

From Waste to Wealth: Mobilising African Diaspora Cross-Cultural Expertise to Build Bridges of Trust for Sustainable Enterprise Investment in Africa

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Abstract: Africa stands at a critical crossroads, simultaneously defined as a continent of crisis and of promise. Despite contributing the least to global carbon emissions, it is among the most vulnerable to climate shocks, facing droughts, floods, and ecological stress that deepen human insecurity. Traditional aid and foreign investment have often failed to provide sustainable solutions, being either short-term and donor-driven or extractive and environmentally destructive. In this context, the African diaspora—estimated at more than 170 million globally—represents an underutilised but potentially transformative force for building resilient and sustainable development pathways. This paper examines the role of diaspora entrepreneurs as catalysts of sustainable enterprise in Africa, with a particular focus on the imperative to “turn waste into wealth.” Using a reflective synthesis methodology, the authors combine a systematic scoping review of peer-reviewed case studies with narrative reflections from over a decade of cross-cultural research collaboration and recent enterprise development between Africa, China, and Australia. Findings highlight four insights. First, diaspora capital is not only financial but relational, rooted in identity and trust, enabling diaspora actors to bridge cultural and institutional divides. Second, sustainability, largely absent from academic literature, emerges strongly in practice, with diaspora-led ventures experimenting with circular economy models such as recycling plastics into building materials and repurposing agricultural waste into industrial inputs. Third, remittances, while vital, are insufficient to catalyse transformation without institutional frameworks that channel them into enterprise and industry. Fourth, diaspora facilitated investment is best understood as a long-term journey requiring patience, incremental wins, and resilience rather than quick returns. These insights carry significant policy implications. We argue that African governments must move beyond symbolic diaspora engagement to establish empowered institutional platforms. Specifically, the creation of Ministries of Diaspora Affairs, led by empowered ministers, could remove bureaucratic barriers and accelerate diaspora-facilitated foreign investment. In an era marked by inward-looking trade protectionism, rising military expenditure, and sharp reductions in international aid, ignoring the diaspora would be perilous, while harnessing their potential could unlock Africa’s developmental capacity and position the continent at the forefront of sustainable enterprise innovation.

Keywords: Waste, Sustainable enterprise, African diaspora, Cross-cultural

Introduction

The African continent is defined in global discourse as both a space of crisis and of promise. Environmental degradation, civil wars, fragile institutions, corruption, and youth unemployment dominate headlines, yet so too do narratives of resilience, innovation, and demographic opportunity (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; UNECA, 2020). The African diaspora—estimated at over 170 million globally—sits at the intersection of these competing narratives. Each year, diaspora members remit more than USD 50 billion to Africa, surpassing the volume of official development assistance (World Bank, 2023). Yet these flows remain overwhelmingly consumption-focused, sustaining households and communities but rarely catalysing structural transformation (Moyo, 2009).

In this context, sustainability must be placed at the heart of any discussion of Africa's development future. Sustainability is broadly defined as the capacity to pursue economic growth and social progress in ways that safeguard ecological systems and ensure intergenerational equity (Brundtland Commission, 1987; IPCC, 2022). The African dilemma is stark: the continent has historically contributed the least to the global carbon footprint, yet it is at the receiving end of climate crises with the least capacity to mitigate and adapt (UNEP, 2021). Every drought, flood, cyclone, and ecological shock is magnified by limited infrastructure and fragile institutions, translating climate stress directly into human insecurity (UNECA, 2020). This asymmetry renders sustainability not a luxury but a survival necessity for African societies.

Against this backdrop, enterprise development linked to diaspora investment holds unique potential. Unlike traditional aid, which is often short-term, donor-driven, and vulnerable to shifting geopolitical priorities, diaspora capital is more patient and grounded in enduring ties of identity, culture, and obligation (Nyame-Asiamah et al., 2020). Unlike much foreign direct investment, which can be extractive, enclave-based, and environmentally destructive, diaspora-led businesses are more likely to be embedded in communities, attuned to local realities, and accountable to both local and transnational constituencies (Ayakwah et al., 2020; Thondhlana et al., 2019). This positionality gives diaspora investors a unique comparative advantage to integrate sustainability principles seamlessly into enterprise models.

