
ENGAGING THE DIASPORA AS VOLUNTEERS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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THIS ARTICLE LOOKS AT THE GROWING INTEGRATION OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE by members of diaspora communities in international development programs. Moving from the major role of financial support through remittances, the diaspora now seeks a more active role in strengthening the social and economic development of their home countries. The first part of this article looks at the experiences of two organizations that work to increase the supply of human resources available for economic development and at the recently developed diaspora components to their programs. The second part examines the experience of a regional professional health association in sub-Saharan Africa as it works towards identifying ways in which the diaspora can assist in improving healthcare through meeting the demands for additional skilled professionals. The final section outlines some of the issues to be pursued in integrating diaspora associations into international development.

BACKGROUND

Migration of peoples from one country to another and one part of the globe to another is a fact of life in today's world. More than 90 million migrants are currently estimated to be living outside of their countries of origin. They help to fill critical labour gaps in richer economies and to reduce unemployment and demographic pressures in poorer countries. Low-skilled migration can increase labour market participation and income; high-skilled migration can increase and help build knowledge in countries of origin.

Ongoing migration has led to the formation of diaspora communities in many countries around the world, including Canada. While not a new phenomenon, many of the new diaspora communities in Canada are coming from the developing world, and, like older diasporas, retain links to their countries of origin.¹ The definition of what a diaspora is or who belongs to a diaspora community is not clear. For the purposes of this article, a member of the diaspora is someone whose country of origin is different than the one in which he or she resides and who has family, historical, cultural, or language links with his or her country of origin. A diaspora association is a formal organization whose purpose is to bring people together based upon a shared affinity with a specific country or culture of origin.

Diaspora communities in Canada and elsewhere give to their countries of origin in many different ways. These donations cover the gamut from time and energy, to more tangible support in the form of funding for community development projects, pro bono

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professional advice to institutions in the countries of origin, and informal volunteer work. Many families and individuals in various communities send funds to families in their countries of origin. These remittances make up a significant proportion of the GNP of some developing countries. According to the IMF, in 2008, the global flow of remittances reached US\$330 billion, with the majority of money going to developing countries (Ratha, 2009, p. 30). These donations reflect the ongoing ties, both emotional and practical, between diaspora communities and their countries of origin. At the same time, there is a demand in developing countries for human as well as financial resources to support their development process.

The “brain drain” of skilled professionals to the West is adding significantly to the lack of professional human resources in the developing world. This is particularly true in Africa, where the need for skilled human resources has become more glaringly apparent with the advent of the HIV pandemic and the increased capacity needed for HIV prevention and the distribution of anti-retroviral drugs. As the health profession, community workers, and family members undertook to address the broad impact of the disease, the related illnesses of TB and malaria became more visible and also needed to be acted upon. Responding to these challenges put increasing demands on national health care systems, which highlighted the severe staff shortages due to migration. The need to replace and stem this tide became increasingly recognized as an issue for strengthening health systems.

Over the past decade, as national governments looked for ways to reduce the “brain drain,” they became aware of the potential for diaspora involvement in meeting development needs. This reflected a change in thinking from “brain drain” to “brain exchange” (Tapsoba, 2000; International Organization of Migration, 2000). National governments, as well as regional and multilateral institutions, are developing programs with the specific purpose of increasing involvement and contributions by the global diaspora. The African Union announced that it would formally include Africans of the Diaspora as a sixth region of its organizational structure (World Bank, 2007). Global organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are integrating diaspora input into their planning and discussions. They are also examining what national governments can do to create enabling environments for diaspora involvement and made recommendations identifying ways to strengthen the impact of remittances in country development and increase the “brain exchange” with the diaspora community. The European Commission is also examining ways to create two-way flows of human, social, intellectual, political, cultural, and financial capital flows by integrating Diaspora linkages into bilateral agreements with African states.

RESPONDING TO THE “BRAIN DRAIN”: MOBILIZING THE SUPPLY OF HUMAN RESOURCES

VSO UK and CUSO-VSO have developed programs to address the impact of the brain drain. These nonprofit organizations send people to work with organizations in developing countries and are funded by national international development agencies (like CIDA) as well as by private fundraising.

Both organizations have programs to support diaspora members and associations in contributing to economic and social developments in their countries of origin through

work on community development projects and providing specialist advice to home organizations (Rockcliffe, 2011). They recognize that integrating diaspora communities into the broader development sector increases potential for long-term sustainability as they frequently can best make efficient direct links with their own communities. Such people often have contacts and the ability to undertake work independent of international aid organizations.

