

DIASPORA AND DEVELOPMENT

Delivered by the Honourable Minister of Political and Public Affairs, Republic of Sierra Leone, Alhaji Ibrahim Kemoh Sesay, on the Occasion of the International Dialogue on Migration 2013 – Diaspora Ministerial Conference in Geneva

Diaspora and Development is not a new concept even though the word 'diaspora' may be as new as the creation of the Jewish Diaspora. Religiously, the concept itself can be traced as far back as when God created the first man and woman. And we have been taught that they were banished out of the Garden of Eden. Scriptures of different faiths agree that we will return to Heaven provided we find a spiritual resource on earth. It means that even our world is a creation of diaspora resources and that the Heavens would be developed by diaspora when we shall have returned with our spiritual resource.

Indeed, the world has experienced great movement of people across state lines and continental frontiers in ancient and in modern histories. As early as in the pre-civilization wars of Barbarians and Samaritans to the Berlin Conference and the Partition of Africa, people moved across state lines and continental frontiers. Forceful migration still remains the predominant reason for the movement of people around the world.

Scholars have espoused many definitions for the word over the years. Non-governmental organizations and institutions have developed their own understanding of the word tailored to their institutional objectives. Recently, state actors have begun institutionalizing the concept thereby bringing forth new meanings and angles to the word domesticated to cultures and traditions. Nevertheless, the common denominator of all of these movements regardless of reasons is that, wherever people move to for survival, they contribute the same things namely human capital, investment, personal funds, culture, tradition and civic competence to their host countries and many a time extend it to their countries of origin.

The purpose of this paper is to share with this forum how we are doing in Sierra Leone in leveraging on the human resources of these scattered communities of ours around the world so that they can contribute to our post-war reconstruction and socio-economic development.

The United States of America, Australia, the State of Israel, South Africa as well as many countries in the sub-Region are all partly the creation of willing or forceful migrant-workers. These people over many centuries still have some amount of, or strong ties and attachment to their countries of origin. On that note, I humbly submit that the global diaspora human resources repatriation agenda must be set upon dual tracks; it must be tailored to and it must be sensitive to the laws, values, cultures and traditions of the host country and the country of origin.

Migrant workers and diasporas are not just scattered people on the globe, they are human capital, they are investment opportunities and they are personal fund-holders with the discretion to keep such resources in their adopted homelands or to repatriate their resources to their countries of origin. The foregoing background is the premise for an unwavering attention to these partners of national development in nations across the world.

In Sierra Leone, His Excellency the President Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma in his first parliamentary address to the nation proclaimed that his government will engage its diaspora populations to join him in nation-building. He called them his Fifth Region in addition to the four geographical divisions by region in the country. But we have observed with keen unscientific interest and attention that the Sierra Leone Diaspora population is most probably greater than anyone of those regions in the country. And we know for certain that about five hundred thousand Sierra Leoneans live in the United States alone.

Like in many other nations in conflict in Africa, while we were at war, the population that left the shores of Sierra Leone was busy improving on their human capacity and sending remittances to their loved ones in Sierra Leone. That is why we have created innovative techniques to reverse the inadvertently exacerbated brain drain by the decade-long civil war. Based on

the vision of the President to engage his Fifth Region, we have created an agency in Sierra Leone called the Office of Diaspora Affairs (ODA) in the Ministry of Political and Public Affairs.

The aim of establishing the ODA is to manage the issues of Diaspora and Development aimed at engaging the diaspora in nation-building process in Sierra Leone. Since then there have been mutual benefit partnerships between the Government of Sierra Leone and its diaspora communities. One such notable benefit partnership is the Government of Sierra Leone's policy of strategic engagement of the diaspora in filling critical capacity gaps in Ministries Department and Agencies (MDAs). In that arrangement, about 35 Sierra Leonean expatriates in the diaspora were targeted of which twenty-five were recruited. In the process, we discovered highly skilled Sierra Leoneans who were willing to be repatriated but found it difficult without incentive packages. The truth that nobody would dispute now is that the West is in serious social-economic declines. One is better off coming home than staying in the diaspora under such favourable repatriation process facilitated by attractive incentive packages by the government. In return, government reduced expenditure on the use of project implementation units (PIUs) filled by foreign expatriates.

