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Globalisation, Migration and the New African Diasporas: Towards a Framework of Understanding

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Towards a Framework of Understanding

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Introduction

Globalisation, human rights and migration have emerged as three of the central themes and challenges dominating international discourse and giving shape to the post-cold war world. Issues pertaining to these themes are at the heart of most of the conflicts in the political, social and economic realms in recent times. Voluntary and involuntary migration of people has been a permanent and even positive feature of human societies and interactions most probably since the dawn of history. Indeed, research by historians, ethnographers, anthropologists and ethnic scholars all confirm that every country today is a product of population diffusion to one degree or the other, over the years. In that sense, every country is ‘international’. According to United Nations figures, over 125 million people today live, temporarily or permanently, outside their country of origin. In addition to these are hundreds of millions more people who have migrated or been displaced within their countries of origin – the so-called internally displaced peoples (IDPs).³

While demographic mobility is ancient, the phenomenon has become more extensive and intensive under the impact of contemporary globalisation.⁴ Recent developments in global society have virtually made human displacement and movement across frontiers inevitable. Indeed, the displacement of people "has become a dramatic sign of our troubled times".² The increasingly severe breakdowns in the economic, political, social and environmental realms continue to make it more difficult for people particularly in the world’s economic peripheries to survive and remain in their traditional communities and countries. To these should be added one of the traditional causes of human displacement, armed conflict and political instability, which has increased substantially since the end of the cold war. With the rising incidence of intra-state wars even as inter-states wars decline, political and military forces “are using ethnicity and religion to promote narrow projects of ethnic or religious nationalism that divide, even destroy pluralistic societies, and displace people.”⁶

Even as the forces that compel human displacement continue to provoke demographic mobility, developments in communications and transportation technology have also facilitated travel particularly for those seeking succour from intolerable conditions and have made many to be aware of the options and conditions in other places. A direct consequence is the increased human displacement within and between most regions of the globe, a phenomenon accelerated by the global economic crisis.⁷ The most affected regions of the world are the countries of the South, which incidentally, are the region least endowed in resource terms to receive and assist large numbers of refugees and migrants.

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⁵ Taran, "Migration, Globalization and Human Rights…", op. cit.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid.
The movement of people across frontiers has become a complex phenomenon as a whole web of factors have combined to effect population movements. In the process, the dichotomy between 'migrants' and 'refugees' has become increasingly blurred especially as it has become difficult to distinguish between people who are fleeing from threats to their life and those desiring to escape poverty and social injustice. Such is the complex nature of population shift that the World Council of Churches (WCC) has opted for a new nomenclature to describe people displaced from their homes and societies to seek their fortunes elsewhere, describing such people as 'uprooted people'.

According to Patrick Taran, the WCC's definition aptly captures the experience of the displaced individuals as uprooted people. The expression “contains the tremendous physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual disruption that accompanies being displaced. That is, being torn away from the family, cultural, community, religious, social and physical environment in which every human individual's identity is deeply rooted.”

The acceleration of the phenomenon of human displacement and demographic mobility in recent years cannot be separated from the phenomenon of globalisation. Globalisation has come to describe the trends and initiatives aimed at restructuring national and international economic life. Globalisation initiatives aim at the global integration of economic activity including production, marketing and consumption of goods and services. A principal feature of the phenomenon is the steady elimination of restrictions on the free movement across borders of capital, goods, resources, technology, and services – but not of labour.

However, globalisation has not proven to be a positive development for all people not least those in Africa. One consequence of globalisation for an increasing number of people around the developing world has been “growing unemployment or underemployment, stagnation or decrease in earnings for those employed, disappearing job security, increasing poverty, reduction in access to health care, education, public transportation, housing, elimination of public benefits or ‘safety nets’ for those without access to employment, in short, increasing marginalization and exclusion.” These elements of globalisation have combined with the consequences of economic collapse to accelerate the phenomenon of demographic mobility. More and more people are being “excluded from any meaningful participation in the economic and social benefits of society.” Rising food prices and general inflation, along with increasing unemployment rates leave more and more people with no option but to leave their homelands in search of food and work, ultimately impacting on the rate of migration.

This in part explains Nigel Harris's argument that ‘increased migration is inevitable in an integrating world economy’ that is increasingly characterised by widening inequalities between the rich and poor nations. It also affirms that Lenin's thesis, advanced as early as 1916, that migration is a function of the laws of uneven development caused by capitalism and that the high level of technological development attained by industrialised countries confer on their people and workers in particular, a high level of per capita income, which attracts migrants (labour) from less developed countries. These general theories have been given validation by the experience of several developing countries particularly those in Africa, who form the focus of this essay.

