

HAB Forum Outcomes: Going beyond remittances

Background

It is a well-documented fact that the diaspora from the Horn of Africa influence conflict situations in the region, such as during the two civil wars between the SPLA/M and the government of Sudan, the Eritrean war for independence and the Ethio-Eritrea war (1998-2000) to name a few examples. In this regard, the diaspora has been more often depicted as conflict actors, negatively contributing to peace in the region. On the other hand, the role of the diaspora in *peacebuilding* within the region and among conflicting groups in the diaspora remains less researched.

The second Horn of Africa Bulletin Forum (HAB Forum) on *Importing/Exporting Peace – “diaspora” as peacebuilders?* on November 19, 2015, fleshed out the debates from the September-October 2015 issue of the Horn of Africa Bulletin (HAB) on the contribution of the diaspora as peace actors in the Horn of Africa region.

The Forum which brought together members of the diaspora, government officials, foreign dignitaries, academia, civil societies, and think-tanks from around the Horn of Africa in an informal dialogue, challenged common conceptions of the ‘diaspora’, highlighted their contribution in peacebuilding and discussed possible strategies as to how the diaspora can better engage in peacebuilding initiatives in the Horn.

The diverse and dynamic group of participants provided thought-provoking insights, as well as practical modes of engagement of the diaspora in peacebuilding within the context of the Horn and among the diaspora communities around the world.

The ‘diaspora’

Before discussing the role of diaspora as peacebuilding actors, a more nuanced appreciation of the diaspora in terms of its identity and positioning is necessary. As such the Forum began with a discussion on *who* the so-called ‘diaspora’ really are.

There is no consensus on the definition of the term ‘diaspora’. The working definition provided by International Organization for Migration (IOM) is “emigrants and their descendants, who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis, yet still maintain affective and material ties to their countries of origin”¹

The perception of who the ‘diaspora’ are by ‘locals’ and their own self-identity, which is shaped by local, national, regional and international experiences led to the major point of consensus which was that the diaspora are not a homogeneous group. They are different, complex, multigenerational demographic groups spanning diverse identities and socioeconomic status. Some are educated, professionals, middle-class and leaders in their adopted communities, while many others are poor, unemployed, illegal, marginalized, concentrated in immigrant ghettos and frequently the targets of racism and discrimination in their daily lives. In addition, while some of the diaspora maintain a relationship with their country of origin or local community others have lost contact.

¹ <https://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/What-We-Do/idm/workshops/IDM-2013-Diaspora-Ministerial-Conference/Background-Paper-2013-Diaspora-Ministerial-Conference-EN.pdf>

The Forum thus drew attention to the importance of problematizing the ‘identity’ of the diaspora, which is characterized by complexity and diversity, and hence resistant to simplification.

The lived experiences of the diaspora inevitably subvert conventional notions of national identity and citizenship which remain imprisoned by the ideas of fixed and singular identities. Singular identities tended to privilege, ‘fiction over reality’. The reality being that the diaspora is multi-local and defined by specific personal experiences.

The Forum thus concluded that issues of identity on the part of the diaspora pointed to the notion of a ‘compounded identity’ as one way to conceptualize the diaspora. The Forum also put forward that it is only through this more nuanced understanding of diaspora that fresh, effective diaspora engagement strategies can emerge, fit to the realities and complexities of this diverse group.

The ‘diaspora’ in peacebuilding

A great number of the diaspora from the Horn of Africa live all over the world. In contrast to the contribution of the diaspora in development, their contribution to peacebuilding is not widely researched and documented. While the Forum concluded that the diaspora can directly and indirectly support peacebuilding in the Horn, it was also agreed that various factors affect the diaspora’s role in a peacebuilding process. Understanding these factors will contribute to the efforts by actors at different levels to support the diaspora in their peacebuilding attempts to achieve sustainable peace.

The first factor centres on the nature of the conflict. Participants were of the opinion that during inter-state conflict or tensions, the peacebuilding role of the diaspora was restricted due to the lack of space for peacebuilding. However, it was argued that in the case of intra-state conflict, the diaspora’s role in peacebuilding was undeniable.

The diaspora’s actual and potential contribution in peacebuilding is also affected by their experiences, contexts, personal interests and willingness to engage, and location (North America, Europe, within Africa etc.), which would shape their engagement accordingly. It is important to understand in this regard why the diaspora left their countries of origin, their stake in the conflict, their understanding of local contexts, feeling of obligation and responsibility, political orientation, self-identity etc.

The other factor affecting the contribution of the diaspora in peacebuilding is the nature of peacebuilding itself. This calls for the conceptualization of peace in a more expansive sense (beyond just absence of violence), which would subsume the role of the diaspora in socio-economic and political contributions to the continent such as investment, technology and knowledge transfer, job creation as part of a peacebuilding process.

Another factor affecting diaspora engagement in peacebuilding are the so called ‘pull’ factors, including national and regional policies, opportunities, recognition and incentives that would motivate the diaspora to engage in peacebuilding in their countries of origin and the Horn of Africa region in general. However, in certain instances such ‘pull’ factors have created a feeling of resentment among the ‘local’ community that feels governments are increasingly incentivizing the diaspora to engage in development back home, from tax breaks, to housing plans, and land lease packages. The diaspora is thus perceived as endowed with cultural, social and institutional privileges in accessing services at the locals’ expense.