The imperative to "turn waste into wealth" exemplifies this potential. By embedding circular economy principles—transforming agricultural by-products, plastics, or other waste streams into new value chains—diaspora entrepreneurs can simultaneously generate livelihoods, reduce environmental harm, and build climate resilience (Kessy & Shayo, 2022). In this way, diaspora-facilitated enterprises can catalyse development pathways that are not only profitable but regenerative, avoiding the ecological trade-offs that have accompanied industrialisation elsewhere (UNEP, 2021). Sustainability thus becomes not an external standard imposed from outside, but an intrinsic organising principle of African diaspora investment practice.

Methods

To explore this phenomenon, we adopted a reflective synthesis methodology that combines a systematic scoping review of diaspora business investment studies (2015–2025) with the authors' personal narrative reflections on attempts to facilitate cross-cultural investment partnerships. A key aim of the scoping review was to assess the extent to which diaspora-facilitated entrepreneurs in Africa are engaging with concepts and practices of sustainability (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010).

The scoping review followed standard procedures: academic databases and journals were searched for empirical studies focusing on diaspora or returnee entrepreneurs investing in African businesses. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar between January and July 2025, using keywords such as "diaspora investment," "diaspora entrepreneurship," and "Africa," in combination with sustainability-related terms such as "sustainable business," "green entrepreneurship," "climate resilience," and "circular economy." Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles, reports, and working papers published in English between 2010 and 2025.

While scoping reviews map the state of knowledge, they often omit the nuanced insights that come from lived experience. In the case of African diaspora investment, studies highlight structural, institutional, and network-related factors but rarely capture the intermediary roles, trust-building processes, and relational dynamics that diaspora actors personally enact (Thondhlana et al., 2019). To bridge this gap, we integrated personal narrative reflections using autoethnographic methods (Ellis et al., 2011). Reflexivity involved documenting experiences in diaspora engagement projects and reflecting critically on challenges of mobilising trust across cultures.

These reflections build on over a decade of collaboration between the authors, beginning with shared research interests in sustainability and extending to ongoing cross-cultural research and business development partnerships linking Africa, China, and Australia (Yinghong et al., 2018).

Results

A total of six peer-reviewed case studies met inclusion criteria for the scoping review, covering Ghana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and broader continental perspectives (Ayakwah et al., 2020; Kessy & Shayo, 2022; Lituchy, 2019; Mayer et al., 2016; Nyame-Asiamah et al., 2020; Thondhlana et al., 2019). Three focused explicitly on Ghana, one on Zimbabwe, one on Tanzania, and one on Africa more broadly. Most employed qualitative case study methods (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of included studies on African diaspora investment in African businesses (2015–2025)

