

## Platform Policy Brief 09

### **Diaspora humanitarian intervention in times of crisis**

This is the ninth policy brief by the Knowledge Platform (KP) for Migration Governance in Africa<sup>1</sup> coordinated by the African Diaspora Policy Centre. The platform is devoted to strengthening the interface between research, policy, and practice in the area of migration governance at continental, regional, national, and local levels. The motto of the platform is: organizing a knowledge network for better migration governance in Africa. It contributes to the migration and mobility dialogue from the perspective of Africa. Additionally, the platform is committed to contributing to a better migration governance system that works for the benefit of all. The platform organized its ninth webinar in June 2021 to reflect on Diaspora humanitarian intervention in times of crisis. The webinar also provided an opportunity for the platform's network to convene virtually, since they cannot meet face to face as long as the Covid-19 pandemic rages across countries.

### **Introduction**

This policy brief is the product of a webinar organized by the Platform in June 2021 to reflect on Diaspora humanitarian intervention in times of crisis. It is widely accepted that the potential of Diaspora humanitarian intervention in times of crisis can be substantial if it is systematically harnessed. Diaspora communities operate as first responders when disaster occurs in their homelands whether it be a result of natural catastrophes, or health crises like Ebola and the current COVID-19 pandemic. What all such cases have in common, however, is that the humanitarian interventions by the Diaspora are still largely informal, haphazard, and not strategically coordinated at either a national or local level in the homeland. Moreover, the humanitarian assistance support provided by the Diaspora often remains unknown because it is not sufficiently documented. Showcasing best practice cases of humanitarian assistance provided by Diaspora communities can increase the profile and visibility of the Diaspora in development community circles in the homeland and beyond. It will also

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<sup>1</sup> A project assisted by the German government via the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The content reflects the author's views and the GIZ is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information in this document.

contribute to policy awareness that, in turn, can stimulate the formalizing and mainstreaming of Diaspora humanitarian intervention within the broader national humanitarian response in time of calamity. Understanding better the patterns and pathways of Diaspora humanitarian intervention will also increase insights into how it might be organized and/or scaled up.

The webinar reflected on the potential of Diaspora humanitarian assistance support in times of crisis. The webinar also addressed the nature of policy shortcomings in this area<sup>2</sup>.

## Diaspora as first responders

It is generally observed that the Diaspora acts as first responders when disaster occurs in their homelands. They act as result of their inner attachment to the people they have left behind physically but not emotionally. They also react quickly because the disaster directly affects their families, friends, villages, cities, and the wider communities that they belong to. Furthermore, due to the social media revolution, the Diaspora communities are often the first to receive information about a disaster and the immediate needs required urgently by the affected population. Consequently, their response is frequently immediate in terms of informing the media in host countries about the occurrence of the disaster as well as necessary action in terms of collecting donations, goods, and other things that must be sent to the affected people promptly. In addition, most of Diaspora humanitarian practitioners have already established their own organizations and are engaged in supporting development in their respective homelands more generally.

Members of the Diaspora use such organizations to work together and pool their own resources (capital, skills, and networks) in order to respond quickly to humanitarian crises in the homeland. These organizations are also used as a vehicle to collect donations from institutions, development agencies, and wider host societies. Members of the Diaspora also organize fundraising activities and lobby governments, private companies, and development NGOs in host countries to raise awareness and increase attention for the disasters and the ensuing humanitarian crises they cause in their homelands. In addition, some members of the Diaspora return to the homeland quickly to coordinate the relief effort on the ground. Those with skills may return home to provide their services to local frontline institutions such as hospitals, or to offer immediate care to the affected population. Others use their contacts and networks in the host countries to mobilize public support, for example by hosting a national TV gala, as in the case of the Ebola pandemic, thereby raising more resources for tackling the humanitarian crises in their homelands. Certainly, we should not underestimate the power of the Diaspora to harness the (digital) media in host countries to raise awareness about the impact of disasters and their consequent humanitarian crises. During humanitarian crises in their countries of origin, members of the Diaspora operate as ambassadors within host countries and use all means to lobby for increased attention and action in response to devastating events. There are many instances where this has been successful, and this is a