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8 World Council of Churches, Statement on Uprooted People, September 1995, p.1; cited in Taran, "Migration, Globalisation and Human Rights...", op. cit. The World Council of Churches' definition goes thus: "Uprooted People are those who flee because of persecution and war, those who are forcibly displaced because of environmental devastation, and those who are compelled to seek sustenance in a city or abroad because they cannot survive at home."

9 Taran, "Migration, Globalization and Human Rights...", op.cit.

10 Ibid.

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11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


Out of Africa

In recent years, sub-Saharan Africa has produced the greatest proportion of the world’s displaced people. It is true that the continent’s share of the global refugee and human displacement problem has declined in recent years, but both in relative and absolute terms, Africa has continued to produce a disproportionate share of the world’s refugees in relation to its overall population. With 3.2 million refugees, Africa’s 12 percent of world’s population has produced roughly 28 percent of the world’s 11.5 million refugees, and about 50 percent (or 9.5 million) of its 20 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). In absolute terms, the number of refugees fell by more than 50 percent during the period 1994 to 1998. In 1994, UNHCR figures confirmed that 47 percent (or 6.75 million people) of the world’s refugees were to be found in Africa. Presently, nine of the world’s 20 top ‘refugee-producing’ countries of the world are to be found in Africa, while ten of the 24 countries with the highest ratio of refugee to local population are member states of the African Union (the defunct Organisation of African Unity, OAU). Africa also provides ten of the 20 countries with the largest number of internally displaced persons.

Many factors have combined to make Africa the world’s top refugee producing region. These include the several violent internal conflicts and civil wars that have plagued many African states particularly in the period since the end of the cold war. In this regard, two principal sub-regions of displacement have emerged in the period since 1990. First, is the five neighbouring states of Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa; while the vast area of Central Africa stretching from Eritrea in the North East to Angola in the South West, and including the DRC, Congo Brazzaville, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, constitute the second sub-region. The two sub-regions have been severely impacted by “interlocking patterns of war and human displacement, in which the movement of refugees, IDPs and returnees constitutes both a consequence and a cause of social and political violence.”

Apart from the consequences of violent internal conflicts and wars plaguing many African states, demographic mobility and human displacement have been provoked by other factors including the severe economic crisis confronting several African states; the emergence of autocratic and oppressive regimes and the accompanying political repression; the brain drain syndrome and the search for economic and social mobility by professionals in various spheres; the search for educational and training opportunities by many young people consequent upon the destruction of educational systems in many African states, etc. The migrants and displaced people affected by these latter sets of factors also reflect the complex nature of population displacement and demographic mobility on the continent in recent years.

While most of those whose movements were provoked by internal conflicts and wars have found themselves accommodated as refugees in neighbouring and other African countries, most of those in the latter categories have sought abode in countries outside the continent particularly in Europe and North America. A major reason for

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16 It should be pointed out that since independence in the early 1960s, African countries in general had barely known any sustained period of peace, as they have been victims of several violent conflicts and civil wars that have ravaged most parts of the continent. The end of the Cold War had brought hopes of a peace dividend that would facilitate the termination of most of the prevailing conflicts particularly those that could be considered a fallout of the Cold War. However, the experience of these states since 1990 has confirmed that rather than abate, new fronts of conflict had opened up, again, mostly intra-state conflicts with even more devastating consequences that compelled the forced migration of their people in search of safe havens.
17 Ibid.
this is that most of the neighbouring African countries are similarly affected by those factors that have provoked their migration from their own countries. Nigeria, for example during the last years of the 1980s and through the 1990s produced a massive wave of migrants occasioned by the inauguration of autocratic and oppressive military regimes, collapse of the economy and infrastructures of state that provoked a massive push effect provoking the migration of professionals and other opponents of the military regimes.

The Babangida regime in Nigeria (1985-93), contributed to the massive emigration of Nigerians to other lands in two major ways. First was the introduction of the IMF-inspired Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) whose ostensible aim was the restructuring of the economy and diversification of the country’s revenue base but which, in its implementation, virtually decimated the Nigerian middle class. SAP measures triggered massive poverty and underdevelopment and one of its most visible outcomes was the massive emigration of several qualified Nigerians to Europe and North America in search of a meaningful existence. Secondly, the Babangida regime provoked massive emigration of Nigerian citizens with its dishonest implementation of its political transition programme that failed to reach its expected conclusion after more than eight years and the expenditure of billions of Naira. The programme was brought to an unexpected end when the regime annulled what has been acclaimed as the fairest and most peaceful elections in the country in June 1993 and consequently launched the country on the path of political attrition. The succeeding regime of Sani Abacha unleashed on the country a reign of terror that witnessed the assassination of political opponents, detention without trials, destruction of the homes of perceived opponents and judicial murders. Many Nigerians particularly leading figures in the pro-democracy movements were forced to go into exile, and yet many others fled in search of the better life. Official UK records reveal that between 1993 and 1995, between 400 and 500 Nigerians applied for political asylum on a monthly basis. This compares with the figure of 50 between 1990 and 1992.19

