Diasporas from conflict regions and fragile states are increasingly involved in the reconstruction of their homelands. Although both African men and women in the diaspora are contributing to peace and reconciliation processes in their homelands, women tend to be more active in this terrain. This is primarily because women and children are far more likely to have first-hand experience with the direct effects of conflict. The psychological and emotional connection that diaspora women share with victims of conflict provides them with an innate drive to take action towards conflict resolution and reconciliation. In recent years, these efforts have undergone a drastic transformation. What began as an emotional reaction to conflict in the homeland has now evolved into a systematic and structured approach to conflict resolution, taking a more holistic approach, and addressing the economic and political factors behind conflict in the homeland.

Women in the African diaspora are establishing an increasingly prominent position as contributors to conflict resolution and reconciliation policies from the host country towards their countries of origin. Their work also addresses the approach that host countries are taking towards regions of conflict. For instance, in a recent opinion article1, Stéphanie Mbanzendore (Burundian Women for Peace and Development) and Juliènne Nsimba Difukidi (Congo Network Netherlands) expressed their concerns about Dutch foreign policy with respect to the Great Lakes Region. They argue that existing policies fail to recognise the complexity of the situation on the ground and consequently lack efficiency and coherence while the methodologies employed lack the necessary tools and momentum to deal with the underlying factors. A strategy that the authors propose is the utilization of the diaspora’s knowledge and influence to strengthen the effectiveness of Dutch policies towards fragile states.

The added value of diasporas to international policies regarding peacebuilding is gaining wider attention within Europe. For example, Multicultural Women Peacemakers Network Netherlands (MWPN), an umbrella network of migrant women’s organisations, is a member of the Working Group for UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. This is a consortium of several mainstream development organisations active in conflict zones and fragile states. One of the principle objectives of this Working Group is to closely involve diaspora organisations in the implementation of the Dutch National Action Plan regarding UNSCR 13252. Similarly, Associazione Diaspora e Pace (ADEP), a Somali diaspora women’s organisation based in Italy, partnered with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a program regarding gender and peace, also within the context of UNSCR 13253. Diaspora women’s organisations are now seen as indispensable players within civil society networks active in peacebuilding.

This factsheet explores the evolutionary process that has seen diaspora women move from implementing small-scale projects to becoming peacebuilding activists both in the homeland and in the host country. In particular, it outlines strategies employed by diaspora women to contribute to the restoration of peace in the homeland.


3 Refer to the following link for more information: http://www.un-instraw.org/en/gps/gps-homepage/somalia-project.html
Small-scale projects to socially transformative programmes

Rigby (2006) has argued that diasporas who are in the most advantageous position to contribute to peacebuilding are simultaneously the ones that are most likely to benefit from the gains of being protected: these are primarily women and spiritual leaders. This has led diaspora women to engage in numerous forms of philanthropy towards their country of origin.

For many diasporas, philanthropy was a safe way to reconnect with their homelands without arousing distrust among local political leaders. Since the 1990s, many of the “conflict-generated diasporas” have engaged in small-scale philanthropic transactions in the homeland. The philanthropic activities of diaspora women have included paying school fees, setting up cultural awareness and exchange programs, organising cultural days, etc. Although some organisations still maintain these activities, diaspora women’s initiatives have undergone significant transformations. A 2006 study commissioned by Mama Cash showed that migrant women in the Netherlands generally engaged in four areas of work in their homelands: micro-finance programmes, construction of women’s centres, leading emancipatory campaigns or training courses and setting up literacy and vocational training programmes. Through women’s centres, diaspora women are tackling both the economic and socio-cultural side-effects of conflict. On the one hand, women are offered skills training in several areas to generate income, and on the other hand, the centres are used to bring women together to discuss the psychological and emotional consequences of conflict in order to collectively map out strategies to deal with these issues within the community. Because many diaspora women have first-hand experience of the marginalisation of women back in the homeland, they are well positioned to set-up programmes designed to deal with the root causes of conflict, rather than being restricted to treating its effects. Through emancipatory campaigns and training courses, they are now able to go as far as transforming the political participation of women by getting women leaders elected into office.

In sum, the activities in which diaspora women are engaged have changed significantly over the years, from small-scale philanthropic projects, to socially transformative programmes.

Direct versus indirect contribution to peacebuilding

Part of the reason that diaspora women are so successful in promoting peace in their homelands is that they utilise a variety of mechanisms to this end. Direct forms of peacebuilding activities include promoting dialogue between the elders of different clans, offering training on peacemaking tools and techniques and promoting an understanding of human rights laws in the country of origin. The indirect ways in which projects set-up by diaspora women contribute to peacebuilding include increasing equal access to health and education facilities, especially in marginalised regions. In this way, the projects address the underlying social factors of conflict. Other organisations bring young people from different regions together through theatre and sporting activities, where they can engage informally with one another, and whereby a natural flow of communication develops between them, gradually alleviating harboured negative feelings about residents of other areas of the country. Another important indirect strategy used by many organisations involves raising awareness among diaspora groups resident in Europe. Through dialogue about the issues that hinder peacebuilding processes in the country of origin, which provide diasporas with alternative analyses of the situation in the homeland, diaspora groups begin to transfer their newly acquired knowledge to friends and relatives in the homeland. This also leads to a gradual attitude shift in the homeland.


