

# Cameroon may lose all doctors by 2009

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Cameroon could lose all of its 3,000 practising doctors within three years if the Government does not act quickly to stem a brain drain in the health sector, the national doctors' association says.

"Between now and 2009, if nothing is done to stop this mass exodus, our hospitals will be empty," Professor Tetanye Okie, vice president of the ONMC association of doctors, said.

"The Government may be forced to undertake a massive recruitment of young doctors."

The West African country officially has about 3,000 practising clinicians for its 17 million people.

But Professor Okie says because they are clustered in towns and cities, rural areas are often left with one doctor for 40,000 inhabitants.

## Low wages

Countries across the developing world are battling skill shortages as qualified doctors, nurses, teachers and engineers are lured by better pay and working conditions in the West.

Cameroon's Government says it cannot afford to pay doctors more but agrees the brain drain is reaching crisis proportions.

"The situation regarding human resources in the health sector is critical," Public Health Minister Urbain Olanguena Awono said.

"Despite efforts to develop human resources, the men in white coats still take their talent to rich countries."

More than 5,000 Cameroonian doctors are working abroad with up to 600 in the United States alone.

Professor Doh Anderson Sama, a gynaecologist in Yaounde, returned to Cameroon after completing his studies in Britain but says he has received several invitations to return there.

"If I were working there I would be earning about 10 times what I am earning here today," he said.

One doctor who asked not to be named complained that illiterate soldiers earned more money than doctors.

Professor Okie says the Government must make health a priority by raising wages.

"The Government has to make a choice. And since no country can do without its health service, particularly medical doctors, for me the choice is very obvious," he said.

- Reuters

## ***Brain drain In Sub-Saharan Africa***

Kenya has lost a third of its skilled professionals and has had to replace them with expatriates from the west at a cost of US\$ 4 billion a year according to a recent report. The report that was presented on last years' Earth summit says that Africa loses an estimated 23,000 skilled professionals a year. It adds that between 1985 and 1990 an estimated 60,000 professionals were lost to the west. The expatriates employed usually cost more that employing personnel who have been trained in the region and thus African governments lose a lot of money that might have been saved had African skilled workers been employed. This is brain drain and it is strangling the growth of Africa.

### **REASONS FOR BRAIN DRAIN**

#### **1. Poor Salaries**

It is no secret that professionals in Africa are among the worst paid in the world. Exemplary of this situation are the material conditions prevailing at the universities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, where the average wage of an academic now provides for at best four days of subsistence, and even the most minimal material conditions of intellectual production (stationery and laboratory and workshop equipment) are beyond reach of the majority of the faculty and students. With the introduction of SAPs (structural adjustment programs) in most African countries, academics found themselves among the worst paid in the entire world. Perhaps an advert in 1992 in Nigerian print media summed up the situation on the continent. It read: 'My employer is a comedian; the pay he gives me is a joke.'

That was the reaction by Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) to a devaluation of the naira in the first quarter of 1992. With this devaluation, even the vice-chancellors, who had worked for ASUU's proscription, found themselves earning an annual pay of less than US\$1,000 equivalent. So they also joined those who were seeking redress.

The government's reaction was predictable: the SAP measures were necessary; all needed to tighten their belts, after all, all sectors were equally affected. All this will sound quite familiar to anybody who has lived through Kenya's Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU) struggle since November 1993.

Resulting from this situation where the dons are forced to live on their bellies, thousands of the best brains from the continent are being forced to migrate to Europe or North America, in search of alternatives to 'academic starvation' or reduce their teaching to a bare minimum in order to 'free' their time for 'extra-curricular' occupations such as running kiosks, raising poultry and any other activity that may help them to 'keep body and soul together'.

Interesting enough, the "imported experts" tend to be people using ideas from the "African experts" who were exported by unfavorable conditions in Africa. Who is to blame for Africa's political and economic problems? Brain drain?

Take Kenya for instance. How many leaders listen to our local experts? Who runs our universities -- academics, or politicians? From primary schools, secondary schools, college to university level, academic institution leadership is controlled by political alliances. Political correctness is the key to success, so states political law. When serious academicians migrate, betrayal is the tug they receive. Those who choose to remain and voice what their rationality dictates, are told, "You've been paid by foreign masters." The same political acrobats ask for aid from the very foreigners to "develop their country", if they miss the aid, they opt to insult the developed countries for having robbed Africa.

People who oppose reason fill the void left by the migrant intellectuals. Haters of reason are quick to blame brain drain, "unpatriotic" intelligentsia for their shortcomings. But one thing they fail to recognize is that the [haters of reason] provided the infrastructure of destruction. They polluted the intellectual world of reason by their strategy of "carrots and sticks". Africa's woes are as a result of reason held hostage by pseudo-intellectual leadership. They are further sustained by the robber ultimatum of "your life, or your mind".

