Engaging with humanitarian diaspora actors

Practical guide

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European Union
Civil Protection and
Humanitarian Aid
1. Introduction

This practical guide is based on experience gained by the DEMAC project since 2015 in its cooperation with diaspora organisations engaged in humanitarian interventions in their country of origin. During the DEMAC project a number of specific recommendations were made to facilitate an improved engagement between diaspora organisations and other actors within the humanitarian system.

This guide intends to

- Identify preconditions for successful partnership with diaspora organisations
- Provide criteria for the practical design of a partnership arrangement with diaspora organisations engaged in humanitarian interventions

It is directed towards

- Humanitarian organisations interested in engaging with diaspora organisations
- Humanitarian coordination structures
- Local organisations
- Donors and institutional organisations

2. Diaspora humanitarians

Diasporas are understood to be dispersed collectives residing outside their country of origin who “maintain regular or occasional contact with what they regard as their homeland and with individuals and groups of the same background residing in other host countries” (Sheffer, 2003: 9-10). As transnational entities diasporas contribute to their countries of origin and settlement.

Humanitarian diaspora organisations are agreed as part of social networks that engage in humanitarian relief activities across national boundaries without states’ mediation (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton: 1992). The range of types of formalised diaspora structures, memberships and degree of professionalism is wide, comprising transnational unions associating numerous organisations from several countries, professional associations, ethnic/clan and hometown associations, small family-based initiatives run by few volunteers, and more informal networks.

In line with above organisational categories, the members of such diaspora organisations can be linked by their common geographic origin at different levels – country, region, village, etc., or by a shared religious or ethnic identity. Diaspora organisations founded on the basis of a common profession (engineers, doctors, etc.) are also common. The active relationship with their country of origin is often multi-faceted and may include family ties and obligations, sense of duty and loyalty, commitment to a certain place, partnerships and cooperation arrangements with associations, schools, hospitals, local government or ministries.

Diaspora communities who engage in non-profit activities such as humanitarian interventions generally have limited financial means (from membership fees or donations) as well as limited time capacity (volunteers). However, from a community perspective, they are quite frequently the primary
contact when a humanitarian crisis arises and will be called upon by individual contacts, village representatives, local towns, villages, institutions and committees in the region of origin. They often maintain long-term relationships with their partners and the place of engagement, which provides them with valuable in-depth insights into the living situation and needs on the ground over a sustained period of time. Specific professional and technical capacity is also bundled in many diaspora communities. Diasporas can build bridges between the countries of origin and residence for purposes of advocacy and resource mobilization, and often serve to transfer supplies as well as knowledge and innovations.

3. Why engaging with diaspora organisations?

Improving coordination and humanitarian interventions

Due to their context-specific knowledge and understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural systems in which conflicts are embedded\(^1\), diaspora humanitarians could contribute to needs assessment, project planning, reporting, monitoring and evaluation. Being embedded in multiple country systems, diaspora may act as bridge builders and might be able to facilitate negotiations between conflicting parties and other humanitarian actors. On the other hand, diaspora organisations can increase their capacities through collaborations with professional humanitarian actors that come with technical knowledge and experience from often numerous crises and settings, as well as structural insight into the humanitarian system.

Improving coordination

The DEMAC project has explored the value of engagement with diasporas, fostering dialogue between diasporas and other humanitarian actors, and bridging gaps in understanding rather than isolating diasporas and marginalizing their effort. The value of diaspora engagement includes expanding humanitarian access in high-risk crisis affected countries (diasporas, often jointly with local actors, delivering aid in areas beyond international presence), cultural background knowledge sharing and possessing insights into effective methods of communication and contextualized responses that are relevant to affected communities. Through cooperation, with institutional actors diaspora organisations can expand their options for action, the scope of their activities and their competencies.

Diasporas are bridges to local communities, and brokers whose efforts contribute to alleviate humanitarian crises. But they require support to maximise their impact and to engage (not merge) with the system.

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\(^1\) This cannot be held true for all diasporas, as it depends on time spent in country of origin, their ability to speak the language (esp. 2\(^{nd}\) generation onwards), etc. However, even diasporas that have little geographical presence in country of origin will likely have a better understanding of the context than a visitor with no shared links of origin.
Diaspora Modes of Humanitarian Intervention

Humanitarian interventions carried out by diaspora organisations are wide-ranging, cross-cutting and multi-sectoral involving significant human capital. They bridge categories of humanitarian, early recovery and development activities through a long-term focus of intervention and investment in a specific locality, rather than select sectors of intervention in changing geographies. For instance diaspora organisations involved in the DEMAC project had activities that aligned with clusters, but were often working cross-sectorally and without necessarily focusing on a specific sector as many formally constituted NGOs would. More broadly their activities range from economic development to infrastructure rehabilitation, in some instances they support peacebuilding, security and reconciliation efforts, and undertake activities in the area of public service development, institution-building and capacity building. Diaspora organisations can be considered as multi-mandate organisations that couple relief and recovery with political, economic and social reform, linking relief, rehabilitation and development and thereby challenging the typical notions associated with humanitarian aid.

