

# **Consolidating Sustainable Liberian Communities in the Diaspora**

**By**

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I would like to thank the Executive Governor Kaduna State, His Excellency Malam Ahmad Nasir El-Rufai, for the kind hospitality that his dynamic government accorded me and my delegation, and the Organization of Liberian Communities in Nigeria (OLICON) in Nigeria to facilitate its second annual convention in this productive city of Kaduna. The relationship between Kaduna and Liberia may be seen in the role Kaduna State and its leaders have played in promoting the bilateral relations of Nigeria and Liberia, and in the Liberian peace process. Governor El-Rufai played a pivotal role to bring peace to Liberia when he served as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja.

Kaduna State is very much at the center of implementation of the defense and security agreement between Nigeria and Liberia. As host of Nigeria's premier military academies, several Liberian cadets and military officers have received training from the National Defence Academy (NDA) and the Armed Forces Command and Staff College at Jaji. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is a distinguished alumna of the NDA, which accorded her the Doctor of Laws degree (Honoris Causa) in Management Science in 2012, for her outstanding leadership. Many Nigerians now call Kaduna their home away from home. In this respect, let me pay tribute to our late sister of blessed memory, Ms Jartu Sackor, who was a long time resident of Kaduna and contributed actively to its civic and community programs. Jartu's body lies at a cemetery not too far from the venue of this Convention. May her soul rest in perfect peace.

I wish to also thank the Officers and members of OLICON for inviting me as the Guest Speaker of their Second Annual Convention to speak on the theme “Strengthening Our Community Through Consolidation.”

I vividly recall the National Convention of OLICON in Onitsha, Anambra State, in July, 2016, when the body’s Constitution was adopted and national election held producing a cadres of officers led by Mr. Daoda Kanneh of Minna, Niger State as National President, and Mr. Joseph Gonganu Mendy as National Vice President. The Vice President of the ECOWAS Court of Justice, Judge Micah Wright, served as the Guest Speaker at the of the election of OLICON Officers and the body’s celebration of Liberia’s 169<sup>th</sup> Independence Day by Liberians in Nigeria. The Judge is on record of delivering a unifying and motivational speech at the event. The Embassy subsequently hosted the first inauguration of OLICON in August 2016 as part of the joint celebration of Independence and Flag days in Nigeria.

Commenting on the needs of communities in the new world order (some may argue disorder) in the March-April 2017 issue of Foreign Affairs, Professor Walter Mead of Bard College, USA, observes that “The challenge of international politics in the days ahead is therefore less to complete the task of liberal world order building along conventional lines than to find a way to stop the liberal order’s erosion and reground the global system on a more sustainable basis. International order needs to rest not on elite consensus and balances of power and policy but also on the free choices of national communities-communities that need to feel protected from the outside world as much as they want to benefit from engaging with it.”

Although his observation was about the historical emergence of populist communities which catapulted the election of Mr. Donald Trump as President of the United States, the free choice and utility implications of his point also apply to the needs of communities in the Diaspora who want to strengthen their constituencies with respect to receiving and home countries’ momentum and vicissitudes of development.

To address the topic of this paper, I explain the issues affecting Liberian Diaspora Communities based on my own experience in the 1990s as an active member of the Liberian Diaspora. Utilizing a “TWOS” Analysis (Threats, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Strengths), I outline the way forward for the achievement of equilibrium between the states of life in receiving and sending countries affecting Liberian Diaspora Communities.

For the purpose of this speech, community means a group of people living in the same place and having a particular characteristic in common. I take consolidation to mean the reinforcement or strengthening of communities’ position or power. Sustainability is the ability of Diaspora communities to maintain their state of life at equilibrium rates or levels. Diaspora means the dispersion of any people from their original homeland. Equilibrium is the state of life of Liberian communities by which opposing forces or influences in their receiving and sending countries are balanced.

Many Liberians are in the Diaspora today because of the fratricidal civil war that mercilessly waged in Liberia between 1989 and 2003. In a pre-war, World Bank demographic study of migration in West Africa by Zachariah and Conde, Liberians were found to be less internationally mobile than their neighbors in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire. That was because of attractive factors at their home that Liberians called the “Sweet Land of Liberty.” In the throes of the civil war, 1990s data from the United States Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) showed that over a million people emigrated in concentric circles: first to neighboring countries, then the ECOWAS sub-region, followed by the rest of the world. About 200,000 died in the first episode of the conflict (1989-1997). Some Liberians were already abroad for various reasons and causes and became part of the Diaspora. For example, I fell in that category. I was a graduate student in the United States when the war started, and became a member of the Liberian Diaspora in the United States.

