

**DEMYSTIFYING THE FALLACY OF BRAIN-DRAIN IN NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE:  
ENGAGING THE BURDEN AND THE CONTRADICTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Desperate emigration among all categories of Nigerians is an indicator of challenging socioeconomic and development environment. As mass poverty, mediocrity and visionless leadership crept into the polity in the 1980s and became institutionalized over the years, it became apparent that striking a balance among the citizenry would translate to devising adjustment mechanisms, including emigration. This paper argues that although migration affects development in several ways, it is fallacious to locate underdevelopment of Nigeria in the 'brain-drain syndrome'. Thus, while it is accepted that highly skilled Nigerians are among those leaving the country, a far higher number of this same category of people residing in the country are unemployed. At best, such migration is developmental given that it reduces the army of the-economically-disengaged. Hence, poor governance, gender inequity, ethnicity, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, terrorism and youth restiveness individually and collectively have greater implications for attainment of sustainable development by Nigeria.

**Key words:** Desperate migration, brain-drain, institutionalized retrogression, development dilemma, sustainable development.

## BACKGROUND

One of the features of Nigeria's contemporary demographic landscape is its stabilizing population composition. Fertility and mortality have remained fairly controlled and on the decline (NPC and ORC 2004; NPC and ICF Macro 2009; NPC and ICF International 2014) through advocacy, awareness creation, lifestyle modification and access to medication among others, despite challenges. Migration presents a different picture given the rarity of evidence on dwindling migratory flows in both local and international contexts. Part of the reasons for the persistence of migration particularly in low income countries of sub-Saharan Africa include harsh socioeconomic environment, lack of trust in the sincerity and capability of the government to address the issues of poverty, corruption in its several strands and lack of objectivity in appointments and promotions in formal employment sector, insecurity and poor state of infrastructures among others.

Although, a high volume of internal movement of people takes place in Nigeria as a result of marked disparity in the level of development within and across states, the present analysis focuses on international migration and in particular emigration which is conceived as anti-developmental mainly among developing societies. Even though a case can be made against this position by reference to remittances of proceeds by emigrants to their home countries, those who conceive it as annihilation rely on its relationship with manpower and knowledge transfer. Among scholars, this debate is persistently lively with a large majority aligning with the latter view, which has always been presented with compelling figures that hardly translate to convincing analyses.

To be sure, data on the status of migrants that transit through illegitimate migration corridors are usually unknown including their educational and professional statuses. Moreover, the distinction between professionals that emigrated after acquiring their skills at home and those that became professionals abroad is usually not considered. These categorizations are usually not undertaken in academic discourses and postulations tend to lump all professionals together as emigrants that relocated as professionals. The import of these analytical gaps is unmistakable and suggests that much of what we know about emigration is embedded in assumptions. Hence, caution should be exercised in migration studies and conclusions given the latent patterns and dynamics that are hardly emphasized in its analysis.

Without prejudice to information in the literature about 'brain-drain' as a major factor in underdevelopment of Nigeria, which we consider here and elsewhere as misleading and fallacious (Nwokocho and Ajaegbu 2014), a near accurate picture of reality can be painted by analyzing cohorts of professionals five years post-graduation. If we consider for instance, a class of engineering graduates (or any other academic discipline for that matter) from a Nigerian university half a decade ago, we may discover that less than one percent may have emigrated for employment purposes while many are either unemployed or underemployed, and may remain so for a long time or even indefinitely. The critical options for the professional would then be between being continually unemployed/underemployed and emigration. For different reasons bothering on self esteem, social security and finance among others (Mberu 2010), the latter option would appear better among a large number of actors both for the micro-individual and macro-society.

As studies indicate remittances from Nigerians in the Diaspora, including professionals, runs into several billion dollars annually and have been on persistent increase over the years (Mberu 2010; Afolayan and IOM 2009; World Bank 2009; Nnaemeka *et al.* 2007). In addition, return-migration, brain-gain and technology transfer are clear manifestations of other advantages of emigration (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016) particularly in a situation where such migration does not

impinge negatively on development on account of abundant human capital as typified by Nigeria (Nwokocha and Ajaegbu 2015). Therefore, well managed the dividends of emigration could largely contribute to the attainment sustainable development both at micro household and macro community levels.

## **THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Structural Functionalism conceives the society as a system made up of interrelated parts that interact on the basis of a common value system. Each agency or subsystem is seen as functional and contributes to the survival of the entire system. Thus, a malfunctioning of any of the parts affects others and the entire system. Functionalism views society as a self-regulating system that relies on some prerequisites for actualization of order and latent maintenance (Macionis and Plummer 2005). Thus, a functioning society is one in which a greater number of its citizens is able to overcome the limitations that may undermine access to Maslow's basic necessities of life, particularly self-actualization and self-esteem. Nigeria for instance, is characterized by dysfunction occasioned by lack of basic amenities, high level of unemployment, breakdown of law and order, ignorance and rising incidences of avoidable deaths (Nwokocha 2012; Nwokocha and Awomoyi 2009).

