

Brexit was a Wakeup Call for Africans in the Diaspora

As the African Union moves towards economic integration, Tobi Jaiyesimi discusses what lessons the continent can learn from Brexit.

That Africa is constantly playing the catch-up game is not a new narrative. As some may argue, the recent decision of the African Union (AU) to pursue an integrated path and facilitate the free movement of people between its 54 countries is long overdue. The launch of the common passport ought to be good news for Africans, rather it is proving contentious in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU). Popularly known as *Brexit*, the UK's decision to leave the EU has sparked high levels of uncertainty globally, and more significantly, within its multiracial and diverse communities. Alongside the uncertainty appears to be an *identity crisis* for those of Black-British and African origins – who, despite the legal backing of citizenship and residency, share an increased sense of vulnerability. The fundamental question remains: *what does Brexit really mean for Africans?* This was the topic discussed at a recent event at the Houses of Parliament organised by the **Young Pioneers Network**.

Though **statistics** based on a survey of 12,369 people show that 73 per cent of black voters backed the Remain campaign, the households represented in the debate contend that older generation Black-British and Africans were in favour of Leave, for reasons including a sense of marginalisation, discrimination and inequality. Disgruntled by the fact that Europeans from EU member states are automatically entitled to social benefits, and often secure higher ranking jobs than first and second generation black immigrants, the idea of Brexit raised hopes that Africans could be on a level playing field along with other races and nationalities. Tom Lawal – a lawyer and panellist at the event – however warned that the idea that Brexit would “open the flood gates for Africans” is fundamentally flawed.



Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, Chad's President Idriss Deby, and Chairperson of AUC Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma unveiling AU passports

Photo Credit: AU

Indeed, Africans are faced with multiple restrictions in the UK; notably on the job front, where recruiters need to ensure that there is no British or European Economic Area (EEA) nationality available and able to perform the same tasks as competently, prior to offering an interview, let alone a job. On this premise, the concept of a level playing field may appear as a reasonable justification. This however ignores the fact that though most players make it to the field, not all

players play – *some are still benched*. In other words, the fact that Brexit puts less power in the hands of EEA citizens, in relation to the UK, does not necessarily equate to more opportunities for Africans – a reality reinforced by the UK immigration points-based system.

The effect of Brexit on employment, for example, **remains uncertain** as most of the UK's employment laws including the protection of workers against discrimination on age, religion and sexuality, were enforced by the EU. Therefore, a process of *unpicking laws* presets decisions regarding employment in the UK, and its implications for all nationalities. The concern however lies in the probability of employment laws derived outside the UK's membership in the EU – such as unfair racial discrimination – being withdrawn. Nonetheless, Brexit was a wakeup call to Africans in the diaspora; a potential opportunity for the reversal of *brain drain*, and the retainment of human capital in Africa.

This argument however oversimplifies the issue of **brain drain** in Africa, and ignores the fact that there is an abundance of smart individuals on the continent. The issue faced by African nations is the lack of strong institutions and a supportive environment that invests in talent and knowledge, and a deficit in infrastructural provision to drive innovation and maximise the human resources available on the continent. Additionally, the brain drain is propelled by the lack of economic and employment opportunities in various African countries, political instability and the tempestuous economic climate. Therefore, Brexit as a solution to Africa's brain drain is far less effective than the economic integration of African countries allowing the free movement of labour.

Not only could the common AU passport facilitate the reallocation of resources, it could potentially address the unemployment and underemployment issues in a number of African countries through the transfer of skills and knowledge. On the other hand, the influx of labour could induce an excess supply of labour over demand, and further exacerbate unemployment and underemployment issues in certain countries. Similarly, the free movement of people could lead to an overcrowding of cities, and potentially exert pressure on the resources, infrastructure, housing, transportation and fiscal budget of more economically prosperous countries like South Africa and Nigeria – essentially, creating *winners and losers* rather than yielding equal benefits for all member states.

In South Africa where waves of xenophobia against 'foreigners' from other African countries sporadically wash through townships **because of migrants being blamed for high unemployment and crime rates**, the idea of free movement of people fails to be romantic. Similarly in Nigeria, its **rapidly urbanising** cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt and Kano already host a high number of immigrants from West Africa – by virtue of its membership in ECOWAS. Further, with a **population** of approximately 182 million, **youth unemployment** 25 per cent above the sub-Saharan African average, an acute housing deficit and high costs of living, the new influx of migrants may only worsen infrastructural and institutional deficiencies. Particularly, if the migrating population is mainly comprised of economically inactive or unskilled labour, integration is more likely to be a *liability rather than an asset* to economically stronger countries.

Therefore, in order to avoid walking in the EU's current shoes in the near future and creating political and economic facsimiles of Britain in the AU, it is crucial for all or most African countries to be at similar levels of development, or at least be on the same path in terms of aligned policies, inclusive economic opportunities and economic prosperity. Equally as important to consider is the current and prospective infrastructural and institutional capacity of African nations. With differing levels of technological advancement, infrastructure, political instability and rising levels of insecurity across the continent, we must ask ourselves: *is Africa ready?*

Undoubtedly, the free movement of people within the 54 countries could prove beneficial, and demonstrate the readiness of African nations to maximise the resources and potential of the continent. It however appears that we may underestimate the requirements which are contingent to the successful integration of economies and "free" movement – specifically, infrastructure. For example, travelling from Nigeria to Senegal often entails a change of flights in Cameroon or Togo, or even both. In similar cases, travelling to another African country – for example, Algeria to

Rwanda – involves flying to Europe to get a connecting flight to your destination. In this context, one then asks *to what extent can we connect people if we are not connected*.

While simultaneously admitting and overlooking the current limitations, a salient question is posed: *will Africa ever be ready?* That is, if we keep waiting for Africa to be “ready” then we, as a continent, may never reach full potential, or have experiences from which we can learn and better implement future policies. While this is a reasonable argument to make, it however highlights the fact that AU integration is based on the assumption that people would be willing to move, and ignores the fact that people are resistant to change. Sharing this view, the consensus further suggests that perhaps we have jumped the gun, and an initial pilot study against the inefficiencies and limitations currently faced by African countries should have been carried out with the implementation of free movement of goods, as opposed to people.

Alluding to the fact that only leaders of African countries currently possess the passport, concerns were expressed about the accessibility of the passport, and **the possibility of it being elitist**. Rather than creating opportunities for all to move around freely, the access to the passport may be limited to those who can afford it, and by default, exclude low-income earners – fostering inequality inter- and intra-countries. Though this would not be optimal, it could be argued that the passport would serve as an ‘invisible hand’ in the labour markets, and ensure that only those that can potentially contribute significantly to host African economies have the opportunity to migrate – an equivalent of the UK’s **Tier 1 visa**, except with no limit on the duration of stay. While this, in terms of nominal growth, appears good on paper, it is not likely to yield the real, sustainable and inclusive growth that Africa requires to truly progress. It is however too early to make such vague conclusions as the common passport remains in the roll-out stage. To Africans in the diaspora, at least, a shared sense of optimism and an increased responsibility to the continent persist, following the integration of the AU.

This article is based on the event EU out, AU in – The Politics of Free Movement organised by the **Young Pioneers Network (YPN) at the Houses of Parliament in September 2016.**

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