From my experience, a key threat of Diaspora Communities during and after the war is the inability by some to overcome the overwhelming issues of their pre-emigration and immigration experiences. Some individuals witnessed the war, or episodes of it, and became traumatized in their new abode. Some even suffered from what psychologists call Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD): “a condition of persistent mental and emotional stress occurring as a result of injury or severe psychological shock, typically involving disturbance of sleep and constant vivid recall of the experience, with dulled responses to others and to the outside world.” Overcoming trauma has therefore been a key issue of adjustment in Liberian Diaspora Communities. The problem has been seen in how Liberians manage their identities, social relations, and participate in political activities, including extending support to the government of the day back home in Liberia.

For example, in the United States during the 1990s, county matters were more attractive to many Liberians than national issues. In other words many Liberians identified more with their county development than with national reconstruction. This was partly due to divisive consequences of the civil war, and frequent political problems within the Union of Liberian Association in the Americas (ULAA).

Consequently, Liberians were always deeply divided on political matters back home. ULAA was therefore unable momentarily to operate as a strong center for the solution of social, economic and adjustment matters affecting Liberians in the United States. For example, adjustment was difficult for newly arrived Liberian children in the West Philadelphia area, where I lived. Kids were left to their own devices when their parents went to work. Some parents had multiple jobs.

I participated in an outreach project organized by a local NGO and the University of Pennsylvania for West Philadelphia schools that were grappling with the adjustment of children in their classes. Part of my assignment was to sensitize the teachers about Liberian culture, including Liberian accents of the immigrant children, how to inform instructors to motivate the new learners to participate in classroom activities. Some of the teachers had perceived that because the Liberian students were less responsive than their American counterparts, they might have psychological problems requiring intervention by their guidance counselors.

Our interventions sensitized the teachers to their new learners’ realities. Many of the faculty reported that the student outcomes changed dramatically a semester following our intervention. The lesson to be learned from this experience in faraway America is that community members

can positively collaborate with local NGOs and private institutions to address the prevailing and urgent adjustment issues affecting their communities.

The threat of disunity in organizational matters can be addressed by commitments to good governance, transparency and accountability. When communities organize themselves into a Union, as you have done in Nigeria, the elected leaders should ensure that the Constitution and By-Laws of the umbrella group is scrupulously implemented with respect to the welfare of Chapter organizations.

The problem with ULAA in the 1990s was frequent disharmony between its Board of Trustees and the Chapters, especially those located on the eastern seaboard of the United States. The power struggle was often about adherence to constitutional term limits, and power struggles between the board chairs and chapter leaders. Another big problem was the extension of support to the regime of day in Liberia. Precious time was sacrificed at the altar of disunity.

You in Nigeria can learn from this experience by adopting good governance, transparency and accountability as the consolidating mantras and practices to strengthen your communities. I am aware that some of our compatriots who applied for the UNHCR benefits before the organization announced the end of the refugee program in Nigeria received their packages and successfully integrated in Nigerian society. Some were repatriated through a special program the Government of Liberia implemented through the Liberia Refugee, Repatriation, and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC) and the Liberia Immigration and Naturalization Service.

In March, 2016, I sent our Minister Counselor for Press and Public Affairs, Mr. Nat Bayjay, to find out the status of former Liberian refugees who were still residing at the Oru Refugee Camp in Ogun State. He reported that although UNHCR had declared its refugee program for Liberians in Nigeria over, because of the improved political and economic situation in Liberia, a significant number of Liberians continue to live in the camp in Ogun State by fending for themselves. This situation has overstretched the hospitality of the local host community, who intend using the land occupied by the Liberians to construct a university campus. Meanwhile,

the entrenched former Liberian refugees are still looking forward to receiving relocation assistance from the Government of Liberia, through the Embassy of Liberia.

The Embassy had previously assisted the Oru refugees through the sponsorship of the Government of Japan, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). About 300 Liberian refugees were repatriated to Liberia. Many left their belongings in storage at the camp because of the limited baggage requirement of the repatriation program. We are still working on sending the belongings that were left behind by the first batch of repatriated group under the Japanese cum IOM Program. This will free the space for the planned development program of the host community, which has graciously extended their welcome of the former Liberian refugees.

