
MONEY FROM EUROPE A LIFELINE FOR NIGERIAN FAMILIES

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Grace and Sunday Otoides house is the last one standing on Bata Road in Benin City, southern Nigeria. All the neighbours have left and the retired couple hope to do the same.

With the money their two children send from Italy, they want to build a new house.

Dozens of lorries used to pass along the road to get to the local shoe factory, once one of Benin City's industrial jewels.

But it's now no more than a track swallowed by swamps.

At the turn of the century, the leading shoe manufacturer that gave the road its name relocated its factory to Ghana, frustrated by constant power cuts. About 3,000 employees, most of them young people, lost their jobs.

Since then, the flood barriers surrounding the area have fallen into disrepair and the water has reclaimed the earth, flooding every dwelling and the factory.

We have nothing. No chop (food), notin, says Grace in pidgin English from a large sofa that has seen better days.

Her husband's pension has also been hurt by the devaluation of Nigeria's naira currency.

Two of the couple's six children were smuggled into Italy several years ago.

They send back what they can, when they can, to help their parents build a new home. The current one threatens to fall down at any moment.

I don't know what kind of job she does. But she works, she works abroad, she's the one who must worry for me. If I work young again, I go travel overseas, says Grace.

More than 37,500 Nigerians arrived on the Italian coast by boat in 2016, according to the International Organization for Migration. Most of them came from Benin City.

The city is riddled with human trafficking networks. Often the Nigerian women who end up in Italy become sex workers, while men are pushed into Italian mafia networks around the trade.

The phenomenon can be traced back to the time of the region's industrial collapse in the late 1980s, military rule and the structural adjustment programmes that killed the economy.

For nearly 30 years, Edo State, of which Benin City is the capital, has survived on the money sent back from across the Mediterranean.

Even small sums represent a real monthly salary for families – as long as the money is sent in foreign currency.

On the outskirts of the city, there are no roads, electricity or drainage, yet brick houses are mushrooming in the largely abandoned fields.

Emmanuel Otoide is building a large house for a client who left for Italy 10 years ago and has not come back.

On the walls, the owner's mother has stuck a notice from her Pentecostal church: 2017 My Year of Greater Light.

The mother of the owner is (a) pure water seller, she is a street vendor, the construction engineer says, adding that without the money from overseas, building the house would be impossible.

Behind him, workers dig the foundations of another house by hand, sweating in the suffocating heat, 10 hours a day, for 3,000 naira (€8.5).

Non-sustainable

There are more than 230 million international migrants worldwide – more than the population of the world's fifth most populous country, Brazil. To help finance development, new diaspora financial instruments, or diaspora bonds, could be created, write Mahmoud Mohieldin and Dilip Ratha.

The appearance of economic development because of migrants from Edo state is fake and non-sustainable, according to Kokunre Eghafona-Agbontaen, from the University of Benin City.

The money sent to often very poor and uneducated families is not invested in viable enterprises or to buy arable land to farm.

The remittances are utilised on a personal and family basis, and there are no visible contributions to the development and transformation of the community, she says.

What's worse is that illegal migration has led to a fall in the level of education in Edo, Eghafona-Agbontaen says.

Young people, convinced that their professional future will not be in Nigeria, now look to leave rather than continue their studies.

The deputy governor of Edo, Philip Shaibu, agrees, saying parents would look for the best agent to transfer them to Europe in the same way they might look for a good school.

Now children want to go on their own. That trend we want to stop.

After years of political inaction, the new Edo state governor has promised to eradicate the dangerous cartels involved in human trafficking, and wants to reinvigorate industry and create 200,000 jobs.

Its a huge challenge and unlikely to be achieved in a country where energy problems are a major brake on development.

But since 2016 the European Union has put pressure on source countries of illegal migrants □ soft diplomacy according to Shaibu, who wants politicians to recognise the problem.

New Consensus on Development adopted – and immediately condemned

The New Consensus on Development was adopted by EU foreign affairs ministers today (19 May) □ and immediately condemned by NGOs working in the field.

We prefer to have our young ones being celebrated outside for skills that they learn in Nigeria rather than drowning off the coast of Libya, he says.

That we dont want.

Kaynak/Source: