



Brain Drain Syndrome and Nigeria's Socio-Economic Development: A Study Of Buhari's Administration, 2015-2023

Samuel Sunday Idowu¹ PhD

&

Adaobi Laura Chigbu

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos.
Nigeria.¹²

Corresponding Author: sunsamd@yahoo.com¹

ABSTRACTS

The mass youth migration in recent times, starting from Buhari's regime, and the projection that Nigeria has been identified as the region that could experience a "lost decade" if it fails to urgently achieve stability, increase growth, and create jobs for its largely young population, are posing a challenge to social and economic development. Therefore, this study provides a critical and heuristic analysis of the brain drain syndrome and its implications for Nigeria's socio-economic development, with the Buhari regime as the overall focus. It adopts a qualitative descriptive design, using experts as key informants for primary data, complemented by secondary sources, while the push-pull theory underpins the study. The research findings reveal that the bleak economy and insecurity mainly serve as push factors, while better economic prospects, a higher standard of living, good infrastructure, and quality education are the pull factors. The impact manifests in the deficit of human capital needed for the socio-economic development drive. The study recommends that the government should recalibrate its economic management to ameliorate unemployment, poor infrastructure and other indices of economic underperformance and strategically tackle the security challenge, amongst others.

1. Introduction

Migration has become a contemplated worldwide issue, primarily in this century. With an increase in emigrants in most Western countries, and with both political and economic variables playing an important role in the rapid advancement of this trend. Though Nigeria, like some other developing countries, experienced the 'brain drain syndrome', also known as 'human capital flight', the concerns about this trend expressed by the public and private sectors of the economy underscore



its disturbing rate. While Okwara (2023) contends that its occurrence varies among countries, the emigration of exceptionally talented individuals is not without costs and benefits to both the home and host countries. According to Romero (2013), brain drain is always characterised by a decline of the human capital reservoir of emigrant states with a corresponding gain to recipient counterparts.

Although brain drain is mostly regarded as a barrier to attaining a global standard of development in many nations (Docquier & Rapoport, 2006; Emeghara, 2013), the Nigerian case seems to portray an extreme case of the negatives, with human resources being lost in core sectors of the economy in ascending rate annually. This informs some scholars' concerns and, sometimes, pejorative commentaries in this regard. The instances of Kalu and Ede (2022) assertion that Nigeria with over six decades existence persistence efforts to emerge from the ranks of developing nations is partly due to the migration of its best brains, and Dodani and LaPorte (2005) submission that talents from less developed places, like Nigeria, are drawn to wealthy nations due to improved living standards and quality of life, greater pay, access to cutting-edge technology, and more stable political environments (Dodani & LaPorte, 2005) attest to these perspectives.

Meanwhile, historically, decolonization and nation-building between the 1950s and the 1980s, when many Nigerians left the country in search of better opportunities such as education and employment, to return to develop their own country, were botched by the economic downturns in the 1980s and 1990s especially degraded infrastructure and unemployment, which, coupled with the political unrest, and an over-reliance on crude oil, caused early migrants not to return and new ones to join them (Nwosu et al., 2022). As such, this betrays the belief that the oil boom in the 1970s and social and economic policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), National Economic Empowerment and Development (NEED), amongst others, would ease the



economic hardship in the country, but, in contrast, they negatively impacted the socio-economic wellbeing of the populace.

Moreover, the socio-economic environment of Nigeria was significantly battered during the Buhari administration, with mass youth emigration experienced, which was code-named the ‘japa syndrome’ in the local parlance (Liu, 2024). In addition, the broader socioeconomic landscape of the country experienced forces that aided the significant emigration of the population during the administration, such as the insurgency of Boko Haram in the northeast, disputes between ethnic and religious groups, corruption cases, increasing unemployment, and other forms of insecurity. Given the mass youth migration in recent times starting from the Buhari’s regime, and the projection that Nigeria has been identified as the region that could lose a “lost decade” if it fails to urgently achieve stability, increase growth, and create jobs for its largely young population (Itsibor, 2023), and that 1.7 million Nigerians have left the country since 2021, with the majority in the middle class, with visas granted to 16,000 individuals who are skilled and are in the health care industry (Punch newspaper, 2022), can it be argued that the country’s social and economic fortunes have prospects for development aspiration as articulated and been pursued by the current President Bola Tinubu administration? The positive answer to this question is doubtful.

