Conference Report: Diaspora and Peacebuilding in Africa

6 December 2006, Felix Meritis, Amsterdam

Background

On 6 December 2006, the African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) in cooperation with NCDO organised a conference on ‘Diaspora and Peacebuilding in Africa’.

The conference was held at the Felix Meritis in Amsterdam. Around 50 people attended to the conference representing organisations from the African diaspora, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mainstream development organisations, Amnesty International, Initiative of Change, media, universities and research institutions such as the Africa Study Centre, and students among others.

The conference’s objectives focused on: launching officially the African Diaspora Policy Centre to a wider public; presenting a number of peacemaking initiatives undertaken by African diaspora individuals, groups and organizations in their respective countries of origin to a wider audience such as policy makers, practitioners and others involved in peace building activities in Africa; discussing and exchanging information, insights, experiences, best ideas and practices on how the African diaspora can be stimulated and supported to become more of a force for constructive conflict transformation in their respective countries of origin; and finally stimulating a constructive policy dialogue (conversation) on the issue among the African diaspora individuals, groups and their respective organizations, policy-makers and practitioners both in the mainstream development agencies and in government institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, peace oriented organizations, civil society associations, the academic world, media and the wider public in the Netherlands.

Context

Many domestic conflicts in numerous African countries have not only been regionalised but they are also largely internationalised through the activities of the diaspora groups. Available evidence suggests that homeland
conflicts also directly affect the lives and wellbeing of the diaspora despite the geographical distance from the conflict zones. This reality therefore makes it imperative to also address the international dimension of the conflict, particularly the critical role of the diaspora groups with regard to homeland conflicts. The connection between the African diaspora activities and the dynamics of conflict in their homelands is a dimension that has been largely overlooked in public debates and policy discussions despite its critical significance.

Generally, in policy discussions on conflict in Africa, the diaspora are mentioned only in passing remarks and without further substantiation as negative agents in the process. However, the long-distance diaspora activities have both positive and negative impacts on the conflict dynamics in their homelands. This reality makes it imperative to mainstream diaspora activities in policy and proposals designed to promote peace and security, political stability and good governance in Africa. The ultimate goal of such policy consideration is to contribute to the transformation of negative and destructive activities of the diaspora into positive and constructive gains for Africa.

**Summary of Interventions**

**Introductory Remarks**

This report provides a concise overview of the priorities and key issues that were raised and discussed during the conference. In his introductory address, Henny Helmich, Director of NCDO, noted the importance of the African Diaspora Policy Centre as a platform that can facilitate serious and deep intellectual debates about the development cooperation relations, the complexity of the challenges in Africa and the role that international actors such as the diaspora can play in this effort. According to Helmich, the development challenges in Africa are superficially discussed in the Netherlands. These pressing challenges that the continent grapples with today need to be intelligently explained, concretely articulated, sensitively discussed and objectively analysed. Furthermore, development is more than boosting the domestic economic. Peacebuilding and the promotion of rule of law and good governance also contribute to the development as they provide an enabling environment that is a precondition for a sustainable development.

_Henny Helmich, Director of NCDO: 'The debate on Africa is media-oriented and therefore lacks depth. How do we intelligently lift the debate from the images of small boys holding Kalashnikovs to serious issues affecting Africa must be a matter of considerable public debates in the Netherlands?"

After Helmich, Domenica Ghidei Biidu, chair of the Board of the African Diaspora Policy Centre also reiterated in her speech of the added value of the Centre in serving as a platform of debate where information, knowledge, expertise, experiences, new ideas, insights and different perspectives are exchanged and shared by diverse stakeholders concerned with migration and development issues both in Netherlands, other European countries and beyond. According Ghidei Biidu, The Centre acts as a platform of a critical diaspora constituency aims to enrich the development cooperation policy in the area of migration and development. This is by ventilating the voices, views and perspective of the migrants and thereby plays as a representative interlocator with other stakeholders and players in the migration and development field for a
genuine and effective policy dialogue. In short, according to Ghidei Biidu, the Centre particularly gives the diaspora a more active voice in the development policy regarding Africa.

**Domenica Ghidei Biidu, Chair of the Board of the African Diaspora Policy Centre:** ‘The ADPC is an initiative of the knowledgeable and critical African diaspora in the Netherlands, whose voices, views, insights and perspectives regarding development cooperation debates on migration and development need to be heard. Especially in issues concerning peace building, better governance and brain gain.’

