

Critical Appraisal of NIDO and The Role of the Diaspora in Facilitating Socio-Economic Development of Nigeria

By

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First of all, let me thank the leadership of NIDO for inviting me to make this presentation. I am honoured to be here today. Due to time constraints my presentation shall not be exhaustive.

The presentation shall consist of three parts. The first part shall briefly attempt an appraisal of NIDO and identify some of the challenges it faces; the second part shall briefly discuss the role Nigeria's Diasporas could play in facilitating Nigeria's socio-economic Development. Finally, the third part shall briefly explore what government could do to reverse what used to be described as brain drain to socio-economic gains and how to maximize its derivable benefits from its growing population of well-educated and economically successful nationals living overseas. In other words, I shall be postulating that diaspora policies require visionary, skilful and dedicated approach from country of origin for it to succeed.

According to some comprehensive studies, the concept of Diaspora covers two groups, comprising of 1. Non Resident Overseas citizens, in the case of Nigeria, these would be Non-resident Nigerians (NRN) – These are Nigerian citizens and their children, who hold Nigeria's passports but reside outside Nigeria. 2. Naturalized Overseas Citizens – In the case of Nigeria, these are persons of Nigeria's origin who have naturalized in other countries and now hold foreign passports.

The rationale for this distinction shall become obvious as I progress but suffice to say at this point that the policy challenges for any country of origin for each of the groups are somewhat different. To reap maximum benefits requires developing strategies and implementing policies that make both groups feel welcome.

As I proceed, I shall touch on some of the Policy interventions that are likely to strengthen these ties and the roles the diaspora could play, drawing from experiences derived from case studies on China, India, the Philippines, Mexico, Eritrea, and Taiwan, without specifically referring to them.

The mentioned comprehensive studies show it is more efficient for the countries of origin to deal with one major diaspora organization, rather than an approach of fragmented strategy.

Now, let's begin with NIDO. An objective and critical appraisal of the organization would show that after all these years it's still facing some teething challenges, but first thing first. Despite all the turbulences, NIDO has survived and standing strong. I commend the current leadership for their efforts to unite the

organization. Despite enormous challenges, they have initiated and organized numerous activities. This illustrious convocation is yet another testimony to that. No doubt, NIDO has been a platform for partnership and networking amongst Nigerians across the world, championing numerous events, some in partnership with some government departments at both states and federal levels. It participated in the development of vision 20:2020 and the first sovereign national conference organized by then president Obasanjo. It also participated in the national sovereign conference organized by President Goodluck Jonathan. It has championed the drive for the Diaspora commission which has now been passed. It is championing the Diaspora voting right. It has also organized several projects, including medical tours, IT programs and the donation and installation of a solar unit to give clean light to a village called Kampala near Minna. The point I am trying to make is that NIDO has achievements to show in the evolving years since its inception. At the same time, it would be naïve to pat our shoulders and do as if we couldn't have done better and be critical of some of the developments in NIDO that have been preventing it from excelling even more, given the potentials within its fold at different times. I suppose the grounds why the organization has been unable to fully live to the high expectations are manifold but a conspicuous one seems our Nigerian approach to doing things. As in Nigeria, there is a tendency to nominate people without enough technical capacity to represent us, which is making the organizations' impacts below its potentials. For reasons hard to comprehend, everybody strives to become a leader, whether or not they are of impeccable character and have the capacity to lead with vision. We support them without due diligence and then turn around to wonder why the organization isn't making that great leap that is so desirable. Too often, we seem driven only by sentiments about what is good for us or is it our CVs and not what is good for the organization and country. Admittedly, decision making in democratic setups is about numbers, but it is also about the contest of manifests, principles and vision and not the highest bidder. It is also about the rule of law and the respect for others. By proposing or supporting those we should know shouldn't be in certain positions, we become active contributors to the problems of NIDO. Along the years, we have tolerated questionable ways to get elected at the different levels of the organization so that the best amongst us don't always get to lead the organization to the good of all. What seems being overlooked is the fact that one illegality attracts the next and encourages further disregard for the laid down rules. It should not be surprising therefore that instead of engaging our minds in matters that would uplift the spirit of the organization, much energy is dispensed on endless internal disputes caused by dishonesty, and lack of transparency, indiscipline and disregard for the organization's laid down rules. Instead of adapting to the constitution we continue to adapt the constitution to us, blaming our tendency to disregard existing rules on some perceived inadequacies of the MEMART. As can be seen, the problem has never been the constitution but the people. For the avoidance of doubt, I recognize that some disagreements are inevitable in all human organizations – problem is, carrying the dirty linens to the public space to watch. This has not been good for NIDO and has been making it unattractive for those who could join and help take it to higher heights. This is occurring so often because NIDO does not have a complaint organ where aggrieved persons can lodge complaints. I am proposing therefore that there be an independent