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<sup>2</sup> The Platform is very grateful to Mr. Badara Ndiaye, who provided a presentation on the model during the webinar. Mr. Ndiaye is a former consultant for ECOWAS on Regional Migration Policy Engagement. He is also an expert in the field of labour migration, migration policies, governance of migrations and diaspora engagement. Mr. Ndiaye is active within the Senegalese civil society associations as President of DIADEM (Diaspora Development Education Migration) and as President of the West African Platform on Migration (MIGRAFRIQUE).

direct result of them being embedded in host societies. The advantages of the Diaspora being integrated into host countries in such situations is that they understand cultural nuances, established political norms, and the social fabric of their adopted society. This places the Diaspora in a strategic position in terms of galvanizing support at national, local, and municipal levels as well as rallying the kinds of resources needed in the homeland during humanitarian crises. Moreover, the Diaspora can play a crucial role once the immediate situation has been stabilized and attention turns to post-recovery efforts.

It is clear, however, that the magnitude and the impact of Diaspora humanitarian assistance can be even greater if it is sufficiently facilitated and coordinated in the homeland. This requires homeland governments to create and facilitate conditions on the ground that structurally supports humanitarian interventions by the Diaspora in the event of natural calamities. In practice, this involves the development of a national preparedness strategy that sets out how governments can respond rapidly and effectively to unexpected disasters. Having such a strategy in place beforehand makes it easier to roll out intervention plans at different levels as swiftly as possible. It can also facilitate the mobilization of resources from diverse stakeholders, including the Diaspora.

A key lesson learned from the current COVID-19 pandemic is the urgent need to have a national preparedness strategy for dealing with all kinds of natural calamities, such as droughts, disasters, diseases, etc, in place, in advance<sup>3</sup>. With this in mind, the best way to effectively harness Diaspora humanitarian intervention is to integrate it into existing relief programs developed to cater for the needs of the most vulnerable groups of society and implemented by local and municipality authorities, local NGOs, and grass-roots communities. A related point is the need to establish a well-functioning logistical coordination mechanism at national, local, and municipality levels that can swiftly move the humanitarian assistance provided by the Diaspora (i.e., medicine and other goods) to the people most affected by the calamity.

## Examples of Diaspora humanitarian intervention in homelands

The experts who participated in the webinar discussed several noteworthy cases that demonstrate effective Diaspora humanitarian intervention exercises. The cases are briefly presented here, although a detailed documentation of each case is very much warranted in a subsequent examination. Nonetheless, the cases provide an overview of how the Diaspora has responded forcefully to various calamities in their homelands at different times. The first case highlighted by the experts was the disaster resulting from a football stadium stampede in Accra, Ghana in 2001 in which 126 people died and many others were injured. At the time, this was the worst stadium disaster to have taken place in Africa. The event caused a shockwave through Ghanaian Diaspora communities, who promptly mobilized relief and

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<sup>3</sup> According to Thomas Piketty, “we should never let a serious crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic go to waste. It presents an opportunity to do things that we could not do before because they seemed impossible and not at all doable”. Thomas Piketty is a French economist and author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2014), which looked at increasing economic inequality and the necessity of wealth taxes. Piketty’s observations on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was published on the Democracy Now website. Available at: Economist Thomas Piketty: Coronavirus Pandemic Has Exposed the “Violence of Social Inequality”, Democracy Now!

