

The Technical Aid Corps (TAC) is an international volunteering programme set up by the Nigerian government in 1987 to serve as a 'practical demonstration of south-south co-operation'. This article looks at the controversy within Nigeria over whether the programme should be discontinued: its critics claim that, in the context of Nigeria's economic and social problems, the TAC is too expensive and encourages 'brain drain', while its supporters say that the programme earns Nigeria much international goodwill and brings personal benefits to the volunteers. For their part, ex-volunteers are ambivalent: they applaud the skills development and cross-cultural experiences the TAC brought them, but complain about the inadequate remuneration and hostility from host communities. However, it is suggested that international service would be denied the crucial component of sacrifice if it were to have no negative consequence at all. It is the fact that the positive effects should – and often do – outweigh the negative effects that sustains such volunteering.

Government-led service: the example of the Nigerian Technical Aid Corps

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The Technical Aid Corps (TAC) – the only institutionalised international service programme in Africa – was started at a most inauspicious time for Nigeria, when the country was in dire need of financial assistance, and even debt relief, from international institutions. In fact, Nigeria has faced increasing economic and political

challenges since the scheme started. Against this backdrop, Nigeria's – and the volunteers' – sacrifices present a challenging empirical and theoretical issue, particularly in the context of the interface between service and citizenship.

It is interesting that, despite the

economic, political and social crises Nigeria has faced over the last two decades, she has sustained the scheme. However, there have been debates between those in Nigeria who celebrate the achievements of the TAC – and therefore want the scheme to continue – and those who emphasise its shortcomings – and therefore want it discontinued. To understand the nature of this debate and the desirability and utility of the TAC, it is important to elaborate the conditions that led to the creation of the scheme and the reasons that continue to necessitate its maintenance as a cardinal point of Nigeria's foreign policy.

The Technical Aid Corps

The Technical Aid Corps (TAC) was established by the Nigerian government in 1987 to serve as a 'practical demonstration of South-South Cooperation'. TAC is a voluntary international service scheme whereby highly skilled Nigerians, particularly young people, volunteer to serve in developing countries for a two-year period. It is designed, amongst other things, to share Nigeria's brimming human resources with other African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, to promote understanding between Nigeria and the recipient countries, and to facilitate through service meaningful contact between Nigerian young people and the youth

of recipient countries. In the past fifteen years, thousands of young people have participated in this programme, at a cost of billions of dollars to Nigeria.

According to the current Director-General of TAC, Ambassador Mamman M. Daura:

Prior to 1987 [when TAC started] technical assistance to most of the countries that Nigeria now assists was cash-based. Nigeria thought that all that these countries needed was money to attend to their needs. The era of cash-assistance is no more. Nigeria realised that the cash assistance only had the impact of the moment. Two, Nigeria also realised that the modern approach to assistance is people-oriented programmes; programmes that will impact on the people of the recipient countries. So, these informed the decision in 1987 to start TAC (interview with author, Abuja, 27 April 2005).

Since it was created, Daura argues, the scheme has become 'a veritable tool of the nation's foreign policy, playing a pivotal role in cementing relations with friendly countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific regions' (TAC, 2004:8). The head of the TAC also believes that the scheme, which is 'unique in Africa' and 'part of Nigeria's contribution to world

understanding and international solidarity’:

has successfully become an effective medium of promoting inter-African co-operation in particular, and South-South co-operation in general (ibid.)

Although the scheme was created in 1987, the statute establishing it was only signed into law in January 1993, exactly six years later. This statute created a directorate called the Directorate of Technical Aid Corps as a parastatal (an independent government department) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is charged with implementing the provisions of the statute as well as ensuring the attainment of the objectives of the scheme, subject to policy direction from the ministry. The policy objectives of the scheme include: (i) giving assistance on the basis of assessed and perceived needs of the recipient countries; (ii) promoting co-operation and understanding between Nigeria and the recipient countries; and (iii) facilitating meaningful contact between the young people of Nigeria and those of the recipient countries (TAC, 2004)

