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Achieving a Win-Win

Tweaking the U.S. Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery Program to Maximize Immigrants' Potential and Improve Immigrant Quality

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. diversity visa lottery (DV) program has become a key migration channel for African migrants to the United States (Lobo 2006; Thomas 2011). The African population in the United States has grown from just 80,000 individuals in 1970, or 0.8 percent of the total immigrant population, to 2.1 million in 2015, or 4.8 percent of the total immigrant population (Anderson 2017). Between 1990 and 2000, diversity visas accounted for 47 percent of the growth in African migration to the United States (Lobo 2006). In the 21st century, DV migration accounts for a third of the increase in African migration to the United States (Thomas 2011). DV migrants deserve attention because they provide an opportunity to examine how immigration policies impact incorporation for immigrants who are not unskilled, poorly educated, and/or undocumented. Additionally, they are part of the skilled, educated, and professional immigrant categories of which Favell, Feldblum and Smith (2006: 3) note “there [is] relatively little ‘human level’ research.”

Debates on the U.S. DV program and African migration usually focus on two key issues: first, that the program contributes to the loss of human resources and the brain drain of highly skilled professionals from African countries, which hinders their development (Ketefe 2013; Logan and Thomas 2011; Rotimi 2005). However, there is evidence of brain gain from highly skilled migration through improved living standards of immigrants, increased human capital accumulation among immigrants and people in the home country, remittances and transfer of information on study and work opportunities to the home country, and return migration (Clemens 2007; Gibson and McKenzie 2011, 2012; McKenzie, Gibson, and Stillman 2007). Second, while some critics claim that increasing immigrant diversity necessitates a tradeoff in immigrant quality (see Kremer 2011), others argue that the program, in allowing a more racially diverse group of immigrants to settle in the United States, gives Africans from underrepresented countries an opportunity to migrate to the United States (Newton 2005). While these debates call attention to important issues, they remain at the macro-level and fall short of discussing the impact of the DV program on DV migrants at the micro-level. Also missing from these arguments are the voices of African DV migrants themselves discussing how winning the DV lottery has affected them and their families.

This paper seeks to add to the little we know about DV migrants, reporting on a study that examined how winning the DV lottery impacted migrants from Ghana and Nigeria both pre- and post-migration to the United States. It begins with a discussion of the reasons people move from Africa to the United States, gives some background on the DV program, and examines the role the DV program plays in African migration to the United States. Turning to the experiences of Ghanaian and Nigerian DV migrants to the United States, the paper then discusses the links between the DV program as a mode of entry and DV migrants’ experiences in the United States. It concludes by proposing modifications to the U.S. DV program that would improve overall quality of DV migrants and facilitate their incorporation into American society, which should benefit the United States, sending countries, and DV migrants and their families.

EXPLAINING AFRICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

African migration to the United States and the West is caused by powerful historical, economic, social, and political factors. Using the push-pull theoretical paradigm to explain African migration to the West, Africans are migrating in large numbers to western advanced democratic countries because of poor economic and sociopolitical environments in their home countries, which create the push factors of low pay, lack of jobs, underemployment, poverty, political instability, and ethnic conflicts (Kaba 2009; Okeke 2008). Worsening economic and political conditions make pull factors of Western advanced countries that include higher paying jobs, better job satisfaction, freedom from violence and persecution, educational opportunities, and reunification with family members more attractive (Lobo 2006; Takyi and Konadu-Agyemang 2006; Okeke 2008). According to macro- and microeconomic international migration theories, African immigrants move to



the United States because a cost-benefit analysis convinces them that migration to the United States would maximize the returns to their human capital, after costs of the journey are deducted (Borjas 1989). Theories of the new economics of migration argue that migration is a family decision, where families nominate a member of the household to migrate as insurance against market failures in the home country (Massey et al. 1999) and, indeed, many African immigrants view their move to the United States as an opportunity to help their families.

Any explanation of increased African migration to the United States and other Western advanced democratic countries must include a historical account of Africa's long history of European colonialism and neo-colonialism with the West which has resulted in a dependency relationship between Africa and the developed world that constantly works to benefit the West and marginalize Africa to the periphery (Wallerstein 1974, 1980). Mass migration of Africans to the West is both an old and new form of exploitation by the West (Lobo 2006).

