

African Diaspora Scholar Mobility Programs: Looking toward Models for South-South Cooperation

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Introduction

The international development community has long acknowledged the diaspora is a source of economic development, primarily through remittances, for countries of origin. Within the international higher education sector, scholars and practitioners alike have begun to apply this concept of generating financial support via the diaspora to sharing and developing knowledge by tapping into the intellectual expatriate community. To this end, initiatives to promote diaspora scholar mobility and research partnership have taken shape, most often focusing on engaging the intellectual Sub-Saharan African diaspora in the strengthening of higher education capacities in that region (Teferra 2010; Ferede 2013). However, these programs in their current form raise questions of asymmetry in the scholarly partnerships they facilitate and fail to incorporate valuable expertise from a significant portion of diaspora communities, as they draw only from scholars within the Global North for placement in institutions in the Global South. Already, migration scholars acknowledge a weakness of diaspora studies literature, which is that it places too great an emphasis on diaspora communities that reside in the Global North rather than fully including and even conceptualizing a Southern diaspora (Crush, Chikanda and Tawodzera 2016). As South-South diaspora engagement comes to the fore of the economic development conversation (Christiansen 2013), my research explores the importance of and potential for South-South diaspora scholar exchange programs within the international higher education sector. Identifying and including Southern intellectuals in this growing trend of diaspora mobility programming has both the possibility to promote knowledge sharing and capacity building in Sub-Saharan African tertiary education, and to correct

for documented inequalities in global educational development and exchange.

It is widely accepted that the field of international higher education is faced with unequal participation of world regions, power dynamics, and student and scholar flows (Altbach and Knight 2007). Relevant literature typically characterizes higher education partnerships between institutions in the developed and developing world—and in Sub-Saharan Africa in particular—as means of capacity building and institutional development for the Southern partners more so than means of cultural exchange or research collaboration from which the Northern partners also benefit (Altbach and Knight 2007; Grant 2014; McEvoy et al 2016). The negative implications of asymmetric, typically South-North, flows of students and scholars from the region are also documented in the scholarship related to brain drain (Altbach and Knight 2007; Gribble 2008). In spite of what international educators know to be true about the unequal relationships across the field, I would argue that these inequalities continue to be perpetuated even in attempted solutions to the recognized challenges at hand, as evidenced by the design of particular international educational programming.

Specifically, and through a post-colonial lens (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 2000), I focus on how these power dynamics persist in the design of a growing number of initiatives that facilitate diaspora engagement in the development of higher education, which are meant to combat the negative effects of brain drain and build capacity among institutions. Many of these programs have origins in the Global North and aim to send diaspora academics from the United States, Canada, and Europe on often short-term assignments to Sub-Saharan African universities. My research asks how these programs might be structured differently in order to correct for

asymmetry in the partnerships they create, as well as to implement lessons already learned from the study of the Southern diaspora and its economic capacity. I seek to analyze outbound tertiary and highly-skilled migrant mobility data from a set of Sub-Saharan African countries for the purposes of identifying and locating alternative, Southern, diaspora communities with which international higher education practitioners and African universities might partner.

Already, research on South-South mobility indicates that Southern diaspora communities are highly-skilled, are willing to engage in the development of their home countries (International Organization for Migration 2014), and, of course, are often geographically more proximate to their place of origin than Northern diasporas. I therefore argue that looking to the results of my analysis of Southern diaspora intellectual communities could provide answers to challenges of North-South asymmetry and sustainability in current and future diaspora scholar exchange program design while enhancing university capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa. To realize the intended goal of South-South diaspora scholar mobility programming, I call for additional research, improved data collection, and dedicated funding. Yet, this preliminary study is significant for the international higher education field, which has thus far not fully explored or facilitated these South-South avenues of diaspora scholar mobility in the Sub-Saharan African context. Doing so would mean seizing an opportunity and truly beginning to combat dominant North-South power dynamics present in the field of international higher education.

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