

ADPC *Factsheet*

African Diaspora as Agents for Peace



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Diaspora as Potential Peace Brokers

Diasporas are critical agents of peace and can – and do – make significant contributions to peace-building, conflict transformation and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in their respective homelands. To maximize this immense potential it should be tapped in a more creative and effective manner. Diasporas are one of the contemporary global forces shaping the directions and trends in this 21st century. This fact makes it important to partner and join forces with them in the promotion of peace in their respective homelands. Diasporas as potential peace actors have been acknowledged more and more by international bodies such as the United Nations. Yet, the potential of their peacemaking capacity has not at all been harnessed to actively foster the resolution and transformation of conflicts in their countries of origin. Diasporas can be part of the solution if they are seen as potential strategic actors and valuable bridge-builders to be alienated with in the efforts of promoting peace in their homelands in Africa. The incorporation of the diasporas into the peace making actors in the homelands in a more structured and formal manner would widen and greatly strengthen the capacity of peace forces active in their respective countries of origin. More importantly, diasporas can play as capacity builders as well as advisors and peace brokers. Furthermore, it should be understood that in the same way that the diasporas contribute to development, they can also contribute to peace building in the home countries. More importantly, peace is a pre-condition for development.

In this regard, there is an urgent need to develop knowledge that gives us better insights on how the long-distance peace-building activities initiated by diaspora organisations and groups can be structurally integrated into the existing peace

making frameworks and processes that so far are exclusively implemented by mainstream donor development agencies, government institutions, international and regional organisations and UN bodies active in their countries of origin. This is with the objective of joining forces for peace and also widening the civil society peace constituency in the EU countries and beyond with respect to Africa. This can be possible if the diasporas are recognized as the “fourth” external peace-building actors active in the domestic peace process after international organisations, governments and mainstream donor agencies.

Empirical Evidence

Most of the African diasporas in the Netherlands (and probably in other countries in Europe) 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 originate from are Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan in the Horn of Africa; and Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Great Lakes.¹ This affirms the direct relation between the violent conflicts and the increasing number of Africans migrating to Europe since 1990.

Further available data demonstrates that many domestic conflicts in numerous countries in Africa have not only been regionalized but they are also largely internationalized among other factors through the activities of diaspora groupings. The reason is 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 reality therefore makes it imperative to address the international dimension of the conflict, particularly the critical role that African diaspora groups play with regard to homeland conflicts. The connection between the African diaspora’s activities and the dynamics of

¹ For more information, see Abdullah A. Mohamoud, “Mobilising African Diaspora for the Promotion of Peace in Africa”, Policy Report for the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sub-Sahara Department (Amsterdam: SAHAN Research Bureau, May 2005).

conflict in their homelands is a dimension that has been largely overlooked in research and policy analysis despite its critical significance.

Prevailing Myth

The prevailing myth is that the long-distance activities undertaken by the diasporas exacerbates the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands. Unfortunately, this prevailing myth dominates the discourse on the topic which largely influences the policy attitude towards diasporas that is largely negative. In practice, this is one of the chief reasons that prevents the mainstream donor NGO's, international institutions as well as governments in both home and host countries from working with the diasporas as they see them to be destructive rather than constructive forces. This is however a partial presentation of the reality. The existing evidence suggests that the long-distance activities undertaken by the African diaspora have both positive and negative impacts on the conflict dynamics in their homelands. More significantly, in the case of most of the African diaspora organizations studied in the Netherlands affirms that their positive contribution to the situations in the homeland outweighs their negative involvement. Furthermore, there are many diaspora groupings with different political and socio-political aspirations, and as such, the diaspora should be carefully disaggregated.