The TAC Directorate recruits experienced Nigerian professionals and experts in the fields of medicine, nursing, law, education, engineering, agriculture, sports and related

fields. Qualified volunteers apply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which then draws up a shortlist of applicants. The short-listed candidates are invited for interview sessions, from which the final list is drawn. Those on the final list go through security checks followed by an orientation programme before deployment. This process more or less conforms to Grossman and Furano’s conclusions about the three areas vital to the success of a service programme. These include screening, training (and orientation), and ongoing management and support (Grossman and Furano, 1999). They argue further that the second stage, training and orientation:

ensure[s] that volunteers build the specific skills necessary to be effective and that they have realistic expectations of what they can accomplish. (ibid:202)

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Olu Adeniji, agrees with Daura’s assessment of the place, role and importance of TAC:

The scheme has since its inception reinforced the focus of Nigeria’s Foreign Policy initiatives especially aimed at strengthening and sustaining both sub-regional and regional co-operation. The TAC scheme has indeed generally invigorated the South-South Co-operation. The

substantial progress so far made by the scheme is evident in the increase in the number of recipient countries, volunteers deployed biennially and the overwhelming interest from Nigerian professionals, who voluntarily show increasing desire to participate in the scheme (TAC, 2004:5).

From an initial twelve at the inception of the programme in 1987–1988, the number of countries receiving volunteers from Nigeria has increased to thirty-three in the 2004–2006 biennial. In the past five years, five new countries have joined the list of recipient countries: Eritrea, Cape Verde, Congo Brazzaville, Guyana and Guinea Bissau.

Over the last two years, the annual number of applicants has hovered around the 150,000 mark, from whom fewer than 4,000 are short-listed for interview. A little over 1,000 volunteers are selected and deployed to different recipient nations. The volunteers are made up of journalists, medical doctors, nurses and other paramedics, as well as lawyers, teachers and engineers, lecturers and university administrators. They work in the health, education, legal and public sectors of the recipient countries. Over the two-year duration of the volunteers' postings, the Nigerian government pays a \$700 monthly allowance to those who work in Africa and \$800 to those in

the Caribbean or Pacific respectively, plus N10,000 (less than \$100) 'off-shore' – that is, paid into their local account. Nigeria also pays for the return tickets of the volunteers. Host countries have the obligation to provide decent accommodation and health insurance for the volunteers, but are free to decide whether to pay them an additional stipend.

TAC: successes and challenges

The scheme accords respectability to Nigeria. It is an enviable programme and assures cordiality and recognition to the country (Mrs Florence Bolokor Mohammed, Head, Information Department of the Directorate of Technical Aid Corps, quoted in Daily Independent online, 2003).

[Nigeria is] a pillar of Africa's freedom ..., and dependable friend ... Nigeria has continued to grant development assistance and personnel to support my government's socio-economic programs, including the Technical Aid Corps Agreement under which Nigerian experts work in Namibia (Sam Nujoma, President of Namibia, quoted in THISDAY, Lagos, Nigeria, 2003).

[A]fter 15 years of operation and several hundreds of Nigerian professionals sent abroad at government expense, the time has come to scrap the TAC scheme ...

TAC has become a virtually worthless program, a drainpipe with little or no foreign policy dividend to reap from it (Kingsley Osadolor, columnist, *The Guardian*, Lagos, Nigeria, 2003).

The successes of TAC and the challenges facing it have in recent times been up for debate within Nigeria. Some have argued strongly, based on its successes, that the scheme should be continued, while others – including, significantly, ex-volunteers – have argued that it should be discontinued. Senior government officials and TAC officials have also offered arguments – some of them based on expressions of gratitude from the recipient countries (such as that from Namibia’s President Nujoma quoted above) – for why it is desirable to continue the scheme.

Some of the reasons offered in official circles have already been discussed above. TAC director-general Daura argues further that the scheme can be judged as a success because of continued requests by recipient countries for volunteers from Nigeria:

I think the scheme has been most successful judging by the expansion ... over the years. We started with a few countries, but now we have more than thirty countries benefiting from the scheme. The other evidence is that the number of volunteers has

increased over the years. So there is a phenomenal increase in the interest both within and outside Nigeria (interview with the author, Abuja, 27 April 2005).