Rather than expecting diaspora organisations to align to ‘conventional’ categories, it may be more helpful to distinguish between initiative-based and transnational organisations, and nature of crisis (i.e. human-induced/conflict-related, health/natural disaster), as this in turn affects modalities of interventions, potential for collaboration and advocacy activities. Importantly, diasporas can be both donors and implementers and are very often part of locally initiated first response mechanisms in humanitarian crises, along with affected communities.

In addition to providing emergency assistance in the eleven sectors of the humanitarian cluster system, diasporas from Sierra Leone, Somalia and Syria also engage in long-term strengthening of livelihoods, including economic development, infrastructure rehabilitation, peacebuilding, security and reconciliation, and public service, institution and capacity building.

Diaspora Modes of Humanitarian Intervention

- Sending cash payment/transfers
- Fundraising
- Mobilising community support
- Skills and knowledge transfer
- Implementing specific projects
- Media outreach (domestic and international)
- Technical intervention in the field
- Sending relief supplies
- Lobbying home and heritage country governments (where applicable)
**Challenges to Diaspora Humanitarian intervention**

Diaspora communities are heterogeneous social formations which differ in terms of approaches, interests, and objectives in their contributions to their countries of origin, leading sometimes to opposing aims and strategies of involvement. Hence, it is essential to understand the interests, aspirations, institutions, and objectives of the different diaspora groups before relevant and feasible engagement plans can be developed.

Beyond the acknowledged constraint of insufficient funding for scalable and collective humanitarian interventions by diasporas, there are issues around transparency, accountability, coherence, coordination and clear reporting channels. Also, research findings reveal some examples of a disconnect between the needs of affected communities and diaspora’s advocacy and relief responses, exposing an apparent disconnect between local, community- and diaspora-led humanitarian interventions. Diaspora relief, if not sufficiently resourced and coordinated, can also be too ad-hoc, sporadic and fractured to be sustainable.

Local perceptions of diaspora groups can also be marked by mistrust and prejudice, when diaspora groups are being perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Hence, by living in a secure country and not suffering the direct consequence of a conflict, diaspora humanitarians can also be perceived by local communities as external rather than as part of the affected population.

The fragmented nature and lack of unity among diaspora organisations reinforces the widespread perception of competition and distrust and limits their leverage in shaping policy and aid practices. It also aggravates community mobilization and effective leadership, adding to the difficulties with bureaucratic funding requirements and relative lack of second and third generation engagement with relief activities and diminishing effectiveness. Voluntary action over extended period of time is difficult to sustain in view of funding fatigue due to persistence of crises. Some diasporas identified complicated grant application procedures, sizeable overhead costs in aid and bureaucratic multilateral agency procedures as major deterrents to supporting diaspora-led efforts.

An agenda for enhancing diaspora effectiveness and improving coordination with the conventional actors would need to build on mitigating the challenges identified above, whilst at the same time, harnessing the positive contributions of diaspora humanitarian actors.

In order to foster a relevant and constructive collaboration with diasporas and local actors, there is a need to translate the donor language into something that can be understood by organisations that are not part of the professional humanitarian scene. One example of good practice is that Syria cluster meetings in Gaziantep are held in Arabic. In some instances, diaspora organisations can be conduits for explaining donor language and concepts of humanitarian assistance to local NGOs that helps to build the capacity of local organisation.
Diasporas’ Strengths and Weaknesses

**Diasporas Strengths and Weaknesses**

**Strengths**

- Direct contact with affected communities
- Rapid response
- Language and cultural competencies
- Better access in most areas in the affected country
- Demonstrate accountability and transparency
- Extensive use of new technologies and social media
- Effective networking/collaboration with local partners
- Flexibility in aid delivery (covert methods/channels to deliver aid/supplies; mobile transfers)
- Bridge between development humanitarian aid
- Motivated by duty, civic responsibility and altruism

**Weaknesses**

- Information channels sometimes unreliable (i.e., may send inappropriate relief supplies)
- Lower levels of technical humanitarian aid expertise
- Fractured and fragmented approach to relief
- Limited effective coordination with conventional actors
- Development activities and humanitarian relief less sustainable
- Smaller-scale interventions
- Lack of funding and institutional capacity to implement large-scale relief
- Lower levels of education and language competencies in host country (for some diasporas only)
- Limited second and third generation engagement in humanitarian relief
- Perceived as biased and politically motivated
4. Steps to engage with diaspora partners

1. **Know your diaspora: Understand the context and pre-positioning.** In order to develop a feasible, relevant and effective diaspora engagement plan, it is necessary to study and map the specific diaspora that you want to engage with. Diaspora-led action is closely linked to the geographic, political and social environment in question – understanding their interests, aspirations, institutions, and objectives is thus an important precondition for engagement.

