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# **The Place of Diaspora Associations in Cities**

**Policy Report**

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This report aims to contribute towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular focus towards:

- SDG 5 - Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities Partnerships for the Goals: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

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## **Summary**

City-level policies affect diaspora members' right to association, freedom of expression, access to public space and visibility, all of which impact how they build communities and are included or not in the city. Considering the way in which diasporas enact these rights at the local level goes beyond individual rights to what has been called the "right to the city": a collective right to have power over the process of urbanization. Diaspora members are shaping cities as much as cities are shaping their identities and communities. Through their associations, diaspora members contribute to the well-being of their community and the cultural life and diversity of the city, despite facing challenges with regard to funding and organizational structure. Drawing on case studies of West African diaspora associations in Paris, Dakar and Tangier, this policy report considers the place of diaspora associations in cities and how city governments can take steps to promote inclusion of these associations and their members.

## **Introduction**

Diasporas are often considered as political and economic actors in terms of their relationship to their state of origin, and many of these states have put in place policies to engage their emigrant citizens in national politics and in economic development through remittances. Less attention has been dedicated to the policies that impact diasporas as actors in their place of residence. City-level policies affect these diaspora members' right to association, freedom of expression, access to public space, and visibility, all of which impact how they build communities and are included or not in the city. As transnational networks develop between diaspora communities and their state of origin, these connections are less likely to be at the state level but more at the local level, dependent on personal relationships, and therefore heavily impacted by city-level policies. Increasing attention is given to how migrants shape cities, and how cities shape migrants in turn (IOM 2015). This policy report draws on case studies of West African diaspora associations in Paris, Dakar and Tangier to consider the place of diaspora associations in cities and how city governments can take steps to promote inclusion of these associations and their members.

This report is part of the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility research programme on migration and cities, which explores how global migration is experienced at local levels, as well as examining best practices at the local level that contribute to the good governance of human mobility.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the report contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly goal 10.7 to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration, goal 11 to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, as well as goal 5 on gender equality by considering the gendered dimensions of diaspora organizing.

By examining diaspora activities with a focus on city-level inclusion, this report identifies the contributions made by diaspora associations, the challenges these associations face, and makes recommendations for how municipal governments can promote the inclusion of diasporic groups.

### **The Place of Diasporas in Cities**

Defining diaspora remains a practical challenge for scholars and policymakers. Not all migrants coming from a given state automatically constitute a diaspora; the term carries certain connotations related to the members' ongoing connection with their country of origin. But the word diaspora itself is gaining such widespread usage that it risks becoming a buzzword devoid of meaning. Indeed, Brubaker is critical of the proliferation of the term because "its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted. This has resulted in what one might call a "diaspora" diaspora'- a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space" (2005, 1). Diaspora is now a category that can be applied to nearly any spatially dispersed group. As the term becomes so stretched, it loses its power to identify what is distinct about the groups called diasporas. To re-endow the term with some distinctive meaning, Brubaker identifies three key elements of a diaspora: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance, that is, preserving a group identity separate from the host society over time. He further suggests a conception of diaspora not based on quantifiable membership, but as a category of practice, such as diasporic claims or actions, which is certainly applicable to diaspora associations.

Such diasporic actions have political connotations depending on the relationship between the state and its citizens abroad and immigrants' relationships to the society in which they live. According to Clifford "the term diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement" (1994, 308). The term diaspora is an active category evoking the struggle of communities living outside their state of origin to define themselves, whether they are abroad because of displacement or voluntarily.

A diaspora is not a static group; it is a dynamically constructed through practice, therefore diasporas are in a constant state of transformation. The initial factor bringing diasporas

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://gcm.unu.edu/research/migration-and-cities.html#outline> for more information on the UNU-GCM research programme on migration and cities

together is a common origin, real or imagined, based on nation, language, ethnicity, or religion. The way a diaspora community forms both influences and is influenced by the urban setting in which that is happening. Additionally, diasporas are not homogenous or all-inclusive groups. Within a diaspora, there may be a mix of ethnicities, religions, and other identities. Nor are diasporas all-inclusive: depending on conditions in a place of residence, diaspora communities may not include people from all economic classes or legal statuses.

