

DIASPORA DIPLOMACY: EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF NIGERIAN DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM ON BILATERAL RELATIONS

Sulaiman Ibrahim Richifa (PhD)

Department of Public Administration,
Kaduna State University, Kaduna, Nigeria
Email: suleiman.richifa@kasu.edu.ng
Telephone: 08033144628, 08052770083

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Abstract

This article evaluates how Nigerian diaspora communities in the United Kingdom influence UK–Nigeria bilateral relations between 2015 and 2025. Diaspora diplomacy is understood as the organized political, economic, cultural and institutional activity through which overseas communities seek to shape relations between their country of origin and country of residence. The study uses a qualitative documentary design and analyses recent official statistics, bilateral policy documents, institutional reports and scholarly literature. Evidence was selected for direct relevance to Nigerian diaspora activity, UK–Nigeria relations and the 2015–2025 period; older works were retained only where they provide foundational theoretical concepts. The evidence shows a sizeable and increasingly institutionalized transnational constituency: 270,768 residents of England and Wales reported Nigeria as their country of birth in the 2021 Census, compared with 191,183 in 2011. Nigeria also received US\$20.1 billion in remittances in 2022 and US\$20.93 billion in personal remittances in 2024, although these totals are global and cannot be attributed exclusively to the UK. Bilaterally, the 2024 Enhanced Trade and Investment Partnership explicitly recognizes an entrepreneurial diaspora and provides for contact between diaspora populations and private-sector groups, while the 2024 Nigeria–UK Strategic Partnership identifies diaspora resources and people-to-people links as a formal area of cooperation. The article finds that diaspora influence is strongest when economic, professional and cultural networks are connected to formal institutions. Political and digital advocacy can shape agendas, but evidence of direct policy causation is more limited. The study concludes that Nigerian diaspora diplomacy has measurable relevance to bilateral relations but requires stronger coordination, institutional access and evidence-based engagement.

Keywords: Bilateral relations; Diaspora diplomacy; Nigerian diaspora; Soft power; Transnationalism; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Globalization has widened diplomacy beyond ministries of foreign affairs and formal missions. In this article, diaspora diplomacy refers specifically to the political, economic, cultural and institutional activities through which

migrant communities and their organizations seek to affect relations between their country of origin and country of residence. This concept is narrower than transnationalism, which describes sustained cross-border social fields, and broader than public diplomacy, which is principally concerned with

communication and influence among foreign publics. Recent scholarship on diaspora governance and digital engagement shows that diaspora actors can operate as intermediaries between states, markets and societies, while foundational transnationalist literature explains the cross-border social structures that make such activity possible (Gamlen, 2019; Brinkerhoff, 2019; Vertovec, 2009).

The Nigerian community in the United Kingdom is large enough to constitute a significant transnational constituency. According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), 270,768 usual residents in England and Wales recorded Nigeria as their country of birth in the 2021 Census, up from 191,183 in 2011, an increase of about 41.6 per cent (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023). The figure does not include all people of Nigerian descent, UK-born second-generation Nigerians, or residents of Scotland and Northern Ireland, so it should be treated as a conservative indicator rather than a complete measure of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK. The size and growth of this population strengthen the practical basis for diaspora influence through professional networks, business, cultural production, civil society and political participation.

The bilateral relationship itself is extensive. In the four quarters to the end of Q2 2024, total UK–Nigeria trade in goods and services was £7.2 billion; UK exports to Nigeria were £5.1 billion and UK imports from Nigeria were £2.1 billion (Department for Business and Trade (DBT), 2024). In February 2024, both governments signed the Enhanced Trade and Investment Partnership (ETIP), the first such UK arrangement with an African country. Significantly for this study, the agreement expressly recognizes the two countries' "entrepreneurial diaspora" and

aims to facilitate contact between diaspora populations and private-sector groups. It also provides for cooperation on formal diaspora remittance channels (DBT, 2024). These provisions offer direct documentary evidence that diaspora-linked economic activity has entered the architecture of bilateral economic relations.