Potential of Working with the Diaspora

The potential of working with the diaspora is that there is now a growing realization among the African diaspora in the West that they have a responsibility to do something for the continent that they have left physically but not emotionally. Furthermore, the African diaspora organizations, groups and individuals occupy a unique position as they live in two cultures, or between two cultures, and thus have the advantage of intimate knowledge about different social situations, local conditions and networks and cultural experiences in Africa to a far greater degree than people with a Western background only. This strategic position therefore enables the African diaspora individuals, groups and organizations to channel new peace making attitudes, ideas, negotiation skills and conflict transformation techniques, innovative approaches and practices from host countries in Europe to their countries of origin.

Key Recommendations

- Widening peace-building actors by incorporating the diaspora in the process in a more structured and formal manner
- Realizing that the African diasporas in Europe occupy a unique bridge-building position in which they can play a potential role in promoting peace in Africa.
- Generating knowledge that enhances our understanding on how the long-distance activities undertaken by the diaspora help exacerbate or moderate the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands
- Exploring how the African diaspora use their accumulated social capital to contribute to the rebuilding of the post-conflict social institutions, political structures and the promotion of viable governance and democratic political life in their countries of origin.

Positive and inspiring examples

Narrating examples of peacemaking initiatives that African diaspora individuals, groups and organizations have initiated are important as they provide unique lessons that can be learned as well as inspire other diaspora organizations to emulate. Three examples of inspiring stories are briefly noted here that are making a difference on the ground.

Three examples of inspiring stories

1 Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL) Foundation was established in Denmark by John Bangura, a Sierra Leonean in the diaspora. Bangura has initiated an innovative approach in bringing peace to his homeland, which was unique. The peace efforts of his organization targeted at the forces with weapons such as the police, military and para-military soldiers so as to reconcile them. This is with the logic that reconciling those who possess the means of violence can refrain the rivalry of the political elites from becoming a

violent conflict. According to Bangrua, “We brought together warring factions to start working on ways to turn Sierra Leone’s social, political and economic fate around.” For more information, see the website of Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL).

2 Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA) was set up by the Somalis in the diaspora. HIRDA contributes to peace building in Somalia through the creation of sustainable livelihoods. HIRDA directly targets the youth by preventing them from joining the many armed militia groupings by giving them vocational training in order to earn

a living without practicing violence. For more information, see the website of HIRDA.

3 Concerned Liberian Women (CLW) was set up by the Liberian women in the Netherlands. The Liberian women initiated this diaspora organisation with the conviction that if Liberia is to move forward and away from strife, the diaspora must play a critical role in the peace and development process. After all, it was the conflict that made them flee from their homeland. The activities of the CLW range from the provision of education on women and human rights to advocating justice and non-violent means of resolving conflicts.

Further Information

Selected African diaspora organizations active in the field of peace-building

Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA)
www.hirda.org

Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL) Foundation
www.hopesierraleone.org

Concerned Liberian Women in the Netherlands

Burundian Women for Peace and Development

Key websites of selected institutions in the field

www.bicc.de
www.conflict-prevention.net
www.gmu.edu
www.georgetown.edu/sfs/isim

Key reports and literature related to the subject

Cochrane, F. (2007). *Civil Society beyond the State: The Impact of*

Diaspora Communities on Peace Building. GMJ: Mediterranean Edition 2(2).

Lyons, T. (2004). *Engaging Diasporas to Promote Conflict Resolution: Transforming Hawks into Doves.* By Terrance Lyons. Working Paper (Washington, DC: Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University).

Mohamoud, A.A. (2005). ‘Diasporas: Untapped Potential for Peacebuilding in the Homelands’, Chapter in *People Building Peace II – Successful Stories of Civil Society, project of the European Centre for Conflict Prevention*. Edited by Paul van Tongeren, Malin Brenk, Marte Hellema, Juliette Verhoeven. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers).

Shain, Y.(2002). *The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation or Resolution.* SAIS Review XXII, no.2 (Summer-Fall).

Zunzer, W.(2004). *Diaspora Communities and Civil Transformation.* Occasional Paper No. 26. (Germany: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management).

About ADPC

The African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC) is an independent platform of knowledge and expertise 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.

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