After Ghidei Biidu, Awil Mohamoud, the Director of ADPC, presented the findings from a policy-oriented research that was conducted to gain a better understanding about the long-distance activities (both positive and negative) undertaken by the African diaspora in the Netherlands and their impact on the conflict dynamics in their countries of origin; and to assess ways in which the potential and peacemaking capacity of African diaspora in the Netherlands can be effectively harnessed in fostering the resolution and transformation of conflicts in their respective countries of origin. Mohamoud described several concrete facts that the findings from the study have revealed. For example, most of the African diasporas in the Netherlands have come from seven countries located in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa regions severely affected by protracted civil wars and other violent conflicts. The countries they have originated are Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan in the Horn of Africa; and Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Great Lakes. This affirms the direct relation between the violent conflicts and the increasing number of Africans migrating to the Netherlands since 1990. Nonetheless, this huge numerical strength makes them potential strategic actors and an important constituency to be aligned with Dutch government efforts to foster conflict transformation and post-conflict reconstruction activities in their respective countries of origin. Furthermore, availed evidence illustrated that homeland conflicts also directly affect the lives and well-being of the diaspora despite the fact that they are far away from the conflict zones. This in fact suggests the benefits that can be gained from working with the diaspora groups and organizations in promoting peace in the homelands.

**Session I**

**Constructive Policy Dialogue**

 Needless to say, the African diaspora in The Netherlands, and elsewhere in the Western world, have been excluded from the political dialogue on Africa for too long. Part of this is to blame on themselves for not actively seeking representation in the debate and another part is to be blamed on policy makers who in the past have made too little effort to hear the views and ideas from the diaspora. The question now is how can both the diaspora and policy makers team up and strengthen each other for Africa’s development? Abigail Gonowolo, Annet IJff and David Gakundzi presented interesting ideas and examples from a diaspora perspective and Paul Litjens did the same from a policy maker’s point of view.

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The Concerned Liberian Women (CLW) in The Netherlands, co-ordinated by Abigail Gonowolo, was set up in 2004 to think of ways Liberians in The Netherlands could follow the Ghanaian diaspora pace of developing to their homeland. After a decades long war, the Liberian women in The Netherlands came up with the conclusion that if Liberia is to move forward and away from strife, the diaspora most certainly has a role to play in that peace and development process. After all, it was the conflict that made them flee from their homeland.

Faced with the realities of a traumatised and divided people, one of the four areas of attention that the CLW soon decided to focus on was unification of the Liberian diaspora in the Netherlands. An impossible task at first, the CLW in a short time managed to convince the Liberian women to join forces and set the right example for others. Soon after the foundation of a strong and unified Liberian women’s association in Holland was laid down, other Liberians followed.

The accomplishment of this empowering task paved the way for the CLW to build on three other areas of attention: education, reconstruction and moral support.

It provides education on women and human rights. Next to that CLW seeks to exchange ideas on how, in conjunction with women’s groups back home, to reconstruct Liberia in all sorts of ways: from basic infrastructure to providing a sense of belonging by locating and empowering women who were traumatised during the war; and from advocating justice to encouraging non-violence. The latter is of prime concern, because in the view of the CLW, women and children are the foremost victims of the war.

Thus the CLW has embarked on studying how to best de-programme the child-soldiers of Liberia, more intensively than the six weeks rehabilitation training provided by the United Nations. Part of encouraging non-violence, says Gonowolo, is the challenging task of bringing to justice to those who committed atrocities during the war. The majority of former-child soldiers were recruited at a very young age and were hardly aware of their actions, but those who consciously and willingly took part in the atrocities must come clean. Women and children must be included in this process, because not only did they suffer the most from the war, women and children are also the first to initiate peace. Therefore if the Liberian dialogue on peace building is to be taken seriously, it should also reflect the voices of women and children.

By mid 2007 the CLW will host a conference on the role of Liberian women in peace building. Both policy makers as well as the Liberian diaspora will discuss topics varying from remittances to advocating non-violence and the Dutch foreign policy with regards to Liberia.

Gradually non-diaspora organisations are recognizing that the diaspora can make a

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*Abigail Gonowolo, Deputy Co-ordinator of Concerned Liberian Women in The Netherlands: ‘Liberian women and children suffered the most from the war. They went through atrocities so vile, that eyes shouldn’t be allowed to see. Yet they are the first to initiate peace. They are the embodiment of the fact that peace building cannot be realised if it doesn’t include women and children.’*

*Annet IJff, head of the Africa and Middle East department of ICCO: ‘What I learnt from Sudan’ is that the diasporas are not always seen as a potential source. In this regard, if the diasporas wish to be a part of any constructive dialogue they must work hard to proof that they are worthy, not only to policy makers but also to those they left behind.’*
difference. ‘What and how can the Sudanese diaspora in the Netherlands contribute to rebuilding the conflict torn areas in Sudan?’ Annet IJff, head of the Africa and Middle East department of ICCO, struggled with this question for some time. With no satisfactory answer from the Dutch foreign affairs department neither from NGO’s (with the exception of Novib). Five years ago, IJff answered the question herself and concluded that her department should be part of this challenge.

