

Review: Engagement with the African Diaspora in the U.S.



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Summary of Findings

- African diaspora communities in the U.S. are not monolithic in their histories, levels of organization, priorities, and degrees of connectedness to the continent.
 - The rate with which specific government policy has been aimed at engaging with African diaspora groups in the U.S. greatly increased beginning in the 1960s and has grown in sophistication since.
 - The majority of these initiatives have been undertaken to advance immigration and nationalization priorities among these groups. Engagement on economic, political, and social issues have been much less prevalent.
 - There exists a large and diverse collection of diaspora-focused civil society and non-governmental organizations operating in the U.S., as well as a largely underexploited demand for closer, sustained ties with the African continent across a range of issues.
- Engagement occurs primarily at the domestic level between institutional actors and diaspora
- communities in the U.S. Formalized efforts to build personalized relationships with popular countries of origin from Africa have increased but remain rare.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the continued growth of the African diaspora in the U.S. and the diverse range of issues that these groups have historically prioritized and organized around, there exist today many opportunities for more nuanced forms of engagement at the institutional level.

In particular, engagement with these groups as economic and political stakeholders has been underexploited and should be more deliberately pursued in service of developing a clearer understanding and articulation of what matters to people within these communities. An important component of this process would be the establishment of trusted actors to serve as effective communicators between these groups and the levers of institutional action.

The potential benefits of a more engaged African diaspora can be realized domestically in the improved well-being of diaspora Africans in the U.S., as well as internationally in helping to retain resilient and multidimensional ties to the communities from which they arrived.

Further research into the economic and social priorities of African diaspora groups would help ensure that future efforts at engagement (both public and private) can be guided by more informed insights.

Background & Motivation

The Africa Center and Afreximbank Bank have entered into a partnership to establish an Institute of Diaspora Studies at the institution's home base in Harlem, New York. The Afreximbank Diaspora Center would be a considerable step towards these goals, as the existence of such an entity within the Africa Center would serve to significantly advance the work that TAC is currently engaged in to help build cultural and economic connections between the Diaspora and the continent and providing a conduit for the Diaspora to impact Africa's growth positively. This new mandate builds on lessons from The Africa Center's rich history, which remains fiercely committed to the institution's core purpose of centering Africa and its people in Africa's story.

The initiative will be executed in three parts:

- (1) A research study, working in partnership with academic research institutions based on the continent to investigate emerging trends in the social, political, and economic characteristics of Africa's large and diverse diaspora.
- (2) An online hub that builds on the findings of the study to create a database connecting diaspora professionals with firms on the continent that align with their skill sets, and
- (3) General programming that will be modeled after The Africa Center's current public programming but will focus exclusively on themes related to the institute's work. This includes lectures, panels, films, and other types of cultural and artistic programming.

The diaspora study will serve as the initiative's first major output. The research will aim to offer comprehensive and insightful approaches to promoting more effective engagement between the U.S. government and the growing numbers of the population that identify as part of the African diaspora. The first phase of the study is the completion of an extensive review of all the relevant policies and initiatives related to economic, social, or political engagement between institutional actors and the African diaspora over time. This comprehensive effort will look to clearly identify the issues that have been most consequential in shaping both the diaspora communities themselves as well as popular understanding of the dynamic between these groups and their countries of origin—insights that will then inform the design of the subsequent study.

People from the African continent and its wider diaspora have made up increasingly large segments of the U.S. population over generations, and the manner in which the country's institutions—public and private alike—have sought to engage with these groups has varied and developed over time. Our understanding of the development, priorities, and characteristics of African diaspora groups in the U.S. would benefit from a more robust accounting of the ways in which concrete and targeted attempts have been made to meaningfully engage with them. This review set out to identify policies and initiatives aimed at fostering greater engagement between important social, economic, and governing institutions in the U.S. and burgeoning immigrant groups from the African continent.

Key Messages

1. Trends in immigration and naturalization provide the most helpful insights through which most of the U.S. government’s engagement with the country’s African diaspora can be understood at the institutional/policy level.

