

Foreign Policy at the Grassroots: Nigeria's Citizens' Diplomacy and Xenophobic Attacks in South Africa

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Abstract

Nigeria and South Africa have historically enjoyed strong diplomatic relations, especially following Nigeria's instrumental role in the fight against apartheid. However, between 2010 and 2017, this relationship was severely tested by recurring xenophobic attacks targeting Nigerian nationals in South Africa. These attacks included physical violence, sexual abuse, property destruction, systemic discrimination, and, in extreme cases, fatalities. This study critically analyses Nigeria's citizens' diplomacy—a grassroots-oriented foreign policy initiative—and its effectiveness in protecting Nigerians abroad during this period. Anchored in the theory of Social Production and Reproduction, the study employs a documentary observational method and relies on secondary data sources, analysed using descriptive statistical techniques. Findings indicate that the weak implementation and limited institutional support for citizens' diplomacy significantly undermined Nigeria's capacity to safeguard its citizens and their interests in South Africa. The study concludes by recommending a strategic overhaul of Nigeria's foreign policy framework to prioritise the safety, dignity, and economic security of Nigerians in the diaspora.

Keywords: *Diplomacy, Citizens' Diplomacy, Xenophobia, Nigeria–South Africa Relations*

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Background to the Study

Nigeria's historical commitment to African solidarity, particularly through its Afrocentric foreign policy, earned it considerable respect across the continent. This approach was instrumental in supporting South Africa's liberation struggle. However, despite this goodwill, scholars have criticised Nigeria's Afrocentric policy as poorly conceived and disconnected from international realities. It has been argued that it neglected the core principle of national interest, which is paramount in the international system (Folarin, n.d.). Critics contend that Nigeria's foreign policy has led to a waste of scarce resources, with little benefit to its citizens (Dickson, 2010). More concerning is the observation that countries which have benefitted from Nigeria's support, including South Africa, have not reciprocated such gestures, but instead have subjected Nigerian citizens to inhumane treatment abroad (Ujara & Ibietan, 2014). In response to these criticisms, the Nigerian government shifted from Afrocentrism to a more pragmatic, citizen-centred foreign policy in 2007, known as "citizens' diplomacy" (Maduekwe, 2007). This study explores how this policy has fared, particularly in light of the repeated xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Citizens' diplomacy, although originally conceptualized in the United States, has been adopted by many countries, including Nigeria. It rebrands foreign policy to prioritise the welfare, protection, and rights of citizens both at home and abroad (Okeke & Onyekwelu, 2014). The Nigerian model of citizens' diplomacy aims to uphold the dignity of its citizens and protect them against hostilities in foreign nations (Elechi, Ofor, & Kalu, 2017).

However, the relevance of this policy has been called into question given the persistence of xenophobic attacks against Nigerians in South Africa. Following the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa began experiencing a surge in xenophobic sentiments, with major incidents occurring in 1998, 2000, and 2007, and recurring thereafter (Swamp, 2004). Xenophobia is broadly defined as the fear or hatred of foreigners and often manifests in discriminatory and violent behaviours (Mudailer, as cited in Adebisi & Agagu, 2017). South Africans, especially in urban and economically marginalised areas, have increasingly targeted black Africans, including Nigerians, in these attacks (Hopstock & de Jager, 2011).

This paradox raises a fundamental question: while Nigeria claims to have improved its foreign policy through citizens' diplomacy, why have Nigerian nationals continued to suffer xenophobic violence, particularly in South Africa?

Hence, the central question guiding this study is:

Has Nigeria's policy of citizens' diplomacy enhanced the protection of Nigerian nationals in South Africa?