Globalization has also increased migration from Africa to the United States (Okome 2006). Processes of globalization have made the world a village linking distant locales in such ways that each locale is impacted by events happening in other parts of the world. These linkages via mass media, faster transportation systems, and information networks make Africans aware of the socioeconomic and spatial disparities between Africa and the rest of the world, and engender in them a strong desire to migrate out of Africa to enjoy higher standards of living. Visiting and returning migrants from these western countries coming with "flashy trappings of Western affluence" along with the Western media help spread the news that life is better abroad (Hailu et al. 2012; Takyi and Konadu-Agyemang 2006: 17).

The U.S. diversity visa program is an important factor in the push-pull matrix that contributes not just to the potentiality of migration but strongly impels migration to the United States. The legal permanent resident (LPR) status it offers is a strong selling point. The diversity visa program initiates migration flows although whether individuals make use of the opportunity it affords is informed by the web of factors identified by theories of international migration. Unlike other United States bound migrants who were recruited by private individuals and capitalists, DV migrants are directly recruited by the U.S. government. But, their transportation to the United States is not paid by the U.S. government, nor do they receive government resettlement assistance, which U.S. refugees, who are the other group allowed entry via state policies, receive.

Despite the fact that the DV program significantly shapes migration flows from different regions of the world, and especially from Africa, to the United States, we don't know much about its effects on its winner migrants pre- and post-migration. The body of literature on African DV migrants in the United States is small. Kremer (2011) was one of two studies I found that examined how DV migrants fared in the U.S. labor market. Comparing the employment outcomes of DV migrants to all other LPRs—those that came via family unification, refugee, and employment visas—he found that DV migrants were slightly less likely than other LPRs to be employed. Kremer (2011, 2014) found that educational attainment was insignificant in affecting employment status while experience in the United States was the most important positive predictor of employment. The second study, Akresh (2006), found that while all U.S. immigrants experienced an initial period of downward occupational mobility, DV migrants were more likely not to see an improvement in occupational status between their first U.S. job and their current job. Because both studies used the first wave of the New Immigrant Survey, which conducted interviews with LPRs six to 18 months after they were granted their green cards, it is impossible to draw definitive conclusions about DV migrants' long-term labor market prospects. Both studies treated DV migrants as a homogenous category, failing to incorporate the diversity of DV migrants in their analysis. These studies also could not speak to any effect(s) of winning the lottery on DV migrants. The few micro-level studies on African DV migrants focused only on their experiences in the United States (Ette 2012; Hailu et al. 2012; Kremer 2014).

This paper is an abridged version of an article I wrote titled "Affecting Lives: How Winning the US Diversity Visa Lottery Impacts DV Migrants Pre- and Post-Migration" which is published in the journal *International Migration*.



In this paper, I discuss how the pre- and post-migration experiences of diversity visa immigrants reveal the need to tweak US immigration policy to better serve both immigrants and the United States, and in so doing contribute to our achieving UN sustainable development goals #8 and #10.

THE U.S. DIVERSITY VISA PROGRAM

The U.S. DV program was created as part of the 1990 Immigration Act and became fully operational in 1995 (Wasem 2011). Its objective was to increase the diversity of America's immigrant streams. Each year, the program awards 50,000 immigrant visas through lottery to people who come from countries with low rates of migration to the United States. Citizens from countries that have sent more than 50,000 immigrants to the United States in the past five years are barred from playing the lottery. Since its inception, each year approximately 20,000 Africans use the diversity program to migrate to the United States (Konadu-Agyemang and Takyi 2006).

The DV program has an educational requirement. Applicants must have at least the equivalent of a high school diploma, which is defined in the United States as successful completion of a 12-year course of elementary and secondary education, or two years' work experience as a skilled artisan in an occupation that required at least two years of training/apprenticeship.