2. **Consider how the specific country and current humanitarian interventions can complement each other** and benefit from an improved coordination.

3. **Identify concrete diaspora partners, assess their type of engagement, the motivation behind, and their capacity.** It is important to be quite deliberate in choosing who to work with, and whether the aim is to broadly engage diasporas as part of civil society, or to develop concrete joint initiatives where what the diaspora in question brings to the table will complement and thus enhance the overall humanitarian action.

4. **Reach out to the diaspora and start developing a partnership.** This step is very important, and should not be underestimated in terms of time and efforts. Diasporas are not tools or instruments, to be engaged with when suitable from the humanitarian end. They need to want to be engaged with. Intermediary institutions that are already in touch with diaspora organisations can help to identify suitable partners, through networks and relationships that have been built over time.

*See the checklist for the first steps in Annex I, page 11*

5. **Partnering with diaspora organisations**

Diaspora organisations are brokers and agents of change in humanitarian initiatives. Therefore engagement between diasporas and other humanitarian actors (UN agencies, INGOs, local HGOs) and inter/intra-diaspora dialogue are critical to working with them as equitable partners. In order to best realise diaspora organisations’ strengths and added value, better ways to categorise them should be sought instead of the currently used “non-traditional” actors.

There are a range of partnership options to explore, covering funding, co-location (embedding a diaspora organisation in your offices), strategic and operational-level collaboration. Some suggestions to consider for your organisation include:

- Information sharing: in any emergency, a mechanism should be put in place for mutual sharing of appropriate information, as far as possible
- Co-locating or embedding diaspora organisations in INGO offices
- Having a focal point for diasporas in your organisation
- Formalising relationships and partnerships with diasporas at organisational-level
Implementing joint project activities

Partnership development can also take directions such as expanding partnerships with the private sector, government departments and philanthropic groups with and through diaspora organisations.

Diaspora organisations have a unique advantage to contribute to coordinated needs assessments as they possess contextual knowledge that includes an ability to map local actors.

Facilitate inclusion of diaspora and local actors in coordination forums/clusters.

As a start you might like to map priority countries (of humanitarian action), or find diaspora organisations that are established in the same country as your headquarters. DEMAC has initiated a basic database which can be a good starting point (www.demac.org/organisation-registry/diaspora-organisations).

Working with diasporas as partners

Consider how any funding applications you develop can be made diaspora-friendly or promote specific funding calls for diaspora organisations. Remember that diaspora organisations bring significant in-kind contributions to funding proposals, often are able to maintain low transaction costs and can offer links to local communities that speak to the localisation agenda.

Diasporas as Advocacy Agents

Diaspora communities engage in lobbying and campaigning in the countries of residence, aiming to raise public awareness to alleviate the humanitarian suffering in their countries of origin/heritage. They particularly make use of new technology and social media as advocacy and mobilizing tools, as well as instruments to measure the impact of their relief activities in the field. Yet the results of their efforts must be considered as rather mixed, mainly due to limited financial resources and impediments from counter-terrorism legislation, at least for Syrian and Somali diaspora. All diaspora organisations clearly stressed the need for additional resources and training in advocacy and fundraising.

Monitoring and evaluation

Given their language skills and cultural competencies, diasporas should contribute to internal and external, qualitative reviews of humanitarian aid, jointly with local partners and beneficiaries. This would enable diasporas to collate and bring to the table local feedback and inputs, thus enhancing participation of people of concern in decision making processes. This would contribute to the development of policy recommendations based good practices, while it would also enable diaspora organisations to incorporate lessons learned into their own humanitarian interventions.

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2 To be further developed and updated under DEMAC II
Inviting diaspora actors to networking events

Newly organised diaspora organisations may require assistance with networking. If you are part of existing networking groups or if you have networking or information days, you should consider inviting diaspora organisations. The perspective of diaspora organisations as actors in their country of origin can be enriching.

It would also be of benefit to invite developed diaspora organisations to contribute to networking events and attend as their experience and knowledge would be a valuable addition.