Hence, this study provides a critical and heuristic analysis of the brain drain syndrome and its implications on Nigeria’s socio-economic development using the lens of Buhari’s regime as the overall objective, while the push and pull factors are also examined as sub-objectives to draw lessons and activate policy actions for today’s government.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Brain Drain



The phrase 'brain drain' originally emerged in a study by the Royal Society of London in 1963, in reference to the early 1960s exodus of British scientists to the United States, which significantly jeopardised the British economy (Giannoccolo, 2009). It pictures the migration of the best professional brains in medicine, academia, and other professions from one country to another. Hence, the concept of brain drain is often than not, projected in a negative light and has a disadvantageous to a nation's development.

Brain drain refers to highly educated individuals migrating from their native nations to industrialised countries for better career prospects and living conditions (Elveren, 2018). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (n.d), brain drain is an abnormal kind of scientific exchange between nations, characterised by a single-directional movement favouring more advanced countries. It is gleanable from both definitions that brain drain is not only a talent outflow from states, often for greener pastures, but a one-sided benefit exchange between them. Put differently, it is a draining of human resources of the migrant's country and a gain to the recipient. In Nigeria, the education and health sectors are mostly experiencing a brain drain crisis, with many medical experts (Doctors and Nurses) and academics, especially Professors, relocating to seek better opportunities or employment in other nations (Ajeeb, 2021).

However, the diaspora remittances accruing from migrants to their home states are downplayed or discounted, which is significant in terms of capital injection. Though the productive age group constitutes a chunk of migrants, the skill-up and technology-savvy cum exposure value additions in a foreign land, which sometimes are employed when returning for domestic development, are benefits to home states as well. Therefore, brain drain conceptualisation should be reviewed as a



unidirectional benefit, but from both sides of the coin, though the derivable benefits may not be even between states, making it a disadvantage to the disadvantaged.

2.2 Causes of Brain Drain

Brain drains are frequently caused by many factors that are known as push and pull forces. The push factors are those elements of a nation that compel people to leave, whereas the pull factors are those that make people want to migrate to other countries (Greece, 2016). Both the pull and push factors traverse the economic, political, social, and cultural. These factors are interrogated to situate this research within the extant literature.

2.2.1 Brain Drain Push Factors

United Nations Centre for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) () identified cogent migration push factors that are concomitant with those of some development scholars. These factors, with their implications, are discussed next.

i. Political environment

The political situation of a country largely determines the economy and other sectors. And, since the polity has a significant influence on national life, the type or quality of a state's political system determines the masses' well-being, which can be either positive or negative. Where political activities, behavioural patterns, economic, and social policies pose a danger, culminating in a politically unpredictable or unstable terrain, the propensity of migrants seeking a haven or economic prosperity would be high. Ajeeb (2021) submits that when political victimisation, ethnic politics or religious persecution takes centre stage in the polity, the push to migrate becomes heightened. In this sense, mass migration is an automatic response to an unsafe and unfriendly political environment in a state. This is an indication of citizens' loss of confidence in the political



system, reflecting one of the bases for a high number of migrants in Nigeria during the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s.

ii. Economic Instability and Infrastructural Deficit

Another major migration push factor is the economic indicators of a country, including Gross Domestic Product (GDP), cost of living, rate of unemployment, working conditions, inflation, (Litwiński, 2017), amongst others. While the national wage structure of a country has a significant impact on the income disparities between the least developed, emerging and developed economies, the currency exchange strength advantage and better living conditions of the developed countries over those of the less developed states further stimulate people from the latter spaces to the former. Therefore, some citizens emigrate to seize the opportunity to advance their profession and brighten their fortunes.

