Mainstreaming the Diaspora into Traditional Development Cooperation Circles

By Awil Mohamoud

Introduction

This policy brief is intended to raise awareness about the urgent need for policy measures that are geared toward mainstreaming diaspora development practitioners and initiatives into traditional and established development cooperation circles in host countries in Europe. Such measures should ensure that the diaspora is integrated into the various stages of the policy process and is engaged in strategy and in practice with the overall development cooperation framework.

The migration and development nexus is a recent but growing trend in international development, and is largely driven by the diaspora – a community that plays a leading role in poverty reduction, job creation, capacity building, and education and health initiatives in the homelands via remittances, investments, knowledge transfer and targeted development programming. Through their engagement in migration and development activities, the diaspora has emerged as a distinctive development actor that is unique not only in terms of its defining features and characteristics, but also in terms of how it is perceived and related to by other stakeholders in development circles. Consequently, migration and development has become a sector of the international development process that operates parallel to and outside of the more traditional and established development cooperation sector, which is generally the domain of governments and their subsidiary agencies.

Undertaking applied research that provides insights into how to effectively merge the two parallel development processes is urgently needed. The merging of the two sectors at policy, strategy and practical operational levels will greatly increase the individual and collective impact they can have on targeted beneficiaries. Such integration would make it possible to capitalise on the potential of the diaspora not only in terms of remittances, but in grass roots projects geared towards poverty reduction, the promotion of democratic governance, human rights, and circular migration, and the overall development of Africa. More importantly, the integration of the diaspora into mainstream development cooperation circles will greatly facilitate the expansion of the development constituency both in host countries in Europe and in Africa.

The Diaspora as an Agent of Development in the Homelands

The contemporary diaspora has already positioned itself as a critical development actor in relevant policy circles through increased involvement in the development of the homelands over the past ten years. The diaspora routinely transfers both financial resources and social capital to Africa, and sets up community development projects and joint business ventures that allow local companies access to financial resources, expertise, innovative trade practices and valuable networks abroad. In fact, a large number of African diaspora organisations in various countries across Europe are now leading hundreds of development-related projects in villages and rural areas all over Africa. Diaspora organisations are particularly active in fragile, post-conflict countries where development assistance is most required. They are responding to vital needs not met by the programmes of more established development agencies. In this regard, the development initiatives undertaken by diaspora organisations often complement those implemented by mainstream donor agencies in the homelands.

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The Opportunity for Policy-Relevant Research

Little, if any, policy research has been conducted that specifically addresses how to systematically integrate migration and development into the traditional development cooperation sector. Several countries have undertaken efforts to stimulate the engagement of the diaspora in the development of the homelands via various programmes and policy mechanisms. Some examples of such programmes include the ‘co-development’ schemes promoted by France, Italy, Spain and others since the early 2000s. It is not yet clear, however, to what extent these projects have contributed to the mainstreaming of the diaspora into the established development cooperation sector beyond merely raising their profile as potential development agents.

This reality presents an opportunity for evaluation and exploratory research into the European experience in working with the diaspora on development-related issues over the past 10 years. The information one could obtain from conducting policy relevant research into this area is of critical significance, and would provide valuable insights into opportunities, constraints, best practices, and lessons learned in the continued integration of diaspora development practitioners into the development cooperation framework. Furthermore, such research would generate a solid knowledge base on the subject that would allow for benchmarking and help policy makers formulate appropriate policy mechanisms that can be translated into feasible strategic interventions and realisable actions.

Undertaking this particular research now is both relevant and timely, as the findings will fill a knowledge gap in the existing policy research and will increase our understanding of the appropriate methods by which migration and development can be integrated into the traditional development cooperation sector.

Evidence-Based Policy Making

The lack of evidence-based knowledge and information has greatly constrained the policy making process in the field of migration and development. As a result, the policy response to the phenomenon of increased diaspora engagement in development activities in the homelands has been fragmented, incoherent and limited. Furthermore, the absence of knowledge on the subject lends itself to misconceptions about the development activities of the diaspora and especially to perceptions that efforts are insubstantial, marginal and sporadic.

The lack of evidence-based knowledge in the field limits the development of policy tools and instruments that would facilitate the identification of entry points and strategic institutions and agencies through which the systematic merging of the diaspora-led and traditional development sectors could be initiated. Such policy tools can only be developed on the back of research, evaluations, and similarly data collection and analysis activities.

The development of appropriate policy mechanisms that would facilitate the integration of diaspora initiatives into existing national-level projects and programmes geared toward achieving various development goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals) in developing countries is essential. Similarly, it is also necessary to formulate policy tools that would assist in the integration of diaspora-led development initiatives into those implemented by mainstream development agencies at the local and municipal level both host and home countries. Finally, policies must also ensure that diaspora development practitioners and the established development agencies initiate practical collaboration such as joint pilot projects in order to foster productive working relationships and the sharing of knowledge and resources. The resulting synergy will itself accomplish multiple goals, such as strengthening the ties between sectors and reaping exponential development benefits in home countries.

Conclusion

There are great advantages to be gained if the efforts of the traditional development sector and the diaspora-led development sector can be combined in the fight against the rampant poverty and marginalisation that is experienced by so many in Africa. The systematic and institutionalised integration of migration and development into the traditional development cooperation sector will, first and foremost, help intensify the overall impact (in terms of both size and scope) of development interventions on developing countries.

The increased collaboration necessarily resulting from the integration of the two development
sectors will mean that each partner is contributing their own strengths, resources and added value to the development effort, leading to improved scope, efficiency and capacity of projects implemented in local communities. The unique transnational context in which diaspora-led organisations operate, for example, enables them to mobilise considerable resources, build up valuable contacts, forge important partnerships and build economic and political bridges across countries and continents.

Additionally, the probability of sustainability increases when diaspora organisations become valued stakeholders in development projects implemented in their native countries, towns and villages. This reality is due to the social and emotional affinities maintained by the diaspora long after their initial migration as well as to the cultural and institutional insights that can be shared to help inform program development and implementation in the interest of sustainability. Thus, collaborative projects stand in stark contrast to the projects led exclusively by donor development agencies operating from abroad, which can be neglected or abandoned once initial goals are met or development policy priorities change.

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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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2 As Kathleen Newland points out ‘the benefits and unique strengths of both diaspora groupings (keen cultural awareness of communities of origin, better awareness of specific needs and/or potential pitfalls, long term personal commitment to projects and communities) and international development agencies (larger funding capacity, professional/technical expertise and experience, efficiency through economies of scale, credibility) can all be magnified through effective collaboration’. See further Kathleen Newland and Erick Patrick. 2004. *Beyond Remittances: The Role of Diaspora in Poverty Reduction in their Countries of Origin*. Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C.