rehabilitation help, in Europe and beyond, for those affected in the homeland. A large amount of money was also collected among themselves and sent home to assist the injured and the bereaved families. In addition, they collected all kinds of materials to help those affected as well as the institutions supporting them, such as hospitals, healthcare rehabilitation centres, and others. The second case the experts briefly described was the Ebola outbreak that occurred in West Africa in 2014. Following this epidemic, the Guinean, Liberian, and Sierra Leonean Diaspora played an effective role in terms of awareness-raising, advocacy, lobbying and fundraising activities in different European countries with successful results. Some members of the Diaspora even went back home to coordinate relief activities on the ground. Others have mounted high-profile political campaigns across different countries and have succeeded in putting the issue at the top of the EU agenda. Furthermore, the Ebola outbreak united the members of the Diaspora in a common cause, transcending and setting aside their differences. More importantly, the Diaspora have become an important voice for the people in their respective homelands. They have proven to be very effective humanitarian actors, capable of raising and mobilizing significant financial resources and urgently needed materials for relief efforts, especially in the areas most gravely affected by the Ebola epidemic. In addition, some members of the Diaspora have given expert advice and helped international humanitarian organizations to identify and prioritize needs and to allocate resources to groups and communities who are most in need of help.

The third case the experts cited is the swift response from Diaspora members to the plights resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective homelands. For example, members of the Diaspora acted quickly and as first responders rallying aid for the affected communities in their homelands; in most cases this involved poor and marginalized groups, including migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. To this end, members of the Diaspora mobilized all kinds of urgently needed resources, be it financial, medical or hygiene kits, and sent them home immediately. In particular, the experts noted the work done by the Ethiopian Diaspora, which has organized crowd-funding initiatives for stranded migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in different parts of Kenya and Ethiopia<sup>4</sup>. They also mentioned the Senegalese and Malian communities in France that have actively lobbied the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD) for support. In response, the AFD provided support to Diaspora projects mitigating the Covid-19 pandemic in both countries. With this financial aid, Diaspora members were able to purchase, and ship needed equipment such as respirators and solar-powered vaccine storage units to health centres in Senegal and Mali. Similar actions were undertaken by Moroccan, Tunisian and other Diaspora communities. In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a greater transnational involvement of the Diaspora in humanitarian responses to crises in their respective homelands. This makes clear that the Diaspora can substantially contribute to humanitarian interventions in the same way that they are already contributing to local development. This presents an opportunity that needs to be seized, according to the experts who participated in the webinar.

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<sup>4</sup> The Ethiopian Diaspora provided humanitarian relief to refugees, displaced persons, and the poor in Ethiopia through their Ethiopian Diaspora Trust Fund (EDTF), created in 2018. Further details can be found on the website of the Fund: [www.ethiopiustrustfund.org](http://www.ethiopiustrustfund.org).

## Lack of available policy tools

Diaspora humanitarian intervention in homelands is an established phenomenon and part and parcel of a commitment to assist and support families and communities back home when unexpected disaster strikes. Diaspora humanitarian intervention complements and boosts other forms of relief provided by diverse humanitarian actors in times of calamities. This includes both local and external NGOs, governments, the private sector, and international agencies and institutions, among others. Similarly, the Diaspora contributes to humanitarian assistance in the same way that they have already been contributing to poverty reduction efforts, economic development, and stimulating the private sector in their respective homelands. Despite this, Diaspora-led humanitarian intervention is not given sufficient policy attention compared to other efforts they are involved in. During the webinar, the experts pointed out that this is partly due to a lack of available policy tools responsive to this type of humanitarian intervention by the Diaspora at local, national, and regional levels. An example cited by the experts is the case of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS has a specialized humanitarian directorate tasked with responding to emergencies rapidly in times of calamities. Current ECOWAS policies, however, are targeted at mobilizing a range of humanitarian stakeholders that does not include the Diaspora. The reason being that ECOWAS has not yet developed a policy aimed at formally involving the Diaspora in humanitarian intervention efforts in the region. This is despite the fact that the Diaspora are already being voluntarily and informally involved in such actions in the ECOWAS region for an extended period. A similar situation can be observed at the national level. According to the experts, many countries have some sort of disaster preparedness programme at the national and local levels, but the humanitarian assistance provided by the Diaspora is not integrated into these programmes at either the national or the local levels. Again, this is due to a lack of available policy tools. A related aspect is perhaps a lack of understanding or appreciation for the potential role that the Diaspora can play as a strategic humanitarian partner in times of need. The Diaspora has been a critical player in humanitarian community circles in their respective homelands for a long period, but this has not been sufficiently publicized. Consequently, there is a complete lack of understanding of the crucial role that the Diaspora is already playing in the humanitarian field, as evidenced in, for example, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, and Tunisia. This, in turn, makes it difficult to formalize or mainstream Diaspora intervention into the wider humanitarian response architecture both at the national and regional levels, as the ECOWAS case affirms.