As a corollary to economic instability push for emigration is the inadequate infrastructure of a nation. Because infrastructure is indispensable to national development, and as asserted by Okoroafor et al. (2020), adequate infrastructure is fundamental to establishing an atmosphere that fosters job satisfaction and productivity; the deficit often spurs young and able-bodied workforce demography to migrate.

iii Quality of Education

The quest for a better education, often believed to reside in the most developed states, is one of the reasons for migration. This is sometimes aggravated by an unstable academic calendar orchestrated by academic and non-academic industrial actions that not only weaken the public confidence in public tertiary institutions but also academic quality (Chukwudi & Idowu, 2021). The Nigeria



Bureau of Statistics (2024) states that the recent increase in the number of foreign students and their dependents entering on a study visa to the United Kingdom (UK) is ascribed to the post-pandemic recovery, the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and the improvement in how institutions attract international students. It is noteworthy, nonetheless, as averred by Litwiński (2017), that education adventurers most of the time transit from temporary to permanent migrants, depriving the home front of the opportunity of harvesting skills acquired for development.

iv. Insecurity and Human Rights Abuse

The twin factors of life threat due to banditry, terrorism and armed robbery, and abuse of human rights by the government catalyse migration of citizens to safer climes. In Nigeria, for instance, the incessant insecurity challenge caused by Boko Haram, bandits, Herds men and farmers conflicts and others have made many to seek asylum in foreign countries or flee to the neighbouring states for safety (Joshua, Idowu & Olanrewaju), while abuse of the fundamental human rights of being treated equally, without discrimination, regardless of their nationality, place of residence, sex, ethnic origin, colour, religion, or language have contributed to exodus of nationals from the countries especially under real or perceived political persecution (Jannah, 2018).

2.2.2 Brain Drain Pull Factors

The pull factors are, according to Lee (1966), elements that attract people to a country. These factors are either homegrown or outcomes of strategic socio-economic and political development strategies by recipient states to lure migrants. The major factors are discussed next

i. Demand for skilled professionals

Some states with a shortfall in needed human resources for either sectoral balance or national development deliberately request migrants to close the gaps. They often roll out conducive



immigration policies that migrants consider beneficial to achieve their goal. For example, the Canada Express Entry, which is used to attract skilled workforce looking for permanent relocation to (British Council, n.d), attests to the demand for skilled professionals by the state's pull factor. Nevertheless, the existential push factors seem to make this push factor a good bait for migrants, especially from developing countries like Nigeria.

ii. Better Economic Opportunities and Living Conditions

The better economy of the developed states that offer employment, better wages, welfare, social security and other socio-economic benefits is considered an opportunity to escape from the harrowing experience characterising most of the developing nations' poor economic situation by migrants. Although there are other attractive, alluring factors to migrants, the desire for a better living standard embedded in the economy of a state appears core and central. Developed countries such as Iceland, Switzerland and Denmark are safe and have a good standard of living, good infrastructure, better public health systems and other amenities that are becoming more attractive to foreigners (Garrido, 2023). Similarly, the United States of America (USA) H-1B visa accounted for an influx of technology-smart Indian emigrants for tech giant firms such as Google, Apple and Microsoft (The Economic Times, 2024). Little wonder many African irregular migrants are arrested in Europe, while some paid the supreme price in their effort to migrate to Western countries through the Mediterranean Sea for greener pastures.

In addition, the ageing population of some developed countries, driven by declining fertility and mortality rates, with the children and the elderly being the primary dependents, entices foreign skilled migrants (Lee & Mason, 2012). Between 2015 and 2020, the EU experienced a decline of 3.5 million individuals within the working-age demographic, specifically those aged 25 to 64. Furthermore, it is anticipated that a further 35 million individuals will be lost between 2020 and



2050, from a current population of approximately 447 million people (Díaz, 2024). The economic growth and sustainability of the EU and other industrialised states would be jeopardised if the vacuum is not filled by external forces.

2.3 The Concept Development

Development is a complex and multi-dimensional concept that extends its reach beyond the traditional political (democratic practices and tenets such as voting process and participation, democratic consolidation, among others) and economic application -adjudge by GDP, inflation, employment and others - to social, cultural, and religious frontiers. Todaro and Smith (2020), nevertheless, underlined the socio-economic nexus of development by submitting that it is the stage any economy or society goes through in order to be advanced and, a multifaceted process that involves the complete economic and social system being reorganised and reoriented rather than being an economic phenomenon only. But literally, development signifies the advancement and a constructive metamorphosis of something or somebody. To a state, in this context, it signals a desirable and measurable upward movement of its components, including the socio-economic, political, human resource, technology and others.

