, explains why various development plans and initiatives targeted at poverty alleviation have been stifled. Therefore, given this background analysis, the study examines whether or not African Diaspora provides a platform, through varied interventionist programmes, for mitigating the escalating poverty levels and leveraging development in Africa. The paper also explores areas of interaction and engagement between the African Diaspora and homeland institution in poverty reduction strategy. African Diaspora, no doubt, constitutes an integral part of African population. To that extent, the popular axiom that ‘poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere’ becomes imperative. The paper is organized in five sections including this introduction. Sections two and three focus on conceptual clarifications and theoretical perspectives respectively. Section four discusses various interventionist programmes of African Diaspora. The final section draws a conclusion.

### **Conceptualization**

**African Diaspora:** African Diaspora is defined and understood from varied standpoints due, mainly, to its nature, dimensions and changing configuration. While some persons interpret African Diaspora to be a homogeneous group, others see it as being heterogeneous on the basis of mode of African emigration to different parts of the world at different times (Oucho, 2008). African Diaspora refers to the communities in Europe, America, Asia, the Middle East and various parts of the globe that are of African descent. The concept initially applied to Africans shipped to America during the Atlantic slave trade. In recent years, African diaspora involves all forms of dispersal of people, whose lineage are traceable to indigenous communities in Africa, who are out of the continent ranging from forced, displaced to voluntary migration for social, economic and political reasons (Nimibofa, 2009: 13).

The African Union (AU) defined ‘African Diaspora’ as ‘the geographic dispersal of people whose ancestors, within historical memory, originally came from Africa, but who are currently domiciled, or claim residence or citizenship, outside the continent of Africa’. Indeed, the AU frames the definition of who is a Diaspora Africa very much in terms of contribution from them towards the development of Africa. Accordingly, AU states that ‘the African Diaspora consists of people of African origin living outside the continent irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent.’ Although the number is not determined, people of African ancestry, referred to as ‘African Diaspora’ have large populations in the USA, Canada, Europe, South America, Asia, Australia, etc. Oucho 2008 considers Africa Diaspora to be ‘a heterogeneous

group of people of African descent spanning much of Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean'. Ouchou also noted that Africa Diaspora included temporary African migrants who may join the existing diaspora to stay permanently in the countries of destinations. The first clear attempt to define 'African Diaspora' in terms that hold a central position was provided by Harris (1982) in Alpers (2001: 8). According to oft-quoted definition:

The African diaspora concept subsumes the following: the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous, and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class and gender.

In this study, the term 'African Diaspora' is used to denote people whose ancestry or lineage are traceable to indigenous communities in Africa but are residing temporarily or permanently outside the continent from time immemorial to the present era.

### **Poverty Alleviation**

The concept of poverty is fluid. It means different things to different people and even to same people different things at different times. Because of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, Ezeh (2009) in Oshewolo (2011:214) submits that there is plethora of literature approached from different perspectives. World Bank's operationalization categorized poverty into 'absolute' and 'relative poverty'. While the former refers to abject human conditions manifesting in hunger, unemployment, exploitation and lack of access to clean water, sanitation, health-care, and education, the latter is a manifestation of socio-economic inequalities (Aminu, 1992: 25). From the standpoint of the former, Ogboghodo (1992: 34) refers to poverty as the condition of being without adequate food, education, health, housing, transportation, income, etc, bringing about the inability to attain a minimal standard of living. This condition connotes extreme socio-economic deprivation and a level of living that is below a particular minimum standard. This categorization of poverty is in line with the focus of this study. It suffices to say that poverty in Africa, whether 'absolute' or 'relative', is integral to or a manifestation of a much fundamental problem of underdevelopment. In reaction to the horrendous poverty crisis in Africa, successive governments have made poverty alleviation a major policy plank, albeit as mere tokenism, rhetoric and political cronyism (Nyewusira, 2007: 29).