Federal policies enacted beginning in the late 20th century led to a sharp rise in immigration from Africa and has continued to grow since then. At present day, almost half of all immigrants in the U.S. from Africa arrived after 2010 and so grassroots efforts at organization and consolidations the in relatively early years of development compared to some other large identity groups in the country. Although not complete, macro trends in immigration data help us understand the development of diaspora groups over time.

Figure 1: Percentage of US Immigrants from Africa

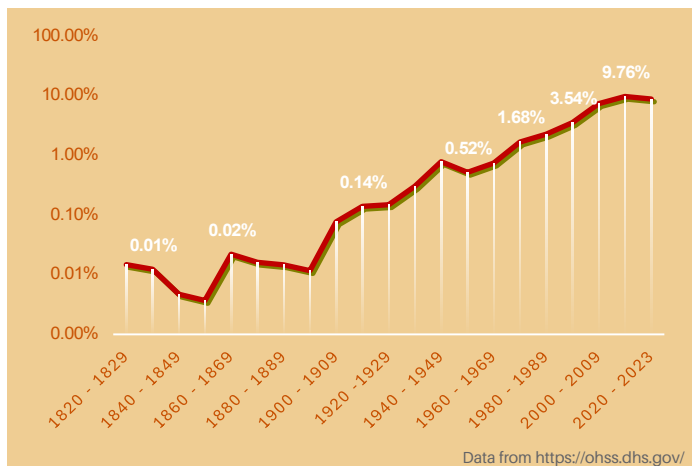


Figure 2: Pathways of Immigration, Africa to US 2013-2023

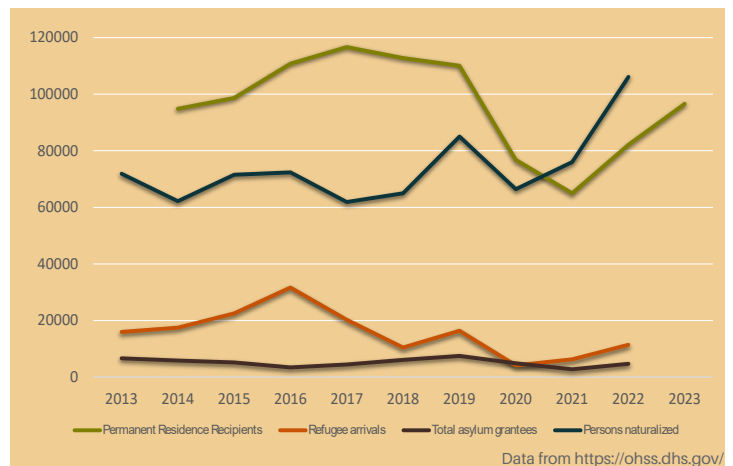


Table 1: Most Consequential U.S. Policies Impacting the Diaspora Over the Last Century

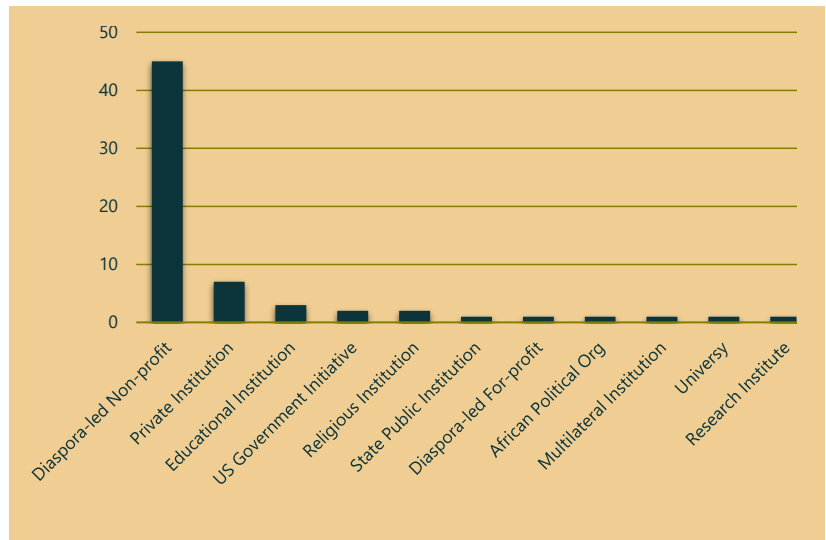
Immigration Act of 1924	Also known as the Johnson Reed Act, limited the number of immigrants allowed entry to the US through an origins quota.
Refugee Relief Act, 1953	Authorized non-quota visas for refugees and escapees from communist countries. While it mainly impacted European and Asian immigrants, it paved the way for future refugee focused legislation.
Civil Rights Act of 1964	Prohibited discrimination on the basis of “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin,” effectively ending Jim Crow laws.
The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965	Also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, abolished quota system and expanded pathways for non-Western European immigrants to come to the U.S.
The Refugee Act of 1980	Established procedures for vetting and admitting refugees, and increased admissions for refugees fleeing conflict.
Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), 1986	Prohibits employers from hiring immigrants unauthorized to work in the country.
The Immigration Act of 1990	Created the Diversity Visa Lottery Program to bolster immigration from underrepresented countries and made it easier for highly skilled immigrants to migrate for work.
Trump Executive Travel Ban, 2017	Temporarily banned travel from 7 majority Muslim countries and suspended refugee admissions.

Key Messages

2. There is a wide range of stakeholders in the U.S. focused on diaspora engagement, but they are particularly concentrated in the non-profit space.

In addition to engagement efforts at the public/institutional level, there exists a diverse range of non-governmental stakeholders actively invested and participating in a broad range of efforts to more intentionally engage with African diaspora groups: organizations from academia, private sector, and civil society that despite significant differences in subject matter interest, scale, and objectives, share a common foundational interest in the livelihoods and wellbeing of African diaspora communities. This strong interest indicates growing demand for connection – either with the African continent or here in the U.S. – within these communities themselves and suggests a variety of potential partners with whom more effective engagement can be sought.

Figure 3: Types of Diaspora Oriented Organizations



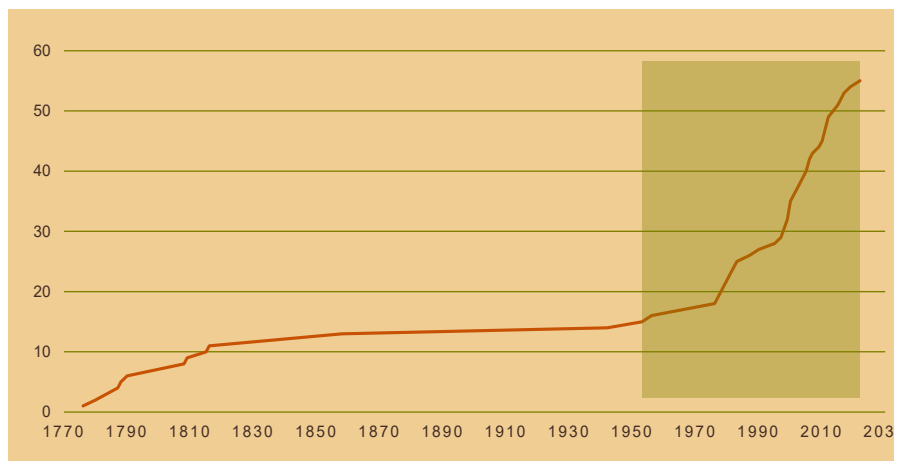
3. We know relatively little about the economic and socio-political leanings of diaspora communities – both domestically and in relation to their countries of origin.

Of the 209 individual references to government policies identified in our review, over half were related specifically to political and immigration-focused priorities. While not necessarily exhaustive, this trend suggests a strong historical emphasis on a quite narrow set of engagement priorities and leaves room for much greater understanding of the issues of economic and social concern within these communities. Both domestically (related to how these groups interact with institutions here in the U.S.) and in relation to their countries of origin.

