# Bridging Gap(s) Between Theory, Policy and Practice

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The challenges facing Africa must be viewed in tandem with the immense opportunities for innovation and change that are also available to the millions of the continent's inhabitants. In the new millennium, the number of educated Africans is much greater than in the past. Paradoxically, this increase in the number of those who are engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge is accom-panied by a decrease in the levels of Africa-centered production and documentation of research activities. Three major gaps exist which should command our attention: (1) production of knowledge in classrooms and the socio-economic and political realities of African states and societies; (2) the politicization of knowledge production, especially about economic development and democratic governance, the unfor-tunate consequence of censorship of African intellectuals, leading to a 'braindrain'; (3) the absence of viable pan-African institutions with the capability to engage in formulating solutions – beyond theorizing – about stemming both Africa's 'braindrain' and the export of the continent's youth to serve as cheap sources of labour in the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic.

These three inter-related phenomena need to be viewed not as discrete research agenda 'items'

But as outcomes of deeply embedded socio-economic and political deficits which urgently need the combined attention of African educators, intellectuals, and policymakers. We have all been aware of this problem for a major part of the last century but what is required now is a concerted effort to: (1) assess the levels of knowledge production and dissemination in 21st century Africa; (2) analyze the social, economic and political impacts of the 'brain-drain'; and (3) craft transnational policies that go beyond rhetorical acknowledgement of the continent's loss of major sources of both skilled and unskilled. Looking at the interface between 'continental' and 'trans-continental' panAfricanism may provide us with new pathways towards the resolution of a very old problem.

The most salient barrier to the production of both theoretical and reality-based knowledge in Africa is the absence of bridges between curricular programmes and applications of classroom knowledge to the dynamic realities of 21st century African states and societies. Knowledge about Africa continues to be produced outside of its borders and the continent's intellectuals – facing censorship, restrictions and, at times, threats to their existence, trek to Europe, the Americas and Asia in pursuit of asylum and gainful employment. True, this is not a new challenge but it is one that may require us to re-consider and re-examine ways in which this enduring problem of the 'brain drain' can be repatriated to the continent. In light of the imperatives of sovereignty and non-interference in other states' affairs, it is understandable that some African leaders are discomfited with raising the issue of exodus of skilled and unskilled Africans, since it may pertain more to some countries and less to others. Nevertheless, the inability or unwillingness of post-colonial African states to concretely address this problem has now led to an expansion of the 'brain-

drain' to include youth who have become 'transnational migrants', producing 'remittance economies', trekking across the Mediterranean and crossing inhospitable desert areas to offer their skills and labour to benefit societies of the our former *metropoles* and distant capitals. I would like to suggest that we consider examining the empirical realities of the 'brain-drain' on the continent – both from a research point of views as well as a policy that would require a pan-African perspective. With refugees flowing outward from the DRC, the Horn of Africa, Lusophone Africa, the Maghreb and West Africa to all corners of the earth, examining the social, economic and political impacts of this flow(s) of populations requires concerted efforts to understand this phenomenon.

Where to begin? Maybe identifying the gap between the rhetoric of governments as well as societies who decry the 'loss of our youth and our professionals' need to be reconciled with the existing particular realities – economic, social and political – which fuel these population flows.

To focus on the realities on the ground in Africa does not mean that we need to ignore the importance of research. The contemporary crossings and (re)crossings of Africans across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic have captured the attention of western societies, reexamining the impact of the flow of Africans into their countries. While some point out the inhumane treatment of the *sans papiers*, others join the crescendo of a chorus denying contemporary Africans a sense of belonging to this sea which once had enclosed the Afro-Mediterranean world.[1] The Berlusconi-led excoriation of Neo-Fascists against the 'black peril' in Italy, the growing tensions between the inhabitants of the *banlieux* and the citizens of the *Republique Françoise* are examples of the need to engage in the production of knowledge that gives voice to Africa's narratives. The absence of an Africa-centred production of knowledge has wider repercussions for the success of continent-wide efforts such as the African Union's advocacy of 'African Solutions for African Problems'

## Note

1. Voices countering the shrill anti-immigrant propaganda can be found in the reasoned, scholarly discourse focused on accessing the memory banks of the Italy's colonial period – a time when the Afro-Mediterranean world became symbolically visible – can be found in Andall, Jaqueline and Derek Duncan (eds.) Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory, Oxfordd & Bern: Peter Lang, 2005.