DIIS BRIEF

Executive summary

Today there is great interest in diasporas' role in development across Africa and much enthusiasm for identifying policies that can maximise their contribution. This brief raises four questions that challenge uncritical enthusiasm for diasporas' increased involvement in development:

- Who is in the diaspora?
- Where is the diaspora?
- How does diaspora engagement affect accountability?
- What ideas of development are being used?

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Which Diaspora for Whose Development?

Some Critical Questions about the Roles of African Diaspora Organizations as Development Actors

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INTRODUCTION

In both Africa and Europe, the roles of migrants and diasporas in development processes are being increasingly highlighted. These include transfers to their country of origin – especially through remittances – financial support for development projects, the formation of diaspora-led development organisations, and direct personal involvement of diaspora members in development initiatives. As a result, there is now a search for policy initiatives to maximise their contribution.

The discovery of these developmentally-minded diasporas is quite recent. In previous decades, such positive connections between diasporas and development were rarely made. Until the late 1990s, Africans who emigrated from their countries were seen as embodying the brain drain and carrying away the skills of the continent. Their remittances were gratefully received by their relatives, but many argued that this flow of funds was used for 'conspicuous consumption' – rather than investment – and increased inequality between households. There were also concerns about the political influence of diasporas, which were sometimes seen as contributing to conflict and corruption.

These negative views of migration from poor regions to wealthier countries have been reassessed in the last decade, both with the growing appreciation of the scale of migrants' remittances and the perceived failure of state-led development policies. There is also an increasing recognition of the importance of transnational practices. Migrants maintain links with their country of origin through complex networks of cultural, economic, social and political relations, which can now be sustained through new technologies (internet, mobile telephony) and cheaper travel. For example, rather than simply sending money, it is now possible for migrants to invest in businesses which they can manage from a distance using phone, texts (sms), email, web-cameras and so forth.

This recognition of the ongoing transnational linkages between migrants (and their descendants) and their countries of origin has stimulated new interest in the role of these diasporas in development. Migrants and their descendants (the diaspora) have come to be seen as a 'new' channel for development initiatives in Africa. For African states, not only do they bring new resources in terms of both finance and skills, but they can also be portrayed as part of the nation, in a way impossible to other donors. For both official and NGO donors in Europe, the diasporas offer a way of linking directly with African communities through people who share the languages and cultures. They are seen as providing an inside track to understand development priorities, which can either bypass or challenge the weak institutions of African states.

No doubt some, perhaps most, diaspora groups and organisations do make vital contributions to development in their homelands and may deliver 'better' outcomes than other development NGOs. However, there are challenging questions that often remain unasked in this newfound enthusiasm for engaging diasporas in development. Four such questions are raised in this brief; these concern both the nature of the diasporas involved and the form of development to which they are expected to contribute.

WHO IS IN THE DIASPORA?

As governments and donors scramble to engage diasporas in development, there is a tendency to claim all who have ancestral origins in a particular country for its diaspora. This is understandable as it broadens the pool of people to whom they can appeal. However, this relationship between individuals and a 'homeland' cannot be assumed and there are dangers in such assumptions.