Poverty alleviation involves measures taken to combat poverty and promote development, and it is achieved through the adoption of different development plans and initiative (Oshewolo, 2011: 217). But Ogboghodo (1992: 38) contends that a viable strategy for poverty alleviation is more likely to be adopted in countries where the poor are part of political and economic decision-making. Sadly, the political economy of most African states does not in the least approximate any arrangement in which the poor participate in decision-making. From this viewpoint, poverty is likely to continue unabated in Africa irrespective of the number of poverty alleviation programmes introduced by government. We take poverty alleviation, in this study, to mean deliberate governmental and non-governmental political, social and economic interventions that address the structural bases of poverty through a clear understanding of the causes and pathways of poverty with a view to leveraging better conditions of living for the masses. In sum, such interventions more or less represent an exit strategy from poverty trap. Poverty alleviation programmes may have different structures and outlooks, but it maintains the central objective of reducing poverty and making life meaningful for the masses.

### **Theoretical Discourse**

The Group theory is adopted as a framework for analysis. The theory presupposes that society is a mosaic of numerous groups living in interaction with each other. It is built around the proposition that men and women with shared interests can organize, interact and seek goals which influence or redirect public policies. Group theory has a basic assumption that public policy or decisions result from intergroup struggles for power and policy direction (Johari, 2011: 31; Allen & Gilbert, 2011: 27). Arthur Bentley is widely acknowledged to be the exponent of group approach to the understanding of governmental process in his classic book; *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures*. Other Proponents of the group theory are David Truman, Allen Potter, H. Eckstein, Samuel Finer, Henry Ehrmann, Charles Hagen and Earl Lathan (Nwachukwu, 2008: 201).

To most group theorists, a group must be associated with activity which is what gives it both its form and relevance, and that explains why group behaviour is at the centre of political or governmental process. These groups may be cultural associations, political parties, interest groups, pressure groups, ethnic nationalities, etc, identifiable with one form of activity orientation or another. The result is that each of these groups, according to Bernard Brown (1962) in

Johari (2011: 310) 'tends to associate itself with a distinctive interpretation of politics or Ideology' The group theory, therefore, shows a great deal of interest in the internal organization and processes of various groups and discusses questions relating to their strategies, resources, internal cohesion, skill and competence at maneuvering and access to decision-makers. The state in this circumstance exists as an impartial arbiter to regulate group conflict such that government policy is basically a compromise among various groups. In the words of Johari (2011:301), 'the groups make claims on the government and the government in turn, acts as the adjuster or balancer of the interests of the social groups'. The group theorists also see the several social groups as playing stabilizing role. As Johari (2011: 312) again puts it, 'the competing groups that make up society are seen as participating in an unconscious balancing process'. Therefore, group theory contends that governmental policies in the main, emanate from the conflict, competition, and consensus among groups. This is why Nwachukwu (2008:210) emphasizes that for one to understand the operation and dynamics of the political system, the process of governance and the formulation of policies, one must study the activities of groups in that system.

In applying the group theory to guide this paper, we are emboldened by the fact that in this era of globalization, which is a reality of the new age, poverty and its effects in Africa remains a threat to the prosperity of African Diaspora. In other words, African Diaspora cannot be insulated from the poverty ravaging Africa. To that extent, African diaspora, as a group with certain background, interests and attitudes can apply collective action to influence or redirect government policies on poverty alleviation. What is of importance to us here is not the structural composition of African Diaspora as a group but its activities and mode of exerting influence at the different stages of public policy making, particularly in the area of poverty alleviation. This sort of intervention of African Diaspora, as we noted earlier in the treatise of Johari (2011), amounts to 'participating in an unconscious balancing process'.

### **Thematic Analysis Of Poverty Alleviation Strategies By African Diapora**

The concern of this paper is the poor in Africa. To x-ray the impact made by African Diaspora in improving living conditions of the poor masses of Africa, the analysis will be executed under two themes, which are in no way exhaustive.

#### **Financial Remittances**

Financial remittances are transfer of money and good by migrants or migrant groups back to their countries of origin or citizenship (Oucho. 2008). It is a major plank of diaspora – driving development activities in the homelands. The Africa Diaspora has become a vital source of foreign exchange for Africa to the extent that it has been designated as the sixth development 'zone' by the African Union. According to Bodom (2014), figures from IMF indicate that remittances increased from US\$15 billion in 1998 to about US\$20 billion in 2003. Bodom also wrote that figures of remittances posted by Solome Lemme indicate that African Diaspora sent home about US\$40 billion yearly between 2007 – 2011 amounting to over US\$200 billion. He concludes that these figures from remittances are far more than the development aid funds granted the continent by international donors.

