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Facilitating Transnational Connections between Diaspora Associations

Policy Report

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

• 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.

• SDG 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Executive Summary

Transnational connections are a central component of diasporic communities. Diaspora members participate in transnational networks that link people in their country of origin, country of residence, and perhaps additional countries where members of the diaspora are present. Such connections are formed not only between individuals, but also between associations. When diasporic communities form associations, these associations contribute to the development of transnational networks that have economic, political, and social impact in both the country of origin and countries of residence. This policy report, based on case studies in Paris, Dakar and Tangier, considers the transnational connections between West African diaspora associations and how such connections can be facilitated to empower diaspora associations.

Introduction

Diaspora members often participate in transnational networks that link their country of origin, country of residence, and perhaps additional countries where members of the diaspora are present. Networks that develop transnationally between diaspora communities start at the local level where individuals are resident. Therefore, in addition to state-level policies that govern people's mobility, city-level policies are also influential in how these groups connect. Transnational networks enable diaspora associations to make contributions to their countries of origin economically, politically, and through advocacy. This policy report, based on case studies in Paris, Dakar and Tangier, considers the transnational connections between West African diaspora associations and how such connections can be facilitated to empower diaspora associations and promote their inclusion.

This report contributes to the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility's research programme on Migration and Cities[1], which focuses on experiences of international migration at the local level and how municipal policies can facilitate the good governance of human mobility. It also contributes to the UN-wide Sustainable Development Agenda, specifically goal 10.7 to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration,

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[1] See https://gcm.unu.edu/research/migration-and-cities.html#outline

goal 11 to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, and goal 16 to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

Transnational Diaspora Networks

Transnational connections are a central component of diasporic communities. Much of the existing literature on transnationalism is linked to migration since the two phenomena are implicitly connected. Glick Schiller et al define transnationalism as "the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (1992, 26). Transnationalism is dynamic process that migrants engage in as they act simultaneously as members in both their state of origin and in their state of residence. As they build these networks, they construct a transnational field that connects people and practices across various physical locations. New technologies facilitate the density of transnational connections, as communication and travel become faster and less costly.

Identity is a central feature of migrant transnationalism: Vertovec explains that "many peoples' transnational networks are grounded upon the perception that they share some form of common identity, often based upon a place of origin and the cultural and linguistic traits associated with it. Such networks are marked by patterns of communication or exchange of resources and information along with participation in socio-cultural and political activities" (Vertovec 573). Transnationalism is an inevitable outcome of the world economic system that facilitates increasing global exchanges of people, goods, and ideas. Cultural flows that are part of this system have social relations embedded in them, and therefore migrants are key transnational actors engaging in these social relations (Glick Schiller et al 1992).

When diasporic communities form associations, these associations contribute to the development of transnational networks. Different practices take place within these networks: diaspora associations may contribute to economic development in their country of origin through remittances[2], they may participate politically, they may conduct advocacy, among other practices. In terms of economic and political engagement with their countries of origin, these efforts can be both bottom-up, initiated by diaspora members/ associations themselves, or top-down through engagement policies implemented by states of origin. While academic literature and policy have given attention to diaspora associations' economic and political transnational practices, the role of diaspora associations in transnational advocacy networks has been given less attention. A transnational advocacy network, as defined by Keck and Sikkink, "includes those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (1999, 89). Such a network is bound by values that transcend geographic boundaries and cultural norms, and these values are shared, not imposed by one group on another. Therefore, even where

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[2] For more information on diaspora economic remittances, see the International Organization for Migration's recent paper: https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ODG/GCM/IOM-Thematic-Paper-Remittances.pdf

north-south partnerships exist in such networks, particularly those that include diasporas, it is not a case of colonialist imposition of values and ideas, but a horizontal exchange in which all parties involved both contribute and gain. These networks are almost exclusively formed in a bottom up manner, rather than initiated by the state.

In considering the ways in which diaspora associations form and participate in transnational networks, it is important to recognize that diasporas are not homogenous. Within a diaspora, migrants may have multiple national, religious and ethnic identities, belong to different professions and economic classes, and have different historical experiences of migration. Diaspora associations may include a diversity of members, but there may also be intra-diaspora conflicts between associations with differing views and priorities (Vertovec 2005). The associations with the most funding and visibility tend to dominate, but they may not represent the whole picture.

In addition to the ways in which diaspora members make valuable contributions to their countries of origin through economic and political transnational activities, they make contributions to both their state of origin and community of residence through transnational activism. Case studies of West African diaspora associations in Paris, Dakar, and Tangier illustrate how facilitating these transnational connections can enable diaspora associations to further make such contributions.

Case studies: Connections between diaspora associations in Dakar, Tangier and Paris

This policy report draws on research conducted with 15 diaspora associations in Paris, Dakar and Tangier. Although each city has a different composition in terms of the migrant population present, the migratory networks that connect these cities have developed in part through economic connections between these states, as well as the historical legacy of French colonialism. Diaspora associations included in the research 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.

Diaspora associations often reference their imagined connection to the diaspora elsewhere and to the homeland. But the actual transnational collaboration that exists between diaspora associations depends on the structure of such associations and their access to resources.

In some contexts, diaspora associations face restrictions that make it nearly impossible for them to be involved in any consistent way in transnational networks. In Tangier, for example, the president of the Guinean community lamented that the association is unable to collaborate with Guinean diaspora elsewhere. Because associations face such difficulties to register at the local level, and many individuals are in such precarious situations themselves, that sustained transnational connections with other diaspora associations are unable to flourish. Policies that

enable diaspora associations to exist at the local level are a first step in enabling these associations to connect transnationally.