Ghana, similarly, fell under a regime of political and economic repression. The rise of Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings to power was preceded by the collapse of the state’s economy. The inauguration of a military regime did not in any way abate the economic crisis. Hence the flow of refugees, rather than abate, merely received a boost as thousands of Ghanaians sought refuge abroad from both economic and political oppression. There emerged in the diaspora several professional, ethnic, welfare and political associations of Ghanaians who joined in the struggle against political repression in their home country. The transformation of Jerry Rawlings into a civilian President merely extended the sojourn in foreign lands of most of these Ghanaians.

One major consequence of the mass migration of African people in the era of globalisation is the emergence of new African diasporas in host European and North American countries. While a significant percentage of Africans in this category having fled from political persecution in their home countries could aptly be described as ‘refugees’, many others could hardly be described as such and would more appropriately be classified as ‘economic migrants’. Even those who applied for political asylum in these Western countries following their escape from the hands of oppressive military regimes would hardly classify themselves as ‘refugees’. This is yet another indication of the complexities of human displacement in Africa in the age of globalisation.

Understanding the emergence of new diasporas

In their new homes, many refugees and migrants live alongside their compatriots and co-ethnics who are part of a broader diaspora or transnational community. The integration of African migrant communities

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18 The destination of the initial set of migrants was partly determined by the connections they had earlier established particularly for those – and these were several – who had been educated outside the country. Thus, those who were trained in Europe and North America, for instance, found themselves returning to their old stumping grounds in those countries.

in the host states is not always an easy process particularly in the face of racist and xenophobic hostility to migrants and migration. Given the fact this generation of migrants are obviously not migrating to the host countries on a temporary basis, they are forced to adjust to life in the land of sojourn even as they seek mentally to maintain their relationships with the homeland. The integration of new migrants in their host states is usually facilitated by the presence of compatriots and co-ethnics who had settled in those places previously. Indeed, the presence of existing social networks is crucial to understanding the emergence of the new diasporas. In their search for acceptance in the face of rising xenophobic and racist hostility, refugees and foreigners generally are forced to constitute themselves into communities in the process of forming their own national and ethnic societies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional groups, religious organisations including churches, and human rights and pro-democracy movements seeking to affect developments in their home countries. Not only are they forced to come together, but African groups are sometimes forced to go into alliance with other ethnic minorities sojourning in their land of refuge.

The religious experiences of migrant communities play a crucial role in their integration process. Given their mental orientation, it was easier for migrants to come together to worship with people of perceived similar orientation and places of worship easily became major avenues for contact for members of the diaspora. Many African-run and dominated churches have emerged over the years to fill a major vacuum in the spiritual experience of diasporic communities. In the United Kingdom, for instance, more than 300 such churches are operating in London alone with several branches, with the Christ Apostolic Church having over 50 different assemblies and an estimated 15,000 worshippers. The Kingsway International Christian Centre with its headquarters in Hackney, East London, is reputed to be the fastest growing church in Europe with over 8,000 congregants at its main church representing more than 40 nations of the world mostly from Africa.

In part, the negative experiences of migrants play a significant part in causing them to come together to form their own communities. Migrants are in many countries being stigmatised as a major threat to host societies. Indeed, many migrants are increasingly associated with crime and other social vices, leading to a criminalisation of the whole phenomenon of migration and demographic mobility.20 The existence of migrant communities is thus crucial in facilitating the migration of new compatriots and co-ethnics. As identified by Jeff Crisp, their role is crucial in at least four important respects.