complaint standing committee to receive and evaluate all future complaints with a mandate to investigate and recommend as to whether or not there is enough merit to pursue the grievance. And if so, carry out a thorough investigation and report to the General House with recommendations on actions to be taken. Irrespective of the foregoing, what some continue to miss is the fact that when you think you are exposing the weaknesses of other members of the organization to non-members, you are actually damaging the organization you apparently so care about. These publicly exhibited and transacted conflicts are preventing the organization from becoming that veritable vehicle to engage government and take development to Nigeria. Every member has a duty to make positive contributions to the advancement and well-being of the organization. After a fair hearing, any member not abiding by the findings of the independent standing committee, has to be sanctioned. NIDO has to find ways to discourage and sanction the pull-him-down syndrome so prevalent amongst Nigerians. In fact there is too much negative energy. NIDO must find ways to make itself less attractive for people who see the organization as a platform for achieving their personal objectives rather than the patriotic vision for which it was created which are “to participate in the process of visioning, planning and the promotion of democracy, social, economic, educational, training, industrial and cultural development and good governance of Nigeria”. In fact, if some stakeholders and NIDO’s leaderships had been less self-promoting and found ways to position the organization to be offering technical supports to government, it would have distinguished itself from all other Nigerian Organizations, in a most remarkable way.

So, what is the way forward, NIDO needs peace and unity, the path to changing the narrative can only go through self-discipline, transparency and accountability, and respect for the rules and bye-laws of the organization. As I have been around long enough to know where the NIDO shoes are aching, permit me therefore to express my conviction that the organization might deliver better results, if it would organize along professionals’ lines, such as medical arm, economics & business arm, engineering and construction arm, IT arm to mention a few – to be populated mainly by experts from the respective areas. These groups can serve as technical partners in their respective areas of expertise and so become the catalyst the organization was intended to be. Such a structure is most likely to attract more professionals into the fold and improve on quality service delivery. For NIDO to become more of what it should be, it has to find ways to increase and intensify cooperation with other Nigerian organizations.

Part II

Regarding the roles the Nigerians in Diaspora could play in taking development to Nigeria, due to time constraints, I shall focus on three areas only; namely money transfer, Know-how transfer and Diaspora Advocacy.

1. Money transfer: Currently, remittances have become synonymous with the diaspora contribution to national development. These rather stable remittances are generating multiplier effects that are not only helping to alleviate poverty in the recipient households but are spilling over to other

households, and helping to stabilize the economy in fundamental ways. Beyond meeting basic needs, they are helping to pay for health care and covering educational expenses of family members. They are financing micro start-ups and promoting entrepreneurship. **But beyond our individual** remittances, there are many other ways the diaspora could invest small amounts of their money with great impacts on the acceleration of the pace of development. For example, if the diaspora would start a fund with a contribution of just \$150 from each of just 25% of the estimated 10 million Nigerians in the Diaspora, this fund could kick start with an amount of \$375 million for development projects with social contents of our choice. I implore that this should be considered seriously.

Furthermore, the Nigerian Diasporas could facilitate the economic development of Nigeria through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and transnational entrepreneurship. It could become more involved with mentoring our youths back home. Have you recently thought of what could be achieved, if every NIDO professional agrees to mentor one or two youths in their respective field of expertise. Through the increased consumption of produced in Nigeria products such as food, fashion and services from the entertainment sector, these sectors could be further strengthened? Through increased demands from abroad, we could help consolidate these sectors.

2. **Technology Transfer:** In fact, on the long term, money transfer without knowledge transfer isn't going to get Nigeria anywhere. Indeed, it is Knowledge Transfer that can accelerate the pace of development. To this end, the NNVS is called upon to do more to facilitate Diaspora short-term return, particularly in such areas as capacity building and technical assistance in critical sectors, including helping to set up advanced research centres. There has to be a clearly defined strategy that actively encourages know-how repatriation.
3. **Diaspora Advocacy:** Frankly, if the diaspora wishes to be taken seriously as a constituency, it must take advocacy seriously. Advocacy is about hard citizenship work, having an opinion and being vocal on issues that we all care about and seeking to influence government, media and other prominent groups on the way forward. The rather besieged ordinary folks in Nigeria are increasingly seeing the diaspora as the last bastion of hope and expect it to become more actively involved in events at home; speaking out to support good policies but also finding the voice to speak up when things aren't going as they should and proposing clear alternatives. I am afraid, rolling out communiques when there are calamities or sending out congratulatory messages to people who have