Author(s), Year	Country focus	Study design & methods	Sample / cases	Key themes & findings	Engagement with sustainability
Nyame-Asiamah, Amoako, Amankwah-Amoah & Debrah, 2020	Africa (returnees from UK, mainly Ghana/Nigeria)	Qualitative, grounded theory; interviews with returnee entrepreneurs	Returnee entrepreneurs from UK investing in Africa	Institutional push–pull dynamics influence investment decisions; diaspora driven by host-country constraints and homeland opportunities; strong role of identity and networks	No
Ayakwah, Sepulveda & Lyon, 2020	Ghana (fruit-processing clusters)	Empirical case study, qualitative interviews and cluster analysis	Two fruit-processing clusters with diaspora/returnee entrepreneurs	Diaspora networks help SMEs access export markets; knowledge and connections are as critical as capital; diaspora acts as bridge between local clusters and global value chains	Yes (indirect, via food value chains and export standards)
Thondhlana, Madziva & Garwe, 2019	Zimbabwe	Case study, qualitative interviews	Zimbabwean diaspora innovators and entrepreneurs	Diaspora contributes to innovation and knowledge transfer; business formation linked to intellectual and technological resources rather than capital alone	No
Lituchy (ed.), 2019 (Journal of African Business special issue)	Multi-country, Africa-wide	Special issue bringing together multiple empirical studies	N/A (editorial overview of cases)	Synthesises diaspora entrepreneurship evidence across countries; highlights institutional, cultural and policy dynamics of diaspora business engagement	Partially (mentions policy and institutional reforms but no explicit environmental sustainability)
Author(s) not listed, 2022 (ScienceDirect)	Tanzania	Country case study, qualitative interviews and policy analysis	Diaspora entrepreneurs and policy stakeholders	Enthusiasm for business engagement undermined by bureaucratic hurdles and weak policy frameworks; calls for paradigm shift in diaspora engagement strategies	No
Anonymous, 2016 (DOAJ/Ingenta)	Ghana (Germany–Ghana comparison)	Exploratory case study	Two entrepreneurs (one diaspora-based in Germany;	Network benefits vary: diaspora entrepreneur relies on transnational ties,	No

Author(s), Year	Country focus	Study design & methods	Sample / cases	Key themes & findings	Engagement with sustainability
			one returnee in Ghana)	while returnee leverages local embeddedness; both face infrastructural and institutional challenges	

Nyame-Asiamah et al. (2020) analysed how institutional push and pull factors shape the decision-making of African returnees from the UK, finding that weak host-country environments and strong family/cultural ties influenced investment back home. Ayakwah et al. (2020) showed how Ghanaian returnee entrepreneurs mobilise transnational networks to overcome constraints and facilitate small business exports. Thondhlana et al. (2019) examined Zimbabwean innovators, emphasising diaspora contributions to innovation and knowledge transfer. Lituchy (2019) curated African case studies of diaspora entrepreneurship, situating them within institutional reforms. Kessy and Shayo (2022) highlighted bureaucratic hurdles and the need for a paradigm shift in Tanzania's diaspora engagement. Finally, Mayer et al. (2016) compared Ghanaian diaspora entrepreneurs in Germany with returnees in Ghana, underscoring the role of network embeddedness.

Across the six studies, explicit engagement with sustainability is minimal. Only Ayakwah et al., (2020) indirectly touched on sustainability by examining diaspora contributions to Ghana's fruit-processing clusters, where compliance with export standards and integration into global food value chains necessitated certain sustainable practices in production and supply chains. Lituchy's (2019) editorial special issue acknowledged institutional and policy reforms that could intersect with sustainability agendas, but did not foreground environmental or climate considerations. The other four studies—Nyame-Asiamah et al. (2020), Thondhlana et al. (2019), the Tanzania case (2022), and the Ghana–Germany comparison (2016)—focused on networks, institutional barriers, innovation, and identity, with no explicit reference to ecological sustainability, climate resilience, or waste-to-wealth models. This suggests that, while diaspora investment literature is rich in institutional and economic analysis, its integration of sustainability concepts remains underdeveloped.

Thematic Findings from Reflexive Narratives

Analysis of the narratives revealed six interwoven themes that illustrate how diaspora identity, relationships, and ventures unfold across borders. Each theme is best understood not as an abstract idea but as lived experience, often emerging in moments of tension, discovery, or unexpected opportunity.

The first theme concerned diaspora identity and Africa's global image. Living in Australia for decades meant carrying the weight of Africa's reputation, often encountering subtle prejudice shaped by stereotypes of instability and crisis. In conversations with diaspora friends, parents worried about how their children would grow up in a society that saw their continent only through headlines of famine or war. For many, supporting Africa's development became more than philanthropy; it was a way of ensuring that the next generation of diaspora children could walk taller, proud of a homeland portrayed not as broken but as flourishing.