When civil strife ended in Sudan, ICCO came up with a project wherein it teamed up with the Sudanese diaspora in The Netherlands to rebuild some of the most severely conflict torn parts of the country along with local NGO’s in Sudan. ICCO used a set of approaches such as sending well/highly educated experts from the Sudanese diaspora. One of the most important lessons learnt, IJff mentioned, were the double standards that the diaspora met with both in Sudan and in The Netherlands. Getting the expertise of the diasporas recognised in Holland was a major challenge, as their diplomas were acquired through educational institutes in Sudan or other African countries. And once in Sudan the diaspora faced another challenge, especially from local NGO’s and well-educated Sudanese who stayed behind. Instead of a partnership in co-operation, the diasporas were met with the opposite of such acceptance.

The Sudan-project was in many ways eye-opening to IJff, especially in the role the diaspora attributed to itself and the sometimes opposite realities in Africa. IJff concluded that by excluding the diaspora in activities relating to issues such as peace building and development, in Africa will be a waste of expertise and manpower.

Taking the role of the diaspora in the Africa dialogue to a broader, pan-European level, David Gakunzi, head of the Europe-Africa Dialogue, North South Centre of the Council of Europe passionately underlined IJff’s concluding remarks. The North South Centre has been advocating nothing less than including the diaspora in the Africa-Europe dialogue. This is because according to Gakunzi, diasporas are important actors (or piece of the puzzle) has been overlooked in the past. In his analysis of African development throughout the past four and half decades, Gakunzi hit a quintessential nerve. As he put it, the African diasporas in Europe do not hold the key to Africa’s development, but simply because they are still part of Africa that they should be made partners in the dialogue.

Considering the fact that a lot of Africans in the diaspora are educated in the West, they could probably be even better assessors of Africa’s problems and solutions. They know both sides of the world: both the African and the European side and that knowledge makes them an invaluable asset. Better yet, they are more than willing to share their knowledge and experiences. There is no dialogue possible if you don’t include migrants and the diaspora.

Paul Litjens, Head of Department West Africa, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs: ‘It may not always seem that way, but we are very much aware of the importance of diaspora involvement in development and especially peace building and conflict prevention. Our role in the peace negotiations in Burundi was a risky but worthwhile endeavour that wasn’t necessarily based on policy but merely on the experiences of some individuals at the Ministry but also from the input of the Burundian diaspora in The Netherlands.’

For decades, policy makers have ignored the possibility of including the African diaspora.
in their sources of information or as partners in exchanging ideas. Paul Litjens, Head of Department West Africa, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs policies, is one of the few who over the past years has switched from that traditional mode of policy making. Apart from a question of mindset, the traditional mode was also a political decision that is directly linked to the objective of the policy and the type of approach used in reaching that objective. When the objective is a comprehensive peace agreement, such as was the case with Sudan, diaspora involvement in policymaking holds a number of risks. The most important risk is representation, and that not only applied to Sudan but to some extent also to Somalia and Eritrea. Litjens argued that most African diaspora groups in The Netherlands also had a problem with representation. In the case of Somalia for instance, it was simply impossible for any Somali diaspora organisation to represent the many clans in Somalia. The question then becomes a choice between two evils: do you include the handful of organisations representing a fraction of the clans and risk being biased or do you keep to the traditional sources of information? For any policymaker the choice is easily made.

Contrary to Sudan and Somalia, bringing about the Burundian peace agreement was a completely different ball game to the Foreign Affairs policy makers. Herein the Burundian diaspora in The Netherlands played a quintessential role. A lot of Dutch-Burundians were involved in the FNL, so that cleared the issue of representation. Litjens recalled the Burundian peace negotiations as a long process, managed tightly from behind closed doors, and neither the policy makers nor the Burundian diaspora could guarantee success. But the fact that the diaspora was involved in the process made a big difference.

**Experiences of Diaspora in Peacebuilding and Best Practices**

John Bangura fled war-torn Sierra Leone to Denmark and had for years been sorting out a scheme to return home and revenge the warlords who literally and figuratively turned his life upside down and even killed some of his close families. Instead he founded Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL), to bring hope to the hopeless. In collaboration with Danish, Norwegian and other European organisations, Hope-Sierra Leone has set up numerous remarkable projects in various fields such as reconciliation, farming and training of the post-war Sierra Leonean police corps. In 2002 H-SL brought together members of the feuding Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Civil Defence Force (CDF) in an unprecedented peace and reconciliation seminar. The warring factions have now engaged in Hope-Sierra Leone’s farming projects in northern and southern Sierra Leone. That of rice grains has replaced the seeds of war and hatred. Ex-combatants and victims work side by side on the farms of H-SL. Asides from this, H-SL provides local communities across the nation with workshops on social healings and non-violent communication.