Turning to community weaknesses, which are related to the aforementioned threats, the lack of capacity and overconcentration on war experiences can stand in the way of consolidation. Liberia is now on record of enjoying fourteen years of peace, eleven of these sacred years under the administration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. This blessing from the Almighty should be consolidated in our communities by mobilizing all our psychological and socio-economic potentialities to move our communities forward.

We should encourage no more space for ethnic epithets in our relations. That some are still doing this, especially in social media should be condemned at every opportunity and proscribed. Many an unscrupulous compatriot uses these platforms for self serving ventilations of falsity, unwarranted insults and profanities. And false information is proliferated if it is true. It is time to question information that we receive on social media based on evidence before we spread them to our friends on whatever platforms we use. The question to ask is how do we really know that received information is true? And how does it affect our lives?

Liberian Diaspora Communities are often located in places of great opportunities. Their opportunities and strengths include their capacities to provide remittances, for transnational household support, access to information, education and skills training. Those in the United States in the 1990s could work and support their families back home through remittances. Macroeconomic data on Liberia in the 1990s revealed significant remittances from Liberian

Diaspora communities around the world, especially from the United States, in insulating households to the then stagflation in the Liberian economy as a result of the civil war.

Nigeria is also a land of great business opportunities for entrepreneurial ventures. The Embassy's magazine JELIN (Journal of the Embassy of Liberia in Nigeria) edited by Mr. Nat Bayjay, Minister Counselor for Press and Public Affairs, recently featured some Liberians in Lagos and Abuja, who are making use of opportunities in music, broadcasting, writing, hotel and event supplies and fashion design. A few examples would suffice. Honorary Consul, Chief Opral Benson, the widow of Nigeria's first Minister of Information, TOS Benson, is today an iconic role model from her work, for over 50 years in Nigeria, in the fields of education and beautification. Ms Jerrilyn Mulbah has made her a name for herself as a talk show host on WE FM, a popular radio station in Abuja. Mr. Abubakar Kaneh is excelling in the hospitality industry, while Miss Jarsea Jessica Kaneh is doing her unique styles as a fashion designer. The President of OLICON, Mr. Daoda Kaneh, has been inspirational as the CEO of Development Initiatives of West Africa based in Minna, Niger State. He and many other Liberians have benefitted from education support provided by the Government of Nigeria and NGOs like the Islamic Education Trust of Minna, Niger State.

Many other Liberians are currently have completed or currently pursuing higher education at several premier Nigerian Universities, including Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, the University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University, the African University of Science and Technology, and the University of Ibadan in fields ranging from ICT to petroleum engineering. Similar opportunities were pursued by Liberians in the United States in education, community development, social work and peace-building.

My personal experience in this respect may be instructive. My zeal in the 1990s was working for peace in Liberia. That burning desire took me and colleagues all over the United States, wherever Liberian communities were found, to ensure that we worked with the various interim regimes to restore peace in Liberia. I was particularly interested in the higher education sector at a time when most schools and government facilities had been destroyed.

We helped to mobilize Liberian professionals in United States for repatriation back home to contribute to the peace and reconstruction process. Motivated by the work of the then President of the University of Liberia, Professor Patrick Seyon, was doing to revive the University of Liberia, I contacted several institutions, including the African American Institute (AAI), where former UL Professor Dr. Jane Martin was President. At a presentation at the AAI, I learned about a United States Pentagon program called “Excess Property,” that provided several used office logistics to institutions of friendly countries. And after another presentation at the West Africa Division of the Pentagon, with my late friend, Dr. Napoleon Divine of Philadelphia, we received the United States Government’s endorsement for desks, chairs, buses, and computers, among others, for the University of Liberia. I was also motivated by the community leadership of the late Dr. Romeo Horton to form an election support group that mobilized support in the US for elections in Liberia. I subsequently became the first participant in 1995, of a UNDP-Liberia program on the Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) to rebuild the University of Liberia. The point here is that members of Liberian Diaspora communities should make use of the opportunities in their receiving countries to strengthen their communities while contributing to national reconstruction and development.

Another point is that Liberian Diaspora communities should engage the opportunities in their receiving locations to make their living. And the opportunities they pursue should be fueled by patriotic zeal to contribute to development back home according to their abilities.