Diaspora relevance also appears in the wider diplomatic framework. The Nigeria–UK Strategic Partnership agreed in November 2024 includes a pillar on sustained people-to-people links intended to harness demographic and diaspora resources (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), 2024). Nigeria's own institutional engagement has become more visible through the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NiDCOM), which coordinates National Diaspora Day and engages organizations including NIDO UK South (NiDCOM, 2023). These developments demonstrate official recognition, but recognition is not the same as proven policy influence. The analytical problem is therefore to determine the channels through which diaspora communities affect bilateral relations and to distinguish demonstrable institutional or economic effects from visibility, advocacy and symbolic participation.

Existing literature frequently treats remittances, migration, identity, development, political advocacy and cultural influence as separate subjects. This can obscure how they interact within a specific bilateral relationship. The present article therefore asks three related questions: through which channels do Nigerian diaspora communities in the UK influence UK–Nigeria relations; what evidence demonstrates the relative strength or limitations of those channels; and what institutional conditions increase or reduce

their effectiveness? The analysis focuses on 2015–2025, a period marked by intensified migration, digital mobilization, formal diaspora institutions and new UK–Nigeria agreements.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Diaspora, Diaspora Diplomacy and Bilateral Relations

Diaspora scholarship has moved beyond the idea of simple population dispersal toward sustained cross-border attachments, institutions and practices. Foundational transnationalism explains how migrants may participate simultaneously in social, political and economic life across more than one national space (Vertovec, 2009). More recent diaspora-governance scholarship emphasizes that states increasingly build institutions and policies to engage overseas populations as economic, political and symbolic resources (Gamlen, 2019). The strength of diaspora influence nevertheless varies according to organization, legitimacy, access to institutions and the capacity to translate transnational resources into collective action.

Diaspora diplomacy can therefore be understood as a mechanism rather than merely a label. Political organizations may lobby legislators or participate in consultations; professional and business networks may facilitate trade and investment; cultural producers may shape public perceptions; and diaspora institutions may transmit knowledge or policy preferences between home and host states. Digital platforms can accelerate these processes but do not automatically produce policy change (Brinkerhoff, 2019). The key analytical distinction is between visibility, agenda-setting, institutional access and demonstrable policy or economic outcomes.

Bilateral relations are also increasingly multi-actor. Governments remain the formal decision-makers, but contemporary agreements involve businesses, professional bodies, civil society and migrant communities. This is visible in the 2024 UK–Nigeria ETIP, which explicitly refers to diaspora populations and private-sector groups, and in the 2024 Strategic Partnership, which places people-to-people and diaspora resources within the bilateral framework (DBT, 2024; FCDO, 2024). These recent policy documents provide stronger evidence of diaspora institutional relevance than generalized claims about the importance of migrant communities.

2.2 Economic, Political, Cultural and Institutional Channels

Economic engagement is frequently treated as the most measurable diaspora channel because remittances, entrepreneurship, professional mobility and investment can be quantified. The World Bank reported that Nigeria received US\$20.1 billion in remittances in 2022, approximately 38 per cent of remittance inflows to Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2023). Central Bank of Nigeria data indicate that personal remittances rose to US\$20.93 billion in 2024 and International Money Transfer Operator inflows reached US\$4.73 billion (Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), 2025). These figures are global Nigerian inflows, not UK-only remittances, and therefore cannot by themselves prove UK diaspora influence. Their relevance is that the bilateral ETIP specifically commits both countries to encourage formal diaspora remittance channels, connecting a major national financial flow to an identifiable UK–Nigeria policy mechanism (DBT, 2024).

Political influence is harder to establish because advocacy does not necessarily cause a government decision. The most

defensible evidence is institutional access and agenda inclusion. For example, the UK's 2025 consultation on a new approach to Africa engaged more than 600 organizations, including diaspora organizations and creatives, demonstrating that diaspora perspectives can enter foreign-policy consultation processes (FCDO, 2025). Nigeria's National Diaspora Day similarly provides a recurring platform for diaspora organizations and government officials; the 2023 programme explicitly recognized NIDO UK South and included UK-based Nigerian participants in discussions on politics, development and diaspora mobilization (NiDCOM, 2023). These examples demonstrate access and agenda-setting, while direct causal influence over final policy decisions remains more difficult to prove.