Conceptual Literature

Foreign Policy refers to the strategies and actions adopted by a sovereign state in its interactions with other states and international actors to protect and promote its national interests. It encompasses diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural tools used to shape

external relations and respond to global challenges. According to Rosenau (1971), foreign policy is "the external behaviour of states and the decisions made by those in positions of authority to achieve national goals in the international system." In the Nigerian context, foreign policy not only reflects national priorities and values but also includes efforts to safeguard citizens abroad, project soft power, and maintain regional influence, particularly within Africa.

Diplomacy refers to the practice of managing international relations through dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful engagement (Ogunsanya, 2012). It is often carried out by official representatives of a state to promote national interest, maintain peace, and foster mutual cooperation.

Citizens' Diplomacy refers to a foreign policy approach that places the welfare and protection of a nation's citizens at the centre of its diplomatic activities. In Nigeria, it involves using diplomatic platforms to defend and protect Nigerians abroad and to address any threats to their safety and wellbeing (Elechi et al., 2017).

Xenophobia, derived from the Greek words *xenos* (foreigner) and *phobos* (fear), implies a strong dislike, fear, or hatred of people perceived to be outsiders. It often manifests in exclusionary practices, discrimination, violence, and socio-political marginalisation of foreigners (Adebisi & Agagu, 2017).

Diplomacy and Citizen Diplomacy: Citizen diplomacy in this context refers to the informal involvement of private citizens in international matters typically reserved for official diplomatic channels (Nwogbaga, Ndukwe, & Nwuzor, 2017; Offor, Nwankwo, & Nnaji, 2017). It entails individuals engaging in cross-border communication and cooperation that contributes to mutual understanding, problem-solving, and peacebuilding.

McDonald (1992) conceptualised citizen diplomacy as non-governmental, informal, and unofficial efforts by private individuals to address global challenges such as conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and environmental cooperation. He identified this approach as Type II Diplomacy, contrasting it with Type I Diplomacy, which involves formal governmental negotiations and statecraft. Citizen diplomacy, according to McDonald, focuses on fostering cooperation and empathy through personal contact. He noted that between 1972 and 1992, such efforts positively influenced areas including nuclear disarmament, U.S.–Soviet relations, and Middle Eastern peace efforts, illustrating that individuals—and particularly groups of individuals—can drive international change.

Hudme and Grant (2010), in *Developing Partnership with Predominantly Muslim Nations*, examined the role of citizen diplomacy in building global partnerships, especially with Islamic nations. They argued that globalisation has empowered individuals to influence international perceptions and relationships through direct interactions or digital platforms. According to them, citizen diplomacy enables foreign policy to be shaped "one handshake at a time" and is distinct from public diplomacy, which refers to government-led efforts targeting foreign audiences to cultivate favourable opinions.

They further contended that citizen diplomacy should be aimed at solving shared challenges and fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships. Key goals include changing perceptions through face-to-face engagement and promoting mutual developmental interests. The authors highlighted that individuals often deliver development outcomes—such as in health, education, and environmental sectors—more effectively than large-scale government programmes. Best practices they proposed include ensuring equality in dialogue, prioritising the lived experiences of participants, and measuring success by the depth and spread of interpersonal relationships and their real-life applications.

Target groups for such initiatives include youths, educators, civil society actors, business leaders, scientists, artists, and religious figures. Hudme and Grant cited the United States Peace Corps, the International Visitors Programme, and the Fulbright Programme as examples of institutionalised citizen diplomacy. Although their study primarily focused on strengthening U.S.–Muslim world relations, their insights are applicable globally. Keilson (2000) echoed similar views, stating that citizen diplomacy fosters cross-cultural understanding and builds international networks of empathy and solidarity.

Citizen Diplomacy and Nigeria's Foreign Policy

In Nigeria, the practice of citizen diplomacy has largely remained rhetorical. Policy formulation and implementation have traditionally been elite-driven, often excluding the wider citizenry from the foreign policy process. Consequently, the intended participatory and welfare-focused character of citizen diplomacy has not been fully realised. Conflict and societal violence, as observed by social theorists, often arise when the needs of certain individuals or groups remain unmet in the socio-economic production process. This leads to competition, resentment, and sometimes violent confrontation between those satisfied and those marginalised (p. 18).