Let me now turn to some current concerns of Diaspora Communities. These may vary by location but invariably include unemployment, education and skills training, integration in host communities, family matters, (host country spouses), consular and immigration issues, Diaspora voting, dual citizenship, political issues at home.

In order to consolidate Liberian communities in Nigeria, I recommend that OLICON devises initiatives to address the first set of these problems. Some of these issues can be addressed through acquiring entrepreneurial skills. Revolving loan funds mirroring the microcredit principles of our *Susus* back home could be established to help members establish small businesses. And there is no short supply of institutions in Nigeria for the provision of these skills.

These range from government institutions like the Nigerian Directorate for Employment (NDC) to the Open University of Nigeria, among others. Compatriots who have opted to integrate in Nigerian society should comply with Nigerian laws and norms, while not sacrificing their patriotic duties to Liberia. Some of our women compatriots are married to Nigerians. A few of these marriages have gone sour. OLICON could help our sisters by extending support through channels of alternate dispute resolutions based on mutual cultural understanding.

The Embassy is actively addressing consular and immigration issues of Liberian communities in Nigeria. I am very pleased to announce that the Passport Application Center (PAC) at the Abuja Mission is now ready for the online renewal of passports of Liberians resident in Nigeria and adjoining countries. We will inaugurate the PAC at a date to be announced soon as a special celebration of our country's 170<sup>th</sup> Independence Anniversary in Nigeria. This is a key deliverable of the Administration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to address the welfare of Diaspora Communities. PACs are also available in the United States, Belgium and Ghana. One will soon be established in Beijing, China. The PAC will address the many immigration issues that some compatriots have been facing in Nigeria, especially with respect to the acquisition of residence permits and documentation for registration at educational and other institutions.

The Abuja Mission and the Office of the Honorary Consul of Liberia in Lagos issue visas, traveling documents, and authenticates certificates. The Embassy also has a Protocol Attaché in Lagos in the person of Chief Cliff Nzeruem. I would like in this special manner, to extend our heartfelt thanks to Chief Cliff for providing valuable protocol services to Liberian dignitaries and other government officials transiting at the Murtalla Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, or visiting Lagos for meetings and conferences. He also personally intervenes on behalf of the Mission, in matters affecting the Liberian communities in Lagos and adjoining states.

The remaining concerns of Diaspora voting, dual citizenship, political issues at home require concerted efforts by both Diaspora Communities in concert with the Government of Liberia. Our Constitution and Electoral Laws do not currently prescribe for Diaspora voting and dual citizenship. But these issues are now currently before our Legislature. And the fact that dual citizenship has been very beneficial in some African countries is a best practice that Diaspora

communities should continue to cite as evidence to support amendment of the requisite national legislations for benefit of the current generation of Liberians in the Diaspora and posterity.

Regarding political issues at home, Diaspora Communities are actively engaged through the utility of the new media. The forthcoming presidential and legislative elections will be defining polls in Liberian history. 1944 was the last year there was orderly transfer of democratic power from the administration of President Edwin Barclay to that of President William V.S. Tubman. President Ellen Johnson has proficiently taken our nation from war to peace. We now look forward to a political future where the successor administration can sustain the peace and consolidate the gains made by the Sirleaf administration. Diaspora Communities are currently social media influencers for the better or the worse. I suggest that Liberia will next be better off with the emergence of a reliable, trusted and experienced leadership, to steer our nation as a stable and responsible member of the comity of nations. There have been many interesting observations on the elasticity of the recent Supreme Court decisions with respect to the provisions of the Code of Conduct Act requiring aspirants in the executive branch to resign two years before the national elections scheduled for this October. Liberia Diaspora Communities should strive to understand the emerging electoral issues and their legal interpretations in order to arrive at their own objective decisions. Their decisions should be devoid of emotionalism and provincialism, but based on nationalism and patriotism, in influencing their constituent voters back home, in making balanced decisions for the benefit of their families, communities and the nation.

In conclusion, considering the theme of this Convention, in order to be a positive and sustainable force of social change and development, Liberian communities in the Diaspora need to maintain equilibrium between their receiving and sending countries' social order as they address their needs, while keeping abreast with the evolving policies and developments back home. This would afford their members to remain focused, law abiding, well informed and resilient in living meaningful lives that are beneficial to them in both their host and home countries.

I thank you.