Cultural diplomacy operates through music, film, fashion, cuisine, festivals, professional achievement and other forms of representation. Its effects are generally indirect: repeated cultural exposure can increase familiarity and attraction, which soft-power theory identifies as a non-coercive source of influence (Nye, 2004). A practical bilateral example is the 2024 ETIP's creative-industries provision, under which Nigeria and the UK agreed to establish a working group to explore a film co-production arrangement. The provision does not prove that diaspora cultural actors caused the agreement, but it demonstrates that cultural and creative links have become a formal area of bilateral economic cooperation (DBT, 2024).

The literature therefore suggests a hierarchy of evidence rather than a simple hierarchy of influence. Financial flows and formal agreements are comparatively observable; consultation and lobbying demonstrate access but require caution

before being described as policy causation; cultural effects accumulate over time and are difficult to isolate; and digital mobilization increases reach but depends on institutional follow-through. A weakness in much diaspora literature is the tendency to infer diplomatic influence from activity alone. This article addresses that weakness by requiring documentary indicators—statistics, formal agreements, official consultations or identifiable institutional mechanisms—before describing an engagement channel as influential.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis triangulates transnationalism, soft power theory and network theory because no single perspective adequately explains diaspora diplomacy. Transnationalism, associated with scholars such as Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994) and Vertovec (2009), explains the structural condition that permits diaspora actors to maintain simultaneous ties across national borders. It answers the question of how Nigerian communities can remain socially, economically and politically connected to Nigeria while residing in the UK.

Soft power theory, principally developed by Joseph Nye, explains one mechanism through which diaspora presence may affect bilateral relations: attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Nigerian music, film, fashion, cuisine and professional success can shape perceptions of Nigeria among British publics and institutions. The mechanism is indirect: cultural visibility may build familiarity and goodwill, which can improve the environment for people-to-people relations, creative-industry cooperation and public diplomacy. The 2024 ETIP's provision for UK–Nigeria creative-industry cooperation provides a concrete

institutional setting in which such cultural connections can acquire bilateral relevance (DBT, 2024).

Network theory, particularly Castells' account of networked social organization, explains why some diaspora actors are more influential than others: access depends on connections, brokerage and institutional position (Castells, 2010). In practical terms, a professional association connected to policymakers, businesses and diplomatic missions can transmit information and preferences more effectively than a fragmented group without institutional access. The theories are therefore complementary. Transnationalism explains cross-border embeddedness; soft power explains attraction and cultural influence; and network theory explains variation in access and capacity. Triangulated together, they predict that diaspora influence should be strongest where cross-border identity, reputational resources and organized institutional networks converge.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design based exclusively on secondary evidence. The documentary corpus covers 2015–2025 and consists of peer-reviewed scholarship, official UK and Nigerian policy documents, bilateral agreements, official statistics, institutional reports and documented diaspora-engagement materials. Foundational theoretical works published before 2015 were retained only where necessary to define or explain transnationalism, soft power and network theory.

Sources were included when they met at least one of four criteria: they provided quantitative evidence on the Nigerian population, remittances or UK–Nigeria

economic relations; documented a formal bilateral agreement or government consultation; recorded an identifiable Nigerian diaspora organization or engagement mechanism; or offered peer-reviewed analysis directly relevant to diaspora diplomacy. Sources were excluded where they were undated, primarily opinion-based, duplicated information available from an official source, lacked a clear connection to Nigeria/UK diaspora relations, or made claims that could not be traced to a credible institution or publication. Priority was given to materials published from 2020 onward, consistent with the study period, while older sources were used mainly for foundational concepts.

The evidence was coded thematically under five engagement channels: political advocacy, economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, institutional engagement and digital mobilization. A second coding layer distinguished four levels of observable influence: visibility, agenda-setting, institutional access and tangible policy/economic outcome. This distinction reduces the risk of treating every diaspora activity as diplomatic influence. Triangulation was achieved by comparing academic interpretation with official statistics and bilateral policy documents. Claims of direct policy impact were made only where documentary evidence supported an institutional or policy connection; otherwise the analysis uses more cautious terms such as agenda-setting, access or potential influence.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Demographic and Institutional Basis of Diaspora Influence

The demographic evidence establishes that the Nigerian community has a substantial presence in Britain. ONS data show that

270,768 residents of England and Wales were Nigerian-born in 2021, compared with 191,183 in 2011 (ONS, 2023). This represents an increase of approximately 79,585 people, or 41.6 per cent, over the decade. Because these figures exclude UK-born people of Nigerian descent and do not cover Scotland and Northern Ireland, the wider Nigerian-origin population is larger. Population size alone does not equal influence, but it expands the pool of professionals, entrepreneurs, voters, cultural producers and organizations through which diaspora diplomacy can operate.

