
Reflective Piece

Rethinking the Nigerian Youth Emigration Surge: An Invitation to Patriotism-Nurturing Emigration

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Perhaps more than any time in recent history, the number of talented, young Nigerians leaving the country in search of better life prospects is preponderantly at its apogee. “The proportion of youth planning to leave Nigeria permanently increased from 36 percent in 2014 to 52 percent in 2018... [while] the number of international migrants from Nigeria...increased from around 450,000 in 1990 to 1.4 million in 2019” (Adhikari, Clemens, Dempster, & Ekeator, 2021, July 19)¹. From the Canadian Federal Skilled Worker’s Program, the various U.S. green card pathways, to studying abroad in Asia, Australia, Europe and South Africa, Nigerian youths seek myriad of ways—sometimes casting caution to the wind—to rescue their future from the limitation-perpetuating vicissitudes that plague the youth demography in contemporary Nigeria.

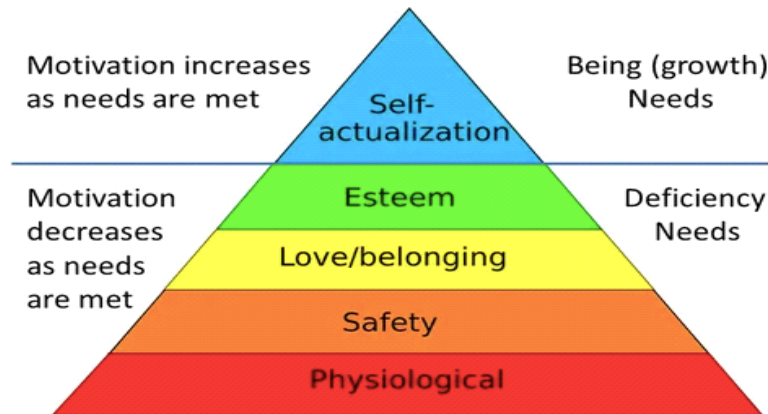
Although I am not oblivious of the many treatises and discourses on this subject that adorn various intellectual and scholarly spaces, I wanted to put in my two cents’ worth on this phenomenon of the incessant mass exodus from Nigeria by its youths.

I have listened to and engaged in conversations and debates about the merits and demerits of this migration phenomenon to all pertinent stakeholders and actors—the youths, their families and friends, the society, the government, and the Nigerian nation at large—in the ecosystem. While stances and rhetoric always differ, and sentiments are sometimes very strong on the subject, one issue that I can bet my bottom dollar on is that until the push and pull factors—that make the appeal to leave Nigeria strong—are addressed, our anti-emigration rhetoric won’t change a thing. The crux of my article, therefore, anchors on the need to embrace a paradigm shift in favour of what I call *patriotism-nurturing emigration*² among aspiring travellers and *patriotism-nurturing identity* among the Nigerian diaspora. I will return to this later.

Remember Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs?³ Let’s take a quick look at the pyramid, its criticisms notwithstanding, to see what insights we might glean to further our discourse. According to Maslow, the most basic and important needs, the physiological needs, are at the bottom of the pyramid, so an individual’s motivation to meet other needs on the pyramid *only* increases after these fundamental needs are met. Consequently, when the physiological needs are not met, “the motivation to fulfil such needs will become stronger the longer the duration they are denied” (McLeod, 2020, December 29).

In other words, as long as the realities of hunger, thirst, and deprivation remain, any attempt to get an individual to operate in the realm of self-actualization will only amount to a pipe dream. It is, therefore, a no-brainer that many talented, young Nigerians appear to be de-motivated toward the pursuit of purpose and fulfilment. The truth is that “every person is capable and has the desire to move up the

hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. [However,] ...progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower level needs” (McLeod, 2020, December 29)⁴.



The debilitating effects of push factors such as high inflation (15.4% as at Dec. 15, 2021)⁵, heightened insecurity, deplorable socio-economic infrastructure, high unemployment rate (33.3% as at Jan. 20, 2022), higher youth unemployment rate (42.5% as at Jan. 20, 2022)⁶, notwithstanding, the creativity and resilience of Nigerian youths at home is unmatched: From feats in sports, entertainment, civil activism, academia, technology, to science, among others. Therefore, one can argue that the stance which labels Nigerian youths as indolent and unemployed *solely* because they are inept, and incapable of sophisticated erudition is sheer fibs. This is not different abroad either: As a Nigerian diaspora youth, I have had the honour of meeting and working with many exceptionally talented and high-impact colleagues in the U.S., the UK, Canada, Mexico, and a few other places.