4. Engagement with African diaspora groups is relatively new.

Policy efforts have increased in scale, scope and frequency over time – particularly after the civil rights movements in the U.S. in the 1960's. The accompanying changes in policies towards developing countries in Africa.

Figure 4: Founding of Diaspora Organizations

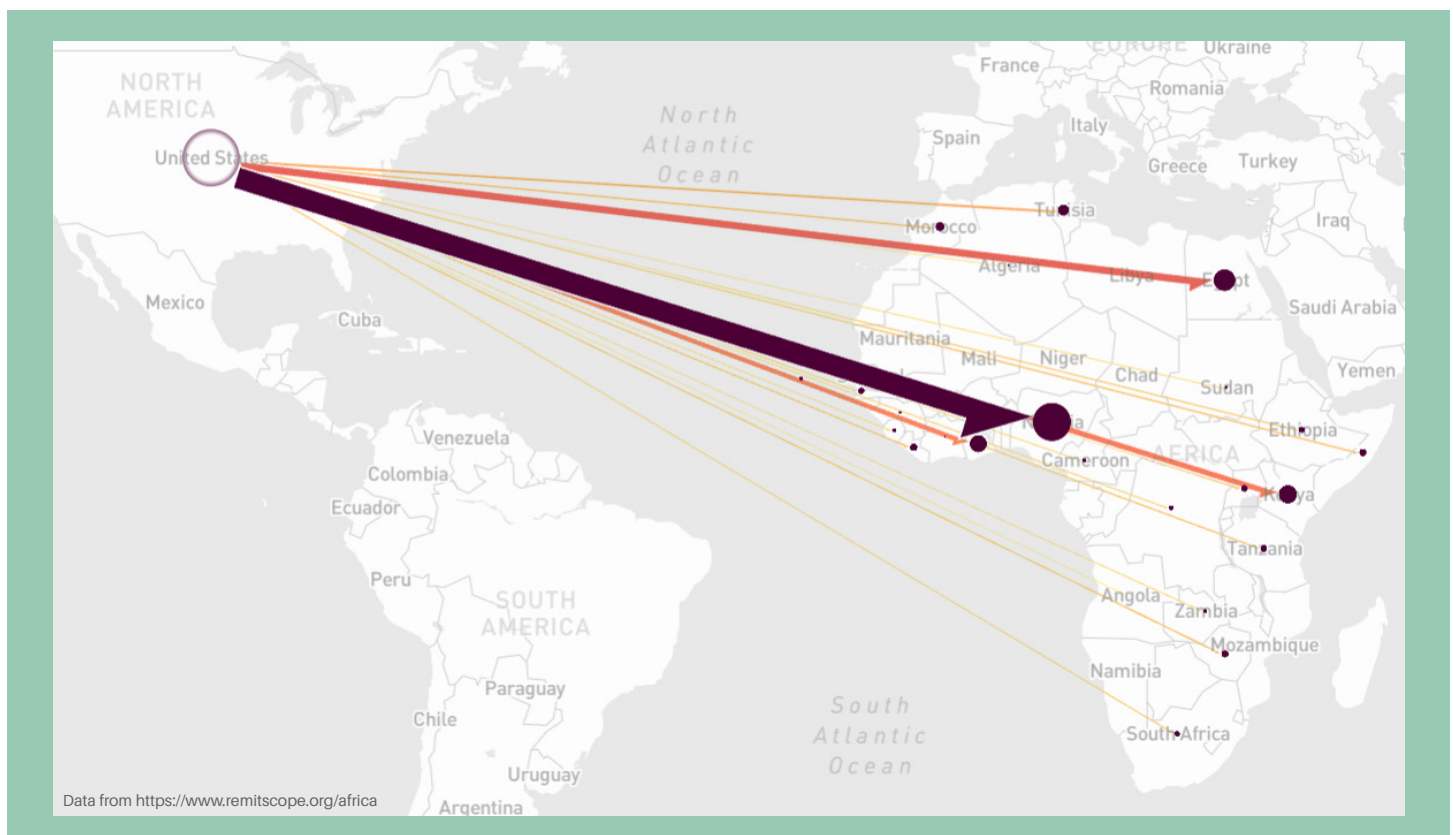


Analyzing the Diaspora

Who is in the African diaspora?