Ambassador N.U.O. Wadibia-Anyanwu, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Abuja, affirms that:

TAC as an instrument of Nigeria’s foreign policy has continued to play an enduring role in cementing relations between Nigeria and the beneficiary countries of Africa, Caribbean and the Pacific. It has sufficiently demonstrated its value as an effective instrument of South-South co-operation. It is gratifying ... that the scheme has created fraternal bonds, mutual respect, a strong spirit of co-operation and endearment between Nigeria on the one hand, and African, Caribbean and Pacific nations on the other (TAC, 2000).

Wadibia-Anyanwu’s understanding of the benefits of the TAC, although expressed at the level of the nation state, can also be translated into the personal level: that of the served and the servers. As regards the latter, it is usually assumed that participation in international service provides a chance for volunteers to:

make a contribution at the global level, to experience hands-on learning

about another country and culture and exchange ideas with people you might not otherwise meet (CCS, www.crossculturalsolutions.org).

Cross-Cultural Solutions – a non-profit organisation, based in ten countries including the US and UK, that recruits volunteers for international service – further states that:

The experience [of international service] doesn't end when you return home. By sharing your international volunteering experience with those in your home community and finding ways to incorporate what you learned into your daily life, you play an important role in fostering cultural understanding between people. So, while international volunteering is sometimes referred to as a volunteer vacation, it is actually much more than that (CCS, www.crossculturalsolutions.org).

However, Kingsley Osadolor, an editor and leading weekly columnist with the *Guardian* of Lagos, thinks that, on the whole, the TAC is not a worthy exercise for Nigeria. He argues that the scheme was started at a time when 'the naira [Nigeria's currency] had not been slaughtered in the abattoir called Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)' and therefore the exchange rate of naira to dollar was far more comfortable. In the context

of current realities, he concludes, the scheme should be scrapped, as it has 'become a virtually worthless program, a drainpipe with little or no foreign policy dividend to reap from it' (Osadolor, 2003).

Apart from the state of Nigeria's economy and the absence of foreign policy gains, another point usually raised in favour of scrapping the scheme is 'brain drain'. Some people claim that, for a country which is imploring its expatriate professionals to return home and help build the nation, it is absurd to be sending much-needed manpower abroad to help other countries. Daura, however, disagrees with this line of thinking, arguing that Nigeria cannot abandon her responsibilities because of her economic crises. Nigeria, he continues, has a leadership role in promoting peace and understanding in Africa and the Third World in general.

Furthermore, Daura believes that 'brain drain' does not happen, because Nigeria has abundant human resources, which he claims is evident in the number of applicants who are eager to serve, a fraction of those eventually selected:

How do you call that brain drain? Is it not a source of pride for Nigeria that there are so many qualified Nigerians? These are people who

want to serve this country; and we have the record that they serve creditably well, introducing new skills that were not there in the recipient countries, and receiving commendation, and by the time they come home, they are really ready to participate in the development of this country (interview, Abuja, 27 April 2005).

Daura's points about the effect of service on the servers are not fully covered in the official literature on the TAC and in most of the statements made by officials of the programme. The benefits of the TAC are often described in the language of the nation state, rather than in terms of the individuals who serve that nation state and how the benefits that accrue to them translate into the good of the nation state and humanity at large. Is this a reflection of the often-suggested citizenship crisis in Nigeria and the African postcolony at large? Does it in any way reflect the tendency towards *discounting* citizens? Even though international service is supposed to key into a 'global ethic' or a 'cosmopolitan ideal', are not man and woman the measure of all things? Why is the effect on the volunteers considered the least important of all the benefits expected to accrue to Nigeria from the TAC?

Olufemi Taiwo would argue that

this can be explained by the fact that Nigeria survives on an anaemic conception of citizenship; so that while there are citizens *of* Nigeria, there are no citizens *in* Nigeria. This distinction between citizens *of* and citizens *in* Nigeria, he continues, 'enfolds a deep irony' (Taiwo, 2000). This is perhaps also because the 'nation-building' challenge has been more central to state-orientated constructions of public issues in Nigeria than the 'citizenship' challenge (see Taiwo 2000:88). In this sense, it can be argued that, for the founders of the scheme, men and women (as citizens) are not the measure of things.