If there were such a thing as *Propensity to Return to Nigeria* scale, then, the several Nigerian diaspora youths that I have met would fall on different points on the continuum. While some youths articulated a zero-tolerance for entertaining the thought of returning to Nigeria in the future, for apparent reasons, some of which I mentioned earlier, others—and indeed a significant number—would love to engage with their beloved *Naija*⁷ as transnationals, investing their resources in the nation to drive her prosperity to uncharted heights of abundance for all. It is to these transnationals and Nigeria-based Nigerians (youths and elders alike), folks whose optimism about a New Nigeria is unyielding, that I write this, as I invite you to engage with my ideas with an absorbent mind.

First, I would like to state clearly: I am not necessarily clamouring for increased emigration from Nigeria. I believe Nigeria’s human capital, especially its youth subset, when provided with pathways to engage in sustained, meaningful economic activities, is crucial to her development. Rather, my position is that perhaps it is time we started looking at emigration as an ancillary to development, especially in the context of *patriotism-nurturing emigration* and *patriotism-nurturing identity* among transnationals, which I described earlier.

Here is what I mean: There are many push and pull factors that interact to increase or decrease the appeal to emigrate. One of such pull factors is the desire to spend part or all of one’s retirement—and some folks retire in their 30s⁸—in a differ-

ent country, to explore its culture and satisfy some intrinsic, not-primarily-economic aspirations. So, when people emigrate in this context, they do not necessarily do so because their home country lacks the infrastructure to meet the basic (deficiency) needs highlighted in Maslow's pyramid. These emigrants, therefore, may have a higher propensity to value and keep their patriotic pride about their home country, and have investment portfolios in it accordingly.

Second, let's consider the *overall* net benefits or big picture of emigration. The Nigerian diaspora, for example, remitted \$25 billion, 5% of the nation's GDP, in 2019 to Nigeria. These are financial resource inflows that otherwise might not have been possible if this human capital had stayed back in Nigeria and were not maximally engaged in meaningful economic activities, because of lower rankings on the Ease of Doing Business (EoDB) index, unemployment, or underemployment.

Another way emigration benefits Nigeria is through skill, technical support, and capacity transfer. "Recent research has found that...skilled migration has many positive externalities including remittances, investment, and trade linkages with countries of destination, as well as better educational attainment of those in home communities" (Adhikari, Clemens, Dempster, & Ekeator, 2021, July 19). With increased human capital, all else being equal, comes increased economic possibilities, such as highlighted above, which add to the overall infrastructural ecosystem of the nation. Personally, I have facilitated career-advancing and capacity building sessions for my mentees in Nigeria, leveraging my skills, expertise, and professional repertoire, thereby directly contributing to human capital development in Nigeria. I know many Nigerian diaspora youths who engage in similar commitment.

Furthermore, emigration benefits Nigeria through increased positive branding. Narratives matter and should not be overlooked or dismissed as unimportant. Narratives shape perceptions, which inform stereotypes. Perhaps no one could have said it better than Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who succinctly quipped that "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." For the most part, mainstream (Western) media's perception and portrayal of Nigeria—and by extension Africa—is negatively skewed against us. And as a nation and people, we need to be more intentional in changing this dangerous single story. I present some economic implications in the ensuing arguments.

Some opportunities will not come to Nigeria or come to us in the magnitude that they should as long as the negative stereotypes about our nation remain. For example, the U.S. makes billions of dollars yearly from the international students who come from more than 200 places of origin to study at its various academic institutions. For instance, despite the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative effects on global economies, international students contributed \$39 billion to the U.S. economy in 2020⁹. Imagine if Nigeria attracted half of this investment yearly! But we will not, at least not when our national image remains largely negative. I'll explain further: You see, one of the critical factors that American students look at when making study abroad decisions is the safety and security of the destination country. Other important factors they consider are their overall perception of the would-be host country the degree to which its level of economic development and socio-cultural fabrics mirror what obtains in America. Sadly, going by these indices, the perception and portrayal of Nigeria in the U.S. and Western media leaves much to be desired.