7 An example is a 2004 international mission organised by Burundian Women for Peace and Development to campaign for the election of female political leaders. All the delegates who were supported by the mission were elected into office.
Engagement of diaspora women in peacebuilding policy

The Hague Declaration on Women and Peacebuilding (June 2003) was one of the first to seek formal attention for the contribution of diaspora women to peacebuilding in their homelands from the Netherlands-based diaspora. Following this event, organisations such as MWPN were mobilised to make a more structured contribution to peacebuilding. The nature of the activities that such women’s networks embark on extends to global issues. For example, a main focus for MWPN is the empowerment of civil society groups in conflict regions to undertake peacebuilding and reconstruction activities themselves. The organisation utilises several strategies and mechanisms in order to empower and strengthen the position of women’s civil society movements. First, MWPN offers a platform for women’s groups from conflict zones to come together and exchange experiences and strategies that have proved effective. They do this through organising conferences and workshops, both in the countries of origin and in the host countries. This is highly effective because not only does it allow the different peacemakers to share knowledge and information, it also allows diaspora women to identify where they can be instrumental in strengthening the capacities of civil society groups in the homeland. Second, MWPN pays specific attention to influencing policies within the homelands and the host countries to ensure that civil society groups active in peacebuilding have access to protection, as their work and activities are threatened by unsympathetic homeland governments. Furthermore, the platform empowers women in the homeland and the host country with knowledge of international laws and conventions in place for their protection. Finally, through its strategic position as an advisory member of the Working Group 1325, MWPN is able to construct alternative margins through which Western governments can strengthen the capacity of civil society groups. An innovative strategy for which the group is lobbying is the increased involvement of the embassies of host countries in fragile states in order to offer political protection and financial support to local civil society groups. These strategies employed by MWPN illustrate that the degree of engagement of diaspora women in peacebuilding has evolved to a level where their role as advisors and policymaking partners has become indispensable.

Positive and inspiring examples

Narrating examples of peacemaking initiatives in which African diaspora individuals are engaged provides important lessons as well as inspiration to other diasporas. The three examples briefly noted here highlight how diaspora women envision peacebuilding in the homeland.

African Sky is an organisation which is founded and managed by women, with a focus on Somali women, though it also works with groups from the wider Horn of Africa. “Peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa requires team building among African women in the diaspora, both in the Netherlands and at a Europe-wide level. It is vital to apply people-to-people approaches and networks, as well as training women on peace-related issues, such as violence against women to enhance a more proactive role in peacebuilding initiatives and processes.”

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2 Shamsa Said (FSAN):  
The Federation of Somali Associations in the Netherlands (FSAN) is run by a team of women that have both strong academic and professional backgrounds. Under their leadership, the organisation has a membership of more than 50 Somali organisations. They work on many issues, among which is peacebuilding. “There are potentials and challenges for women in peacebuilding in Somalia. A more proactive role for women in peacebuilding could be realised by working with the younger generation, whose focus is not on differences and the conflict because they hold a wider view of the world. Focus on the younger generation would therefore entail more dialogue within the diaspora.”

3 Fatumo Farah (HIRDA):  
HIRDA has been active in peacebuilding for over 10 years. It addresses peace issues through the mobilisation of traditional leaders and by facilitating conferences for parties in conflict. Most significantly, HIRDA has been able to access conflict areas in Somalia through provision of essential services, while initiating clan meetings during service delivery. They also dialogue with sponsors of militias as a strategy to reduce access to resources that may be used in fuelling conflict. “Peacebuilding initiatives in the Netherlands still require recognition, in order to increase the visibility of the role played by women. Bringing together various women’s groups in the diaspora would play a big role in expanding this arena, and thereby a more proactive role for women in peacebuilding.”

Key Recommendations

The positive developments within Europe towards the inclusion of diaspora women’s organisations sets a standard for effectively channelling the contributions made by diaspora women to peacebuilding processes. Following are a few recommendations that can further galvanise these efforts:

- Generating knowledge and documenting the strategies and methods that diaspora women’s organisations employ in their peacebuilding programmes in the homeland;
- Utilising diaspora women’s knowledge to address the socio-cultural factors behind conflict in fragile states;
- Recognising the activities of diaspora women’s organisations as an innovative contribution to the work of mainstream development organisations.
Further Information

Selected African diaspora women’s organisations

African Sky Foundation: www.africansky.nl
Associazione Diaspora e Pace (ADEP)
Burundian Women for Peace and Development (BWPD): www.bwpd.org
Women’s Organisation Netherlands-Darfur (Vrouwen organisatie Nederland-Darfur)

Websites of key institutions on women and peacebuilding

United Nations Development Fund for Women www.unifem.org
Council on Regional Affairs: www.cfr.org
International Crisis Group: www.crisisgroup.org

Key reports and literature related to the subject


About ADPC

The African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) is an independent platform of knowledge and expertise in Europe in the area of migration and development. The Centre generates knowledge, information and policy insights on the subject from the diaspora perspective – a point of view which has been largely overlooked. For more information, please visit www.diaspora-centre.org.

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