been promoted or doing a job they are being fabulously paid for, do not fall into this category. Now, let's pause for a minute and consider the following, despite being confronted with dilapidated infrastructure and challenges of all kinds, such as spending billions of dollars on electricity without electricity supply, billions of dollars on roads without good roads, billions of dollars on railway without railway system, thousands of people dying from minor diseases due to lack of quality health care delivery, falling educational standards, etcetera, Nigeria remains Africa's largest economy, well, I don't want to dabble into what this says about other major African countries but I ask you to ponder over what we could make of Nigeria if the looters stopped looting and we begin putting the resources into fixing these deficiencies. Undoubtedly, Nigeria would be amongst the 15 largest economies of the world. Amazingly, despite these unprecedented looting, Nigerians remain also the only people who find all sorts of reasons to justify to celebrate and give awards to their known corrupt politicians provided they get their crumbs. They soon forget the other millions of their brethren suffering and crying daily under the weight of these politicians. Amazingly, they soon turn around to wonder why these people are emboldened to do what they do and why hardly anything functions in Nigeria. Nigerians in diaspora have to upgrade and stand up to be counted, not by the number of times they appear in pictures or shake hands with politicians but by their courage and what they stand and advocate for, without putting their personal interests at the forefront. From the look of things, if not the diasporas, who is going to transform Nigeria?

Part III

Now, what could government do to enhance and deepen the cooperation?

In fact, given the growing magnitude of international migration, some countries are now more or less equating their diaspora as a distinctive region/constituency of their countries, establishing ministry or sub-ministry level institutions for their Non Resident and ex nationals abroad. These smart countries are pursuing strategies to domesticate close ties with this constituency by cultivating shared patriotic sentiments and offering them privileged access to business opportunities, and strengthening those domestic institutions that may affect them. They recognize their Diaspora community as a vital force to drive the pace of development back in their countries of origin.

To this end, there are a lot of things Nigeria could do: Firstly, by transiting from lip service to actual implementations of policies that are mutually beneficial. Secondly, it is important for representatives of home countries to recognize that they do the diaspora no favour by engaging them and that forging a strong

partnership is in the best interest of their countries. Thirdly, they have to recognize that most of the future jobs shall be knowledge based and they need their Diaspora for capacity building to drive innovation and entrepreneurship.

Taking a cue from the studies I referred earlier, particularly as it refers to India, being one of the pioneer countries to implement a comprehensive diaspora policy, Nigeria could speed up the pace of its diaspora contribution by doing the following:

1. Introducing flexible citizenship laws and developing schemes that grant lifelong visa free entry for the NON into Nigeria, along with full residency and employment rights.
 2. Granting voting rights to the Non Resident Nigerians (NRN) by amending voting rules to enable them register at their respective locations/embassies.
 3. Granting political rights to Non Resident Nigerians (NRN) by allowing them to run as independent candidates for any office of their choice. This could bring new attitudes that could influence the current culture of win or die. The smart countries recognize that investing in strategies and policies that make their diaspora feel welcome back home are in their best interest.
 4. Granting special incentives and guarantee to the diaspora to encourage FDI and participation in the equity market, and reducing bureaucracy and costs of doing business.
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5. Create an agency to be responsible for employment of overseas Nigerians (doctors, scientists, academics, economists, engineers, IT experts, etc)
 6. Reducing custom duty on businesses of Diaspora Nigerians investing in Nigeria and granting tax holiday for a defined period of time. This to include granting returnee Nigerians a five year special status on taxes, accelerated access to justice and assistance to overcome other bureaucratic hurdles, all driven by a clear vision to lure back and reintegrate the diaspora into the economy.
 7. Creating a Facilitation Centre to serve as a one stop shop for economic engagements, investments and businesses coming from the diaspora. Don't be misled by any suggestion that something similar already exists – they are not functioning.
 8. Strengthen and support NIDO with its strategic outreach to enable it become stronger to leverage on the expertise, skills and experience of overseas Nigerians.
 9. Rapidly implement the already passed Diaspora Commission bill to serve as a high level body to draw upon the talent of the best Nigerian minds overseas, including the rapid implementation of the diaspora database.
 10. Strengthen the yearly Diaspora Day Event. This yearly event remains the only convention that connects Nigeria to its vast Nigerian Diaspora. This event is vital and must be seen as a long term investment.

11. Encourage donor governments and multilateral agencies as well as Nigeria's government agencies to engage Nigerian diaspora experts for development assignments in Nigeria.

Summarizing, for Nigeria to derive maximum benefits from its diaspora, it has to move away from its current lip service and fragmented approach to adopting a more comprehensive and long term oriented strategy.

Thank you

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