Both organizations create links between diaspora members and organizations in their countries of origin, integrate the work into the broader development framework, and identify development needs and resources in order to recruit volunteers. One component of both programs is strengthening the organizational capacity of the diaspora organizations within the UK and Canada so that they can become effective partners with organizations in their countries of origin.

While VSO UK and CUSO-VSO share the same goals in supporting diaspora engagement, they work toward these goals in different ways. Their programs are quite different in scale and the approach taken with diaspora communities. VSO UK has built partnerships with 22 diaspora organizations in the UK since 2005 and over the following three-year period sent 600 diaspora members for short-term placements, ranging from one week to one year (Grover, 2009).

CUSO-VSO began its diaspora project in 2007. The work started with the Guyanese diaspora of Canada and focused on education and disabilities in Guyana. Later, VSO-CUSO started a project with VSO Ethiopia and the Canadian organization Academics for Higher Education and Development. The focus was on resources for training medical students. CUSO-VSO subsequently received additional funding for Canadian diaspora associations to participate in on-going programs in Rwanda, Nigeria, and Jamaica.

As noted above, the approach taken by each organization is different. VSO UK focuses on building the capacity of the diaspora organizations in the UK so that they can manage their own programs. The diaspora organizations are responsible for choosing their partners in the host country, selecting the development focus, and identifying the skills needed. They are also responsible for recruiting, training, and managing volunteers from the diaspora community in the UK and managing their relationship with the overseas partners. The UK diaspora organizations have the option of working with the VSO UK program office in their country of origin or working independently. VSO UK provides the training needed to recruit and send international volunteers, provide support in country, and provide other support as requested.

A member of the Burmese Diaspora in Canada, from the organization Canadian Friends of Burma, returned as a volunteer both to Burma and to the refugee camp in Thailand where he had lived for a number of years. He carried out a study to determine the feasibility of a program to strengthen the capacity of organizations along the Thai-Burmese border and to build links between them and Diaspora communities in North America. He recommended that CUSO-VSO be more flexible about formal qualifications for the program, underlining that cultural understanding and experience in the region are the crucial factors for success.

The Canadian CUSO-VSO uses a different approach. Headquarters staff work with organization staff in offices in the country of origin to identify needs within the organization's plans for each country, identify the type of placements needed, and undertake recruitment, training, and placement of the diaspora volunteers. The needs identified must correspond to the national development plans of the countries involved. These

volunteers are managed by CUSO-VSO staff in country. The responsibility of the Canadian diaspora is to advise CUSO-VSO regarding the country context and to recommend potential partners. It also markets the recruitment process within the community. While the responsibility for the program by Canadian diaspora organizations differs from the approach used in the UK, in both countries, diaspora organizations benefit from working with a well-respected international organization.

DEMAND FOR HUMAN RESOURCES

The Southern Africa Network of Nurses and Midwives (SANNAM), a professional association representing nurses and midwives in 14 southern Africa countries, is acutely aware of the impact of shortages in human health resources as a result of the “brain drain.” SANNAM, in partnership with several Canadian development organizations,² examined the feasibility of integrating members of the Africa-Canada diasporas into initiatives to strengthen the health sector in member countries. In Canada, this initiative was facilitated by members of the African Diaspora who were enthusiastic about addressing these health care issues. SANNAM members suggested two key areas as priorities for diaspora participation: (a) increasing health human resources to deliver patient care, and (2) increasing access to training in order to upgrade skills.

INCREASING HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCES

The shortage of health workers in sub-Saharan public health systems is so severe that training programs are unable to meet the need. Consequently, there is a need to obtain supplementary staff, and short-term placements (three to six months) in sufficient numbers could reduce some of the current pressures. As with all human resource placements, the selection and management of diaspora volunteers plays a crucial role in success. Based on previous experience, it was recognized that it is especially important to negotiate working relationships between health workers who remained at “home” and those who went “overseas.” Antagonism can develop in situations where visiting Diaspora members receive better benefits and more attention than those who have been working in difficult situations for a long time and who view diaspora members as “having had it easy” in the west. A selection criterion that can identify those who seek to “assist” permanent staff and who appreciate the unique opportunity to contribute to health (despite the working conditions) can increase the likelihood of successful placements. Another important selection criterion needs to be level of experience. As respect for “elders” is an important cultural value, the age and experience of diaspora volunteers is important. Volunteers are needed who have extensive experience both within the health field and in working with people. The capacity of diaspora members to return to their home country for three to six months could be a challenge due to family and work commitments. However, a study found that health workers were able and willing to return for these longer periods of time (Belai, 2007).