This table below shows the for-academic credit study abroad destinations of U.S. students in the 2019/2020 academic session. The only African country on this list is South Africa, while more than 50% of the countries are in Europe. This should

not come as a surprise, given the analysis I made in the previous paragraph. The stomach of many of my readers would turn if they knew that some Americans still think Nigerians live on trees and among animals. This, by the way, is not a joke: Many U.S. cultural trappings still project this primitive and socio-culturally unsophisticated image of Nigeria and Africa.

DESTINATIONS	2018/19	2019/20	% of total	% change
WORLDTOTAL	347,099	162,633	100.0	-53.1
Spain	33,849	19,792	12.2	-41.5
Italy	39,043	19,731	12.1	-49.5
United Kingdom	39,358	19,147	11.8	-51.4
France	18,465	8,528	5.2	-53.8
Australia	10,665	8,252	5.1	-22.6
Ireland	11,777	4,712	2.9	-60.0
Germany	12,029	4,512	2.8	-62.5
Costa Rica	8,333	3,917	2.4	-53.0
Japan	8,928	3,406	2.1	-61.9
Denmark	4,846	3,130	1.9	-35.4
New Zealand	4,233	3,096	1.9	-26.9
Mexico	6,340	2,999	1.8	-52.7
Czech Republic	5,480	2,667	1.6	-51.3
China	11,639	2,481	1.5	-78.7
Netherlands	4,182	2,202	1.4	-47.3
South Africa	5,278	2,159	1.3	-59.1
South Korea	4,558	1,942	1.2	-57.4
Argentina	3,317	1,920	1.2	-42.1
Israel	3,532	1,893	1.2	-46.4
Greece	5,834	1,829	1.1	-68.6
Ecuador	3,675	1,787	1.1	-51.4
India	3,366	1,736	1.1	-48.4
Austria	3,039	1,405	0.9	-53.8
Chile	3,190	1,332	0.8	-58.2
Thailand	2,859	1,228	0.8	-57.0
Other Destinations	89,284	36,830	22.6	-58.7

Needless to say, the negative perception and portrayal of Nigeria (and Africa) in Western media and culture *also* shapes how much foreign direct investment (FDI) and tourist attraction we get. United Arab Emirate's tourism revenue was \$38 billion in 2019.

We can change this! I believe the Nigerian diaspora, given the right governmental support framework, can become Nigeria's biggest national image-promoting ambassadors. Not that the Nigerian diaspora would not promote their nation without

any support from the government, but my assertion is that we might not be able to fully unlock this dimension of the net benefits of emigration and the Nigerian diaspora to the Nigerian nation as long as we are fixated on the tunnel vision rhetoric of brain drain as the only (major) impact that emigration causes on the Nigerian economy and society.

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Notes

<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/expanding-legal-migration-pathways-nigeria-europe-brain-drain-brain-gain>

² I coined this term and conceptualize it as emigration that is motivated by a desire to become and achieve more outside of one's country of birth or origin, in which the individual does not lose their patriotic pride because the pull factors are more than the push factors. If sustained, it morphs into *patriotism-nurturing identity* whereby an emigrant, now a member of the diaspora, voluntarily, and with utmost pride, sees themselves as ambassadors of their origin country and conducts themselves accordingly in the destination/host nation.

³ **Physiological needs** (air, food, water, shelter, etc.); **Safety needs** (safety and security, desire to have order and predictability in one's life, health and wellness, financial stability, etc.); **Love/belonging** (being part of a loving/caring community: Friends and family, etc.); **Esteem** (desire to feel respected, valued, accomplished, etc.), and **Self-actualization** (the need for fulfillment, arising from attaining one's fullest potential).

⁴ <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html> (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs image also culled from this source).

⁵ <https://www.channelstv.com/2021/12/15/nigerias-inflation-rate-drops-to-15-4-nbs-report/>

⁶ Data from the National Bureau of Statistics <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/>

⁷ The colloquial demonym for Nigeria, coined by Nigerians.

⁸ Amon and Christina, for example, retired at 39 and moved to Portugal from the U.S. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd6dEoZpXMk>

⁹ <https://www.iie.org/en/Why-IIE/Announcements/2021/11/US-Institutions-Top-Choice-for-Intl-Students> (study abroad image was also called from the IIE's website).