

LEVERAGING THE IMPACT OF DIASPORAS ON PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

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OVERVIEW

Diaspora groups vary in their composition, allegiances and experiences, and each group evolves differently over time. Such groups may have a positive, neutral or negative influence on conflict dynamics and development efforts in their countries of origin. Certain groups have exacerbated conflict and impeded development by financing armed groups or other political actors that use violence or exclusion to secure or maintain power. Many others, however, have made a positive contribution to their homelands.

This session focused on the formal and informal mechanisms through which various diaspora groups, including forced and voluntary migrants driven by political, economic, social and conflict-related factors, exercise a positive influence in their countries of origin. Participants discussed opportunities for effective diaspora engagement in political activities, and peace and development processes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Diasporas can facilitate development in their countries of origin, most notably through their remittances and investment in local and national development. For example, annual remittances from the various Somali diasporas are thought to amount to over US\$ 1.2 billion.¹ These are used primarily to fund basic household expenses, such as education, food and clothing, as well as community development and political projects. In Myanmar, remittances are largely used to cover basic household expenses. Formalizing remittance flows and promoting competition between the financial institutions that facilitate international money transfers are two ways in which governments could maximize the economic contribution of their respective diasporas.

Diasporas also play a role in facilitating dialogue and reconciliation. For instance, the Tamil diaspora fuelled the violence in Sri Lanka in many ways, but it was also largely responsible for raising global awareness of the conflict and securing Norwegian mediation. During the 2004–2005 ceasefire, the Sinhalese and Tamil diasporas funded relief and rehabilitation projects in communities with little or no state presence. In 2015, the Government of Sri Lanka introduced dual citizenship to encourage further diaspora engagement and secure a lasting peace.

The ability of the diaspora to transfer knowledge, skills and values between countries can be an asset for peace and development. Diasporas hosted in pluralist societies with good governance and respect for human rights can influence local perceptions of freedom, tolerance and accountability in their country of origin by describing their experiences abroad. More direct means of influence include supporting political parties and civil society organizations. Forum Syd's Somali Diaspora Programme, for example, helps ethnic Somali groups in Sweden facilitate socio-economic development in Somalia.

¹ Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit, Somalia (FSNAU), *Family Ties: Remittances and Livelihoods Support in Puntland and Somaliland* (FSNAU: June 2013).



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Clarify the concept of the diaspora and understand the various contexts in which it can be part of peacebuilding and development processes.** The term covers diverse groups, such as refugees, economic migrants and second- or third-generation migrants (generational diasporas). Clear definitions of the various categories are essential when developing relevant policy on emigration or electoral processes.
- 2. Develop international electoral guidelines for the involvement of diaspora in political and electoral processes in their home countries.** In the absence of explicit international electoral guidelines, different countries have different electoral laws governing the extent to which the diaspora can contribute to political and electoral processes back home. In some countries, such as Eritrea and Zimbabwe, people in the diaspora are prohibited from voting or standing in elections. Zimbabwe also forbids people in the diaspora from funding political parties in the country.
- 3. Use technology to overcome the financial and logistical obstacles associated with voting from abroad.** Options for electronic voting (i-voting), for example, might assist in this area.
- 4. Host countries should support the integration of diaspora groups.** According to the United Nations, the average duration of stay for refugees in exile is 26 years. Diaspora groups that are well integrated into their host countries are better able to support their communities back home through remittances, activism or political involvement.
- 5. Enhance the role of the diaspora in areas of particular interest, such as justice initiatives.** Support from host states for transitional justice processes in countries of origin can be deeply significant for diaspora groups. Many in the Syrian diaspora in Sweden are unhappy that the legal process is disadvantageous to opposition fighters and seemingly benefits pro-regime supporters.
- 6. Civil society groups that support peacebuilding and development initiatives should form strategic partnerships with diaspora groups.** The Somali Youth Development Network, for example, works directly with local communities and engages with members of the Somali diaspora on issues relating to youth participation, peacebuilding and development. Such networks offer contextual understanding of key issues, local buy-in and sustainability.
- 7. Work to change negative public stereotypes of diasporas in host societies.** Populist rhetoric, stereotypes and the criminalization of immigrants reduce the potential impact of diasporas. As a starting point, the public conversation and understanding of diasporas must change.