The formation of the African diaspora definitionally includes all types of movement of people from the continent—both within and without. The definition of the diaspora for this study refers specifically to the development of self-identifying diaspora immigrant communities, organizations, and interest groups over time. This scope considers the diaspora to be populations that exist outside of their home country and the African continent altogether. According to the African Development Bank: *“There’s an estimated 160 million Africans in the diaspora; the nearly \$96 billion they remitted to the continent in 2021 far exceeded the \$35 billion in official development assistance that flowed into Africa in the same year.”* A report by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation highlights that diaspora has at least 271 definitions, leading to a variety of calculations for this population. This literature review assessed engagement with African diaspora groups in the U.S. specifically. However, given the complicated history of migration from the African continent—specifically the legacy of forced migration to the U.S.—concrete, singular definitions of diaspora are not always practical. The authors acknowledge that the scope of diaspora that is being employed in this review and any subsequent study is not representative of the full scope of groups and peoples who may credibly identify as belonging to the African diaspora.

Figure 5: Flow of Remittances from US to Top African Recipient Countries



Where does the diaspora originate, and where are they based in the US?

Figure 6: Top Origin Countries of Focus in Literature Review

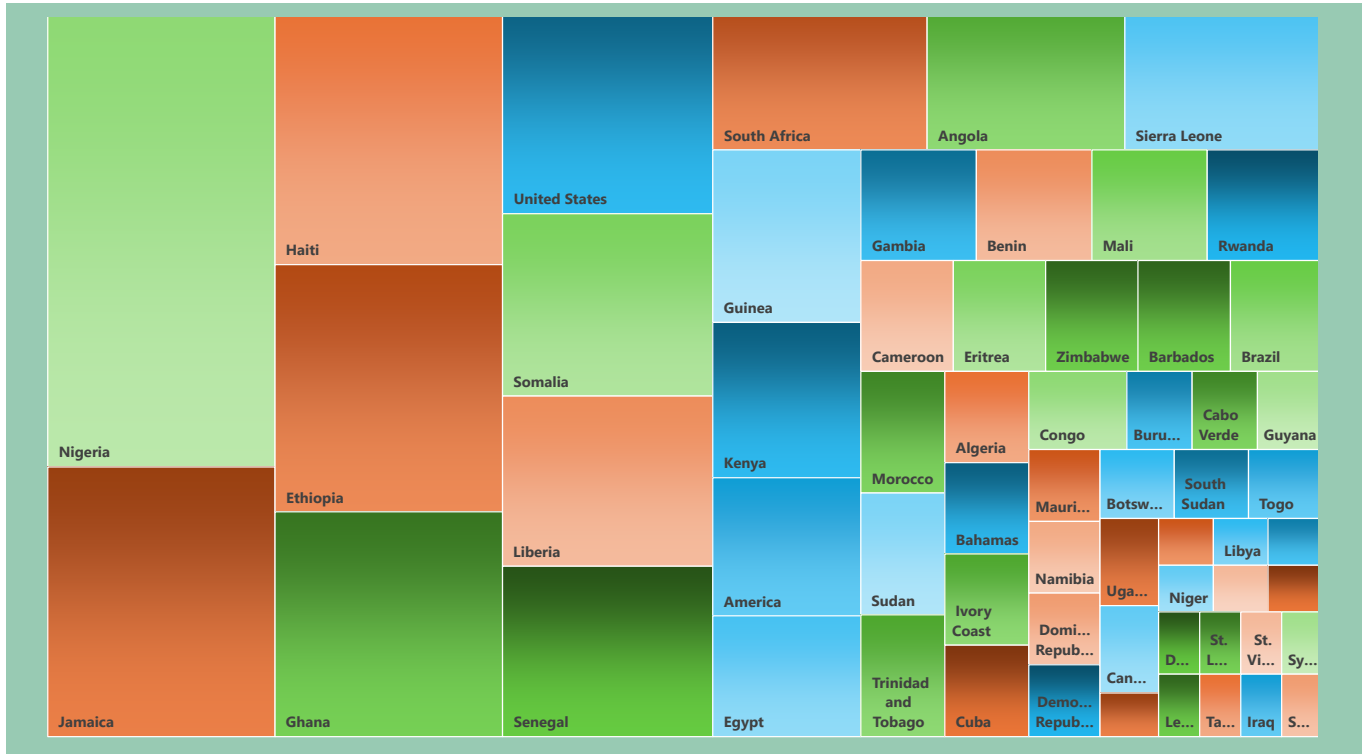
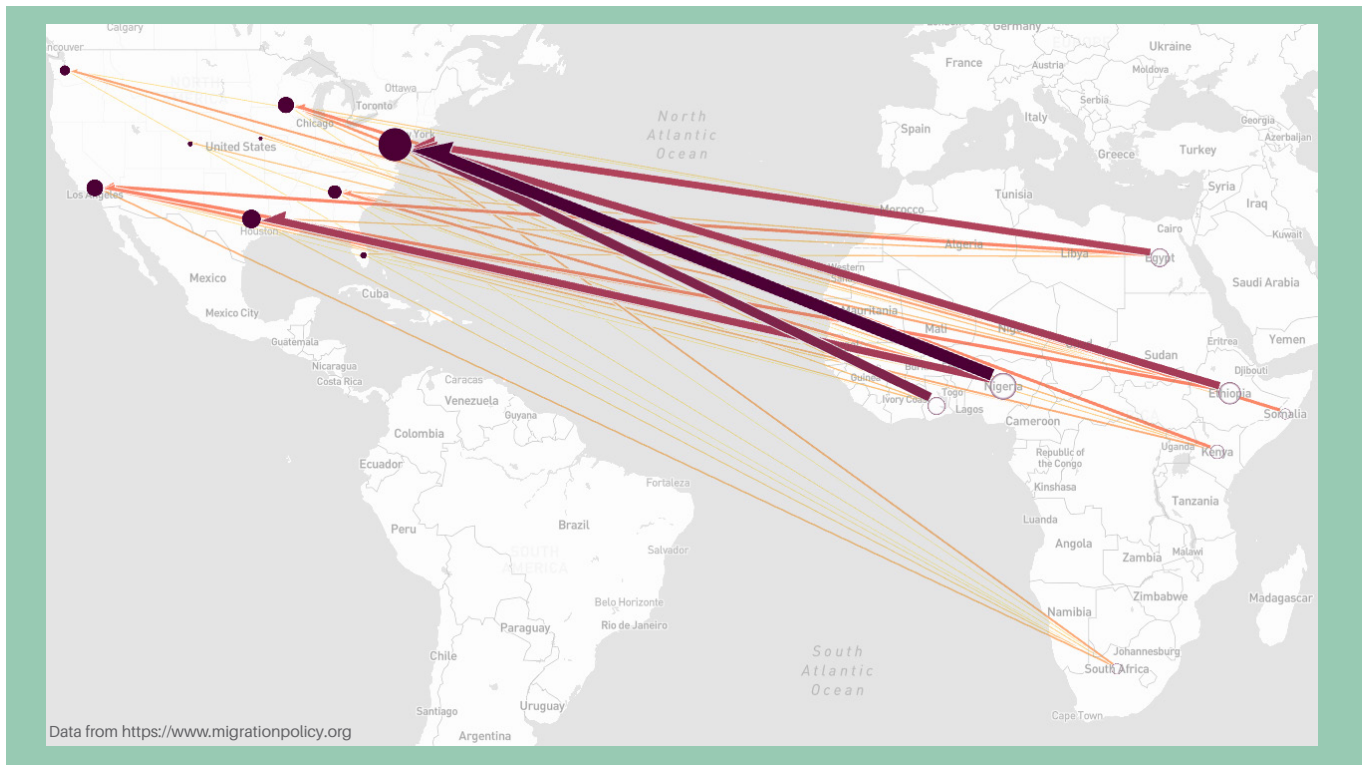