Turatsinze (2010: 1) made the following comparison between remittances and foreign aid funds in some African countries. In 2005, the remittances received were for Nigeria US\$3,329 million (3% of 2005 GDP) and Kenya US\$524 million (3% of 2005 GDP). In 2006, Ghana received US\$1.27 billion which was more than the foreign aids received and more than the country's export earnings for the same period. In 2007, Liberia received USD303.3 million, higher than its annual public budget of the same year. In 2009, Rwanda received USD165 million higher than the annual development aid.

These figures from remittances, according to Turatsinze, only reflect the official remittances and exclude money sent through informal networks. The account of Dr. Akin Awofolaju, a Director on Nigeria in Diaspora (NIDO) Board, shows that financial remittance to Nigeria between 2013 and 2014 is over US\$35 billion.

In much of sub-Saharan Africa where investment opportunities are limited, financial remittances lift households out of poverty in which majority of households are entrapped. Remittances provide families in Africa with additional income, some of which end up in consumption and others in investments. Oucho (2008) notes that financial remittances reduce infant mortality, increases access to water, boost growth by financing investment, provides better nutrition and access to health and education. Mohamoud (2003:4) while writing on correlation between financial remittances and poverty reduction stated that:

Financial remittances provide a lifeline for many of Africa's poor. At the micro-level remittances has become a much needed and reliable source of stable income to many marginalized families, extended families and local community groups. During natural disasters, for example, increased contribution from African Diaspora effectively

provides a form of insurance which helps families and communities cope during crises. As such, remittances from the African Diaspora not only help provide relief to the poor but also, increasingly, serve to guarantee economic stability in many poor countries in Africa.

The advantages financial remittances have over foreign aid are numerous; first, remittances go directly to the targets; family members, local communities, paying school fees, building houses, health matters etc. Some of the remittances are also invested in businesses that create jobs and generate wealth in what Turatsinze (2010) termed, 'Back Home Investment'. Such investments are usually channeled to agriculture, food processing, transportation, communication and energy, and the profits reinvested in Africa instead of being repatriated as it is the case for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Through this process, African Diaspora stimulates economies of its home lands and contributes effectively to the eradication of poverty in Africa. Secondly, remittance funds, unlike foreign aid funds, are devoid of conditionalities for the most part. As a matter of fact, foreign aid funds are normally used as a neo-colonial tool to influence the political and socio-economic decision-making processes of recipient countries in Africa by donor countries and agencies. Rather than alleviate poverty, foreign aid funds have exacerbated poverty in Africa through neo-liberal policies of Structural Adjustment Programmes. Therefore, rather than depend on foreign aid funds, financial remittances have proven to be a more viable option in poverty reduction and speeding up African development.

### **Social Remittances**

The North-South Centre of the Council of Europe (2006) in Oucho (2008: 4) defines social remittances as 'ideas, practices, mind-sets, worldviews, values and attitudes, norms of behavior and social capital (knowledge, experience and expertise) that the diaspora mediate and either consciously or unconsciously transfers from hosts to home communities. Africa as a continent suffered from the loss of millions of highly skilled and educated professionals from the days of Atlantic slave trade to the present era of brain-drain. These professionals, who now constitute the nucleus of African Diaspora, obtain these social remittances through expertise in work places, socialization and acculturation in host countries, and transmit same to Africa through the process of globalization. From the account of Dr. Akin Awofolaju, a Nigerian diasporan, African diaspora undertakes all possible means to transform the African brain-drain to a brain-gain by participating in the development of their respective home countries in Africa (This day, August 30, 2014. P. 20).