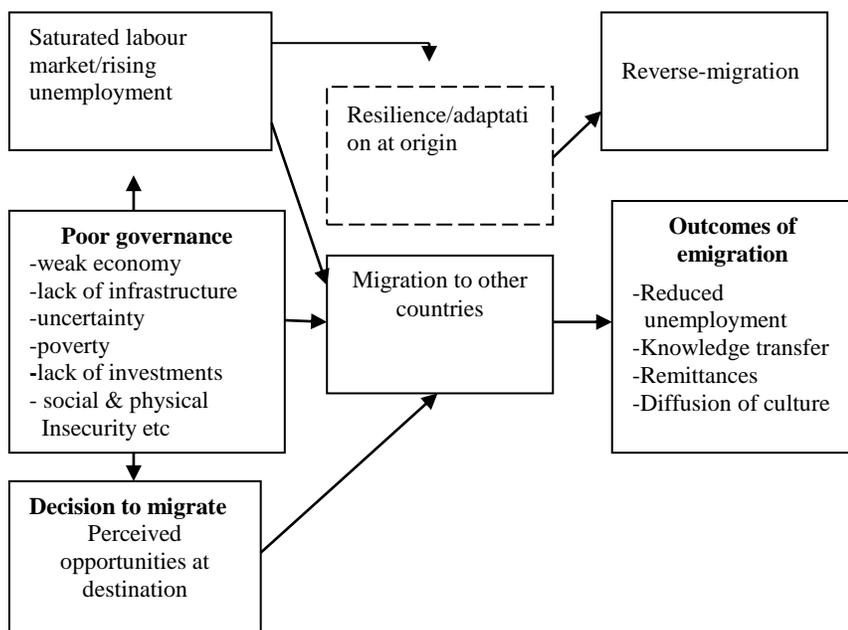
Nigeria negates the Structural Functionalist's view of society as a summation of unified, ordered and contributory sub-systems (Ritzer 2008). The reality of the Nigerian situation is manifest in government insensitivity, dissensus at different levels of individual and group relations, lack of motivation to make meaningful contributions to the maintenance of the system as a whole. Apparent governmental failure in economic, infrastructural and human development and attendant poverty became part of the people's difficult existence and explains emigration among all categories of Nigerians as a mechanism for overcoming real or imagined inadequacies.

Rational Choice Theory sees individuals as capable of weighing the advantages and demerits of an intended action before taking such action which ought to be directed at ends or goals (Friedman and Hechter 1988). As such, actors have the capacity to make choices among alternatives within the context of prevailing conditions. However, such ability must be considered relative to a prospective actor's level of awareness about the efficacy of these alternatives in dealing with a particular condition. In the present analysis, an intending migrant is expected to assess his/her situation at origin relative to the perceived conditions at destination before arriving at migration decision. By extension, the rational choice theory presupposes that an actor should have sufficient information on events and circumstances in the two locations with regard to everyday life. Without such informed outlook and insight migration decisions would only be based on conjecture and intuition.

An uninformed person or agency may perceive emigration, in itself, as the key to overcoming socio-economic deficiencies prevalent at place of origin without deeply analyzing the content and context of an intended action. In some instances, migrants are unable to realize the goal for which they relocated to other destinations, yet the circumstances at home, which for the most part portend hopelessness and uncertainty, may justify such migration decisions (Nwokocha 2015). In what follows, we present a conceptual framework that represents a synthesis of structural functionalism and rational choice theory in explaining the dynamics of emigration and the central argument canvassed in the discourse. Figure 1 locates the main reason for emigration in poor governance that finds expression mainly in weak economy, lack of functional basic

infrastructures, lack of investment, poverty, uncertainty and insecurity among others. It is argued here that such structural dysfunction and dislocation of a people's collective essence are avoidable in a country like Nigeria where the citizenry is reputed for hard work and industry.