INCREASING ACCESS TO TRAINING

As a result of the growth of the Internet, diaspora members are now able to communicate with groups and individuals in their home countries in a way previously inconceivable. This facilitates connectedness as well as a commitment that is sustained and immediate.

Formalizing a process so that health workers can increase their access to a variety of skills-building activities (e.g., training, discussions, mentorship partners, advice, etc.) can expand and strengthen the capacity of health workers. Such initiatives, currently underway, could be expanded by using research centres and members of the diaspora.

The sharing of information and knowledge represents a viable avenue for diaspora involvement in strengthening health systems and service in Africa. The African Diaspora in numerous settings has indicated a strong collective affinity based upon familial, cultural, economic ties to strengthening development. In addition, African professionals are increasingly viewing themselves as transnationals who have with a life-long commitment to both their home and host countries.

Knowledge networks are growing, and health workers could benefit from this mode of capacity development. Specialist networks could be established to share knowledge, contacts, information, and experience. With access to improved equipment, professional associations such as SANNAM could facilitate regional exchanges with diaspora members for discussion, skills exchange, and the formulation of responses at a regional level. Diaspora members could also play a role in facilitating transnational networks based upon shared concerns and integrating inputs into transnational discussions. Finally, there is potential for global knowledge networks in which the diaspora members could play a role – facilitating discussions and exchange of information for inputs into the organizational policies of the WHO, ILO, and ICN.

The current knowledge networks that are successful³ have found that it is possible to develop human resources that are effective and accessible and that strengthen capacity. Key to their success is a strong social networking component that is built with shared interests, skill levels, and face-to-face contact.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The following points highlight some areas for consideration by the philanthropic community regarding the successful engagement of the diaspora into international development programs.

DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS

Diaspora associations have emerged based on the affinities of shared language, cultural understandings, and nation, state, or region. Their primary purpose has been to assist newcomers who have migrated, maintain cultural traditions, provide support to each other, and speak or act on behalf of the community. In Canada, these associations are strongest at the city level where events are planned and levels of interaction are high. Several associations are developing strength at the provincial levels. The African Diaspora Association of Canada works at the national level and, like many diaspora organizations, faces the challenges of operating a national organization with a small population, great distances, and a lack of resources.

The concept of the diaspora requires clear thinking as it represents not a single entity but numerous associations based on a language, region, culture, community, and, in some

cases, political affiliation. Attention to the different affinity groups might provide ideas for potential directions. Issues such as the cost of sending remittances affect the entire diaspora community, and a national association could be involved in these deliberations. In addition, do diaspora organizations, which are primarily social in nature, want to become involved in international development programs and, if so, how can they best achieve this? “Diaspora organizations in Canada are increasingly becoming involved in such programs. When the Canadian government sets its development priorities for countries that are to receive aid, diaspora associations affiliated with those countries could help by providing input into project selection and project implementation.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

National governments can play a role in facilitating the effective engagement of diaspora members and associations in international development. Following the example of the African Union, national governments could increase the ease of access to countries of origin. India and Poland have recently created a separate classification of citizenship to facilitate this interaction.⁴ Some governments have assigned diaspora communities to a government department in order to attract and encourage diaspora support. Embassies in Canada could be encouraged to work more closely with diaspora associations to facilitate joint ventures and links between Canada and the various countries of origin, which could improve communication on familial, economic, cultural, and political circumstances. Governments could also integrate diaspora members in development initiatives by involving them in bilateral discussions. African governments could create a philanthropic foundation governed by a national board to which diaspora members could contribute.

The Canadian government could undertake initiatives similar to the UK, New Zealand, and Australia, where the federal government supports a national Diaspora organization focused on international development. The UK government supports a national organization⁵ for development work and provides a funding stream (Akins, Sands, & White, 2009) to Diaspora members who work in existing organizations and to strengthen emerging diaspora associations. In Canada, given the smaller diaspora populations and the geographical spread of Canada, similar support to the African Diaspora Association of Canada could serve the same ends.