Unfortunately, many Nigerians abroad continue to suffer various forms of abuse, including unlawful detention, torture, deportation, and discrimination, often with little or no explanation or due process. While this is not to suggest that all Nigerians abroad are innocent of wrongdoing, many are victims of unjustified hostility and mistreatment. There also appears to be a lack of awareness among South African communities—especially in the townships—regarding the legal rights of foreign residents to live, work, and own property under South African law. This ignorance has further compounded the xenophobic attitudes towards Nigerians and other African nationals.

Citizen Diplomacy and Nigeria's Response to Xenophobic Attacks

In many countries, immigrants are often viewed with suspicion. South Africa, however, presents a more severe case, where such suspicion has turned into widespread xenophobic violence. South African citizens have repeatedly harassed and attacked foreign nationals, with Nigerians being among the most affected.

Media reports reveal the extent of this violence. Between 5th and 6th April 2019, two Nigerians were reportedly killed in xenophobic attacks. Okunnu (2019), in a report titled

South Africa Xenophobia: 10 Years of Attacks on Foreigners, chronicled numerous incidents of anti-immigrant violence, many of which targeted Nigerians. In 2008, at least 62 individuals were killed and approximately 6,000 displaced. In 2012, 125 Nigerians were deported over allegations of possessing fake yellow fever certificates. In 2015, about 250 foreigners were attacked and five were killed, following inciting comments by Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini. By 2018, reports indicated that shops belonging to foreigners had been looted in Soweto, with Nigerians again among the primary victims. These events raise fundamental concerns about the effectiveness of Nigeria's citizen diplomacy in safeguarding its nationals abroad and preserving Nigeria–South Africa bilateral relations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has critically examined Nigeria's citizens' diplomacy as a grassroots-driven foreign policy response to the recurring xenophobic attacks on Nigerians in South Africa between 2010 and 2017. The findings underscore that the persistent targeting of Nigerian nationals not only strains bilateral relations but also undermines regional cohesion, African solidarity, and the prospects for sustainable development within the continent. Despite Nigeria's historic support for South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle and its broader commitment to Pan-African ideals, the violent treatment of its citizens abroad—coupled with the muted response from South African authorities—reveals a troubling deficit in reciprocal diplomatic respect.

While the roots of xenophobia in South Africa may lie in local socio-economic discontent and competition for scarce resources, such grievances do not legitimise violence, discrimination, or state inaction. The apparent failure of South African law enforcement to prosecute offenders' points to institutional indifference and a breach of international human rights norms. These realities call for a strategic reassessment of Nigeria's foreign policy, with greater emphasis on the protection of its diaspora, the enforcement of diplomatic reciprocity, and the integration of grassroots concerns into external policy engagement.

Recommendations

1. **Robust Diplomatic Pressure:** The Nigerian government must exert consistent and strategic diplomatic pressure on South Africa to protect foreign nationals and ensure justice for victims of xenophobic violence.
2. **Policy Re-evaluation:** Nigeria must reassess its citizen diplomacy framework to ensure it reflects a commitment to the welfare, dignity, and safety of Nigerian citizens abroad.
3. **Public Sensitisation Campaigns:** Religious institutions and media organisations should work collaboratively to promote African unity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence in South Africa and across the continent.
4. **African Union Involvement:** The African Union (AU) should facilitate high-level discussions and pass a strong resolution condemning xenophobia and calling for member states to protect all Africans residing within their territories.
5. **Economic Leverage:** African governments hosting South African businesses must consider using economic diplomacy as a form of leverage to demand accountability and urgent action from South Africa.

6. **Respect for International Protocols:** South Africa must be urged to adhere to international instruments such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, ensuring that all residents, regardless of nationality, are treated with dignity and equality.

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