While taking these factors into consideration, it is important to highlight actual examples of the peacebuilding role of the diaspora over the years in the Horn of Africa region. One instance is the role of the diaspora in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of South Sudan in 2005

which ended the longest war in Africa between the Government of Sudan and the SPLA/M. Another example is the Ad-Hoc Peace Committee organized in the late 1980s by a group of Ethiopian diaspora in the US, who facilitated several bilateral negotiations between the then government and conflicting parties. The Committee helped raise funds to defray the cost of the Addis Ababa Conference for a “Peaceful and Democratic Transition” which brought together representatives of the conflicting parties in 1991. Another example is the Ogadeni Elders’ Committee, composed of a group of Ethiopian-Somali diaspora in the US who played an instrumental role in many ways promoting and supporting the signing of an agreement between the Ethiopian Government and a branch of the Ogaden Liberation Front in 2009. Furthermore, during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war, a group of Ethiopians and Eritreans in the diaspora formed a coalition and shuttled between Ethiopia, Eritrea and the US trying to facilitate a peaceful dialogue between the conflicting parties. In Somalia, the diaspora community continues to be very active in the peacebuilding effort. One example is Forum Syd’s² Somalia Diaspora Programme that supports ethnic Somali groups residing in Sweden to participate in peacebuilding initiatives by funding projects within Somalia.

Policies to engage the ‘diaspora’

Recognizing the potential of the diaspora, some countries in the Horn have developed policies and established institutions to more systematically facilitate diaspora engagement in their countries of origin³. For example, the Ethiopian government has established the Diaspora Engagement Affairs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other offices in various Ministries. The Ethiopian government’s efforts to engage the diaspora can also be witnessed in the five-day Diaspora Day celebration which includes exhibitions showcasing the contributions of the diaspora and the prizes awarded to individuals from the diaspora who had made singular contributions in the economic sphere.

In Uganda, the Department for Diaspora Services under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs engages the diaspora with the overarching theme ‘Beyond Remittances’. The major functions of the Department include the provision of consular services and engaging the diaspora in development and investment initiatives.

In Sudan, the Sudan Center of Migration, Development and Population Studies-Secretariat of Sudanese Working Abroad, which works under the Council of Ministers Ministry of the Government of the Sudan, and also liaises directly with the Office of the President of the Sudan is responsible for diaspora engagement. The office provides training to diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on diaspora issues and themes. It is also developing a database of the Sudanese diaspora, which will encompass the size, location, the skill sets and the resources at the disposal of the diaspora. The database is expected to make diaspora engagement more effective. The office is committed to and guided by the importance of ‘engaging, enabling and empowering’ the diaspora.

While the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) continues to deliberate the possibility of a regional action plan for diaspora engagement in development, exchange of information and cooperation, first proposed at the Second Meeting of the IGAD Regional Consultative Process on Migration held in Addis Ababa in 2012⁴, at the continental level, the African Union (AU) has already institutionalized diaspora offices under the Department of Citizens and

² <http://www.forumsyd.org/Soka-bidrag/sok-bidrag/SomaliaDiasporaProgramme/>

³ <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/committed-diaspora-more-developing-countries-setting-diaspora-institutions>

⁴ http://igad.int/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=400:igad-embraces-migration-and-development&catid=63:migration&Itemid=159

Diaspora Organization (CIDO)⁵. The AU has also declared the diaspora as its 6th region, giving recognition to the importance of engaging the diaspora.

Most policies aimed at engaging the diaspora especially at the national level focus on the contribution the diaspora can make to economic development. This according to Forum participants is increasingly creating a feeling of being instrumentalized, where by national governments and institutions only find the diaspora useful as far as they are sources of remittance and /or are able to invest in their countries of origin. It was stressed that national governments and the different institutions should adjust their approach of diaspora engagement to also include assisting the diaspora in their adopted countries, such as providing necessary consular services to the diaspora. The approach adopted by the Ugandan Government with an overarching theme 'Beyond Remittances' which focuses beyond the financial contribution of the diaspora, is one good example which may lessen the feeling of instrumentalization among the diaspora.

Conclusion

Though the current rhetoric on the diaspora and the traditional reproachful attitudes towards it is paralleled by the emphasis in the analytical literature on the negative role of the diaspora in relation to conflict, the Forum challenged these perceptions and highlighted the ways and conditions in which the diaspora can make meaningful contributions to peacebuilding in the region. The Forum has also brought to light various government initiatives to engage the diaspora and what their expectations are.

The Forum drew attention to the need to undertake disaggregated mapping of the diaspora in order to understand how they can be involved in peacebuilding, and what their expectations, aspirations and needs are, in all their diversity. The need to undertake research and organise forums that highlight the positive contributions of the diaspora in peacebuilding has also been reiterated by participants.

Forum participants emphasised that the potential for diaspora engagement is determined by the space and incentives provided by governments in the countries of origin, host governments and the donor community. It was also emphasised that these actors should avoid the pitfalls of instrumentalizing and politicizing the interventions of the diaspora in peacebuilding.

Participants further stressed that the role of the diaspora may not be specifically targeted to peacebuilding. However, they can contribute to peacebuilding in a number of different ways including through democratic institution building, development and humanitarian work, trade and investment, cultural exchange and overcoming stereotypes etc. The Forum also underlined that the diaspora will be most effective in peacebuilding if they work alongside local communities, CSOs and governments.

Finally, the Forum concluded that diaspora engagement in peacebuilding is their right and also their responsibility; their engagement should emanate from both a sense of obligation and also as a right.

⁵<http://pages.au.int/cido>