Because we know that for any country to effectively and efficiently harness and harmonize its diaspora resources for a sustainable socio-economic development, concrete modalities should be put in place for such realization to be fruitful. Thus, the appropriate and adequate answers to the fundamental questions below are crucial to diaspora success-story in any nation:

- How to define and gather data on diasporas?
- How to incorporate diaspora contributions into the development strategies of the home and host country?
- How to identify appropriate partners within the diasporas?
- What institutional frameworks and incentives can facilitate diaspora engagement for development in the home country?
- What resources are available within diasporas that could contribute to development and how can this be maximized?

The possibility of pooling Sierra Leonean skills, talents and resources is of necessity if the country is to move forward as a true financial independent nation. Tapping into the economic power of the Sierra Leone diasporas has become important even to the aid and development community. The World Bank and the African Development Fund report on remittances recommends that African countries consider issuing diaspora bonds and selling them to expatriates, who together save tens of billions of dollars a year. It is plausible that a fraction of these savings could be attracted as investments in Sierra Leone with properly designed legal instruments and incentives.

The ODA has been very instrumental so far in helping other diaspora Sierra Leoneans who fall outside the existing strategic engagement scheme in resettling through attractive incentives and guidance in setting up small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well as securing other appointments for them in MDAs and big corporations. In the area of remittances, even though financial records show that diaspora remittances to Africa surpass all the foreign donor moneys combined, Sierra Leone is still grappling with innovative techniques and ideas of how to mainstream and formalize diaspora remittances to reflect on the balance of trade and the national gross domestic product (GDP). We are also challenged with a diaspora and domestic investment proposal, which is aimed at leveraging diaspora remittances entitled, Domestic Expatriates Nationals Investment-Sierra Leone (DENI-SL) scheme. The main objective of DENI-SL is to prepare diasporas and Sierra Leoneans at home to take advantage of the on-going privatization process in Sierra Leone in order for them to be able to jointly own state entities instead of auctioning them off to foreign direct investors who are readily prepared with the huge capital requirement for such investments, on the premise that state ownership is public ownership.

Amid these challenges in grappling with diaspora issues, the foregoing are our achievements so far in the area of Diaspora and Development in Sierra Leone. In 2012, the President in his bid for re-election in Sierra Leone promised the people "I will do more". In that light, and in doing more for the Diaspora, he has included in his Agenda for Prosperity, which is an upgrade of its predecessor, the Agenda for change, a project to develop a

Diaspora and Migration policy, which is a flagship project in the Ministry of Political and Public Affairs. This bill, when enacted, will clearly map out the rights and obligations of the Diasporas and the Government in Sierra Leone including their Right to Vote. The foregoing will engender a strong and solid sense of ownership and will empower my country to compete with countries around the world over Sierra Leone diaspora human capital, potential investments and personal funds in the form of skill and technical contributions, remittances, SME's, and private sector investments.

Today, I came here to also bring to the attention of this forum a major constraint that limits countries in unlocking the full potentials of their diaspora populations in Europe, United States and Canada, with the hope that it will become a topic of global debate for the benefit of enabling the world to become a true global village in which people and resources will move freely across national and continental frontiers just as we have achieved in the area of free-flow of information across national and continental frontiers.

The constraint that makes it absolutely impossible to create a Diaspora-Driven Investment Fund in the West is the Securities & Exchange Commission (SEC) of the US and Canada and the Financial Services Authority (FSA) of the UK and similar regulations in other EU countries. Any attempts to form a Diaspora Fund of any sort have invariably been thwarted by this killer-constraint.

In conclusion, our agenda this year is to provide our diaspora compatriots with a formidable Diaspora and Migration policy, which is aimed at a complete overhaul of our relationship with our diaspora communities around the world. Our determination is to have a complete legal instrument that will package the issue of diaspora and development in a way that our Fifth Region will fully be a part of our post-war reconstruction and national development.