The DIASPORA LOCAL GOVERNMENT: natural partners

Antony Otieno Ong’ayo, Research Coordinator at the Amsterdam-based African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) in the Netherlands, says that the continent’s Diaspora – an increasingly prominent development actor in its own right – is already building bridges with local government in African nations and suggests how donors can help such partnerships to thrive.

Are you looking at promoting links between the Diaspora and local governance in ACP countries?

Yes. This is based on first, the ADPC belief that advancing institutional knowledge, improvement of essential service delivery facilities in such areas as health and education sectors, upgrading and strengthening governance institutions, deepening democratisation processes and facilitating knowledge transfer (brain gain) are forms of development that should get proper policy attention.

Second, the recognition that the Diaspora organisations are beginning to initiate projects that cultivate its strategic bridge-building position through the kind of linkages being developed with institutions and organisations in host and homelands, whether formal or informal. These linkages become key strategic frameworks for fostering institutional links whose impact could immensely contribute to better governance at local authority level.

Third, it has been recognised that an increasing number of Africans abroad are seeking elected office positions in their home countries, either as members of the national legislatures or...
local authority or as presidential aspirants. These are developments which require further study to ascertain their respective potential for improved local governance.

How can the Diaspora help build the capacity of local governance in African nations?

Through the transfer of skills, experiences and professionalism gained over time in the host countries in Europe and America. A number of Diasporas in Europe are in leadership positions in several parliaments across Europe. There is even a much bigger number in local authority politics and public services. These experiences can be shared with local government authorities in their countries of origin to improve governance and service delivery to the people. They can also help improve on the systems of local democracy and making local government accountable and transparent, inject new ideas and create strategic linkages for local development. The Diasporas are now in a strategic position to facilitate the process of trans-national activities and networks. They can now channel information, innovative ideas, intellectual capacities, new technological skills, smart and innovative business and trade practices, peacemaking tools and techniques and democratic political habits and practices from the West to Africa. This implies the transfer of values and best practices that they have gained and experienced in the host countries. Such inputs would motivate the local communities to re-engage with the local leadership through popular participation, and consensual decision making, based on democratic frameworks through which the local communities can express themselves, and contribute to the development agenda. Examples include participatory planning and budgeting. Through their social networks, the African Diaspora can mobilise through community, hometown associations and groups for community development. The networks can play a significant role in resource mobilisation for maintaining and extending public services such as schools and hospitals. Through their networks of professionals, researchers, entrepreneurs, and investors, the African Diaspora can also share much needed information on various topical issues affecting their countries and local communities, with their governments, peers back home, and develop frameworks through which they can employ their skills and expertise back home even on short-term basis.

Do you have any examples of any projects in African nations of the Diaspora working with local government in an African municipality?

The ADPC has been documenting and providing a platform for Diaspora organisations to showcase experiences of Diaspora organisations as agents for development and best practices. Examples include: the Federation of Associations Franco-African Development (FAFRAF) which is involved in international development capacity building, institutional development, local governance and capacity building and covers such countries as Benin, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); the Sikaman foundation which is a Ghanaian organisation based in the Netherlands providing training, capacity-enhancement and knowledge to community projects in Ghana and the Kenyan Diaspora Network and its work on anti-corruption, civil society strengthening, and emergency assistance.

What does the Diaspora stand to gain from such cooperation?

The benefits that accrue from such cooperation are direct and indirect; short but also long-term. First, the Diaspora have close links with local communities such as members, families, relatives, friends, and they play a significant role in the lives of these people through other initiatives such as remittances, social capital as well as emotional ties, which shape the current functioning of most families whose members are in the Diaspora. Therefore improved local governance is likely to benefit the Diaspora directly in terms of less dependency. Many people in the Diaspora send back money for family maintenance, sometimes as an obligation and in most cases out of necessity to sustain immediate and extended family. Such responsibility puts a lot of pressure on the Diaspora, especially in cases where a Diaspora is also a student. Therefore improved living conditions through better governance and opportunities for upward mobility at local level are likely to reduce the economic burden the Diaspora have to carry.

Secondly, the Diaspora would benefit directly in cases where they may be engaged in paid consultancy services, or professional exchange programmes but here too, such benefits must be seen from a broader perspective. For instance, where they may charge for such services, the costs would not be exorbitant, which implies that their engagement is out of personal volition to make a contribution to the betterment of the local communities. However, one indirect benefit which is very significant and has long term impact on many lives applies to the local communities, to whom service delivery and democratic governance at local level would have improved. The involvement of the Diaspora in local governance would immensely contribute to the improvement in the way critical issues that affect such communities are dealt with. These include ways to improve health care, sanitation, and environmental management, provision of essential services such as water, infrastructure, and educational facilities among others.

What sort of donor funding could encourage such links?

In order to encourage linkages between Diaspora and homeland local institutions, donor funding needs to be structured and channelled under a multi-donor trust fund which can provide funding for specific programme activities targeting governance in local authorities. This would have specific focus on local governance at municipal, and county council levels, since these are the main areas where large populations in Africa experience deprivation, social, economic and political exclusion.

The other important area is funding for research and development. Research collaborations between Diaspora host institutions and home country counterpart research institutions could help provide local institutions
with the much needed knowledge in order to be able to address the modern challenges to better governance. This is an area which could build capacity and empower the home countries’ local authorities to develop effective measures, and skills that would enable them to create institutional frameworks that improve service delivery. Improved services and infrastructure would consequently enable such urban areas to attract investment and to be able to compete in the national and global economy. It is also an area in which the home countries would benefit through exchanges and transfer of needed skills and information for policy formulation, generated by innovation and creativity in the process.

The other area is to fund technical expert networks of the African Diaspora; and Policy-relevant Action Networks. For example, such funding could go to joint (Diaspora and home country) expert teams established in strategic areas of focus and priority set by the Diaspora and home governments in order to improve local governance. The influence of these sectors and networks are immense and would greatly impact upon the type of governance system that are put in place at municipal level, since they will set the bar higher enough to force the local authorities to pull up, and meet those standards.

Lastly, most important of all is to create a fund (Marshall-type plan) that would specifically target self-reliance and sustainability of any donor funded activity, especially in areas that require constant financial injection. Relying on donor funding for programme activities is not sustainable, therefore local institutions can be assisted to generate their own funds which would maintain the existing or newly established programmes. This would also contribute to the local ownership of these initiatives and processes, since modern challenges in terms of governance and institutional responsiveness to global forces do not require a dependency culture as the main factor that determines alternative responses to people’s needs, especially in the developing countries in Africa.

**D.P.**

**Keywords**

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