Access to training sessions

To increase the impact of joint working with diaspora organisations it would be helpful to share understanding of the humanitarian architecture. If you are running training days, consider inviting diaspora organisations to kick-start knowledge sharing efforts with diasporas as part of a continual process, not just one-off session. Mentoring is another way your organisation can embed learning across diaspora organisations or by seconding diaspora staff to your operations. This arrangement would also provide your organisation the opportunity to understand and learn about how diaspora organisations function and their methods of response.

Capacity building has been viewed positively by diaspora organisations but should not be at the expense of other interventions including supporting a higher-level vision where diasporas can contribute their diverse abilities capacities towards, for example, addressing some of the key challenges such as access, protracted displacement and addressing root causes of displacement.

Also, in crises/situations where diasporas might be one of few feet on the ground, collaborating with diasporas to exchange on methods and challenges of humanitarian interventions as well as offering technical trainings on sector specific expertise would contribute to a maximisation of diaspora-led interventions.

Working together on remittances and cash transfers

There is potential for learning between diaspora organisations and INGOs/UN agencies involved in cash transfers, which are increasingly used as aid modality in humanitarian crises. Given the access that diaspora organisations have in many contexts, there could also be a future role for them to partner with INGOs as delivery agents and to foster even greater innovation in humanitarian programming on cash transfers. Similarly with remittances, there are many gaps in data collection and methods of targeting of remittances to best address humanitarian needs, that diaspora organisation could assist in filling.
6. Capturing the contribution of diasporas

Are diaspora organisations noted in your operational handbooks or online staff portals?

Existing humanitarian databases and other tools (such as Financial Tracking Service) may not always be sensitive to diaspora interventions. Encourage staff to think more broadly about the full palette of humanitarian actors including whether there may be any diaspora organisations you can link with and whose contributions can be highlighted in country-wide reporting tools. As a first step it is worthwhile explicitly mentioning diaspora organisations in internal documents as a key humanitarian actor to engage with.

Capturing diaspora contributions at country and cluster-levels

Whether you are a cluster lead, co-cluster lead or member of a cluster working group, you can encourage all actors involved in existing coordination mechanisms to reflect the contributions made by diaspora organisations. This will more accurately capture the full gamut of humanitarian action with diaspora organisations often able to provide real-time qualitative data that can supplement quantitative data so that everyone is reporting in one direction and not creating further parallel structures.

Diaspora support for collaborative research on humanitarian challenges

What common challenges can be unlocked together with diaspora organisations?

In an era of protracted conflict and unprecedented levels of displacement all humanitarian actors are grappling with issues such as access, protracted displacement and addressing root causes of displacement. Diaspora organisations can offer knowledge, skills and expertise to help un-lock these challenges and their unique position should be viewed as an opportunity. As a result they can enhance potential research agendas you may be developing (especially as part of WHS follow-up).

7. Support and Resources

Some reports and documents on diaspora humanitarianism, useful links and a diaspora database are available on the DEMAC portal: www.demac.org

You can also seek further support as needed from the DEMAC Team: info@demac.org
ANNEX

In practice – Checklist for the first steps

For institutional humanitarian organisations

- **Identify a problem** that partnership with diaspora organisations can help solve (e.g. lack of information, problem of access, cultural and language barriers, etc.).

- **Explore possibilities for partnership** with diaspora organisations and their partners on the ground (e.g. joint project activities, participation in humanitarian intervention, and partnership in existing diaspora initiatives).

- **Map the diaspora** in Europe, USA and the region of the targeted country (size of the diaspora? Relationship of diaspora communities with the government of the origin country? Percentage of highly skilled professionals among the migrants?).

- **If needed, involve intermediary institutions** that can establish contact with diaspora communities (e.g. DEMAC, GIZ’s Sector Project Migration and Development Project, BENGO, chambers of commerce and associations, diaspora ministries in the partner country and platforms such as the Africa Europe Diaspora Development platform - ADEPT).

- **Identify suitable diaspora organisations** as partners (weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the organisations with regard to the project, for instance, sectoral competence, performance capacity).

- **Clarify joint objectives and expectations the various sides have of each other** Humanitarian projects, diaspora community, partners on the ground, other partners of the humanitarian project as the basis for successful cooperation.

- **Establish direct contact with partners of the diaspora organisations** on the ground in order to test their performance capacity and potential role in the project (for instance, organisational capacity, relationship with the partner in the diaspora, risk of political instrumentalisation of the project activities).

- **Determine formal procedures and requirements** for the participating partners including assignment of roles, responsibilities for managing the project.

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1 Adapted for humanitarian actions based on GIZ Guidelines for practice “Cooperating with Diaspora Communities”