Another reason why the Diaspora humanitarian response has not captured the necessary policy attention is its informal and fragmented nature; that is to say, it is not sufficiently organized. In most cases, Diaspora humanitarian intervention is implemented in a haphazard manner since it is not strategically coordinated at either the national or the local level in the homeland. Moreover, there is almost no documentation of the magnitude and impact of such interventions on the direct beneficiaries. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many policy circles have yet to grasp the patterns of the voluntary nature of the Diaspora humanitarian response and how it works on the ground. Nonetheless, considering the importance of post-COVID resilience preparedness, it has become more crucial than ever to leverage Diaspora-led humanitarian support. The negative impact of the pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the poor across Africa, an issue that highlights the importance of developing a social safety net system in Africa to support those struck by natural calamities

such as droughts, disasters, and diseases. Hence, the added value of Diaspora humanitarian intervention should be part of this broader discussion about widening the pool of humanitarian partners in times of calamities now and in the near future.

The Diaspora must also be part of discussions about the creation of social safety net programmes that support the poor to build resilience against the impact of pandemics such as the COVID-19 crisis. It should be noted here that Diaspora humanitarian intervention is not something new, rather it remains a neglected issue in both the research and policy fields. As a result, little is known about the pathways, patterns, and workings of Diaspora humanitarian intervention. It is therefore imperative that Diaspora humanitarian intervention receives the attention it deserves, as a vital lifeline to many communities at the bottom of society in the event of sudden or unexpected natural catastrophes or health crises like Ebola or the current COVID-19 pandemic. Better organized Diaspora humanitarian assistance that can be scaled up is critical in this context. But this requires effective policy tools at regional, national, and local levels that can facilitate the mainstreaming of Diaspora intervention into existing humanitarian programmes designed to respond to emergencies. As noted above, currently, such policy tools are not yet available at all policy levels. The starting point should be the recognition that Diaspora humanitarian assistance is as valuable as that provided by external humanitarian actors. The Diaspora must be treated as a critical humanitarian actor in their own right that can make an indispensable contribution to humanitarian responses in times of crisis.

## Lack of evidence-based research

According to the experts who participated in the webinar, the lack of available policy tools in this area is not an aberration. It is the result of the lack of evidence-based research that can inform policy in this field. Making policy on any issue should be based on reliable and factual information and well-grounded and rigorous research insights. There is already a lot of evidence-based research devoted to development-related activities undertaken by the Diaspora with respect to their homelands in Africa. By contrast, there is hardly any research addressing the modus operandi of Diaspora humanitarian interventions. As previously noted, Diaspora humanitarian intervention remains insufficiently showcased and undocumented. A limited study by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) in Washington confirms that the Diaspora act swiftly, as first responders, when disaster happens in their homelands<sup>5</sup>. This is a key advantage of Diaspora humanitarian support: it is delivered quickly and the necessary resources, whether it be money, materials, or equipment, are gathered immediately. It is also delivered as a targeted response that ensures assistance reaches the people who need it on time. Furthermore, there is evidence that Diaspora assistance substantially boosts other resources collected and delivered by other humanitarian actors.

There is no doubt that homeland governments want to harness the potential of Diaspora humanitarian intervention. However, they are currently grappling with deciding what the appropriate policy interventions should be to harness it effectively. The problem is not the

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<sup>5</sup> Newland, Kathleen, ed. (2010) "Diasporas. New Partners in Global Development Policy," Migration Policy Institute, Washington.