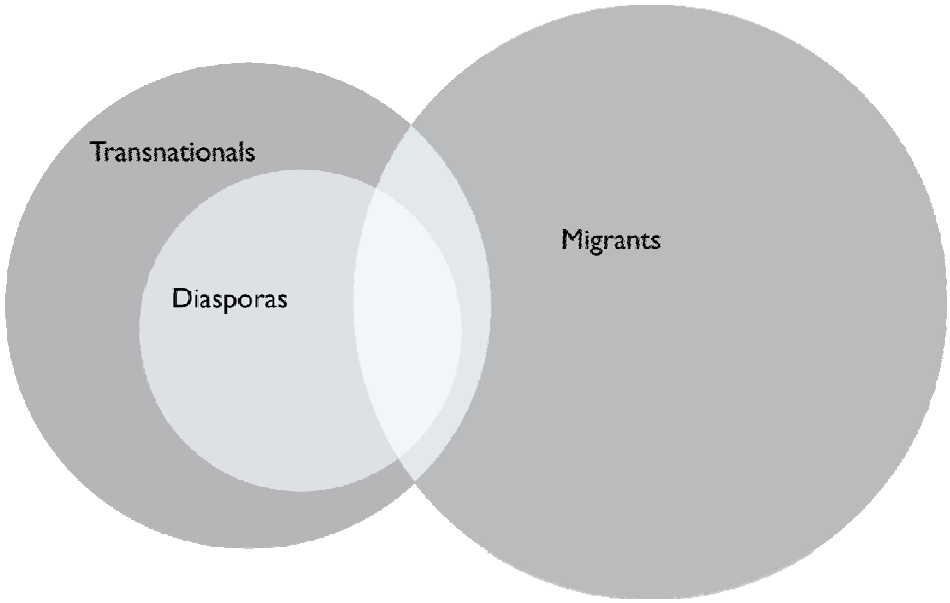
A concise working definition of diaspora.

A group of people constitute a diaspora if they satisfy the following four criteria:

- **Movement from an original homeland** to more than one country, either through dispersal (forced) or expansion (voluntary) in search of improved livelihoods;
- **A collective myth of an ideal ancestral home**;
- **A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time**, based on a shared history, culture and religion; and
- **A sustained network of social relationships** with members of the group living in different countries of settlement.

With this definition, it becomes clear that a diaspora can be distinguished from other groups of migrants or others engaged in transnational practices. Not all migrants become diasporas and not all diasporas can be considered as migrants (although their ancestors may have been so). Similarly, people may engage in transnational practices without forming a diaspora – for example, global elites of bankers operating between European capitals and North America are certainly engaged in transnational practices but do not necessarily form a diaspora. The simple diagram below attempts to summarise contemporary relationships between diasporas, migrants and transnationals.

Figure 1: Relationship between sets of diasporas, transnationals and migrants



The current trend of migration policies in Europe is towards temporary worker programmes that will facilitate circular migration as an acceptable form of non-European immigration. Adopting

the language of diasporas in reference to African migrants and their descendants and supporting the work of diaspora groups can be seen as helping to sustain the connection between Africans and their countries of origin, potentially maximising the likelihood of return 'home'. In an atmosphere of growing hysteria about migration across Europe, it can also help to sustain their exclusion and lack of belonging, as engagement in diaspora activities and transnational practices become grounds for suspicion and raise questions of loyalty. In short, describing Africans as part of a diaspora may make it more difficult for them to become *unexceptional* members of different European societies, rather than people with origins elsewhere.

WHERE IS THE DIASPORA?

Most of the interest about the engagement of African diasporas in development is focused on those living beyond the continent, in particular in Europe and North America. This is not surprising. These tend to be the wealthier, better educated and more highly organised groups. They have much easier access to high-level networks which bring them into contact with global elites such as African and donor government officials, and business people across the world. A development organisation established by the Ghanaian diaspora in London is likely to be able to command far greater resources and link into high-profile development activities much more easily than one formed in Abidjan. However, it is important to recall that these diasporas outside Africa may only represent the tip of the iceberg, in terms of numbers of people. There is very little information about the development activities and interests of diasporas within Africa.

HOW DOES DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT AFFECT ACCOUNTABILITY?

For many years there have been vociferous complaints about the lack of accountability of development organisations. This has helped to stimulate a variety of responses – such as the Paris Declaration and SPHERE Project – concerned with the effectiveness of aid and the accountability of actors. The involvement of diasporas in development introduces an intriguing new dimension to these issues.

In as far as diasporas can be considered as part of the societies of their homeland, we can ask if their development activities are participatory by definition. Such self-development would appear to avoid many of the problems of accountability of outside external aid agencies. However, this position fails to take note of the discrepancies of power.

Diasporas (out of Africa) are likely to have an elite position in relation to the poorer societies of their homeland. They have control over resources, including finance and skills, and have power to decide how they should be allocated. While they may have the linguistic and cultural background to make easier and deeper contacts with local communities, compared to other development NGOs, it is important to consider the power relations at play.