Social remittance enhances good governance, freedom, basic civic rights, democracy, rule of law, etc, in Africa. In this regard, Mohamoud (2003:21) submits that African diaspora 'promotes and demands democratic and well-functioning public institutions that are accountable to the people, transparent, and respect the freedom of expression and protest'. These demands for radical political change profoundly reshape economic policies along the lines of poverty reduction and developmental initiatives. The influencing of political climate by the African diaspora to engender pro-poor policies in Africa is sometimes achieved under the auspices of pressure groups. For instance, the core vision of Nigerians in Diaspora (NIDO), umbrella organization for all Nigerians in the Americas and the Caribbean, revolves around social remittance, namely, to instill ethical consciousness and civic responsibility that will enhance the socio-economic advancement of Nigerians and Africans in general. This goal is pursued through programmes, policies, strategies and advocacy issues targeted at job creation and poverty reduction mechanism in Nigerian rural communities. NIDO collaborates with community based organizations to harness Nigerian diaspora's 'talents, expertise and resources in this direction (This day, August 30, 2014. P.20). There are other African Diaspora political and social-economic groups that had and are still campaigning for reforms targeted at development in Africa. Examples are United Democratic Front for Nigeria – Abroad, Diaspora Openhouse in Washington, D.C, Development Marketplace for Africans in Europe, Africa Recruit, the Ghanaian Diaspora, Somaliland Forum and the Association of Zimbabweans Based Abroad (AZBA) (Oucho, 2008). These diaspora groups have repeatedly clamoured for political and economic reforms that engender poverty reduction. They operate as external wings to co-ordinate the activities of pro-democracy movements and civil society organizations in Africa such as Pro-Poor Governance Network, Civil Society on Poverty Eradication, and National Democratic Coalition.

Part of social remittances that African Diaspora transfers back to the continent is variety of activities which contributes to the development of the continent. There is no doubt that African diaspora possesses huge intellectual, business and financial resources that are badly needed in the continent. As a matter of fact, African diaspora constitutes a network of human agencies through which new political ideas, intellectual capital and technological renaissance is transmitted back to a continent reputed to be the cradle of civilization. As Mohamoud (2003:20) puts it, 'the African diaspora is actively forging new trends of transnational social networks and linkages'. In terms of development challenges in Africa, Mohamoud further posits that Africa Diaspora campaign and press for debt relief,

trade concessions, the opening of markets for products from Africa and enhanced aid budgets in the social sector and the informal economy that cater for the poor'. African Diaspora is also in the vanguards of influencing the policy decision of developed nations towards Africa. But the reality is that African Diaspora intervention, in the form of social remittances, is constrained by poor governance, lack of personal freedom, basic civic rights, attenuated democracy and rule of law, volatile political environment, unwillingness of governing elite to collaborate with skilled and professional diaspora for development initiatives and absence of policies that specifically target diaspora participation in governance. (The North-South Centre (2006) in Oucho (2008:np). Indeed, the rate of policy and institutional failure and the attendant development deadlock in Africa is reflective of a closed governance system that excludes in the main, African diaspora's intellectual, business and financial resources.

Peggy Levitt (1996) in Oucho (2008:np) identified three types of social remittances transmitted to Africa by African Diaspora. They are; normative structures; systems of practice; and social capital. The first consists of ideas, values and beliefs, norms for behavior, notions about family responsibility, principles of neighbourliness, community participation and social mobility. The second relates to religious rituals individuals engage in, how people participate in political and civic groups, establishment of leadership roles, the process of socialization, goal-setting and formation for inter-agency ties. The third type of social remittance, which is social capital, is a combination of the previous ones. It occurs as exchanges when migrants return to live or visit their communities of origin; when non-migrants visit their migrant relations outside their homeland; or through exchanges of letters, emails, videos, cassettes and telephone calls. As good as these social remittances may sound, we must caution here that some with stereotyped Western or alien culture cannot lift Africa out of poverty. The challenge, therefore, is how Africa can make effective use of social remittance for poverty reduction and development without impeding local initiatives.

### Conclusion

Remittances from the African Diaspora are a form of external stimulus to many poor countries in Africa. In this regard, it is a reliable source of development inputs from the rich West to the poor in Africa. The study demonstrated the significant link between African Diaspora remittance (financial and social) and poverty alleviation in Africa. As a form of pro-poor finance, financial remittances are used for different social and development purposes by recipients. Social remittances, on the other hand, build capacity in a manner that has direct correlation with poverty reduction.

Given the immeasurable benefits of remittances, African Diaspora must be actively involved in the governance and decision-making process of its homelands. Thus, the African Union's Sixth 'Zone' policy, which included African Diaspora as the sixth region of the AU'S organizational structure, should be activated to incorporate African Diaspora as development agents and financiers, considering its huge intellectual, business and financial resources.

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