lack of political will, but rather the lack of viable policy instruments. Hence, the experts from the Platform have recommended the urgent development of a new research programme on this issue that caters to the policy needs of homeland governments across Africa. According to the experts, the focus of such research should be, in the first instance, on mapping the Diaspora humanitarian organizations involved in this area. This should be followed-up by showcasing and documenting best practices of Diaspora humanitarian intervention for wider policy lessons. Moreover, any evidence-based analyses and insights that such research generates should also inform homeland governments' policy formulations in this area. This will help them create viable policy tools that will enable the integration of Diaspora humanitarian assistance into the existing national emergency plans. They must also have viable policy tools that facilitate the efficient coordination of Diaspora humanitarian support at the national, regional, and local levels. The final goal is to have a policy in place that facilitates the mainstreaming of Diaspora humanitarian assistance into national resilience preparedness schemes that are needed now more than ever across Africa.

Undertaking evidence-based policy research in this area will also be of importance for the partners of the Diaspora in host countries. Understanding the ways that Diaspora humanitarian efforts can be better organized, coordinated, and improved from the side of host countries will be critical in the success of this endeavour. Diaspora humanitarian response is still conducted in a haphazard manner both in the host and in the home countries and there are still challenges that need to be overcome in the effort to improve Diaspora humanitarian intervention in their respective homelands. Access to viable research findings and insights can provide lessons about what has worked well and what has not worked in the past. Furthermore, the production of evidence-based knowledge on this topic will also increase policy and public awareness of the potential and benefits of Diaspora humanitarian response in both host and home countries. However, the Diaspora should be the immediate target group and beneficiary of this type of research in order to gain better insights into how their humanitarian intervention efforts can be improved and how they can build strategic partnerships in the host and home countries in this endeavour. Ultimately, other humanitarian community circles will also benefit from such research outputs as they will get a better understanding of how they can partner with the Diaspora in humanitarian responses to sudden calamities. In short, the experts made clear that undertaking evidence-based research in this area is policy-relevant and timely.

## Conclusion

The discussion of the Diaspora humanitarian response in times of crisis generated a very lively exchange among the experts of the Platform who participated in the webinar. All participants had recent examples of Diaspora humanitarian response to the damaging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the lives of a lot of people back home. The Diaspora responded immediately to the crisis, by sending money, hygiene kits, medical equipment, and all kinds of urgently needed goods. They also organized large crowd-funding initiatives for vulnerable communities badly affected by the pandemic. Some of them, notably, medical doctors and nurses, returned home to support their colleagues working in overcapacity hospitals and nursing homes. However, according to the experts, some of the Diaspora faced policy and bureaucratic hurdles when travelling back home, due to cross border travel

restrictions because of the pandemic. Likewise, bureaucratic red tape meant that some of the goods that the Diaspora sent home could not be released from ports and reach the people in need. Nonetheless, experts affirm that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the untapped humanitarian potential of the Diaspora in times of crisis. To this end, the experts narrated their close and first-hand observations of the magnitude and the impact of Diaspora humanitarian intervention and how it can be scaled up and enhanced through knowledge input and with the right policies.

The convening power of the Knowledge Platform (KP) made it possible to bring together experts from different countries and regions in Africa to share their first-hand experiences and expertise and to cross-fertilize new ideas on this important topic. The KP facilitates peer-to-peer learning among the experts in the form of South-South exchanges. Peer-to-peer learning is crucial for promoting the exchange of knowledge, experience, and practices as well as network-building in general. The motto of the KP is: organizing a knowledge network for better migration governance in Africa. The goal of the KP is to develop a robust migration governance system in Africa that works to the benefit of all.

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The analysis in this policy brief is informed by the knowledge, experience, and expertise of the African migration policy experts who participated in the eighth webinar organized by the Knowledge Platform for Migration Governance in Africa. The added value of the African migration policy experts in the policy discussion in the field, devoted to strengthening the institutional capacity of migration governance, is tremendous. The experts articulate a less familiar African narrative in the discussion, closely informed by insider observation, local perspective, specific country experience, and deeper understanding of the complexity and challenges of the multi-facets of migration and mobility dynamics on the continent, which receive little policy attention. The experts who participated in the ninth webinar of the Platform represented different partner countries in Africa, namely: Nigeria, Senegal, Morocco, and Tunisia.