Meanwhile, Rostow (2013), in the 20th century post-Second World War era, popularised development, connected it to industrialisation and economic growth, and also used it interchangeably. Consequently, the global attention on the need to address new states' underdevelopment challenges was ignited, which gave birth to the 'Washington Consensus' and its attendant Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) commercialisation, privatisation and other liberal economic policies and remedial measures. Though the broad nature of the development is globally acknowledged today, the main applied forms are socio-economic, which depict the material circumstances, economic structure and entrepreneurship, access to public goods and



services, relationships within the social system, environmental conditions, and personal happiness of the masses (Litwiński, 2017), political, technological, cultural, human and religious. Nonetheless, the nexus between brain drain and socio-economic development in Nigeria is examined in the context of this research

2.4 Theoretical Underpinning

The theory of push-pull, also known as migration theory, is employed as an analytical tool for this study. Push-Pull theory was introduced by Ravenstein in 1885 but popularised by Everett in 1966 (Singh, 2023). The theory argues that migration occurs in phases – villages to small towns, from rural towns to cities, and from cities to metropolitan regions; it has two driving factors – the push (circumstances that drive migrants to relocate) and the pull (the negative connotations that contribute to the departure of migrants); and, has existed since the inception of civilization (Akinwale & George, 2023). The three strands' assumptions of the push-pull theory highlight the desire of individuals to seek climates offering a better standard of living, either in towns, cities, or metropolises within or outside a country.

However, the aspect of migrating outside the shore of a state is what the push-pull factors strongly hinge on as migrants' comparison outcome between their home and foreign countries mostly precipitates their decision. Additionally, the push-pull factors influencing choice to migrate are delineated by Lee as actors connected with the place of origin, factors connected with the place of destination, intervening obstacles, and personal factors (Faridi, 2018). These factors offer insights on reasons behind some Nigerians professional migrants abroad as they make logical or judicious decisions regarding where to migrate, how to circumvent hindrances, and motives for migrating. But the theory seems not to project the socio-historical link of migrants, socio-economic loss or



gain of states, and emergency cases such as crisis or war that sometimes occasion unplanned migration.

3.0 Method

The study aligns with the qualitative approach, hence adopt qualitative descriptive design to adequately explain the data about brain drain effects on Nigeria's social and economic development. The population of this study consist of experts in the health and academic sectors, the most affected professionals in Nigeria. Medical practitioners in Lagos State Teaching Hospital (LASUTH), Ikeja, Lagos and academics in the Department of Political Science, University of Lagos (UNILAG), Akooka, Lagos. While attempts to get the official actual population of LASUTH failed, that of UNILAG was estimated by unofficial source at 25 academic staff. A purposive sampling was employed, making the senior medical and academic staff of both institutions (eight with four from each) be selected for interview, while the question used as an instrument was facially validated, making it reliable by senior academics in the department of Political Science and International Relations, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos. A thematic analytical tool is adopted while relevant secondary data are employed to complement the primary sourced data.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section delves into the presentation of thematic data of the semi-structured face-to-face interviews of the medical and academic experts and their descriptive analysis. The key informants' perspectives on the push and pull factors causing migration in the country's context were first harvested before they assessed the overall impact of migrants on the socio-economic development fabric of the nation.



4.1 What key push factors made skilled Nigerians emigrate to other countries during Buhari's administration between 2015 and 2023?

Respondents are unanimous in their view that economic reasons such as Job insecurities, low salaries, poor working conditions, unemployment and inflation are the push factors for Nigerians' migrants abroad. Other factors considered influencing the decision to 'japa' are political performance-based, such as poor governance, insecurity, decrepit infrastructure, healthcare access issues, and an unstable educational system, which largely affect the quality and standard of living. These submissions are captured aptly by respondents 6, 3 and 4, thus:

"We had two recessions, and the naira depreciated against the dollar by almost five hundred per cent. He met the dollar at 185 naira, and in his first seven months, it rose from 185 to 500 naira before it later came back to 386 or thereabout. With that, the naira started losing its value, and of course, the prices of commodities like food went up. And coupled with the closure of the border at that time to stop the influx of imported foods, essential goods like rice prices soared. So, these actions just threw the price of things up, and of course, a lot of people began to look for somewhere else where they believed they would get much better value for their earnings."

Respondent 6

"One of the push factors that led to the emigration of skilled Nigerians is just the fact that everyone wants a good standard of living, so that is the major factor", **Respondent 3**

In addition, respondent 4 made mention of security alongside the standard of living issue.