The Western countries that are absorbing Africa's thinkers do so because they recognize the power of the mind. Africa fails to learn from its environment. For instance, it is a known fact that some plants are adjusted to the climate in such a way that they have deep taproots in areas with less water, and they also shed leaves during dry seasons. Africa, unlike its characteristic vegetation mentioned above, does not make any effort to tap its intellectual potential. It has not learnt to adjust according to seasons [colonial, post colonial and neocolonial seasons], it specializes in the "blame industry". The taproot of African governments is aimed at destructive military arsenals, destruction of reason, techniques of silencing dissenters and populist policies.

By failing to offer "green pastures" for its own intelligentsia, Africa is committing suicide by slow poison.

## **2. Unfavorable working conditions**

African governments are very reluctant to give money for research and hence those in research feel that they are academically starved. They thus opt to seek for greener pastures overseas where their work is held in high regard and they can enjoy the fruits of their work. In the west most of the institutions have very good facilities which provides a very good environment for research and development purposes. This is opposed to the situation in Africa where one is forced to use facilities that are outdated or even laboratories that lack even the most basic of facilities.

African governments do not think that Africans have the capacity to produce anything that is of real value. Take for example a few years back when a certain researcher called professor Obel claimed that he had found a cure for the dreaded disease AIDS. The Kenyan government did nothing to assist him in his research. In fact he was hounded by the health ministry which claimed that he had contravened the laid down rules to be followed before a drug can be declared a drug.

Millions of shillings channeled into Kenya in the fight against AIDS. From this, only a very small portion if any goes into AIDS research. Yet it is our very own researchers from Nairobi University who discovered that certain sex workers seemed to have developed immunity to the AIDS virus.

## **3. The quest for higher education**

In Kenya for example, every year, 30,000 Kenyans head overseas to study in Europe, the United States and Asia because of the limited access to higher education at home. It takes time, persistence and money to arrange a passport and travel papers from offices, including the government, which are often unhelpful and sometimes downright obstructive, but it does not stem the exodus.

After completion of their studies abroad, faced with the choice of myriad opportunities for professional and financial success or a return to recession and crime-riddled Kenya, thousands opt to stay on, often illegally. Inevitably, the loss of its "brightest and best" talent has made Kenya's attempts to drag itself out of poverty and progress down the road to development all the more difficult.

## **4. Lack of jobs**

Due to rapid population growth, recessions and a host of other problems that afflict the African continent, one may be unable to get a job. That person may decide to seek for greener pastures. Thus when an opportunity to go and work abroad presents itself, that person will not hesitate to go and try his luck.

## **HOW TO ADDRESS BRAIN DRAIN**

At a meeting of health ministers through out Africa held in Switzerland, it was said that tens of thousands of health workers leave the continent every year for the United

States, Britain and Europe. Kenya's health minister Mrs. Charity Ngilu suggested that those countries who take on workers who are already trained should at least let the African governments be part and parcel of what they were doing.

### **1. Compensation**

Those countries that take on already trained workers should pay compensation to the governments of the countries from which the workers come from. This is because the government has spent money to train these workers who then proceed go to another country leaving their own without skilled workers. An example of this is in Kenya where only 10% of the qualified health workers are retained. This means that a lot of the government's money is going to waste in training personnel who will go to work in another country. Asking a country to pay compensation would discourage the countries in the west to stop hiring too many skilled workers and help reduce brain drain.

### **2. Improvement of wages**

Most of the professionals who leave Africa do so because of financial reasons. This is because they are paid peanuts as compared to their compatriots in the west. So one solution to brain drain would be to increase the wages and benefits of their skilled personnel. According to the health minister Mrs. Charity Ngilu, her ministries move to increase the wages of nurses and doctors has resulted in luring some of the workers who had migrated to other countries to come back home. She says that about 4,000 nurses have been lured back. This would also deter those who were thinking of leaving the country.

### **3. Revival of the economy**

When the economy is in a bad state (like it is now) then the whole country is affected because there are fewer and fewer opportunities for one to earn a living. This means that there is widespread poverty. Those who have skills will have nowhere to apply their skills. Reviving the economy would mean the provision of opportunity hence eliminate the need for one to emigrate to the west.

It would also mean the creation of jobs because those companies or factories that had been shut down due to economic recession would be reopened and staff rehired.

### **4. Establishment of more institutions of higher learning**

This would offer many of the students who opt to travel abroad for study an opportunity to study at home. This would save their parents as well as the government the money that is paid to other countries in terms of tuition. These institutions should be well equipped so that research can be encouraged. The academic staff in these institutions should also be well remunerated so that they are not demotivated.

*By: Macharia Martin Wambugu  
4<sup>th</sup> Year Mathematics Student, JKUAT*

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