In regards to African diasporas, much of the existing literature has focused on the diaspora descended from the slave trade, but increasing attention is now directed towards new African diasporas originating from more recent migration flows (Koser 2003). However, this literature tends to focus on remittances and political practices rather than on inclusion of these diasporas in their places of residence. This report considers contemporary West African diaspora which meet the aforementioned criteria set out by Brubaker of dispersion, homeland orientation, and preserving a group identity, and how they form associations to enact their identities and their rights.

Diasporas organize in associations to provide them with a structure through which to share their cultural identity, show solidarity between each other, and make claims for their rights in the public sphere. These rights-claiming actions are simultaneously happening at the sub-national and transnational levels, but largely bypass the nation-state (Sassen 2002). Diaspora associations do everyday actions in the cities where they are based while being connected transnationally to their homeland as well as to various other diaspora associations. Even though most immigrants may not be members of associations, the way in which these associations exist reveals much about the relationship of immigrants to the state, because “immigrant and minority organizations also play a key role in mobilizing dispersed immigrants with common origins and cultural backgrounds to make claims upon the state by engaging in contentious politics in the public arena” (Castañeda 2012, 57). In cities without a supportive environment for migrant and diaspora organizations, immigrants face greater challenges to organize and make right claims. When diaspora members do participate in the public life of a city and enact their rights, they can be considered to be acting as citizens even if they do not have that legal status (Isin and Nielsen 2008).

Considering the way in which diasporas enact certain rights (to assembly, freedom of speech, etc) at the local level goes beyond these individual rights to what has been called the collective “right to the city”. Building upon Henri Lefebvre’s (1968) conception of a “right to the city”, David Harvey explains this as “a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire” (2008). It goes beyond an individual right of access to the city; rather the right to the city is a collective one to have power over the process of urbanization. This concept has begun to gain traction at the global political level: the New Urban Agenda<sup>2</sup> includes a vision of the right to the city as “the equal use and enjoyment of

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<sup>2</sup> The New Urban Agenda is an action-oriented document on urbanization that aims to support the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development; especially SDG 11 - making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and

cities and human settlements, seeking to promote inclusivity and ensure that all inhabitants, of present and future generations, without discrimination of any kind, are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements to foster prosperity and quality of life for all.”

Immigrants, as members of the city, are included in the right to the city. Furthermore, in order for diasporas to form and flourish, Robin Finlay argues that a *diasporic* right to the city must be fulfilled, which means “the right to transform and produce urban space and the right to specialise and display distinctive identities” (2017, 3).<sup>3</sup> Various diaspora associations from West African countries in the urban centers of Dakar, Paris and Tangier illustrate how such associations organize and participate to achieve inclusion in the city.

### **Case Studies: Dakar, Tangier and Paris**

Paris, Dakar and Tangier are cities bound together by the history of French colonialism. The continuing existence of the French education and legal systems throughout West Africa, and economic connections between these states, have contributed to the migratory networks that connect these cities. Each has an identity in terms of the migration, though this is becoming increasingly blurred. Paris is an important destination city for migrants from former African colonies, and there are long established diaspora communities that have developed neighborhood identities and active associations. Simultaneously, Paris is struggling to welcome new migrants who are in irregular legal situations, some of whom are refugees and asylum seekers. Seen from Europe, Dakar is often considered a city of origin, but in fact has a double identity as a destination city for many migrants coming from other countries in West Africa, and even a transit city as some of these migrants move on, often towards Europe. Tangier, on the other hand, is thought of by many West Africans themselves as a transit city on the way to Europe. But as European border polices become stricter, journeys become riskier, and more migrants struggle to get across the Mediterranean. Therefore, Tangier has a growing sub-Saharan migrant population residing there and struggling to find its place. In each of these cities, immigrants from across West Africa have organized in diaspora associations. The challenges diaspora groups face across these localities are diverse, and they have developed unique strategies to enable them to participate in public life that could be furthered by supportive city-level policies.

This policy report draws on research conducted with 15 diaspora associations in these three cities. Associations were identified through their online presence and by word-of-mouth and include general associations, women’s associations, and student associations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders of associations, and participant observation was done and various association meetings and public events.

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sustainable. It was adopted at the UN Habitat II Conference in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016. See: <http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

<sup>3</sup> De Certeau explains space as something that occurs “composed of intersections of mobile elements”, as opposed to place, which exists as a stable configuration of positions. Thus, his assertion that “space is practiced place” (1984, 117). Cities are composed of places that become spaces as people perform their everyday lives. For diaspora members, transforming urban place into space is part of enacting their right to the city.

