



Diasporas in Action

Working together for peace, development
and humanitarian response

Conference Outcomes

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Diaspora Learning Network



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Cover photo: Panel on conflict resolution and peace-building:
(L-R) Hariz Halilovich, Daniela Gavshon, Nawal El-Gack



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Diasporas have been actively engaged in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian responses in their respective countries of origin for many years. As non-traditional humanitarian actors, only recently have they been recognised as key to the future of effective engagement with developing and conflict-afflicted countries.

Convened by the Diaspora Learning Network (DLN) and supported by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Diasporas in Action Conference brought together Australian and international representatives from diaspora organisations, civil society, government, international and national humanitarian organisations, research institutes and the academia. The Conference created a foundational learning space for participants to explore and discuss the current landscape of diaspora projects, and opportunities for collaborations and actions between multiple stakeholders.

Drawing upon the diverse work of diaspora individuals, groups and organisations, the conference was framed around six (6) thematic streams: Diasporas in human development; Diasporas, conflict resolution and peacebuilding; Diasporas and human rights; Diasporas and economic development; Diasporas, humanitarian issues and response; and Diasporas and settlement in host countries.

The Conference was opened by Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Minister for International Development and the Pacific. The Minister emphasised the significant value of the personal links which diaspora communities in Australia maintain with their countries of origin and the incredible richness which they contribute to Australian society.

Discussion was framed by international and local keynotes whose comments highlighted both the variety and impact of diaspora actions in both country of origin and host country. Learning from the experiences of diaspora communities in other parts of the globe, the opportunity presented by partnerships between diaspora communities, government and other development actors was clearly illustrated. The non-traditional and innovative approaches which diasporas often bring to major global challenges through their personal connections with country were showcased from the Indo-Pacific region.

What did we learn?

The conference featured interactive learning sessions with presentations given by researchers, activists, policy makers, entrepreneurs and development practitioners - among others - in relation to each of the core thematic areas.

Key discussions surfaced important learnings which frequently crossed the thematic boundaries, and demonstrated the integrated nature of many activities and initiatives undertaken by diaspora communities in Australia.

It is only in recent times that the contributions of diasporas in development efforts such as poverty alleviation have come to light. Whilst diasporas have been playing important roles in humanitarian response, conflict resolution and peacebuilding over a long period of time, it is only in the past few decades that any serious enquiry has been undertaken to understand the true extent and impact of these forms of diaspora engagement with their countries of origin.

There is a notable shift in the perception of diaspora actors away from simple acknowledgment of them as non-traditional, stand-alone actors, and towards potential partnerships. The future approach would see diasporas contributing alongside traditional actors in human development and complex emergency scenarios, utilising their in-depth understanding of the social, political and cultural context in their countries of origin as well as their direct relationships. Diasporas benefit from greater access to areas of need compared to traditional actors, and continue to be able to work in complex situations where external actors are unable to operate.

Remittances have historically been narrowly understood as the social welfare system via the diaspora. However the broader role which remittances have to play when used effectively in social and economic development is critical, and alongside investment, has significant potential to have large-scale impact. Diasporas are often major investors in their country of origin and hold unique expertise, acting effectively as brokers between investors, government and communities.

Finally, diasporas are agents for change not only in their countries of origin, but also in their countries of residence (i.e. Australia). As well as bringing innovative ideas and cultural diversity, diasporas naturally support those who are new to Australia and provide a bridge for those seeking to migrate. Diasporas must be recognised as legitimate actors and stakeholders, responding to local and global issues.

What are the challenges?

Several key challenges were identified as potential barriers to diasporas working together with traditional actors in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response:

- Measuring and valuing the impact of diaspora engagement are not naturally undertaken, and can be difficult to achieve
- Lack of coordinated effort makes it difficult to ensure the appropriate and representative voices are heard amongst the diaspora communities
- Choosing not to engage diaspora organisations is a political decision in itself
- External actors cannot easily determine the political intentions of diasporas
- Diasporas do not move along the same trajectory and time as their in-country counterparts, resulting at times in a disconnection in culture and relevance
- Insufficient knowledge about diasporas' work
- Lack of communication channels between stakeholders and the diaspora.
- Use the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework to synthesize diaspora initiatives and government priorities.
- Incorporate diasporas as an active participant in both the planning and execution of aid, development, and peace and security initiatives.
- Close the gap between traditional and non-traditional actors using transformed ways of working including understanding the development or humanitarian agenda through the diaspora lens and funding restructure.
- Minimise perceived risks associated with engaging with diasporas through bilateral discussions or roundtables.
- Capitalise and capture the wealth and diversity of skills and knowledge flowing into Australia through diasporas.