Winning the lottery does not automatically grant the winner legal permanent residency. It only gives the winner the right to apply for the diversity visa (LPR status). Applications for the diversity visa must be processed within the 12-month period finishing at the end of the fiscal year for which the applicant won the lottery. Many applications are not processed within this one-year window and many others fail to meet U.S. admissibility criteria. The winner and/or his derivatives (spouse and children under the age of 21) must use their visas to enter the United States within that fiscal year as the visa cannot be deferred or used in another fiscal year. A significant financial outlay is needed (approximately \$2,000 per adult) to pay the visa processing fees and buy an airplane ticket to the United States.

SUMMARY OF DATA, METHODS, AND RESULTS

In semi-structured in-depth interviews with 61 diversity visa migrants from Ghana and Nigeria, 37 Ghanaians and 24 Nigerians, I asked how and why they applied for the diversity visa lottery, what expectations they had about life in America, and whether their lives now matched their expectations. From their stories, it became clear that winning the DV lottery had caused unexpected developments in many respondents' lives that had curtailed their dreams of making it and made settling in America more challenging. I identified several DV-caused impactful events that affected them in the United States. They are: marital and or family instability, interruptions in one's educational career, insufficient knowledge about diversity program, weak social networks that provided limited and or transient support to the DV migrant upon arrival in the United States, and feelings of dislocation and or emotional trauma (see table 1). For respondents who were in college when they won the diversity visa, the decision either to abandon their tertiary schooling or complete college after learning that they had won the diversity visa was the most consequential decision that determined whether they enjoyed a smooth transition into American society or faced many challenges and/or dashed dreams.

There were five important factors that enabled respondents to positively weather the suddenness of winning the DV program, successfully negotiate the social dynamics of winning the lottery while in the home country, and smoothly incorporate into American society without long-term downward mobility into a lower class than what they held in their home country or what they expected to hold based on their pre-migration status or trajectory. These were 1) being a college graduate; 2) being at the early stage of a career; 3) being unmarried or unfettered by a romantic relationship; 4) having strong social support networks, particularly having a



parent or sibling in the United States who was legal and doing well; and 5) coming from at least a middle-class background—having parents and siblings who did not need financial support and who in fact could support the winner migrant if needed. These factors are consistent with research that finds that immigrants with high levels of human capital and strong social support networks are more likely to successfully integrate into American society (see Alba and Nee 2003).

A more detailed discussion of the data, methods, and findings on the impact of the DV program on DV winners pre- and post-migration can be found in “Affecting Lives: How Winning the US Diversity Visa Lottery Impacts DV Migrants Pre- and Post-Migration” in *International Migration* (Imoagene 2017).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, IMMIGRANTS, AND IMMIGRATION POLICY

Theories of international migration, in addition to incorporating an account of state agency in shaping and controlling migration flows (Zolberg 2006), must include an account of the impact of migration policies on immigrants pre- and post-migration. Doing so accomplishes two things: first, it extends our gaze beyond what is happening within U.S. borders to what is occurring in sending countries and, second, it enriches our understanding of the link between theories of international migration and immigrant incorporation. This gaze allows us to understand how immigration policy and immigrant outcomes fit into the larger global interest on sustainable development in urban areas.

Even though the DV program helps improve the image of the United States, reaffirming the notion that it is a magnanimous country (Goodman 2016), what I have shown is that the United States has to do more to support DV winners as they prepare to migrate and after they migrate to the United States, to help them optimize their potential and facilitate their successful incorporation into American society. The findings suggest that DV migrants with a particular profile are the most affected by the randomness and suddenness of winning the lottery, the limited time to prepare for migration, the lack of financial resources to keep the family together or afford multiple trips between the United States and the home country, and minimal government support. They are non-college graduates from poor and lower-class backgrounds, who were in poorly paid jobs in their home country, and who did not have well-established parents or siblings in the United States. Withdrawn support from family and friends within the first few months of their arrival in the United States altered their mobility trajectory; some respondents had to give up educational opportunities that would have helped them get better jobs. Others had to take poorly paid jobs because pressure to pay room and board truncated the amount of time they had to hold out for better-paying jobs. Another group who were negatively affected were respondents who abandoned their tertiary education to migrate to the United States upon winning the visa lottery. A majority had failed to obtain the bachelor's degree they would have earned had they remained in their home country in the United States. These winners would have done better socioeconomically than they were doing at the time I interviewed them if they had received some support from the U.S. government at key points in their immigrant journey.