**Session II**
Another example of constructive diaspora involvement comes from the African diaspora from the Horn region. In 2005 the training for conflict transformation was organised with participants whose countries of origin included Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. The aim of the training for conflict transformation skills had a three-fold objective: firstly to involve members of the diaspora organisations in peace building, to serve as a platform for dialogue among key actors in building harmonious relationships and thirdly to resolve differences through better understanding, dialogue and compromise. Furthermore, the conflict transformation training was also primarily intended to understand conflict dynamics, provide an analytical tool to map conflicts, exchange experiences, provide tools to deal with conflicts and lastly to enhance the trainees’ potential for conflict prevention and transformation.

As the training was completed, the African diaspora trainees proactively initiated to transfer this successful training where it is most needed: their respective countries of origin. Thus Amne Nagi of the Multi-cultural Women Peacemakers Network The Netherlands and Mohamed Basweyne of Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA) were trained to become trainers themselves.

Preparations are being made to set up a training centre in Ghana by mid 2007 to train people from Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti among others in peace building, conflict resolution and reconstructing life after the war.

These examples show that the African diasporas have taken it upon themselves to actively and positively help where they are needed. And gradually non-diaspora organisations are recognizing that the diasporas can make a difference.
Conclusions

In his closing remarks professor Gerd Junne from the University of Amsterdam reminded the audience of the four-fold purpose of the conference. Namely, to give peacemaking activities already undertaken by the diaspora more visibility; inform about the strategic potential and peace making capacity of the diaspora; stimulate a constructive policy dialogue between the African diaspora and Dutch policy makers and to explore additional ways on how African diaspora groups can become a constructive force for conflict transformation.

Diaspora relations with their countries of origin are based on remittances, direct and indirect political support, investment in economic activities, integration into international networks, (distance) education and training and the exchange of experiences. But these relations alone cannot build Africa. Diasporas ought to be more effective on a larger scale. Policymakers, NGO’s and other civil society groups have already created the infrastructure for dialogue and exchange of ideas. The challenge ahead is for these organisations and institutes is to assist in sharing knowledge, experiences and networks with the diaspora organisations so that they can in turn help their countries of origin more effectively. When such a challenge is met, the prospects for Africa will be more promising than ever. Diaspora involvement will effectively result in new forms of public-private partnerships (combining public aid with remittances), stronger involvement of diaspora groups in Dutch civil society organisations and plans and in the expansion of economic networks to increase development potential.

Key Recommendations

- Broaden peacebuilding actors by incorporating the diaspora in the process in a more formal manner.
- Use the unique strategic position and the immense social capital of the African diaspora better for the promotion of democratic political life in their countries of origin.
- Realise that the African diaspora in the Netherlands and Europe occupy a unique bridge-building position in which they can play a potential role in promoting peace in Africa.
- Generate knowledge, information and insights on long-distance activities undertaken by the diaspora.
- Help exacerbate or moderate the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands.
- Support the diaspora groups that share common values or views on the respective countries or themes you’re debating on.

List of speakers

* Henny Helmich, Director of NCDO
* Domenica Ghidei Biidu, Chairman of the Board of the African Diaspora Policy Centre
* Awil Mohamoud, Director of the African Diaspora Policy Centre
* Paul Litjens, Head of Department West Africa, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
* David Gakunzi, Head of the Europe-Africa Dialogue, North South Centre of the Council of Europe
About the African Diaspora Policy Centre

The African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) is a platform of knowledge and expertise in the area of migration and development. The Centre serves to facilitate an effective policy dialogue through sharing and exchange of information, knowledge, expertise, new ideas, insights and different perspectives, practical experiences, past lessons and best practices among the migrant organizations, civil society associations, the mainstream development agencies, the government institutions and other stakeholders concerned with migration and development issues in the Netherlands. The Centre particularly contributes to better development in Africa by providing a platform that enables African diaspora in Europe to connect more closely with the continent as a collective force, pool their resources and proactively undertake initiatives for the promotion of peace, better governance and brain gain in Africa. The Centre is unique in acting as a valuable strategic link between African diaspora communities in Europe and Africa. In this regard, the Centre is filling an important strategic gap in the European countries and, the Netherlands in particular. The added value of the Centre is to assist the tangible contribution of the African diaspora to the efforts geared to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals in Africa in 2015 and beyond.

For more information contact
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