

Diaspora Engagements in Development Cooperation

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Increased International Interest in Diaspora Engagements

In recent years, interest in the transnational engagements of migrants and diaspora organizations has seen a rapid increase. A wide variety of international actors are now engaged in exploring the links between migration and development. Examples include the World Bank's Program on Migration and Remittances, the funding provided by various European governments to diaspora-driven development projects, African and Asian governments setting up service centres for emigrants, and diaspora organizations investing in real estate to address both housing and business needs in their countries of origin. Whether private or collective, economic, political or social, diaspora engagements are recognized as making a difference to conditions in migrants' countries of origin. At the same time, though, this new trend has been met with great scepticism. First, the motives for and interests behind the hype are distrusted, and there has been considerable criticism that many of the initiatives to engage diasporas in development cooperation are only rhetoric, with little being done in practice. Second, a common assumption behind many migration–development initiatives is a view of migrants as positive agents of change, but this view is highly contested. Third, the current debate focuses on a rather one-sided engagement, from North to South, excluding opportunities for real exchange and thus also real change.

This policy brief specifically focuses on collective diaspora initiatives and attempts by governments and other external actors to capitalize on such initiatives. The brief was commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who wished to see what lessons could be drawn from experiences in other countries.¹ (In Norway, initiatives to en-

gage diaspora members and groups in development are at an early stage, mainly owing to the relatively recent history of migration streams from outside Europe into the country.) Two points should be kept in mind when reading the brief: First, diaspora organizations are civil society initiatives. Accordingly, as will become evident, many of the issues they face are the same as those faced by other types of NGOs working on development issues. Second, it is crucial to understand the importance of the 's' at the end of 'diaspora engagements'. Such engagements do not constitute a single reality, because there are many different ways for diasporas to engage transnationally with their countries of origin, and because diaspora groups are widely divergent. One particular factor that is recurrently identified as causing considerable difference is whether the country of origin is experiencing war.

Engagements on Various Levels: Decentralized Development

Migrants and their organizations engage in development initiatives on various levels. Accordingly, many of the transformations that diaspora groups are engaged in creating are not grasped through macroeconomic or development indicators at the national level. Among Sudanese migrants, 'fundraising' activities are conducted on behalf of families faced with particular crisis situations, such as the need for medical surgery. Mexicans abroad are well known for their contributions through so-called Home Town Associations (HTAs): organizations that allow immigrants from the same city or region to maintain ties with and materially support their places of origin. TECH, a Tamil NGO with offices in ten countries worldwide, is actively engaged in development and humanitarian projects in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Eritreans outside Eritrea are expected to contribute a certain percentage of

their income as tax to the government. Whether at the family, home-town, regional or national level, these examples all may have development impacts, but most of these impacts are invisible unless a decentralized view of development is applied. This is particularly the case in contexts where 'the nation-state' has little significance in everyday life and human security is provided on a subnational level, as in Afghanistan and Somalia.

Disputes, Divisions and Diverging Interests

The most commonly voiced challenge related to diaspora engagements is the fact that diaspora groups are so divided. For external actors, it is crucial that individuals and organizations they support are seen as legitimate actors by the migrant communities they represent. In facilitating diaspora engagements, Western government bodies and NGOs ideally would like to work with diaspora representatives that embody the collective voice of 'the diaspora'. However, there are obviously great differences between groups as divergent as, for example, third-generation Pakistanis and newly arrived Somalis in Norway. Furthermore, within these groups, many subgroups can be found that would want their own voice represented. On top of this, each community has a dynamic character, with transformations occurring through the growth of a second or even third generation, retiring members or others migrating back or onward, and new inflows.

Yet, disputes, divisions and diverging interests occur not only within diaspora groups, but also between various governments, government bodies and civil society actors. First, the interests and priorities of countries of settlement and origin are often not the same. European countries, for example, include a strong focus on return and circular migration in their migration–development programming, something that is considered with scepticism by many African governments. Countries like the Philippines and Mexico have placed strong emphasis on migrants' human rights, an issue that is not at the top of the agenda for most receiving countries. Second, the migration–development debate establishes new links between immigration policy, foreign policy and international development cooperation, but the international and government bodies working in these fields often have diverging – and at times opposing – policy aims. Third, the NGOs that are increasingly involved in facilitating diaspora engagements represent a wide variety of organizations in terms of their histories, current shapes, goals and methods of working. There may be far too many divergent actors involved in a

number of current initiatives to enable proper coordination and functioning.

