



# **Diasporas, Development and Diplomacy**

*How not to engage refugees in assistance back  
home*

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Many aid and peacebuilding programs are seeking to leverage migrants' access to and knowledge of their countries of origin. However, the potential benefits come with big risks. Most obviously, governments of origin may not like some members of the diaspora – and vice versa – in ways that are not easy for a host country to understand upfront. Here, we focus on the role that refugees can play in aid and peacebuilding programs, concluding with a recommendation designed to ensure that diaspora groups interested in politics do not derail the potential for peaceful progress on development.

The wave of focus on interactions between migration and development is not new, building as it does on prior waves of enthusiasm in the 1960s and 1980s. During those previous surges, there was much emphasis on the potential of remittances to overcome poverty and contribute to development and on migrants returning to serve their countries of origin. In recent decades, host countries and countries of origin have become more interested in other kinds of migrant transfers, including knowledge, networks and cultural insight. Migrants are now transnational actors who can contribute to the development of their countries of origin without actually returning to them.

Major emigration countries like Mexico, China and the Philippines have several institutions representing diasporas at various levels of government. A survey of states participating in the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) identifies more than 400 institutions in 56 countries that are directly engaging diasporas through various programs and policies. 77 of the identified institutions were created specifically to engage diasporas on a formal basis.

For their part, host countries have increasingly embraced the notion of diasporas as development partners or consultants on policy formulation regarding their countries of origin. At the interregional level, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy 2011-2013 explicitly assigned an important role to diasporas through the diaspora outreach initiative. This initiative aimed to establish an Africa-EU Diaspora cooperation framework, with the objective of engaging the diaspora in the development of Africa amongst other objectives. At the EU level, examples of diaspora engagement include the Joint Migration and Development Initiative (JMIDI), which provides activity funding and involves EU member states and sixteen target countries.

At a member state level, some countries are engaging diasporas more than others. Some credit the UK with being one of the first to identify the potential for migration in development and is one of the leaders of the current surge of interest in the notion. Recent efforts in diaspora engagement include DFID's 2009 partnership with Comic Relief, in which DFID put forward a budget of 20 million GBP, open to bids from diaspora organisations to participate in development in their countries of origin.

Research on diasporas has shown they are generally fragmented and their subgroups may have a range of different interests. This is hardly surprising, given diasporas are formed from different groups of migrants and different phases of migration, not to mention divergent living conditions and legal situations in the host country. Diaspora



fragmentation causes challenges for donors when engaging diasporas for development. There has been rhetorical recognition that diasporas are not homogenous groups, but in practice this idea is difficult to expunge. The donor response to diversity is in some cases to encourage the creation of umbrella organisations that bring together and represent each faction. However, given diversity within many diasporas, comprehensive and effective ‘unification’ – a migrant government-abroad – is unlikely.

Refugee diasporas tend to have special strengths and weaknesses in their potential for engagement as development actors. Their potential strengths lie in their understanding of power, politics and the potential for peacebuilding. On a political level, they may provide representation to people without voice in their country of origin – a positive challenge to the government of origin if channelled effectively. On a practical level, refugee groups may have a comparative advantage in advising on marginalisation, reconciliation and demobilisation. They may also wield influence or at least provide a conduit for communication to groups back home who must be part of a comprehensive settlement to questions of war and peace.

The potential weaknesses of refugee diasporas are in their politics. They tend to be more politicised than diasporas formed of economic migrants, mainly due to their original motivations for emigration. Politicised diasporas present challenges to the tone and to the effectiveness of development cooperation. For example, it is awkward for European actors operating in Sri Lanka to be seen to engage with the Tamil diaspora – and Tamil groups with political goals are unlikely to be dedicated to basic development activities or allowed by the Sri Lankan government to operate effectively. Moreover, there can be a tendency for politicised groups to shift away from local development to focus on national government reform. From one perspective, all development activities are political, but some are more political than others. Efficiency and effectiveness will suffer if development programs are crippled from the start by disputes over the legitimacy of diaspora actors.

### *Drawing the Line*

At a March 2014 seminar held by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, several participants mentioned that politicisation – and fear of it – led to difficulties in engaging with refugee diaspora groups in development programs. If diaspora, development and diplomatic organisations are correct that refugee diasporas tend to be more politicised and that politicisation can unnecessarily complicate basic aid activities, then there is a case for differentiating more carefully and forcefully during the selection of partners in development programs that leverage diasporas. A simple suggestion would be to formulate programs and selection procedures to engage groups in a “diasporas for development” (D4D) pool. If programs incorporate or are occurring alongside more overtly political aims – such as conflict resolution, peacebuilding or demobilisation – then these should be separated administratively in how they recruit diaspora organisations as participants, with a “diasporas for peacebuilding” (D4P) pool. Formalising such a policy may be more efficient than approaching it an ad hoc manner.



An argument donors employ for tying together peacebuilding and development funding is that parties to a conflict or governments presiding over dangerously divided societies need the carrot-and-stick of development funding as a motivation to deal with more sensitive, political or difficult issues. The empirical validity of that argument is unclear. Regardless, the delicate process of cajoling a recalcitrant government to take strides on something like minority rights is unlikely to proceed more smoothly through the involvement of politicised or perceived-to-be-hostile diaspora groups.

Recognising the diversity of opinions and expertise within refugee diasporas, refugees themselves should certainly not be excluded from development programs and their skills may be valuable as part of a D4D group. Instead, using a bureaucratic division to encourage the evolution of different pools of organisations will support useful specialisation of groups into development and peacebuilding clusters. Refugees and other migrants could then self-select according to their ambitions and skills.

Following this straightforward suggestion will not mean the end of complexities in development and security programming. In many ways, the aid and peacebuilding communities are still at the beginning of experiments that engage diasporas in their work. Nevertheless, an approach that removes political tension where it is unnecessary, which disentangles and delineates the purposes of diaspora participation, may help to ensure that such activities do not end before they begin.