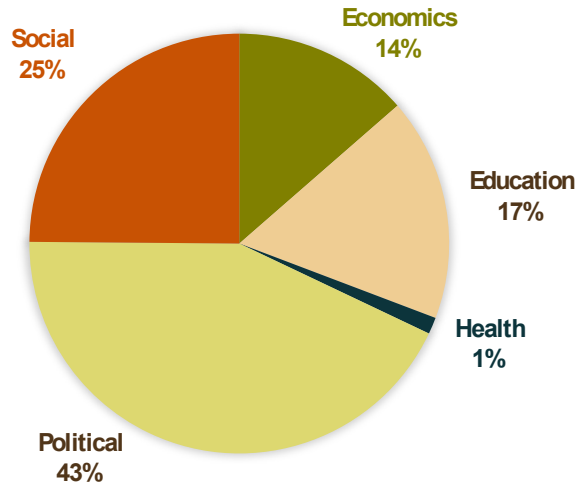
Figure 7: Flow of Immigrants from 7 African Countries to US Cities



What does engagement mean?

For the purposes of this review, engagement is broadly defined as any activity undertaken by a governing institution to understand or address any issues of public interest or concern. We outline four different types of engagement that we identify as relevant to the development of diaspora groups in the U.S. over time. These are primarily Economic, Political, Immigration, and Socio-cultural. In addition to direct actions by public governing institutions, engagement also relates to policies, laws, or initiatives aimed at promoting institutional-level change in the private and non-governmental sectors as well. Engagement in this review refers specifically to local, state, and federal legislation; executive orders; creation of government bodies; establishment of cultural and not-for-profit institutions.

Figure 8: Types of US - Diaspora Engagement in Literature Review Sources



Who is working on diaspora?

Figure 10: Breakdown of 65 Diaspora Organizations by Mission Focus, Location, and Year Established

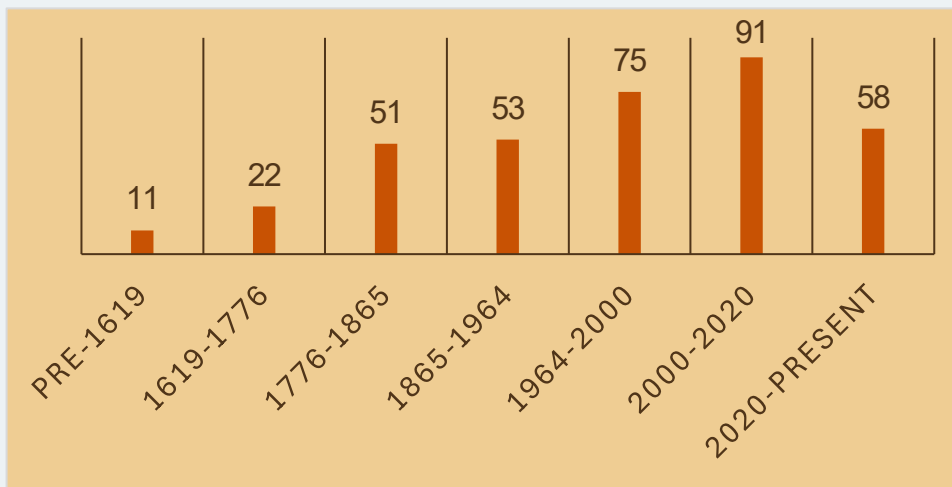


Review Process

Guiding Questions

This review set out to map the historical policy-informed engagements between the diaspora and the US government by cataloging the unique trends from a variety of regions across the continent. It also looked to identify key actors and stakeholders that can be effective in bridging the gaps between the demand from diaspora groups for deeper engagement, and that of government institutions for more nuanced understanding of these communities. This research will inform the establishment of the Africa Center’s Diaspora Center, created in partnership with AfreximBank. It will also be the first comprehensive public study of its kind that can inform engagement with the African Diaspora in the US with Africa.