Institutional recognition has also increased. Nigeria's National Diaspora Policy and NiDCOM provide a state framework for diaspora engagement, while the 2023 National Diaspora Day communiqué records participation and recognition of NIDO UK South and UK-based Nigerian professionals (NiDCOM, 2023). On the British side, the 2025 consultation on the UK's new Africa approach explicitly included diaspora organizations among more than 600 organizations consulted (FCDO, 2025). These examples move the analysis beyond an assumption of influence by showing actual institutional channels through which diaspora perspectives can enter government dialogue.

5.2 Economic Engagement: The Most Observable Channel

Economic engagement provides the clearest measurable evidence, although attribution must be handled carefully. Nigeria received US\$20.1 billion in remittances in 2022 and US\$20.93 billion in personal remittances in 2024 (World Bank, 2023; CBN, 2025). These totals originate from Nigerians worldwide, so they should not be presented as UK diaspora remittances. What can be

demonstrated specifically in the bilateral context is that the 2024 ETIP acknowledges the entrepreneurial diaspora, seeks to facilitate contact between diaspora populations and private-sector groups, and commits both sides to channel diaspora remittances through approved International Money Transfer Operators (DBT, 2024).

The wider commercial relationship provides the context in which diaspora business networks operate. UK–Nigeria trade in goods and services stood at £7.2 billion in the four quarters to Q2 2024, with £5.1 billion in UK exports to Nigeria and £2.1 billion in UK imports from Nigeria (DBT, 2024). The ETIP created working mechanisms across financial services, education, creatives, investment, clean growth, agriculture and other sectors. Diaspora entrepreneurs and professionals can reduce information asymmetries, provide cultural and market knowledge and connect firms across both economies. The practical evidence therefore supports a more precise conclusion than the original manuscript: diaspora economic influence is institutionally recognized and operates within a large bilateral market, but available public statistics do not permit the whole value of UK-based Nigerian diaspora investment or remittances to be isolated.

5.3 Political Advocacy and Institutional Access

Political advocacy is visible, but its effect is best described as agenda-setting and institutional access rather than direct control of foreign policy. NiDCOM's 2023 Diaspora Day included discussion of diaspora political participation and diaspora voting, with UK-linked participants and NIDO UK South among recognized organizations (NiDCOM, 2023). This demonstrates that organized

diaspora actors can place political participation and development issues before Nigerian officials. In the UK, the 2025 Africa-policy consultation included diaspora organizations, demonstrating an avenue for diaspora perspectives to enter a foreign-policy review process (FCDO, 2025).

A stronger indication of institutionalization is found in the 2024 Nigeria–UK Strategic Partnership. Its sixth pillar commits both governments to sustained people-to-people links and to harnessing diaspora resources (FCDO, 2024). The partnership does not identify a particular diaspora organization as the cause of this policy, so causal claims should remain restrained. Nevertheless, it confirms that diaspora resources are no longer peripheral to official bilateral language. The evidence therefore supports the conclusion that diaspora communities contribute to the policy environment through consultation, expertise and agenda-setting, while final decisions remain state-controlled.

5.4 Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Nigerian cultural visibility in Britain is expressed through music, film, fashion, food, festivals and professional achievement. Soft power theory suggests that such visibility matters when it generates attraction, familiarity and legitimacy (Nye, 2004). The bilateral relevance of cultural connections is visible in the ETIP, which identifies creative industries as an area of cooperation and establishes a process to explore a film co-production arrangement between Nigeria and the UK (DBT, 2024). This provides a practical policy example linking cultural exchange to bilateral economic cooperation.

The analytical limitation is attribution. The presence of Nigerian cultural products in

Britain does not by itself demonstrate that diaspora communities caused a particular diplomatic decision. Cultural diplomacy is therefore better understood as an enabling environment: diaspora cultural activity strengthens people-to-people familiarity and can create networks and market demand that governments later institutionalize. Its effect is cumulative and indirect, unlike a signed agreement or measurable financial flow.