"Maybe for some people the need for security and a better standard of living, because during his time, they had a lot of insecurity issues in the country. I think that also contributed immensely to that wave of people wanting to leave for somewhere else." **Respondent 4**



Corroborating the respondents' submission, Nwozor (2015) avers that the weak Nigerian Naira accounted for and exacerbated the intrinsic conflicts inside the economy because it failed to offer a substantial economic foundation to support the livelihoods of its abundant, highly-skilled workforce, causing widespread unemployment, entrenchment of poverty, which resulted in a significant professional emigration from the nation. In addition, Demissie (2025) maintains that unstable global oil price weakens Nigeria's naira and economy between 2021 and 2023, with a paltry GDP growth rate at 3.4, 3.1 and 2.74, respectively, aggravating unemployment and inflation. It is evidenced from the respondents' submissions that the poor economic condition, high level of insecurity and parlous state of health and educational sectors are the push factors for emigration under Buhari's regime.

4.2 What key pull factors make skilled Nigerians emigrate to other countries during Buhari's administration between 2015 and 2023?

In response to the pull factors' influence on Nigerian emigration, the eight respondents averred that economic and educational prospects incentive moving abroad, which are better salaries, career growth, job availability, stable economy, better standard of living, scholarships and provision of work or study visa. Hence, seeking a greener pasture is the kernel sum up the pull factors. As avowed by respondents, 1, 8 and 6 respectively.

"The strong economies and better job opportunities abroad enticed skilled Nigerians to move..."

Respondent 1

"...they have a working system, a working legal system, a working economic system, a working financial system, security, not just security of livelihoods, but also security of jobs. The promise of getting commensurate pay for the amount of effort you put in when you work. You live the way you earn, so if you earn well, you live well. And of course, all other factors put together also contributes



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and the worsening situation in the country at that time. All of that is really significant. **Respondent**

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“Skilled Nigerians emigrate to seek better employment prospects and higher incomes due to limited opportunities domestically during that period, they needed to pursue quality education by studying overseas to access improved learning environments and enhance their career prospects, they emigrated to gain international experience and advance careers especially in fields with limited growth opportunities in Nigeria, they also see the needed to have access to superior medical care that is inadequate or unavailable in Nigeria ...” **Respondent 6**

The submission of Nwodom et al. (2021) that economic conditions of unemployment, poor wages, or low per capita income in comparison to the country of destination are strong economic engineered pull factors migration, and the Open Doors (2019) education report on Nigeria’s foreign student enrolment of upward movement from 6, 568 in 2019 to 13, 423 in 2019 attested to educational migration reinforces the respondents’ views on emigration pull factors. Hence, it is logical to agree that economic and educational advantages are pulling factors for migration during the year of study.

4.3 How does brain drain affect Nigeria’s socio-economic development during Buhari’s administration?

All respondents concurred that brain drain altered Nigeria’s socio-economic development. They posit that the inability to retain skilled talents led to a weaker and underqualified labour force, slow economic growth, and made it difficult for industries to find high-skilled workers. creating a talent shortage, which is hindering innovation, growth and reliance on foreign experts across the health, education, engineering, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sectors. Respondents state further that while professionals migrate after huge investment in training them without short-



term replacement, the country is losing huge human and financial resources indispensable for national development. This is fittingly captured by respondents 4, 5, 7 and 6 thus:

“The labour force we have now is underqualified individuals who are vying for jobs. People who can manage the infrastructure are no longer there; they have all left. For example, in the healthcare sector, we have one doctor for every ten thousand Nigerians, as compared to 2017, when we had twenty-five for every ten thousand people. It’s very serious, and this issue has really drained the country of a lot of talent that is supposed to stay here, but instead, brain drain is taking everybody over there, improving those economies, making them better and leading ours to suffer.”