## **Contributions of Diaspora associations**

Diasporic communities contribute to the diversity of the cities in which they live. Through their associations, diaspora members contribute to the well-being of their community and the cultural life of the city.

### **Culture and community**

West African diaspora associations often convene around national identity, though there also exist groups based on religious, ethnic or gender identities. One key event for diaspora associations based on national identity is the cultural day, which is an annual event for many associations in Paris, Dakar, and Tangier. Each association has its own way of organizing the event, which typically includes food, music, dancing, and a traditional fashion show.

In Dakar, the Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals organizes their cultural day in cooperation with the Cape Verde diaspora. According to the vice president of the Ivoirian association, the two diasporas formed this partnership spontaneously after members of the Cape Verdean community attended an event organized by the Ivoirian community. The partnership is strategic because the Ivoirians consider the Cape Verdean community to be more established in Dakar and therefore has more experience and connections to organize a big event, and a joint event creates links between the communities and entices even more members of the public to participate. Similar cooperation takes place in an informal way between the Togolese and Beninese communities in Dakar because they share many cultural traditions and previously neither community was large enough to organize on its own.

The Union of Senegalese Students and Interns in Tangier cooperates with the broader Senegalese community to organize cultural events, through this was not always the case. "Before, there was a misunderstanding between the community," one student explained. "They thought we were elitist, while some students thought they were uneducated." In 2017, Mandiaye, the new president of the Union of Senegalese Students and Interns reached out to the general Senegalese association and later that year, for the first time, the two associations collaborated to organize an event. Ever since they have been in contact and plan to work together more in the future. "Now we know them, they're like our mothers here," says Mandiaye. Such relationships within the diaspora are important for members to feel included in the community.

Many associations explain that cultural days are an essential way to share their cultural identity with other people in the city. Malian students in Dakar go so far as to charge admission to their cultural day for Malians while others enter for free to encourage attendance from outside the community. Cultural days are an important way for diaspora members to perform their homeland traditions in the public space, asserting that the culture they brought from their country of origin has a place in their country of residence. This practice contributes to their building a new identity as a diaspora, comprising elements of their homeland and new place of residence. The way in which diaspora members are

able to perform their cultural traditions in a new city influences not only how they express their diasporic identity, but also the identity of the city itself in how it promotes diversity.

### **Solidarity**

In addition to the cultural activities of diaspora associations, they also serve as spaces of solidarity among people from a common country of origin. Across West Africa, in Dakar in particular, “migrants increasingly depend on others when arriving in the city: migrants in a dependent status are more and more numerous and they stay dependent longer. For instance, in Dakar, 33% of migrants who arrived during the 1960s stayed with friends or family, as compared to 60% of migrants of the 1980s” (Beauchemin and Bocquier 2004). Such dependence on family, friends, or countrymen often takes place within diaspora associations that have developed structured practices of solidarity.

Solidarity funds made available to members of the association are one common practice. For instance, the solidarity fund of the Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals in Dakar enables members to travel back to Côte d’Ivoire in case of a family emergency and pay back the funds at a later date. The Council of Nigeriens in Paris has developed a similar fund, and for example it will lend students money to pay their university fees. Such financial assistance enables immigrants to continue building their lives in their country of residence even when they face unexpected financial difficulties.

Solidarity also extends to newly arrived migrants without legal status. In Paris, the Council of Nigeriens is called upon by NGOs to translate and serve as cultural mediators for other Nigeriens and helps orient them toward organizations that assist migrants without legal status. Diaspora associations even express solidarity with those who are not interested in joining the association. Khady, the leader of the Association of Senegalese Nationals in Tangier, explains that for Senegalese migrants transiting through Tangier in an attempt to get to Europe, participating in the association “doesn’t interest them at all, they will never integrate. They come ask us for information and we give it to them with pleasure, because they’re our brothers and sisters after all.” Those migrants face great difficulties trying to reach Europe and often live in precarious conditions outside of Tangier, so the pan-African student association expresses its solidarity by running collections for clothing, food, and other essential items for these migrants. Such examples show that there is potential for cooperation between organizations that provide aid to migrants and diaspora groups to co-construct city-level responses to new migrant arrivals.

### **Common Challenges**

Diaspora associations manage these activities despite the challenges they face. Across all three cities, leaders of diaspora associations identified similar difficulties regarding funding and organizational structure, as well as inclusion across the diaspora.