Consequently, it is important to ask whether the debate about the desirability of the TAC proceeds from a 'nation-building' perspective on service or a 'citizenship' perspective. While the two are not mutually exclusive, the perspective that is privileged – the national-community over the individual-as-member-of-human-community, or *vice versa* – may determine how the success or otherwise of TAC is evaluated. Therefore, while the officials may focus on what Nigeria gains in foreign policy terms – which can, of course, also be beneficial to the volunteers in the long run – the volunteers themselves may focus on what they gain as individuals and how these gains may benefit their

country and mankind in the long run. The critics of the scheme, for their part, seem to focus exclusively on the absence of gains for the country. But, even here, these perspectives must, one assumes, be governed by a conception of service and voluntarism that is taken for granted.

If a volunteer can be defined in terms of the following thoughtful definition:

an individual engaging in behavior that is not biosocially determined (e.g., eating, sleeping), nor economically necessitated (e.g., paid work, housework, home repair), nor sociopolitically compelled (e.g., paying one's taxes, clothing oneself before appearing in public), but rather that is essentially (primarily) motivated by the expectation of psychic benefits of some kind as a result of activities that have a market value greater than any remuneration received for such activities (quoted in Brown, 1999:18),

it is clear then that, as purposeful activity, volunteering is neither compelled, nor is its productive value (if there is any) materially returned to the volunteer. The 'stipend' or 'allowance' given to the volunteer is presumed to be just enough to keep body and soul together for the period of service, since such service cannot be accomplished otherwise.

While it may be true, as Daura argues, that volunteering under the TAC scheme enables the volunteers to acquire a sense of 'duty towards the development of Nigeria', so that they return with 'zeal, exposure and experience to plough into Nigeria's development projects', the reality is often more nuanced. As some of the volunteers that I spoke with confessed, many of them decided to serve because of the material gains which they believed will accrue from the 'service' period abroad, while some joined because of the possibility of making contacts and getting a job abroad. (Further interviews with more volunteers may reveal other motivations.) One of the past volunteers, who served in the Commonwealth of Dominica, said in an interview that if she were to be asked to serve again now, she would not do so because

it will not be worth it ... what the federal government pays now will not be more than what I get [in Nigeria] (interview, Ibadan, 7 January 2005).

She said her salary before she 'volunteered' to serve was less than what she earned during the service. But she earned her due promotion while abroad, so upon her return, her salary was now higher than what she earned in Dominica. This particular respondent, who is a nurse, was surprised that her chief nursing

officer has just ‘volunteered’ for TAC, because the \$800 she would earn would be equal to her salary in Nigeria. ‘I don’t know what she’s going there for’, she says.

The respondent also claims that she did not ‘enjoy’ her service in Dominica because she was working in the only hospital in the country, which was a government hospital. There were no private hospitals where she could earn extra money by working in private practice (known as ‘PP’ in Nigeria) in addition to her regular employment. This is a common practice among professionals in Nigeria – principally a response to poor pay. The former volunteer said:

No private hospital for me to work, nothing for me to even earn money on my own. I had to start selling adire [local tie and dye clothes] for me to make up, because the cost of living was very high. If I had to make do with what the federal government [of Nigeria] was paying, then I would have come back without anything to show when I returned to my home after two years (interview, Ibadan, 7 January 2005).

For this respondent, service – ‘that kind of sacrifice’, as she calls it – entails ‘servicing your country’ and getting personal benefits. ‘It is symbiotic – give and take’, she adds. Is this still the pure ‘service’

envisaged by the founders of the scheme? Or does this unadulterated kind of volunteering not really exist? Or, more importantly, does this remark reflect the reality of service in Nigeria?