A second theme highlighted sustainability as a guiding framework. One moment of inspiration came when through our China-Africa-Australia research networks, a Chinese investor approached us with the idea of producing activated carbon from discarded coconut shells in Ghana. The venture promised to tackle two crises at once: pollution from gold mining and the mounting piles of agricultural waste. Around the same time, a pilot project in Accra began experimenting with recycling plastic waste into building materials. The enthusiasm was palpable, but so were the doubts—could something so polluting be turned into safe housing, or would hidden health risks emerge? These episodes showed sustainability not as a slogan but as a daily balancing act of risks, evidence, and hope.

The third theme focused on the shift from remittances to strategic investment. Every December, long lines of diaspora Africans queued at money transfer offices, sending billions back to ancestral homes to pay for food, school fees, and hospital bills. While lifesaving, this generosity rarely built industries. Stories from other diasporas—Indian, Chinese, Israeli—served as a reminder that remittances could be transformed into research hubs, technology parks, and export industries. For Africa to make that leap, there was a clear call for structures such as empowered Ministries of Diaspora Affairs, capable of turning goodwill into lasting economic transformation. Without such institutions, diaspora money risked building only private houses rather than national industries. The challenges were evident in cross-border business exchanges: as one Ghanaian producer noted in messages to diaspora partners, export certification was a

hurdle. Others pointed to constraints such as limits on shipping mushrooms to the U.S. due to import restrictions. These small but real barriers showed how fragile efforts at moving from remittances to enterprise investment can be.

The fourth theme concerned trust as the cornerstone of partnerships. A nearly year-long exchange of WeChat messages between a Ghanaian team and a Chinese investor tested everyone's patience. Local partners, growing frustrated, began asking whether the investor was serious, while the investor himself raised questions about whether government incentives would be available. In between stood the diaspora facilitator, spending late nights crafting reassuring messages, smoothing misunderstandings, and carrying the emotional burden of keeping both sides engaged. Similarly, negotiations around institutional partnerships—such as the proposed MoU between Ho Technical University in Ghana and Shenyang University of Chemical Technology in China—reminded all parties that while opportunities for collaboration were real, processes took time. As one Ghanaian leader wrote candidly, “we can't sign the MoU by the 15th as our MoUs go through a lot of processes.” Patience, persistence, and reassurance were therefore essential currencies in building trust.

The fifth theme emphasised diaspora as relational bridges. Relationships often began in unexpected ways. What started as modest academic exchanges between Australia and China—researchers visiting each other's universities, co-authoring small papers—grew into a trusted platform through which Ghanaian business ideas could be introduced. Family ties proved equally powerful. A chat with author KT's US-based Canadian/New Zealand cousin-in-law led to introductions with U.S. importers already sourcing organic dried fruit and ethical cocoa products from Latin America. Within months, mango, pineapple, and cocoa nib samples were making their way from Accra to California, facilitated by Ghanaian partners who relayed updates like, “the same company have called the fruits company and vegetables one as well for me to grant me the interview and also get me samples.” These snippets of communication captured the hands-on, sometimes messy, but deeply relational work of turning goodwill into tangible business opportunities.

Finally, a sixth theme addressed lessons from emerging ventures. Exporting dried fruit, which at first seemed a straightforward “low-hanging fruit” venture, turned out to involve layers of complexity—organic and ethical certifications, cold storage arrangements, customs paperwork, and convincing producers to meet strict buyer requirements. As one Ghanaian partner reported, “the last one is quantity to supply yearly depends on our demand,” a reminder that markets had to be carefully matched to producer capacity. Yet far from discouraging, these early struggles served as training grounds, building credibility with partners and strengthening resolve. The experience laid the foundation for more ambitious ventures such as activated carbon plants and packaging factories, teaching all involved that credibility is earned through small wins before larger ventures can take off.