The Importance of Local Institutions

As mentioned, a central tenet within the migration–development nexus holds that migrants are positive agents of change in development. However, migrants are often viewed with ambivalence in their societies of origin. There may be a schism between official pro-migrant initiatives in the country of origin and more sceptical views within the general population. Initiatives are bound to fail if there is no local support for them. It is extremely difficult to administer and implement projects transnationally, for practical reasons and because this reduces the local community's sense of ownership: If a project is to be sustainable, the local community needs to feel a sense of commitment and responsibility to it, and those doing the actual work need to be based locally. One cannot assume that migrants, some of whom have not lived in the country of origin for many years, have a perfectly updated understanding of the situation on the ground. Local expertise is crucial to ensuring that projects are not out of touch with realities on the ground. Furthermore, at times the priorities of members of a diaspora may not reflect the interests, needs and rights of local populations. This is especially problematic since the financial and political power of diaspora members and organizations may at times outweigh the power of residents. A needs assessment that includes all of the different actors involved is an important starting point, especially in conflict situations, which are often even more dynamic than usual.

The challenges involved in putting in place schemes that tap into the interests and resources of diaspora groups while also benefitting and involving the local community and the government in the country of origin are huge. First, there is often a lack of trust between diaspora organizations and local organizations, each side accusing the other of lack of professionalism and undue interference. Second, there is often a similar lack of trust between diaspora members and the government, particularly in the case of refugees. When programming that aims to facilitate diaspora engagements is developed in countries of settlement, it is crucial to acknowledge that countries and NGOs in the South are also taking measures to facilitate diaspora engagement. Depending on the local context, third-country institutes at the national, regional or local level need to be involved in programme or project development from its initial phase if true sustainability is to be achieved. Research has shown

that the development effects of both private remittances and collective initiatives are marginal if structural conditions are not favourable.

Professionalizing Diasporas and Pluralizing Development?

It is important to note that most diaspora organizations are run by volunteers. This has serious implications for what such organizations can achieve, as it means they have limited amounts of time and resources available. Furthermore, organizational skills, experience and an understanding of the aid regime in the country of settlement may also be lacking, though it is crucial to recognize different levels of professionalism. To address these constraints, one common focus in existing programming aimed at facilitating diaspora engagement is on capacity-building. While this is certainly a crucial way of bridging the gap between diaspora organizations and 'mainstream development', it does raise a concern. The question is whether in trying to facilitate diaspora engagement in development, external actors just want migrants to 'do development' in the ways in which that word is currently understood, or whether there is also a willingness to enter into debate on common perceptions and practices of what development is and how it is achieved?

Castles and Delgado Wise argue that, in the migration–development debate, adopting perspectives from the South means questioning the dominant understanding of 'development' as a replication of the past trajectories of today's 'developed' countries.² In addition, it means questioning the conventional ways of measuring development – for example, in terms of growth of GDP per capita, which provides no insight into growing inequalities or local or regional transformative processes. A willingness to engage diaspora members and organizations in development as equal partners might lead to redefinitions of some of the core principles of current aid practices. For example, business ventures are often seen by migrants as a different way of contributing to the development of their country, and it thus may be worthwhile to rethink current restrictions on development projects that have a commercial character. Also, the fact that diaspora organizations are often functioning across nation-state borders – for example, with a board or a funding base in the UK, the Netherlands and the USA – may require new approaches.

Recommendations

When asking how to engage diaspora groups in development initiatives, the first issue that external actors must realize is that, often, diaspora groups

are already engaged. Diaspora engagements are not, and cannot be, created by external actors, but can be facilitated in such ways that their positive outcomes increase while potential negative outcomes are curtailed. The previous analysis has brought up some key points. First, enabling cooperation and establishing trust between government institutes, civil society and diaspora organizations requires a real, long-term commitment with sufficient resources. Second, diaspora organizations are neither responsible for nor capable of bringing about structural development at the national level. At the same time, their initiatives can lead to crucial transformations at the local or regional level, and thus decentralized views on and measurements of development are necessary. Third, there are too many actors with too many interests and viewpoints involved in the project of facilitating diaspora engagements. On a project level, the number of actors involved should be minimized, and great investments are required to enable fruitful dialogue and cooperation. Fourth, for successful implementation, local government and civil society actors are crucial, and they should be involved from the inception phase. Finally, a real, equal exchange will lead to changes in common thinking and acting in the field of development cooperation. These key points inform the following three main recommendations:

1. Enable an Increased Utilization of Qualified Individuals and Organizations

While countries of origin often lose highly qualified and much-needed people, these individuals and the organizations they form are often under-utilized in their countries of settlement. One way of addressing this issue is by facilitating (temporary) return of experts, as UN programmes like TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals) do, though return should not be seen as essential for utilization of migrants' expertise. Virtual exchanges, recruitment within mainstream aid organizations and consultancies for government institutes in the country of settlement are alternative ways of utilizing expertise within the diaspora. Africa Recruit,³ a Commonwealth/NEPAD initiative, for example, builds on this premise. Governments in countries of origin may need to invest greatly in IT infrastructure in order to profit from diaspora resources transnationally. Furthermore, they may profit from setting up sources of information on investment opportunities. Governments in countries of settlement can develop regulations on inclusive recruitment policies and board membership. In addition, they may be able to provide funding for training and networking tools. Mainstream NGOs in both contexts can develop active recruitment

policies to ensure greater organizational diversity, and can provide capacity-building for staff on diversity management. Furthermore, having a long-term strategy on diaspora engagements is advisable, and hiring qualified staff to develop policies and practices on a full-time basis pays off. Diaspora organizations can build on and learn from existing initiatives, such as the pioneering work of Migrations et Développement (M&D) or the African Diaspora Policy Centre's skills database.⁴

2. Provide Opportunities for 'Volunteers'

Most diaspora groups are volunteer civil society organizations. With some additional capacity-building activities, they might benefit greatly from existing opportunities for this sector in the country of settlement. Governments can provide tax-reduction schemes for contributions to diaspora organizations. Also, initiatives to improve the legality, speed and costs of remittance-transfer systems are highly beneficial, and have been high on the agenda for many European countries. In addition, the financing system for development cooperation should be used to encourage key NGOs to cooperate more with diaspora organizations, rather than creating competition over the same resources. There are many interesting initiatives by civil society to provide greater opportunities for volunteers. The Linkis programme,⁵ a joint initiative by the main NGOs in the Netherlands, provides funding for small development projects, of which a minimum of 30% goes to diaspora organizations. In the Philippines, the Scalabrini Migration Center is engaged in a research and capacity-building project that focuses on Philippine organizations in Italy and Spain and these organizations' (potential) local partners in the Philippines. Diaspora organizations may need to build partnerships not only among themselves but also with civil society and government institutions in countries of settlement and origin in order to improve their organizational capacities and knowledge of both contexts.

3. Diversify the Development Approach

True diaspora engagements will lead to the introduction of different ideas of what development is and how best to achieve it. The unique resources of diaspora organizations extend beyond their language skills and cultural knowledge. Through their networks in and understanding of institutions in countries of origin and settlement, diaspora organizations can build bridges between institutions. There is a wealth of human, social and financial resources present in diaspora groups. Finally, diaspora groups often have organizational structures and support bases that go beyond national frameworks. External actors in countries of settlement willing to facilitate diaspora engagements in development will benefit from investing in capacity-building on diversity management. Governments and civil society in the South need greater debate and cooperation if they are to gain a more powerful voice within the international debate. Only in the years to come will we be able to evaluate whether and how initiatives to engage diasporas in development cooperation are truly diversifying approaches to development.

Notes

¹ For an interesting comparative study, see also De Haas, H., 2006. *Engaging Diasporas: How Governments and Development Agencies Can Support Diaspora Involvement in the Development of Origin Countries*. Oxford: International Migration Institute.

² Castles, S. & Delgado Wise, R., eds, 2008. *Migration and Development: Perspectives from the South*. Geneva: IOM.

³ See <http://www.africarecruit.com> (accessed 7 October 2008).

⁴ See <http://www.migdev.org> (accessed 7 October 2008) and <http://www.diaspora-centre.org/Database> (accessed 7 October 2008).

⁵ See <http://www.linkis.nl/nl-NL/content.aspx> (accessed 7 October 2008).

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