

'Brain drain' hits Africa's tech developers

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When Samuel Onidare returned to Nigeria from the United Kingdom a year ago, he had difficulty convincing his colleagues that he made the right decision.

Onidare, who is a lecturer at the Department of Telecommunications Science, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, has research interests revolving

around wireless cellular communication, next-generation mobile broadband, wireless sensor networks, power control and 5G.

Determined to help build indigenous tech talents in Nigeria through teaching and research, he defied all odds and remained in the country.

But since his return, Nigerian universities owned by the [national government](#) have been closed down because of wage disputes between lecturers and the government. An overwhelmed Onidare said the Nigerian situation speaks to the challenge hindering the growth of tech talents not just in Nigeria but across Sub-Saharan Africa.

"I thought I had learnt a lot so I was coming back with all the enthusiasm," he said. "But upon getting here, you realize that the system doesn't even want you. That's why a lot of people stay back (abroad) or migrate. It's about a working system. Most times it's not even the best of situations for them abroad but when you compare it to what they will come here to meet, it's better."

Africa's untapped talent for growth

Data from the United Nations shows that Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 70% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population being under the age of 30. Such a high number of young people is the world's largest source of untapped talent for economic growth.

The pool of talents explains the significant presence in Africa of global tech organizations such as Google, Amazon, Starlink, Facebook, and Microsoft, says 34-year-old Kunmi Lasisi, a Nigerian tech developer based in Canada. In April 2021, Twitter set up its first Africa base in Ghana, West Africa.

But despite this potential, there is a new wave of migration from many

parts of Sub-Saharan Africa that significantly impacts the technology ecosystem. In Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy, "japa" is a popular slang for brain drain which manifests in the movement of skilled workers—mostly health workers and tech talents—to [high income countries](#) such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Nigeria was the third most common country of citizenship of people invited to apply for permanent residency in Canada. Similarly, as of 2021, over 400 Nigerian tech talent had migrated via the U.K. government's Tech Talent Visa, according to a report.

The situation is nearly the same across the region, says Fred Kithinzi, [chief executive officer](#) at Belva Digital, a digital marketing company in Nairobi, Kenya. While the big tech corporations are recruiting from Africa, they are also relocating these talents to their headquarter countries. "In some quarters, this has been referenced as a ticking time bomb," explains Kithinzi. "In others, it's termed the 'brain-drain.'"

Struggling economies

The main reason for the exodus of tech talents is that most youth in Africa do not have stable economic opportunities, says Lasisi, who worked with a tech giant in Lagos before his migration to Canada.

Most African economies are also struggling with surging inflationary pressures, with monetary regulators having to raise interest rates to curb the rising cost of goods and services. In June, economies like Nigeria and Ghana had 18.6% and 29.8% inflation rates, respectively while Sudan and Zimbabwe recorded 220.7% and 191%, respectively.

The state of the economies manifests in the infrastructural deficit which stifles productivity among tech talents, according to Emmanuel Otori, CEO of Abuja Data School, Nigeria.

Otori argues that most people want to remain in their country if the pay is good, but a combination of poor infrastructure and insecurity pushes many people out of the continent. "In addition, the cost of data (internet) is a concern for young tech talents who don't have resources," Otori adds.

Pay disparity

Nigel Mugamu came back to Zimbabwe in 2010 when the economy had double-digit growth rates after years of hyperinflation. He explains that he returned home because he wanted to live with his family on the continent.

"But since then, I know many Zimbabweans who have left the continent for Germany, France and that's obviously having a negative impact on tech on the continent," said Mugamu, who lived in Australia and the United Kingdom but now works as chief storyteller at 263Chat, an online media organization in Zimbabwe. "A lot of those issues comes back to infrastructure, opportunities, availability of capital and talented developers. There are funding and knowledge gap issues, and lack of venture capitals—early stage investors—to support the innovations too."

According to the 2021 Africa Developer Ecosystem report by Google, about 38% of African developers work in Africa for a company with its headquarters based outside of the continent.

Otori tells SciDev.Net that as soon as many of these talents gather enough skills, they migrate out of the region.

One reason for this, he argues, is low pay.

"A tech talent may be able to earn from US\$50,000 to US\$70,000 annually ... in Canada," he says. "But in Nigeria, you might be paid

250,000 naira per month (roughly US\$500 monthly or US\$6,000 annually). When you compare regardless of the cost of living, it's better to move because what's left can help you live an ideal life."

He explains that some tech skills—such as coding and data analysis—are very technical in nature, even if high-paying. "So, 70% of the people who come to our institute to learn are migrating, almost immediately. This doesn't help the growth Nigeria might have if we are able to retain them. But since the motivation is not high, they move."

Onidare buttresses the point about pay with the story of his friend, an associate professor, who stayed back in the United Kingdom to become a mere junior engineer: "As a junior engineer, he is probably earning six times of what a professor earns in Nigeria anyway."

"At the minimum, if you are an IT person, whether software or networking, you stand a chance of earning at least 'times ten' of what you will be paid in Nigeria if you go outside the country."

Building robust systems

The solution to the brain drain crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa is to build robust systems across countries in the region, Onidare tells SciDev.Net. He says the process begins with appreciating local talents.

"There is the problem in Nigeria—or maybe it's an African thing—we don't appreciate what's our own, especially in the tech world," he says.

Onidare also calls for synergy among government policymakers and the university community.

"Back when I was in Sweden doing my masters, the synergy between the academics and the industry was such that companies brought their new

products to universities for testing before taking it out," he says. "But here, people don't think anything can come out of our [educational] institutions. But why will they think so when the government doesn't even believe in the educational system?"

But Kithinzi argues that [brain drain](#) is not necessarily a bad thing because some of the top businesses and start-ups in Africa were founded by African professionals who gained global experience and later returned to bring change to the continent.

"Brain drain is a consequence of demand and supply in a capitalist world. We can use it to our advantage," he explains. The leadership in Africa has a role to create an enabling environment to nurture, retain, grow and attract talent, African or not, and to use this talent to grow and compete with the rest of the world."

Provided by SciDev.Net

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