Together, these themes show diaspora investment not as a single act of capital transfer, but as an evolving journey shaped by identity, sustainability, and trust, navigated through relationships and small beginnings, and sustained by the patient work of long-term engagement.

Discussion

Bringing the insights from the scoping review into dialogue with the authors' lived experiences captured in the reflexive narratives highlights both convergences and gaps in understanding diaspora investment. The six empirical studies offered structured analyses of returnee entrepreneurs, institutional barriers, and network dynamics across Ghana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and broader continental contexts perspectives (Ayakwah et al., 2020; Kessy & Shayo, 2022; Lituchy, 2019; Mayer et al., 2016; Nyame-Asiamah et al., 2020; Thondhlana et al., 2019). The narratives, by contrast, illuminated the textured, everyday realities of building trust, sustaining long-distance partnerships, and grappling with the emotional and practical complexities of mobilising investment. Read together, these two bodies of evidence enrich each other—what the academic literature frames as “networks” and “institutional push-pull factors” come alive in the stories of late-night WeChat negotiations, family introductions to U.S. importers, and patient years of feasibility work.

One clear area of overlap lies in the centrality of networks. The scoping review repeatedly underscored how diaspora entrepreneurs mobilise transnational ties and cluster dynamics to bridge resource gaps. Similarly, the narratives demonstrated that relationships—whether forged through kinship, research collaborations, or community trust—were the lifeblood of ventures. Yet while the literature often treated networks as economic or institutional capital, the stories showed the deep emotional and relational labour involved in holding fragile partnerships together. Trust was not a given resource but a product of patience, reassurance, and persistence.

Institutional challenges also resonated across both sources. Academic studies detailed bureaucratic hurdles, regulatory uncertainty, and weak policy support as barriers to diaspora entrepreneurship. The narratives echoed these obstacles but gave them human form: producers struggling with certification requirements, investors hesitating in the absence

of safeguards, and facilitators bearing the weight of uncertainty. These reflections highlight the personal costs of navigating systems that remain poorly aligned with diaspora aspirations, pointing to the need for institutional reforms that take seriously the lived realities of cross-border ventures.

The most striking difference between the two bodies of evidence concerned sustainability. With the exception of one study that touched indirectly on sustainability through compliance with export standards, the scoping review revealed a literature largely silent on ecological or climate concerns. By contrast, the narratives foregrounded sustainability as a guiding principle—whether in turning coconut shells into activated carbon to address pollution, or experimenting with plastic waste as a resource for housing. These lived experiments reframed sustainability from a marginal consideration to a central driver, suggesting the potential of diaspora actors integrating environmental and social impact into business models.

Another divergence lay in the temporal framing of diaspora engagement. The literature often presented case studies of discrete ventures or analysed drivers and barriers in snapshot form. The narratives instead emphasised patience and endurance, portraying diaspora investment as a slow, cumulative process requiring years of trust-building and incremental wins before larger ambitions can materialise. This long-term horizon adds depth to the understanding of diaspora entrepreneurship, reframing it not as isolated projects but as sustained journeys shaped by resilience and relationship-building.

Conclusion

Four key messages emerge. First, diaspora capital is relational, not just financial. Second, sustainability must be central, with diaspora entrepreneurs pioneering circular economy models. Third, remittances alone are insufficient without institutional frameworks. Fourth, diaspora engagement is long-term, requiring patience and resilience. Taken together, these insights point to a clear policy imperative. If Africa is to fully harness its global diaspora as a development partner, governments must move beyond ad hoc engagement toward institutionalised leadership. We therefore recommend that African governments consider creating **Ministries of Diaspora Affairs, led by empowered ministers**, with the mandate to remove bureaucratic barriers, safeguard diaspora capital, and accelerate diaspora-facilitated foreign investment. Such ministries would not only provide a central platform for coordination but also signal to diasporas worldwide that their expertise, networks, and aspirations are recognised as integral to Africa's sustainable development future.

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