With its abundant human and material resources, though grossly mismanaged over the years, Nigeria typifies a crawling giant in several respects particularly in her inability to create jobs to cater for the employment needs of a large number of citizens that desperately yearn for such opportunity. As a corollary, the country has failed to recreate its population size and natural endowments into an advantage and therefore unable to key into the sustainable development paradigm. The economics of non-expansion of extractive and manufacturing industries inevitably led to saturation of the labour market to the effect that wages are ridiculously low in some instances.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework

**Source:** Author, 2016

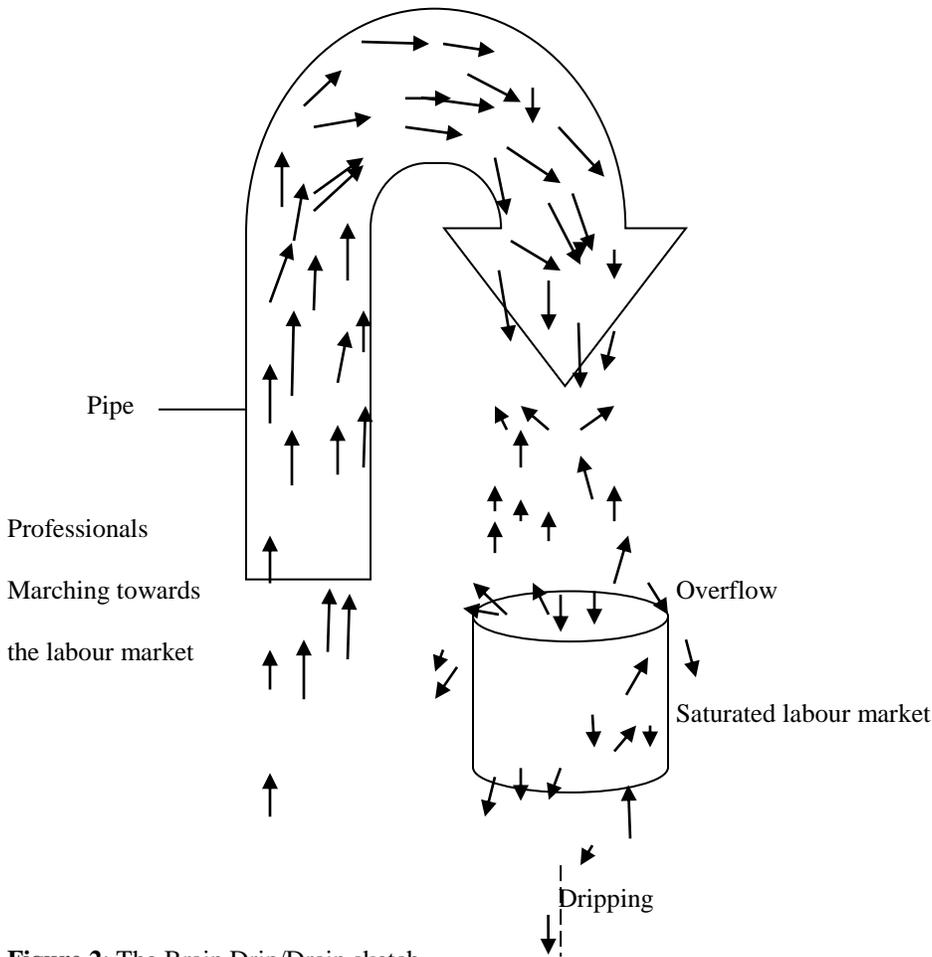
Rising unemployment in its several manifestations engenders the decision to migrate based on some presumption that there are better opportunities at destination. Ordinarily, many Nigerians for reasons related to weather, acquaintance with local foods, immigration laws, observance of cultural beliefs and practices among other factors would rather prefer residing in Nigeria to relocating to other countries. To be sure, some potential migrants have had to shelve the idea of migrating to other locations by exhibiting resilience and adaptive capacity at origin. Adaptation to prevailing circumstances at home is best explained from an actor's perspective but may generally derive from an attempt at maintaining kinship, normative and social ties. This attitude of not wanting to relocate to other destinations translates to a phenomenon described as *Reverse-Migration*.

In more concrete terms, we conceive reverse-migration as a situation where even when the prevailing circumstances at origin are sufficient to constitute push factors for emigration, a potential migrant does not consider such movement as an option towards overcoming identified challenges (it is the exact opposite of contemplating emigration at the slightest challenge at origin or an exhibition of a mentality of relocation to other countries for its sake; not necessarily for what such movement may portend for the individual and/or family). Such a posture may derive from a sense of patriotism, fear of the unknown and discouraging reports on some relatives, friends or neighbours who had migrated in the past and perceived as largely worse-off in several respects upon return, among others.

### **THE FALLACY OF BRAIN-DRAIN IN NIGERIA**

This article is an attempt at demystifying the fallacies that shroud academic discourses on brain-drain as if to suggest that emigration of educated persons and professionals is in itself antithetical to Nigeria's development. We draw our analogy from the employment situation with reference to job prospects among graduates of tertiary institutions using the diagram below. Figure 2 shows the quantum of fresh graduates upon completion of the one year compulsory service to the nation (also known as National Youth Service Corps-NYSC) journeying through our analogical/hypothetical pipe towards the labour market which is already saturated and suffocating. The effect of Nigeria's huge youthful population (ISERT 2014; Isiugo-Abanihe 2011) filters into various aspects of the country's socioeconomic life including the education sector where different categories of professionals and the thematic 'brain' are produced annually.