Making several changes to the structure and administration of the U.S. DV lottery program will contribute to our achieving several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG #8 seeks to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all and SDG #10 seeks to reduce inequality within and among countries. The U.S. DV lottery program can be tweaked to optimize the human potential of DV migrants and facilitate their successful incorporation into American society. First, the United States should create an exemption for college students that permits those who win the DV lottery while in four-year degree-granting colleges to get their bachelor's degrees before using their diversity visa. Immigrants with college degrees (even foreign ones) fare better in the U.S. labor market than migrants without college degrees (Alba and Nee 2003; Akresh 2006). This slight change to the program would ensure that the United States gets the



higher-quality immigrants needed to satisfy its economic interests, which addresses one of the main criticisms of the DV program (see Kremer 2011). Second, administrators of the program need to create an information brochure that lists agencies and organizations DV migrants can reach out to for help. The brochure should contain educational information for those interested in pursuing educational opportunities and licensing board information for skilled artisans. This would prevent DV migrants from being dangerously ignorant about what their next steps should be once they arrive in the United States.

Third, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) or U.S. State Department should create a DV migrant assistance office. This should not require much additional financial commitment because the U.S. government already has the administrative infrastructure that assists refugee settlement. The government can also connect DV migrants who need assistance to nonprofit organizations it already partners with for refugee settlement.

Fourth, the United States should create a need-based assistance program for DV migrants. It should build a database of DV migrants' information, and then identify those who might require assistance upon arrival in the United States based on what is known from sociological research. The most critical group that would need assistance are DV migrants who have little to no social support in the United States and/or are financially impoverished. It is not necessary for the need-based assistance program to provide regular benefits similar to unemployment benefits or monthly housing vouchers.

Fifth, since sending countries enjoy significant benefits from their citizens living abroad, governments of sending countries such as Nigeria and Ghana should create assistance offices and programs for their citizens in countries in the Western diaspora charged with facilitating their citizens' successful settlement in the new country.

In conclusion, having LPR status is a big deal for immigrants in the United States. DV migrants are indeed fortunate that they are LPRs upon arrival in the United States. But, the experiences of Ghanaian and Nigerian DV migrants suggests that legal status in and of itself is not enough. Several aspects of the DV program throw up barriers to DV migrants' successful incorporation into American society, and both the United States and DV migrants' countries of origin can do more to help them prosper in America. Doing so would be a win-win for all stakeholders.

TABLE 1: SELECTED IMPACTFUL EVENTS FROM WINNING THE DIVERSITY VISA LOTTERY

Consequences	# of respondents (%)
Possessed Insufficient Information during Application Process	46 (75.4)
Failed Social Support Network Post-migration <i>(Respondents kicked out earlier than they expected or had been told they could stay; had to move in with another relative/friend; had to turn to church & church members for help; had to abandon or postpone acquisition of more education/ occupation credentials because of pressures to pay for earlier than planned housing costs.)</i>	21 (34.4)
Interrupted Tertiary Education Won DV while in college in country of origin	18 (29.5)
Remained in college after winning DV and graduated with bachelor's degree	2 (3.3)
Abandoned tertiary education to migrate to United States	16 (26.2)
Had gained admission but did not enroll	3 (4.9)
Was enrolled in university but did not finish	13 (21.3)
Of the 16 respondents	
Obtained a bachelor's degree in the United States post migration	7 (43.8)
Had failed to obtain a bachelor's degree	9 (56.2)
Of the 10 respondents who had not obtained a bachelor's degree post-migration	
Had some US schooling—course credits or associate degrees from community colleges	6 (60)
Marital and Family Instability (directly linked to moment of winning the DV)	20 (32.8)
Unexpected Divorce: <i>(Used for papers—asked for a divorce upon arrival in U.S., evidence of adultery as DNA test proved child of union was not biological offspring)</i>	4 (6.6)
Planned divorce: <i>(dissolution of temporary marital alliances)</i>	7 (11.5)
Created transnational families - Family Separation	10 (16.4)
Feelings of dislocation/emotional trauma	11 (18.0)

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