### **Funding**

Funding is a primary concern, because without sufficient funds diaspora associations have difficulties to run activities and participate in the life of the city. Two funding strategies,

utilised by the majority of associations across all three cities, are membership dues and admission to events. In Dakar, another common practice is to seek out corporate sponsorships, often from small businesses run by someone who belongs to the diaspora in question. In Tangier, this strategy is also used: the pan-African student association annually receives two plane tickets from Royal Air Maroc to any destination in Africa and sells lottery entries to win the tickets. Partnerships with other civil society groups can also be used to access funding. The Association of Senegalese Nationals in Tangier is unable to receive funding directly because it is not formally registered, but through a partnership with CEFA (European Committee for Training and Agriculture), an Italian NGO, they participated in a project to build the capacity of migrants to advocate for their rights. Such partnerships depend on diaspora associations being able to connect with other associations present in the city.

Governments of the country of origin and the country of residence are another potential funding source. The Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals in Dakar draws on a fund that the President of Côte d'Ivoire established for them but does not receive any continued financial support from the embassy. Local governments often have funding available for associations present in the city, but diaspora associations cannot always access these funds. Access to such funds is restricted to associations that are formally registered, which also means the leaders must have regular immigration status. The Beninese association in Dakar has never asked the local government for money, but said if they did they would probably receive it. They have never asked because they assume it is a complicated process and decided they can manage with what they have from other sources. This lack of awareness of funding modalities is an indication that local governments could proactively provide more information and assistance to enable eligible associations to access public funds. The funding available for student associations in Paris is a good example: the President of the Association of Malian Students in the Paris Region explains that they can apply for dedicated funds available to all student associations, and universities disseminate information on how to access those resources.

### **Structure and Inclusion**

Diasporas are diverse populations, therefore who is included in various diaspora organizations can pose a challenge. The structure of diaspora associations impacts who is able to participate and how the association is positioned within the city. Often the most marginalized migrants face the most barriers to inclusion, even within diaspora communities. Immigrants who are facing difficulties to find work or housing may not participate in associations because they have more urgent priorities. Those without regular legal status may be reluctant to take part in public activities for fear of potential legal consequences. Women may want to participate but be limited by restrictive gender norms. Students are sometimes overlooked because they are seen as temporary migrants. This section highlights some of these challenges as well as the solutions some associations have adopted.

The legal circumstances for migrants in each city influence the composition of diaspora associations. In Paris, because of the strict immigration controls into France, formal diaspora associations tend to include primarily educated migrants with regular legal status but not immigrants in precarious legal situations. In Dakar, thanks to freedom of movement in West Africa, a broader cross section of immigrants is included in diaspora associations. For example, the Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals includes many people working in informal sectors and even has sections for people in those sectors to connect in order to share strategies and resources. Tangier has the most precarious climate for migrants, so associations tend to be less formally organized and more inclusive of anyone interested, but migrants who do not intend to stay do not have incentive to participate. Because of the precarious legal situation of many migrants in Tangier, many associations, including those of Senegalese and Guinean diasporas, cannot formally register as an association because not all the members of its organizing team are legal residents of Morocco. Being legally registered as a non-profit association is often a precondition for accessing public funds.

With the increasing feminization of migration<sup>4</sup>, female immigrants are becoming more visible and increasing their role in diaspora associations. Although many of the activities diaspora organize are empowering for immigrants, some also reproduce certain restrictive gender norms. Many diaspora associations note that it is typically the female members who cook for events and who do the dances and fashion shows at cultural days. In the spring of 2018, the male president of the Tangier section of the Union of Senegalese Students and Interns in Tangier created a Women's Committee to facilitate women's work on certain events, notably cooking and hospitality. Despite the evident gender bias, Sokhna, who leads the aforementioned Women's Committee, is pleased with her role. "I didn't see myself as a leader," she said, "but this has given me that experience and I'm happy with that."

Some migrant women notice the need for associations that serve them and have taken the initiative to start both informal and formal groups. In Tangier, the Association of Senegalese Nationals was started by women who formed it as a social group to cook and dance, and it has now expanded to include any interested Senegalese immigrants. The association, though not formally registered, is able to finance itself when the women are paid to dance at various cultural events across Morocco. Women in the Beninese community in Dakar began their activities in a similar informal fashion, and now they are participating in the creation of an umbrella association for the whole diaspora. In Paris, women members of the Council of Nigeriens of France determined that they needed an association to address their concerns and created one under the auspices of the existing Council. Such dedicated women's spaces are empowering for female immigrants<sup>5</sup>. The woman who is the head of the Club of Ivoirian Women in Dakar was recognized for her leadership by being elected leader of the Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals in Dakar. In all these cases, it is women who are longer-term residents of the city who have started the associations, and

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/global-feminization-migration-past-present-and-future> for a history of the feminization of migration.