First, existing networks act as an important source of information to prospective migrants as they provide them with details on various issues including transportation arrangements, entry requirements, asylum procedures and social welfare benefits, and, probably more importantly, the detention and deportation policies of destination states. The last information (i.e. the detention and deportation policies) is particularly useful for those individuals escaping from autocratic regimes and those hounded out of their homelands by military and other dictators. Asylum seekers and other migrants who possess this information are better placed to negotiate their entry into destination states in Europe and North America than those who do not.21 In addition, the information provided to prospective migrants through social networks with regard to the quality of life in prospective destination states, does contribute to the decision by many migrants to seek new lives in those countries. And, it has been pointed out that the less accurate such information is, the greater its impact is likely to be in persuading prospective migrants to seek to relocate as existing migrants generally pretend to be better off than they actually are. The outcome is distorted information that serves as a strong incentive to migration particularly for prospective economic migrants and those seeking to develop their talents and potentials outside their homelands.22

The second major role of existing social networks in facilitating the development of new diasporic communities is their mobilisation of

20 Taran, "Migration, Globalization and Human Rights...", op.cit.
21 Jeff Crisp, "Policy Challenges of the New Migrant Diasporas..."
resources for prospective migrants from a low or middle-income country to move to a more prosperous state. This is particularly the case for economic migrants, and it is clear from the fragmentary evidence available that such resources are mobilised in part by means of remittances sent home by members of the diaspora community. Such funds, which sometimes come in the form of loans but at other times as outright grants, are used to finance the journeys of relatives, kin, compatriots and co-ethnics.

A third facilitating role existing migrant social networks identified by Crisp is the provision of the organisational infrastructure required for people to move from one part of the world to another. This is a very important role particularly in those instances when movement has to be arranged in an irregular or clandestine character. In Nigeria, for example, many leading figures of the pro-democracy movement – and even many who had nothing to do with such movements but are related to known opponents of the regime – had to escape the oppressive regime of the late General Sani Abacha. Their exit in many instances were coordinated effectively with other members of the movement already in exile and who had perfected the escape strategy including the procurement of the necessary papers to enable would be escapees transit in the neighbouring countries (especially Benin Republic) under assumed identities, before departing for Europe and North America.

Finally, migrant social networks provide new migrants with subsistence and support including, notably, employment, when they arrive at their final destination. Migrant networks facilitate the introduction and integration of new migrants into the employment market in the hostlands. Many times, the employment provided is at the informal and personal levels, and the jobs are oftentimes beneath the qualifications and status of the beneficiaries. It is possible also that these ‘beneficiaries’ are victims of exploitation by their so-called benefactors. However, in a situation where migrants and asylum seekers are effectively shut out of the formal employment market, the ‘half bread’ provided by social networks is often better than none. For the professionals like doctors, engineers, computer scientists, whose entry into the host state is documented, their entry into the formal sector and their integration is usually only a matter of time, usually only until they are able to retrain themselves to meet the requirements of the regulatory professional bodies. In any case, too often, many trade groups represented among migrants often constitute themselves into professional associations whose activities usually facilitate the integration of their professional compatriots.

The transformation of informal social networks into organised diaspora forums and networks is facilitated by a number of factors including the search for acceptance and identity in new hostlands that caused migrants to seek contacts and relationships with similarly positioned nationals. Migrant groups constitute themselves into new communities through the formation of national, cultural and ethnic societies, professional and welfare associations. The addition in recent years was the formation of pro-democracy and human rights movements that sought to affect democratic agenda projects in their home countries. With the opening up of the political space in many of these countries, their citizens in the diaspora also formed branches of political parties and associations that were operating in the home countries. Kole Shettima has noted that, at the height of the pro-democracy agitation in Nigeria, there were no fewer than 100 Nigerian pro-democracy movements in the United States, five in Canada, and 50 in the United Kingdom. While a few had started as branches of pro-democracy and human rights movements in Nigeria, most of these movements started as independent organisations without any link with the pro-democracy movements in Nigeria.

In explaining the coalescing into a coherent force of these diasporic communities, one cannot ignore the crucial role played by the advances in global information technology including in particular the use

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23 Jeff Crisp, “Policy Challenges of the New Migrant Diasporas...”

of the internet. In general, demographic mobility has been significantly boosted by the internet and the worldwide web revolution. The internet has been instrumental to the formation of new diaspora communities and the creation of new identities for Africans in the diaspora. Probably the most articulate expression of migrant networking and impact on home states is the coming together of Nigerians in the diaspora in the United States, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and indeed in virtually all parts of the world in what became known as Naijanet, an internet-based discussion forum. As in the case of their Nigerian counterparts, the immigrant Ghanaian communities in Europe and North America similarly formed a vibrant internet discussion forum, Ghananet, that facilitated the emergence of a new nationalist spirit devoted to the revival of the Ghanaian nation and the re-emergence of democratic practice. The constitution of Liberian and Sierra Leonean diasporic communities into organised networks was similarly facilitated by the use of internet forums.