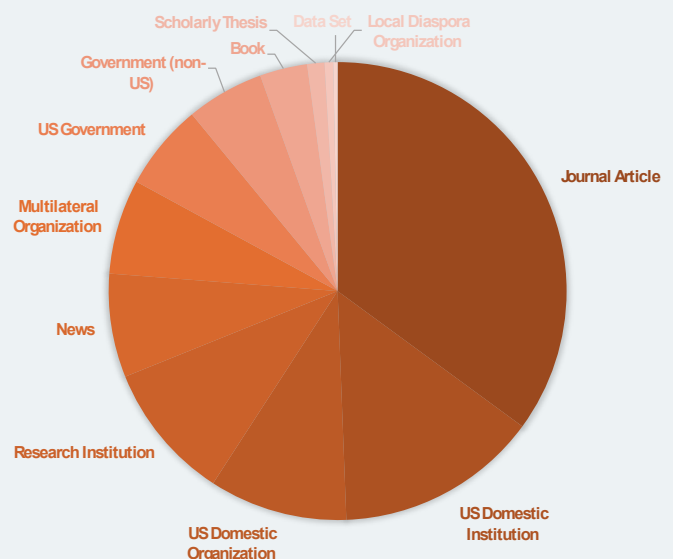
Figure 11: Breakdown of Literature Review Sources by Time Period



Number of sources included

The final number of sources included in this review amounts to a total of 266. The research focused primarily on diaspora-focused public policy and engagement from the municipal and federal government, books, organizations concerned with Africa and its diaspora, peer-reviewed journal publications, and published articles sought from research institutions.

Figure 12: Breakdown of Literature Review Sources by Type



Review Process

Search Terms and Variables of Interest

Number of key search terms

The research reviewed search results from a total of 215 unique search terms. Searches were conducted on several databases including google scholar, jstor, and the Yale University Library. Search results were reviewed manually and determinations of inclusion or exclusion were made by the researchers.

Variables of interest

Each included source was cataloged according to the following dimensions:

Time Period: (see Figure 11)

Country of Origin

Region of the African Country (ex: Origin Region: Central Africa)

Location in the United States (City and/or State)

Ethnic Groups mentioned (ex: Ethnic Group: Igbo)

Source (Ex: Source: Government, News, US Domestic Institution, Multilateral, etc)

Engagement type: Political, Economics, Education, Social (Cultural and Arts).

Relational Type: US-Diaspora, Diaspora-Diaspora, Diaspora-Continent, US-Continent

Type of source: Journal, US Domestic Research Institution, US Domestic Organization, Multilateral Organization, Book, US Government, African Government Grey (for non-aforementioned sources)

Further Proposed Research

Our review of diaspora-focused policies and initiatives in the U.S. over time reveals no substantive articulation or analysis of the socio-economic priorities of African diaspora groups in the country today. While the expansion of immigration and naturalization policies have been notably successful in creating more permissible/accommodating circumstances for these communities to develop over time, the complex nature of the lives they lead once they settle here has been somewhat under-examined. Policymakers and other diaspora stakeholders referenced in this review could benefit greatly from a more nuanced investigation into the social and economic realities that most inform the experiences and perspectives of diaspora Americans—both in relation to their naturalized homes and countries of familial origin. Further research could focus on examining:

- What are the economic conditions and aspirations of African diaspora groups, and to what extent do they seek further access to financial markets on the African continent?
- What are the social and political priorities of African diaspora groups in the U.S.?
- How would diaspora African in the U.S. characterize their interactions/level of connectedness with the continent today? What types of engagement would they like to see enhanced and how can this be best facilitated?
- On what issues facing the continent are diaspora Africans best positioned to contribute to solving? In what capacity would diaspora stakeholders be most productive?

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