

When Africans Save Africa

Frances Williams^a

If the African continent could be likened to a fairy tale, it would have to be the story of Sleeping Beauty who lies in a deep slumber waiting for the kiss of life from a handsome white prince. However, as the surging profits of gold, oil, and diamond multinational corporations prove that many handsome white princes are already in Africa, the world's richest continent (in resources and potentially in dollars) will have to look to the efforts of its own people for its best chance of a full awakening.

Yet, with so many of her people now living outside her borders, how can this be achieved? Statistics estimate that Africa loses twenty-thousand professionals each year and that the number of Africans living outside the continent has doubled in a generation.

Recruitment tactics by developed countries have successfully lured away thousands of African professionals, with the United Kingdom and United States easing their own skills gaps in education and health through imported talent from Africa's beleaguered health and educational sectors. This hemorrhage of African talent, usually educated at the expense of cash-strapped nations, impacts heavily on the capacity of African governments to develop and implement the policies needed for sustained economic growth.

Today, with an estimated twenty-one thousand Nigerian doctors and more than two-hundred thousand African scientists working in the United States, critical resources have left Africa. So who will awaken this beautiful sleeping giant? The only sustainable asset of any enterprise or nation is its people, but preventing migration from Africa can

^a Frances Williams is the editor of ReConnect Africa, an online publication and portal for professional Africans, and chief executive of Interims for Development, a UK-based human resources, careers, and training consultancy for Africa.

never be the answer, and compelling return is impossible. The challenge, then, is for Africans outside the continent to find a way to make a difference.

Financial Power

The financial power of the diaspora is already making a difference, and Africans outside the continent are the biggest donors and financial contributors to African development. In 2003, according to the World Bank, remittances to Africa by non-resident Africans were estimated at US \$200 billion, representing revenue greater than official aid and foreign direct investment for many African countries.

Notwithstanding the valuable role remittances play, the ongoing and sustained development of the continent also requires the skills and talents of expatriate Africans working in partnership with those at home to fulfill the potential of this great continent.

Brand Africa

Making Africa the destination of choice for professional skills and financial capital means changing the traditional image of the continent. Attracting the best of Africa's talent involves re-branding Africa to its own estranged sons and daughters. It involves presenting a balanced and real picture of a continent faced with serious but not insurmountable problems. It means telling the stories of those who are creating wealth and opportunity for themselves and their fellow citizens. It requires an African perspective of Africa to be articulated and shared as well as all the stakeholders in Africa's future to contribute their part to selling the message of change and of optimism.

New media channels established by Africans are opening up with the aim of providing balanced information and signaling opportunity on the continent. The Internet has facilitated accessible media platforms that are making a conscious effort to move away from the pervasive Afro-pessimism of mainstream media to tell the stories of

real people and real successes, while also giving Africa's businesses a voice in selling their success stories to a sometimes skeptical and often disconnected audience.

African governments have a strong role to play in re-branding the continent, and South Africa offers an example of how positive branding can create a strategic investment advantage. Through its International Marketing Council, the South African government has acknowledged the importance of proactively branding the country and the continent to the global marketplace. With slogans such as "South Africa — Alive with Possibility" and "South Africa — Open for Business" coupled with marketing and investment road shows and conferences, the country has made an impressive and rewarding case for inward investment.

Awakening the Beauty

Africans in the diaspora are also taking on the challenge of lending their skills and expertise — whether for the short or long term — to the task of saving Africa. From hometown associations to business networks and professional and national associations, non-resident Africans around the globe are harnessing their intellectual, technical, and entrepreneurial skills for Africa's development. Through increasingly vocal political lobbying and advocacy, Africans in their host countries are also seeking a greater influence on Western policies toward development in Africa. A recent initiative by Africans living in the United Kingdom has seen the lobbying of the British government to offer tax relief on remittances sent by Africans in the United Kingdom to their home countries.

As the continent experiences the early stages of a grassroots entrepreneurial revival, the role being played by Africa's diaspora in linking people and networks and providing vital information will increase. Africa needs to create employment for its people and to support the development of enterprise as a means of so doing, and

Africans in the diaspora are developing programs that enable skills gained in the West to be shared and invested back into Africa. The Supporting Entrepreneurs and Enterprise Development in Africa, or SEEDA, project developed by an African nongovernmental organization in the United Kingdom has seen experienced Africans coming from Europe to spend several weeks in Sierra Leone and Ghana, working closely with grassroots entrepreneurs to provide business advice and stimulate job creation.

Sleeping Beauty eventually woke up and showed her gratitude to her princely savior. Africa will eventually awaken to its rightful place on the world stage but when it does, it will be due to its own people. For as the African saying goes, “a stranger will never put out the fire in your house while his own is burning.”