A diaspora organisation associated with a dominant social group may find it as difficult to avoid imposing its view of development as any other external development organisation. Moreover, it may be equally possible for it to undertake inappropriate projects with impunity. This has been seen in the famous 'three for one' (*tres por uno*) programme in Mexico, where some hometown associations have chosen to invest in high-profile prestige projects that reflect the interests and lobbying power of the association involved.

Engaging diasporas in development gives no automatic solution to such problems of accountability. Who should have the largest say in determining development priorities? The situation where they are selected by donors and NGOs is not acceptable, but we have to ask if shifting the focus to diaspora groups necessarily gets us much further.

Apart from the issue of accountability for diasporas' development activities, the focus of African states on soliciting the resources of diasporas also raises questions about democratic accountability. As noted above, discussions about diasporas and development are largely focused on people of African origin resident outside Africa. This group constitutes a (relatively) wealthy elite. If diasporas have control over significant resources, states are ready to listen to them – perhaps more than to citizens within the country. Initiatives to engage diasporas in the homeland – such as enhancing their rights to buy property or providing tax breaks for investments – may successfully increase the flow of resources. However, there is a danger that this can encourage states to pay disproportionate attention to the interests of their wealthy expatriates compared to those of much poorer residents. If revenues can be generated by 'tapping' the diaspora, is there a danger that the voice of citizens and domestic tax payers can be neglected?

WHAT IDEAS OF DEVELOPMENT ARE BEING USED?

Many efforts to engage diasporas in development are focused on bringing the skills and resources of diasporas into the existing framework of the development 'industry'. It is precisely because this industry has failed to bring the desired development gains to Africa that donors, NGOs and African states are so receptive to the idea of working with diasporas. However, this openness does not appear to extend to rethinking the basic ideas of development.

Many of the dominant ideas of development applied across Africa tend to analyse migration as both a cause and consequence of development failure. The solutions put forward are concerned with enhancing people's quality of life in a particular location with the expectation that this will reduce migration. This both runs against the lessons of history (think of the failed attempts to reduce rural-urban migration through rural development), and opposes the very processes of migration that brought diasporas into being.

Many of the strategies adopted by donors and NGOs – the development 'professionals' – for working with the diasporas tend to treat them as a client group that needs to be supported, have its capacity built, or otherwise facilitated to engage in activities which support development. However what marks many diasporas out from other client groups of development activity, is that they can potentially generate huge economic, political and human resources for development – after all, that is why states and development agencies are so interested in them.

Therefore, diaspora groups may be in a unique position to challenge current development models and to experiment with new ideas. They could be able to challenge the normative sedentary perspectives of the current development industry and reconceptualise development for a mobile world. As the aid 'professionals' come knocking at their door to try to engage them in 'development', it offers a chance for dialogue which can cross the gulf between development and diasporas. The result may help the development industry to move away from paternalistic notions of development, which assume that people want to stay in their place, to consider the broader processes of social transformations which are not bound to particular 'developing' regions of the world.

CONCLUSION

Diasporas have always been engaged in development activities of some form, contributing their skills and resources to bring about social, economic and political change in their homeland. This may not always have been recognised as development by the development industry. As diasporas are courted by African states and donors, there is a danger that they can be co-opted into this industry, reproducing similar initiatives under diaspora leadership, rather than sustaining their distinctiveness. Likewise, it is incumbent on Afri-

can states looking to diasporas as agents of development to avoid privileging the priorities and activities of this mobile expatriate population above those people who remain within their borders.

These are difficult questions which have no simple answers. It is impossible to generalise, given the many different African diasporas existing in many countries and organising themselves in a variety of ways, Moreover, development comes in many shapes and forms and it has no universal definition. As the worlds of development agencies and diaspora organisations come closer together, it becomes more important that such critical questions are addressed.

FURTHER READING

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Kleist, Nauja. 2008. "In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34(7):1127 - 1143.

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