5.5 Digital Mobilization, Networks and Constraints

Digital platforms enable Nigerian diaspora organizations and individuals to communicate across borders, publicize campaigns and participate in hybrid consultations. NiDCOM's 2023 National Diaspora Day, for example, included online participation through Zoom and social-media platforms (NiDCOM, 2023). This illustrates how digital infrastructure can widen participation beyond those physically present in Abuja or London. However, digital visibility should not be equated with policy influence. Network theory predicts that online mobilization becomes more consequential when it connects to organizations with access to ministries, parliamentarians, diplomatic missions, professional bodies or business institutions.

Fragmentation remains a major constraint. The diaspora is not a single organization and contains different regional, religious, professional, generational and political interests. This diversity can enrich debate but makes common representation difficult. A second constraint is the evidence gap: publicly available sources rarely identify which diaspora intervention caused a specific UK or Nigerian policy change. The strongest claims in this study are therefore those supported by formal policy recognition, consultation records

and measurable economic data. This evidence-based distinction makes the analysis less descriptive and avoids overstating causality.

5.6 Relative Effectiveness of the Channels

The evidence does not justify a simple ranking based only on frequency of diaspora activity. Instead, effectiveness varies according to the type of outcome being measured. Economic engagement has the strongest evidence of tangible relevance because remittance flows are large, bilateral trade is measurable and the ETIP formally integrates diaspora-related economic mechanisms. Institutional engagement has also strengthened because diaspora resources appear explicitly in the 2024 Strategic Partnership and diaspora organizations participate in government consultations. Political advocacy is effective primarily at the levels of agenda-setting and access, but documentary evidence of direct policy causation is limited. Cultural diplomacy contributes to the social and reputational environment of bilateral relations and is increasingly connected to formal creative-industry cooperation. Digital mobilization is an enabling mechanism rather than an independent source of policy influence. Overall, diaspora diplomacy is most effective when these channels reinforce one another through durable institutions and identifiable policy processes.

6. Conclusion

Nigerian diaspora communities in the United Kingdom have become identifiable actors within UK–Nigeria relations, but their influence is uneven and should not be overstated. The strongest evidence lies in demographic scale, economic flows, formal policy recognition and institutional access. ONS data show a substantial

Nigerian-born population in England and Wales; Nigerian remittances remain economically significant; the 2024 ETIP explicitly recognizes the entrepreneurial diaspora and diaspora remittance channels; and the 2024 Strategic Partnership places diaspora resources within the formal bilateral framework. These developments demonstrate movement from informal transnational activity toward greater institutional recognition. However, evidence that diaspora advocacy directly determines bilateral policy remains limited. The study therefore concludes that diaspora diplomacy operates most effectively as a bridge: it connects markets, institutions, cultures and policy conversations, while sovereign governments retain formal decision-making authority. Stronger coordination, transparent consultation and better measurement of UK-specific diaspora investment, remittances and policy participation would make its contribution easier to assess and potentially more effective.

7. Recommendations

1. NiDCOM, the Nigerian High Commission in London and relevant Nigerian ministries should establish a quarterly UK–Nigeria Diaspora Policy Forum, with published agendas, action points and follow-up reports, so that consultation becomes continuous rather than event-based.
2. NIDO UK South, working with other Nigerian professional, business, youth and community associations in the UK, should serve as a coordinating platform for issue-specific coalitions rather than claiming to represent the entire diaspora. Common policy positions should be developed through open consultations and documented mandates.

3. The UK Department for Business and Trade, Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, NiDCOM and the Nigerian High Commission should create a diaspora investment and professional-exchange window under the ETIP, including verified project information, regulatory guidance, investor matchmaking and sector-specific technical missions.

4. The FCDO and relevant UK departments should include Nigerian diaspora organizations in structured consultations on Nigeria-related policies where diaspora expertise is directly relevant, publish consultation summaries, and explain how evidence submitted by stakeholders was considered.

5. NiDCOM and the Nigerian High Commission should introduce a consultation feedback register that records diaspora proposals, responsible agencies, agreed actions, deadlines and implementation status. This would strengthen trust by making follow-up visible.

6. Capacity support should be coordinated by NiDCOM and the Nigerian High Commission, in partnership with UK-based universities, professional bodies and civil-society organizations, through training in policy research, evidence-based advocacy, organizational governance, fundraising and engagement with public institutions.

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