What are the opportunities?

Several key opportunities were identified as potential ways of moving towards positive collaboration between diasporas and traditional actors in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response:

- Build bridges and formalise engagements between diaspora communities and Australian government and NGOs for improved development, humanitarian and peacebuilding outcomes.

This report has been prepared by the DLN to draw out these key learnings from the conference and document calls to action for the different actors represented at the conference.

Panel on humanitarian issues and response:
(L-R) Joanna Pradela, Beth Eggleston, Louise Olliff, Najeeba Wazefadost



BACKGROUND

Diaspora communities have been actively engaged in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response since before such concepts were formalised or professionalised. However, it is only in recent years that the impact and influence of diasporas are being recognised by fellow stakeholders, including non-government organisations (NGOs), policy makers and academics.

In September 2016 - for the first time in Australia - a conference to advance dialogue and shared understanding of the role of diasporas in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response was convened. The conference, entitled *Diasporas in Action: Working together for peace, development and humanitarian response*, sought to create space for foundational learning and the exploration of opportunities for ongoing collaborations and actions between multiple stakeholders who participated.

The conference attracted a diverse range of participants, including those representing:

- Diaspora community organisations and enterprises working on projects for social impact, both in Australia and internationally.
- Academics undertaking research on diaspora communities both in Australia and internationally.
- International non-government organisations (INGOs) seeking to engage and work collaboratively with diaspora communities in advancing shared goals.
- The Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), which brought important policy perspectives and insights.

This unique range of actors was involved in dynamic discussions. They also helped progress an agenda for partnership and collaboration between the different groups represented.

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW



Associate Professor Harry Minas
(University of Melbourne/DLN)

Featuring a full program of international and local keynotes and complemented by interactive workshops and forum discussions, the conference was framed around six thematic streams:

- **Diasporas in human development**
- **Diasporas, conflict resolution and peacebuilding**
- **Diasporas and human rights**
- **Diasporas and economic development**
- **Diasporas, humanitarian issues and response**
- **Diasporas and settlement in host countries.**

This report seeks to outline the key lessons learned and topics of debate which arose through the conference proceedings. It aims to provide opportunity for lessons to be disseminated and conversations to continue.

ABOUT DIASPORA LEARNING NETWORK

The conference was convened by Diaspora Learning Network (DLN). The Network is a collaboration between organisations committed to promoting thinking and practice around the role of diasporas in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response. The convening members of DLN are:

- **Diaspora Action Australia (lead convener)**
- **Melbourne Refugee Studies Program, the University of Melbourne**
- **Australian Council for International Development**
- **Australian Red Cross**
- **Oxfam Australia**
- **Refugee Council of Australia**
- **Research for Development Impact Network**

Following the conference, DLN aims to continue the multi-sector dialogue. DLN also plans to build on this report's outcomes in order to facilitate ongoing learning and collaboration regarding the role of diasporas in peace, development and humanitarian action. Diaspora communities are strongly encouraged to participate in DLN and a consultation will be held with interested stakeholders in early 2017.

DLN is grateful for the generous support of the conference sponsors: the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the University of Melbourne, the Research for Development Impact Network, Oxfam Australia, the Australian Red Cross and Diaspora Action Australia.

DLN Representatives and Organising Committee



KEYNOTE INSIGHTS



Q + A with keynote panel: (L-R) Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie, Laurent de Bœck, Dr. Helen Szoke, Dr. Will Jones, Denise Cauchi.

DAY 1 SETTING THE SCENE

Denise Cauchi

Diaspora Action Australia & Diaspora Learning Network

Diasporas are active and engaged in the community, both in their country of origin and their country of residence. They are significant, non-traditional actors in the arena of peace building, development and humanitarian response.

What diasporas in Australia do

Diasporas in Australia use their knowledge, transnational connections and positions of relative advantage in Australia to set up schools, train teachers and scientists, and run health units. They send emergency relief after natural disasters. They campaign for human rights and hold governments to account. They raise awareness in Australia about the context of their countries of origin, and they advocate to the Australian government and the United Nations on issues of importance. They help people flee danger, navigate life in transitional refugee situations in third countries, and settle in Australia if they arrive here, as the Syrian diaspora is currently doing. They are involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, both overseas and in Australia. They are involved in nation building alongside some leaders in exile. They vote in elections and referenda that bring conflicts to an end. They also invest in new businesses and foster trade links. Almost every diaspora member remits money back home.