Migrant-Homeland Relations

The purpose and manner of departure of most migrants often affect the nature of relationships they develop with kith and kin including political allies, friends, professional colleagues, etc., back in their homelands. Many times it is assumed that the involuntary nature of the departure from their home states of particularly recent migrants and refugees would cause them to develop an antipathy and a particularly negative orientation and attitudes to their countries of origin. However, the experience and activities of the new migrants and of their social and other forms of networks, confirm that migrants remain connected to their home states and indeed continue to impact upon developments there. In the particular case of relationship of diasporic communities with the government of their homelands, the nature and purpose of exit oftentimes determine whether diasporans seek to support, strengthen, or to overthrow or accept the status quo in their homelands.  

The recent experiences of Nigeria, Ghana and other states in West Africa with large migrant communities that constitute the new African diasporas particularly in Europe and North America, confirm that migrant networks indeed constitute significant policy challenges to home states. Diasporic activities that involve conflict have usually enjoyed attention. In many instances, diaspora communities have lent their support to pro-democracy and anti-government (not necessarily anti-state) activities in their home states. Most of the new African diasporas were active in the pro-democracy activities seeking the replacement of autocratic regimes in their home countries. Nigerian diaspora-based human rights and pro-democracy movements were in the forefront of the struggle against military dictatorships in Nigeria. Similarly, Ghanaians who had sought refuge abroad from political repression in their country were active in the struggle to effect political change in Ghana.

In all instances of identified organised diasporic communities, there is evidence that the emergent migrant networks impacted on developments in their home states politically, socially and economically, as well as in security terms. But, apart from high profile political activities and those with security implications including attempts to subvert and replace autocratic regimes in their home states, the more routine activities of diasporic communities are also worthy of attention. For example, many migrants had departed their homelands in search of the proverbial greener economic pastures. The aspirations and expectations of many of their kith and kin inevitably became focused on diaspora-based relations and even friends. In the harsh economic environment prevailing in several African states, personal survival many times hinged on what migrant relations were able to send back home either regularly, occasionally, or at agreed intervals. This is the root of what has since

become known as the 'remittance economy', i.e. financial remittance from diaspora relatives that constituted significant sources of income for several families in home states, otherwise known as the Informal Money Transfer Systems (IMTS). Remittances lodged to home countries under the IMTS are essentially funds transferred across international frontiers outside of the conventional regulated banking and financial channels. As we know them today, IMTS evolved from two different systems, the “hawala”/“hundi” that developed in South Asia, and the “fei ch’ien”, which started in China. According to various estimates, the sums that flow through these informal channels range from $100 billion and $300 billion every year. Funds from IMTS sources have been crucial to the economy of many African states particularly in Southern Africa where migrant workers employed in South Africa have contributed significantly to the foreign exchange earnings of many of these states. In recent times, informal remittances have remained popular due partly to cultural factors of dependence on funds from these sources by several families in home countries; the simple operational characteristics of the system, its efficiency, low cost of operation, and the absence of bureaucratic bottlenecks. At the national level, remittances from international migrant sources may form a substantial source of foreign exchange, while at the domestic level, these remittances could serve as a means of effecting income redistribution. Recent experience has shown that at the household level, such remittances improve the welfare of both urban and rural households. This is despite the fact that the long term impact is difficult to assess given that funds from such sources are used largely for consumer items with only a small proportion being invested. Thus, the economic dimensions of the activities of diaspora communities are significant.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to provide a framework for understanding the phenomenon of the new African diasporas. The movement of African people to other lands outside their continent is not a recent phenomenon. In addition, the permanent settlement of many of those involved in this population movement in their hostlands is also not recent. However, developments in recent years reveal the emergence of new dimensions to the phenomenon of demographic mobility and involuntary migration. The lines of distinction between refugees and migrants have become substantially blurred. The various fallouts of globalisation have also added to the complexities of the modern phase of international migration. Ironically, Africa’s perceived marginalisation in the international system given the developments in the global economy has contributed to the ‘globalisation’ of Africa and Africans as the people have been forced to respect Lenin’s thesis that uneven development is a trigger for migration and that the technological attainments of the developed countries is an attraction for migrant labour to move to such economies. But internal developments have also encouraged and facilitated the emigration of Africans to other lands. Migrant networks pose various challenges to both host and home countries. Recent developments confirm that a number of African countries are beginning to recognise the widespread significance of the phenomenon. For example, the Nigerian government of President Olusegun Obasanjo has appointed a Special Assistant to the President on Nigerians in the Diaspora. It is expected that this could assist the evolution of rational national policies to deal with this phenomenon in the years to come.