It is important to state here that the labour market is composed of new job seekers and individuals who are underemployed and willing to take up new positions.



**Figure 2:** The Brain Drip/Drain sketch

**Source:** Author

Apparent from Figure 2 is that the labour market in Nigeria is overflowing and further additions would compound already precarious employment situation. The overflow is a product of the imbalance between increasing unemployment rate and inability of government to create jobs. We argue here that the concept ‘drain’ is largely misapplied in migration analysis particularly in Nigeria, which has neither witnessed exhaustion of skilled manpower nor its depletion to the extent that positions were vacant and irreplaceable. Experience consistently shows that job vacancies, no matter how seemingly unattractive, are oversubscribed in Nigeria. This situation therefore questions the veracity of the claim that graduates and professionals are emigrating to other countries for employment to the extent it constitutes a problem to Nigeria’s development.

Indeed, considering the very high number of skilled manpower in the labour market compared to their counterparts that emigrate for jobs elsewhere, it is more realistic to describe what obtains in Nigeria as 'brain-drip'. The latter phenomenon, which is hardly emphasized in scholarship, supposes that the number of emigrants in the professional category is infinitesimal relative to their in-country counterparts that are unemployed. We therefore consider the use of brain-drain as a conceptual misapplication and an overstatement which though has gained prominence in the literature is capable of projecting wrong and misleading intellectual signals among development scholars. We are hence persuaded to view 'brain-drip' as developmental given that it is a mechanism for mitigating the overarching suffocation being experienced in the labour market presently. As a corollary, the competition for the few available employment spaces would have been fiercer without such occasional relocation to other countries for the purposes of securing job opportunities.

The advantages that inhere in brain-drip as canvassed here are more visible when the situation is put in perspective. Assuming five Electrical Engineers leave the shores of Nigeria for Denmark, Saudi Arabia or any country for that matter for employment, their departure may go unnoticed at the macro society level where over one thousand and two hundred other Electrical Engineering graduates roam the streets. At best, the migration of such individuals is felt at the micro family, household and neighbourhood levels. Apart from the remittances that these migrants are likely to send home after a while, the vacuum created by their exit contributes to de-suffocating the labour market no matter how little. In the long run, three advantages are likely and include: creation of spaces, remittances and knowledge transfer upon return.

The above position does not in any way remove or diminish the fact that brain-drain, where it exists, is anti-developmental and in fact a major factor that can accelerate it. However, the reality is that the Nigerian situation is far from it. Drain in the present analysis would imply depletion or exhaustion of professionals or graduates as a result of emigration; none of these concepts finds expression in the Nigerian labour market lexicon. The brain-drip and saturated labour market interaction (leading to overflow) has accounted for desperation among job seekers to the extent that the demand for and supply of labour do not necessarily obey the market forces. Ordinarily, low wages discourage job seekers, including professionals, from presenting themselves for employment; in Nigeria such wages still attract skilled professionals, and sometimes are sternly competed for. In the short run, the wage regime may seem favourable to employers, however, the long term negative effect on the country's development may be enormous considering that underpaid employees may not be sufficiently motivated to contribute maximally to national growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has demonstrated that ascribing underdevelopment of Nigeria to brain-drain is, to say the least, alarmist and deceptive. Our analysis has shown that in reality what obtains in Nigeria is brain-drip which we have argued is a kind of 'blessing in disguise' particularly considering that it reduces the army of unemployed professionals in the country. It is therefore time that Nigerians accepted the fact that rather than locate the nation's development dilemma in emigration of highly skilled citizens, ineffective governance, ethnicity and primordial sentiments, gender inequity, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, lack of basic infrastructures, corruption, terrorism and youth restiveness individually and collectively are critical in understanding the contradictions of development in the midst of abundant human and material resources.

Hence, problematizing brain-drip, as has been argued in this paper, would amount to misplacement of concerns away from the real issues that undermine sustainable development in Nigeria. Perhaps, the amplification of the phenomenon as brain-drain, as is replete in the literature, was in order to showcase the perceived enormity of the magnitude of emigration of professionals. Incidentally, that position did not, at the same time, take into account the totality of the situation with specific reference to the pervasive unemployment crisis and Nigeria's labour market context that has consistently defiled the laws of demand and supply and by implication market forces. We consider any attempt at reversing the brain-drip situation, by seeking to attract skilled people back, as antithetical in the midst of social, economic and political stagnation.

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