<sup>5</sup> See Pescinski 2015 for further information on immigrant women's associations and political participation.

indeed “women who are more ‘settled’ or more secure in terms of legal status, language skills and economic conditions often emerge as advocates to the larger community” (Al-Ali 2003, 18). City polices can promote this kind of female leadership: in cities where there are local programmes of intercultural mediation, migrant women who are involved as mediators can go on to play a key role in creating women’s diaspora associations (Bello 2015).

Students are a vital but often overlooked group in West African diaspora populations. Although they are currently living in a given city and unite based on their common status as students, they are not necessarily included in broader diaspora communities or the life of the city. They often form diaspora student associations themselves. What sets these associations apart from the numerous other student associations that exist in universities is the way they frame their activities based on a common national origin. Across Paris, Dakar and Tangier, student diaspora associations share two common objectives: 1) to promote social cohesion and share culture among students from their country, and 2) to support those students in the practical aspects of their lives in a new country.

Students are also aware of the broader diaspora, and frequently they are ones taking the initiative to integrate their associations into that community. Having links to the broader diaspora community enables students to seek guidance from more established immigrants from their country and can also help students to network for eventual internships and jobs. This also connects them to a community once they graduate, if they decide to stay in the country. Students are often the ones making the effort to more formally structure a relationship between student associations and other diaspora associations. Virgil, a student from Benin who has lived in Dakar for six years, is working with other Beninese diaspora members to establish a section of the High Counsel of Beninese Abroad in Dakar to bring together various existing diaspora groups, including students. The president of the Club of Nigerian Students and Interns in Senegal is leading an effort to do the same for the Nigerien diaspora.

Despite the challenges in bringing together the diverse immigrants that make up West African diasporas, many groups are making the effort to identify points of convergence and find strength in joint efforts. One way to do so is to maintain the dedicated associations for women, students, and other specific groups within the broader network of the diaspora as a whole.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Diaspora associations actively participate in the life of the city, contributing to transformations of urban spaces and claiming their rights to find inclusion in the city. The existence of such associations facilitates immigrants making rights claims and can also open the door to further inclusion at the local level, for instance through political participation. City governments are encouraged to take the following actions to promote the inclusion of diasporic communities:

- Promote a diasporic right to the city by ensuring that the human rights to the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression are fulfilled for immigrants. This can be facilitated by including diaspora voices in public spaces and city events.
- Simplify administrative steps for diaspora associations, including the process to register associations, reserve public spaces, and apply for public funding. Cities governments can better enable diaspora associations to use resources that are already available to them by running workshops and publicizing information on how legally establish an association and seek funding (both public and private), with outreach dedicated to immigrants and diaspora groups available in various languages. Increasing funding available to diaspora associations is desirable, but when this is not possible local governments may facilitate access to public spaces that can be used free of charge for events and meetings.
- Include diaspora associations in conversations about local policy and in city-to-city partnerships. For example, in a local district of Dakar, a strategic planning workshop was recently convened on migration, development and youth employment. It was co-organized by NGOs in a municipality in Italy where there is a significant Senegalese diaspora, and it included members of the Senegalese diaspora, returned migrants, and local authorities. Such workshops are an ideal space to include representatives from diaspora associations. Many diaspora members do not have political rights as citizens, and inclusion in such consultations enables them to have a voice in the local policies that directly impact them. Diasporas should be included in consultations beyond migration policy, for example education and housing, because as city residents all local policy is relevant to them. Workshops and consultations should be organized with a view to gender balance and including the voices and concerns of women.
- Promote inclusion of female migrants by supporting women's diaspora associations and encouraging their participation in other diaspora associations. Strategies include empowering women leaders by making trainings and resources available to them, as well as funding for women's initiatives.
- Facilitate connections between diaspora associations and other city associations. This can begin with an action as simple as maintaining an up-to-date database of registered associations active in the city, their mission, and their contact information. Local governments can also organize forums and consultations with associations, including diaspora associations, to enable them to network and exchange knowledge.

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