A respondent insists that adequate remuneration is key to service, and says that low pay is a major drawback of the TAC. Some do not mind the ‘low remuneration’, the respondent says, because ‘they know they will not return to Nigeria. They see it as a stepping stone.’ In one particular case, the government of Belize asked Nigeria to allow the volunteers to stay on in Belize after the completion of their service and take up regular employment. Nigeria granted the request. Daura says that such a case is:

in the best interest of Nigeria and the countries concerned. [But] at the end of the day, they will come back (interview, Abuja, 27 April 2005).

But do they always come back?

In some cases, volunteers find regular employment in the recipient country at the completion of their term; they only return to Nigeria temporarily, to complete the formalities of signing the register. One respondent revealed that out of the eight volunteers in her set – including a consultant psychiatrist, two medical laboratory

scientists, four psychiatry nurses and one nurse-tutor (my respondent) – she was the only one who had returned. Another volunteer who had returned said:

I think TAC should be discontinued because our volunteers are not coming back. We are losing our volunteers. They are using it as a stepping-stone. If it were a scheme in which Nigeria spends all that huge money and the volunteers would return with the knowledge they have acquired, and the experience, and where there is the opportunity to put these into use in Nigeria, then it would be desirable to continue the scheme. It would be a laudable programme. But the volunteers don't return, thereby increasing the problem of brain drain.

Another challenge for the TAC is the lack of adequate publicity in recipient countries about the nature of the scheme, which can lead to misunderstandings with local communities, who sometimes think that the volunteers are job-seekers who have come to exacerbate the local employment crisis. The head of the TAC directorate concedes that there is a 'publicity lacuna' which needs to be filled. For instance, the volunteers I spoke to all told me that local communities in recipient countries were often ignorant of the fact that they were volunteers and that Nigeria was responsible for

their upkeep. They often encountered hostility and accusations of coming to take local people's jobs. A volunteer who was in the Caribbean said:

They had that negative thing that the rest of the world feels about Nigeria. They also thought we were there to take their jobs, so they were very hostile when we first got there. This was before they realised that we were there temporarily. Their government did not inform them well; their government gave them the impression that they were paying us to work for them. We had to tell our directors when they visited that they should go on TV to tell the local population that we were there to help them and that our government was paying for the help. It shocked many of them when they realised this, so they came to appreciate our sacrifice. There is a lot to be done for the awareness of local population on what we are doing (interview, 7 January 2005).

The few ex-volunteers I spoke to were ambivalent about the effects of service on them. They generally felt that it had had both positive and negative effects. For example, one ex-volunteer agreed that volunteering encourages civic virtues, but also added that it had been a great sacrifice to have to leave the family, 'my comfort zone, for a place I had no prior knowledge of'. At the same

time, added the respondent, leaving one's normal environment 'is a good thing, that kind of experience is very important', also because 'it promoted human solidarity and appreciation of other people's culture'. Yet the same volunteer said:

I will not say I benefited, because there was really nothing new. I didn't gain much from it ... I wasn't really challenged the way I thought I would be when I left Nigeria.

However, she also stated:

But because it is a new culture, different kind of people, different beliefs, different way of thinking, different ways of doing things, definitely learning must have taken place. There is no way I would not have gained something (emphasis added).

This illustrates the ambivalent position of even former volunteers on the success or otherwise of the scheme. For his part, TAC director Daura says he cannot think of any negative effect that international service under TAC has on the volunteers.

Tang, McBride and Sherraden (2003) have noted the tendency in research on service to concentrate more on the positive effects of service on the served, while understating firstly the positive effects on the servers

and secondly the negative effects on both the server and the served. This tendency, I suggest, is perhaps a reflection of the real world. But if any tentative conclusion can be reached on this matter, it is that international service has both positive and negative effects on servers, the served and the institution involved. Indeed, I would like to suggest that international service would be denied its crucial component – sacrifice – were it not to have any kind of negative consequence. However, it is the fact that the positive effects should – and often do – outweigh the negative effects that sustains such volunteering and animates the argument for the transcendental values of service. It will be important, therefore, for research to concentrate equally on the negative impacts of service, so as to inform broad policy. The analysis should be carried out in a nuanced way which emphasises the fact that without some negative aspects, service might be deprived of the key component of sacrifice.

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