Even when associations are not formally connected, individuals in the diaspora maintain transnational connections through personal relationships. Indeed, the majority of contact between diaspora members in different countries and people in the country of origin is through personal connections. Where more structured diaspora associations exist, such personal connections may be the first step to facilitate cooperation between associations. In Dakar, the Federation of Clubs of Ivoirian Nationals has informal ties to the Ivoirian community in Mauritania through personal contact with people who have migrated there from Dakar. The association attempted to use these personal relationships as a starting point for collaboration, but so far these efforts have been unsuccessful, perhaps because in Mauritania the diaspora not structured in a formal association. In other cases this is more successful: the Council of Nigeriens of France was able to build upon personal connections to form a common association for members of the Nigerien diaspora across France, and is currently working to do the same across Europe. Uniting in such a way gives the diaspora more visibility and its voice more weight when they are acting publicly to claim their rights.

Many governments in countries of origin attempt to put in place a structure that federates diaspora associations across countries of residence as part of their diaspora engagement policies (Gamlen 2008). For example, in Benin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation is responsible for the High Council of Beninese Abroad. The Beninese community in Dakar is in the process of organizing itself and updating its statutes to adhere to this body in order to be able to collaborate more easily with the Beninese diaspora elsewhere and participate in consultations the government holds with the diaspora. However, no resources, financial or logistical, were made available to assist the diaspora in this process. Although such a structure guarantees that diaspora associations have a voice in the government of their country of origin, there is a risk in granting legitimacy only to recognized member associations while marginalizing associations that choose not to participate. This can be particularly damaging to female diaspora members, who are less represented in the leadership of diaspora organizations, and whose women's associations may not be given the same legitimacy as umbrella organizations.

In other cases, diaspora associations take it upon themselves to develop a formal structure with representation across different countries. For example, CodiTogo (the Coalition of the Togolese Diaspora for Democracy) intends to serve as a platform to bring together all the actors of the Togolese diaspora to advocate together to bring democracy to Togo. Currently there are member associations in 11 countries across Africa, Europe and North America. An initial in-person meeting was held in Paris in 2017, and another meeting was held in Dakar in March 2018. Organizing in-person meetings is reserved for major events, such as the initial meeting to define the coalition and the second meeting to further develop objectives and elect

the board. Otherwise, the majority of work takes place virtually, through emails, WhatsApp, and the website[3]. Technology plays an extremely important role in enabling their activities. In the case of the Togolese diaspora, such structure and collaboration are essential because they are contesting the current undemocratic Togolese government.

The Guinean diaspora in Paris, on the other hand, participates in a transnational advocacy network that is less formally structured but also dedicated to a common cause. A key event in the country's recent history, the massacre of pro-democracy protestors on 28 September 2009[4], served as a rallying point for many diaspora associations that are now advocating for justice, human rights and democracy in Guinea. Conducting such activism from abroad is a strategic choice, because one diaspora member explained that "for the defense of human rights it's easier for Guineans to act from abroad". Guinean associations across Europe, Africa, and North America coordinate demonstrations and promote each other's activities on social media, once again illustrating the power of technology. When diaspora associations conduct advocacy from abroad, individual diaspora members using their rights as residents in their country of origin, which can empower them to feel more included in that country. Additionally, such transnational advocacy networks include not only diaspora associations, but also other NGOs dedicated to the same cause. In Paris, the Guinean diaspora has direct access to the Amnesty International West Africa research office and the International Federation for Human Rights, which collaborate with the diaspora to amplify their advocacy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Increased transnational coordination between diaspora associations build solidarity and enable diaspora groups to share strategies and best practices to make political, economic and social contributions in countries of origin and residence. The following recommendations are intended for diaspora associations, local governments, and national governments, to facilitate increased transnational cooperation between diaspora associations.

- Local governments can facilitate the formation of diaspora associations and their work by simplifying administrative steps, including the process to register associations, reserve public spaces, and apply for public funding. As seen in the case study, when diaspora associations are unable to formally register, it is more difficult for them to do activities locally and more difficult for them to connect to other diaspora associations transnationally.
- Country of origin governments can promote diaspora engagement by organizing strategic consultations with diaspora members in states with active associations (as the Beninese government did recently in Paris). Such consultations should seek to include diverse representation of the diaspora, with particular attention to gender balance in

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[3] See http://www.coditogo.org/
[4] See the Human Rights Watch Report: https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/12/05/waiting-justice/accountability-guineas-courts-september-28-2009-stadium-massacre

order to ensure that women's economic, political, and advocacy priorities are given due consideration. Beyond single-country consultations, governments can organize virtual consultations with associations in multiple countries, which can also serve to build connections between these groups.

- To overcome the challenge of connecting with other diaspora associations, active groups can increase visibility and collaboration through strategic use of technology. Diaspora associations themselves can do this by maintaining up-to-date webpages and social media groups with phone and email contact information, as well as current activities. This will enable other diaspora groups and civil society organizations to identify relevant partners. Meetings and consultations involving diaspora organizations across multiple countries can be held virtually, or include a virtual component, to enable participation of diaspora associations who otherwise would not be able to attend in person due to scheduling or financial limitations.

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