Challenges

Despite their efforts, diasporas also face challenges. These include access to resources, a need to strengthen their organisations, insufficient networks and partnerships, and inadequate access to policy makers that would enable them to have a seat at the table on issues relating to their countries of origin. These obstacles can be overcome.

Possibilities

For the international development sector and government in Australia this is a new and exciting area; however, there remains significant uncertainty around the possibilities for working together. By contrast, overseas examples are demonstrating to us that diaspora engagement with government, NGOs and the private sector is well developed. There is plenty to learn from these experiences.

Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells

Minister for International Development and the Pacific

Australia is a successful multicultural nation, and is one of the most culturally diverse, yet socially cohesive societies in the world. Drawing from her own experience as a member of the Italian migrant community, the Minister highlighted the important role which diaspora communities play in maintaining and strengthening ties between Australia and nations around the world.

Diasporas living in Australia are an important source of assistance for people around the world, especially in their times of greatest need, for example when facing the challenges of war, drought or famine. Australia's aid program is committed to bringing stability and economic growth to the Indo-Pacific region, and does this through partnerships with foreign governments, the private sector and traditional development actors.

The Government is keen to understand better how it can benefit from the local expertise and quick responsiveness of diaspora communities in times of crisis, and towards long-term development and peacebuilding efforts.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of this session was to examine global experiences and their relevance to Australia.



Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie

Up!-Africa Ltd

Diasporas as transnational actors

Mainstream humanitarian and development actors share values and ideals with diaspora actors, creating significant opportunity for collaboration at a transnational level. However, sometimes there is a distrust of diaspora communities due to their perceived conservative values or ethnic loyalties.

The role that diasporas play in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian action is influenced by the contextual factors below.

Origin country context

In cases of conflict and humanitarian crises, diasporas can be either part of the problem or part of the solution. The international humanitarian effort often faces obstacles when trying to work proactively and productively with non-traditional actors (i.e. the diasporas) in innovative ways. Despite the presence of deeply rooted institutional obstacles, perseverance is important.

Host country context

Sharing from the experiences of the UK, various failed attempts at diaspora engagement present lessons from which Australia could learn. A bold policy commitment to diaspora engagement in a 1997 UK White Paper failed due to a lack of follow-up and subsequent backtracking. Later efforts to group all diasporas under a single national umbrella group also proved ineffective, and as a result highlighted the value of building on existing community-level structures.

In light of such learnings, Australia should give serious consideration to how it can best support existing and emerging diaspora networks and organisations, by serving the needs of communities in both host and origin countries.

Diaspora context

Diasporas will rarely look, sound and act like conventional peace activists, development practitioners or humanitarian relief workers. But sometimes, it's been the development industry playing catch-up with diasporas, particularly in understanding the significance of remittances. For years, migrants sent their remittances home to needy relatives. Today, the development industry has direct cash transfers, remarkably similar in nature to remittance transfers.

Laurent de Bœck

International Organization for Migration

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has adopted a strategy to enable, engage and empower diasporas as transnational actors to actively and effectively contribute to peacebuilding, development and humanitarian efforts around the world.

Diasporas are bridge-builders between countries, and IOM recognises the unique role played by diaspora communities in establishing and maintaining strategic partnerships across borders. Diaspora communities have a connection with and understanding of their country of origin, which makes them vital actors both during and post-crisis. The role of remittances in filling funding gaps in times of crisis is also a significant element of diaspora engagement.

IOM has proactively assisted governments to develop national diaspora action plans and to create diaspora web portals. These activities have helped governments to connect and mobilise diaspora communities around the globe, including in Kosovo, Mozambique and Burundi.

Dr. Will Jones

University of Oxford

Diasporas have historically played a significant role in contesting the authoritarian regimes of their countries of origin, particularly in Africa. Dr. Jones' research highlights how diasporas can use their unique positioning to challenge regimes and campaign for democratic process and justice.

It is important to recognise that diasporas can and have played the role of both peace-breakers and peace-makers in different contexts. Having said this, there are ways for policy makers to guide the engagement of diaspora communities towards more peaceful action.

Firstly, policy makers are recommended to facilitate platforms for diaspora organisations, and not agendas, by:

- Providing legal assistance
- Convening spaces for diaspora organisations
- Facilitating connections to powerful and 'elite' members of society
- Allowing diasporas to set agendas.

Secondly, policy makers are encouraged to promote inclusive grassroots structures and give a voice to all of the members of the diaspora. Lastly, it is recommended that they support diaspora wellbeing and settlement in host country through the provision of essential services including psychological support and economic empowerment programs.