The Canada Revenue Agency could recognize the contributions of diaspora members to recognized foundations undertaking philanthropic work in their home countries. Currently, Ireland and the UK departments of revenue recognize contributions to recognized organizations implementing development projects in their home countries. (Oucho, 2008).⁶ Governments in both countries of residence and countries of origin could take steps to facilitate diaspora volunteering through funding to support structures and policy changes, such as easier visa processes for returning diaspora members. Diaspora organizations are being recognized as important and underutilized players in the development of their countries of origin. International volunteering is one mechanism that allows such organizations to have a positive impact on development in their countries of origin. By working in partnership with international volunteering agencies, they can build their capacity not only by implementing volunteering programs but also by carrying out development awareness programs both within their own communities and within the larger Canadian community.

If international volunteer-sending organizations decide to work with diaspora communities, they can perhaps learn from the experiences of VSO UK and CUSO-VSO. Although VSO UK and CUSO-VSO used different approaches in their initial efforts to incorporate diaspora volunteers, they are now moving towards a single, similar model (Breedon, 2011). The preferred model allocated a significant role to the organization's country program offices, which finds placements for diaspora volunteers and provides support to the volunteers while in the country. This approach has also enabled diaspora associations to become actively involved in development projects.

Diaspora organizations have limited funding and are mostly run by volunteers. Their lack of staff may impose a need for more flexibility on the part of well-funded international development organizations; for example, they may have to work outside of regular business hours, if they wish to involve volunteers from these communities on their boards of directors.

The VSOs in the UK and Canada had to become sensitive to the political undertones within diaspora organizations and to not assume that all organizations from the same country were willing to work collaboratively. Affinity groups often cluster around waves of migration, and these are frequently influenced by political events and perspectives that not all migrants share. Agencies that seek to work with diaspora communities should take care to understand the histories of the various diaspora organizations and to seek common goals.

Organizations that provide placements for diaspora volunteers may be surprised at the hostility encountered from colleagues who remained in their countries. It is not unusual to find on the one hand resentment toward those who had the opportunity to work overseas and, on the other hand, a lack of awareness of the hardships faced by migrants, who frequently work in low-paying jobs while sending funds to their families. Successful placement in volunteer situations in the countries of origin requires human resources management skills. This includes knowledge about how to post a position accurately, write job descriptions, prepare for screening, select candidates, and do pre-departure training. This knowledge level is frequently overlooked by members of the diaspora involved in a development project who may assume that anyone who is from the country and is willing can do the job. VSO UK and CUSO-VSO have years of experience in this area of human resources. This is an asset that they can bring to any partnership.

In conclusion, there are currently serious shortages of skilled personnel in many countries who are critical to the economic development of the country. Recent technological changes permit rapid communication for those who have migrated, enabling them to remain up-to-date with events and changes in their home country. In addition, they have the language and cultural knowledge and context that can strengthen the results of international development projects. These powerful human resources can be used by governments of origin and development organizations and can allow diaspora associations to help strengthen their countries of origin.

NOTES

1. Dr. W.J. Tettley at the University of Calgary initiated innovative research on the nature of affinity and the role that diaspora members can play in building their countries of origin. He identified “push factors” (e.g., human rights abuses, economic conditions, low remuneration, family expectations for professional, etc.) and “pull factors” (e.g., remuneration, work environment, safety, children’s education, etc.) contributing to migration of professionals.
2. Canadian organizations involved included the North South Institute, Africa Diaspora Association of Canada, Canadian Nurses Association, and Somerset West Community Health Centre.
3. New Zealand’s Global Talent Community, Chiles’ ChileGlobal, and Australia’s Australia Net are examples of diaspora networks being established to contribute skills and resources of country of origin.
4. The emerging concept of “extended citizenships” in India and Poland reflects this changing concept of national status, in which it is possible to have recognition in one’s home country as a resident abroad.
5. The Diaspora Volunteering Alliance (DVA) was formed in the UK in 2008 with the goal of supporting and promoting the mobilization of diaspora communities to actively contribute through volunteering, to fight poverty and disadvantage, and to increase the number of diaspora organizations and individuals involved in international projects.
6. DFID (UK) funds the organization Comic Relief to administer grants to UK diaspora led organizations to “create real and sustainable changes (in) some of the poorest and most disadvantaged communities in Africa.” The health sector is a priority area.

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