Respondent 4

“...It has resulted in just brain drain syndrome. It created a huge lacuna in the economy that is supposed to have a boom in the light of mass production of graduates, professionals and elites”

Respondent 5

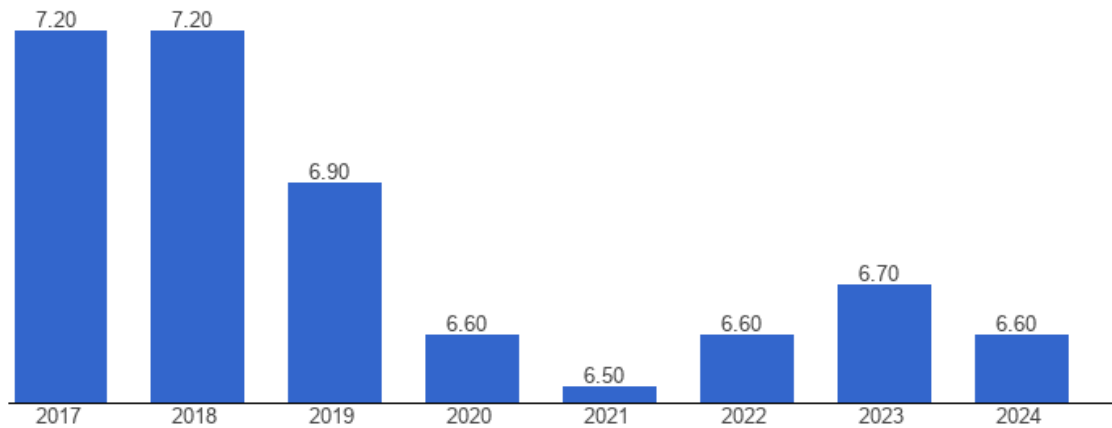
“There is a philosophy that ‘Nigeria can only be built by Nigerians’. When the system cannot retain the best of the best automatically, it would affect the other sectors of the economy. One, you would see poor performance from the people that are left, and they would also be short-staffed, which is currently going on in the educational sector, health sector and in some government parastatals.” **Respondent 5**

“...the outflow of individuals during Buhari’s regime negatively impacted Nigeria’s sectors by causing brain drain, reducing innovation and delaying projects. It increased dependency on foreigners, slowed economic growth, worsened the skill gap and weakened local firms. This also reinforced a cycle of talent loss...” **Respondent 6**

Figure 1 presents the annual exodus of the skilled workforce in Nigeria between 2017 and 2024.



Fig 1: Nigeria's Human capital flight and Brain drain Index 2017 -2024



Source: *The Global Economy* (2025)

4. Discussion of Findings

Arising from the empirical data, it is evident that during the period under investigation, the poor state of Nigeria's economy and insecurity is mostly responsible for emigrants abroad, more importantly, to better their economic fortunes and access a higher standard of living. This finding aligns with Litwiński, (2017), Submission that the desire to eke out a better living condition pushes migrants. Also, the deficits of infrastructure, quality of education and bleak economic prospects in Nigeria pull emigrants to better havens abroad. There is agreement between this finding and Garrido (2023) and The Economic Times (2024) argues that citizens respond to host nations' greener pastures and alluring incentives as pull factors.

The effects of brain drain on the country's socio-economic development revelation is negative as domestic professional skills and talents gaps are widened, limiting opportunities for innovative drive or stimulating socio-economic development through inward employment generation and harvesting human resources training investment. Hence, though the intertwined connection of both the push-push theory is relevant to this research as it underscores the bases for migration in Nigeria,



as argued by Lee (Faridi, 2018), the weight of its adverse impact on the nation's social and economic progress is significant and far-reaching.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of his study, it is safe to conclude that both the push (poor economic fortune and insecurity), and pull factors – good state of the economy, infrastructure and educational system abroad – occasioned emigration with attendant decline in available high-skilled labour essential to leverage for social and economic development in Nigeria. The vacuum, therefore, vitiates the national capacity for sustainable benefit of rewards from human capital investment. To mitigate this trend, the research canvass for the following recommendations.

First, the Nigerian government should recalibrate its economic management to ameliorate unemployment, poor infrastructure and other indices of economic underperformance through relevant but context-specific policies to discourage migration. Second, wages and salaries need to be constantly reviewed to keep pace with the rate of inflation, thereby minimising the cost of living.

Third, the challenge of insecurity should be confronted with better strategies and military tactics in collaboration with foreign allies, where and when necessary to enhance citizens' confidence of safety of life and property, which is a primary purpose of governance. Fourth, the political system needs to be made more stable and predictable, not only to instil trust in Nigeria but also to attract foreign investors and strengthen the country's economic prospects. Lastly, government-diasporans engagement should be bolstered to encourage diaspora Nigerians to project and be willing to send remittances, which is a plus to capital injection. It is believed that these suggestions would convert the negatives off brain drain to positives in both the short and long terms if implemented.



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