DAY 2 REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of this session was to look at case studies of how diasporas engage with countries of origin in the Australian region.



HE Abel Guterres

Ambassador of Timor-Leste to Australia, New Zealand and Republic of Fiji

The role of diaspora communities is very important in influencing and supporting the people in their countries of origin with political, humanitarian and economic aid and development.

In the unique case of Timor-Leste, the international solidarity and support mobilised by diasporas was decisive in their future. Without the international intervention of diasporas, and the involvement of the United Nations, Timor-Leste would have had no hope of regaining its freedom and independence.

Living as a political leader in exile for decades, the Ambassador shared his very personal experience of mobilising the Timor-Leste diaspora community of Melbourne towards the independence agenda and building international pressure towards the cause.

Jeremy Liyanage

Bridging Lanka

Jeremy set up the diaspora organisation Bridging Lanka to foster development and reconciliation in Mannar, north-east Sri Lanka. Jeremy, who has an overwhelming desire to contribute to the land of his birth, shared his personal account of working to maintain the connection and bridges between two countries. His work represents the long-term commitment of diasporas to development projects which are highly adaptive and flexible.

Bridging Lanka does scrupulous grassroots work to transform Mannar society by slowly changing attitudes and breaking down the concepts of perpetrator and victim that maintain enmity and resentment between groups. The organisation works with the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim communities, including ex-Tamil Tigers and members of government. They are encouraged to recognise the humanity in each other, and their shared experience of suffering, regardless of which side they were on. This attitudinal change occurs on a personal level, one person at a time.

The ability to undertake projects and activities with minimum funding demonstrates the unique positioning of diasporas to leverage personal relationships and knowledge of local context for maximum value for money.

Finau Limuloa

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Suva

Pacific diasporas are “the ultimate double agents”, holding unique powers that allow them to seamlessly flow between two cultures. With shared knowledge, experience and appreciation of language and culture, they are able to establish relationships and approach humanitarian response with nuance equipping them with tools that place them far ahead of traditional interventions.

Drawing on examples of the Fijian diaspora, Finau demonstrated the variety of roles played by the diasporas in humanitarian preparedness and response. They can act as cultural educators and ‘translators’, as well as messengers to leaders and decision-makers on the ground, based on tight personal and cultural ties.

However, the sharing of expertise and knowledge is two-way. Traditional development actors can also support diaspora organisations to respond more effectively in areas such as donations of goods in humanitarian response.

CASE STUDY 1

ADVOCATING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



Lensa Dinka is a passionate advocate for her people, the Oromo, in Ethiopia

Words by Lara McKinley and Amy Rashap, picture by Lara McKinley

“THE ISSUE BURNS ME FROM THE INSIDE”

How the Oromo people in Australia founded a group that now enjoys consultative status at the United Nations, able to officially report on human rights abuses in their home country of Ethiopia.

Married couple Lensa Dinka and Marama Kufi make a formidable team. Since arriving in Australia in 1999, the pair has worked tirelessly to expose the human rights abuses inflicted upon their people, the Oromo and are officers of a small yet highly effective diaspora organisation, the Oromo Support Group Australia (OSGA).

Lensa explained: “Oromo are the majority of the people in Ethiopia but do not have any voice, political rights or any freedom of speech. People are being killed voicing human rights issues.

“The issue burns me from the inside,” she said.

A presentation given by Marama at the Diasporas in Action conference clearly highlighted why: in slide after slide he bore witness to the murder and torture of his people — reports the OSGA continue to receive daily.

Finding a forum to present these findings wasn’t always easy, Lensa said. “For ten years we tried to do something for our people, for Australian society to understand our issues, but we couldn’t get anywhere.

“For ten years we tried to talk to everyone but it wasn’t until we connected with Diaspora Action Australia (DAA) that we started to make progress.”

“We started getting in contact with government bodies, with NGOs and our calls [reached] people who had never heard about us,” Lensa said. Marama also noted appreciatively that through various DAA workshops and mentoring programs, the OSGA has gained invaluable skills in communications, organisational management and leadership.

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In July this year the OSGA were given a special consultative status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This means their group is regarded as an official source on human rights abuses in Ethiopia. They are the only Oromia diaspora group in the world to have this status.

“Now we can go to the next level,” Lensa said. “I want to say thank you to the big, beautiful strong [DAA team]. Thank you is not enough. Your work is going somewhere, the fruit that we are seeing now.”

Marama agreed and said that his experiences at the Diasporas in Action conference have deepened his thinking, helped him build valuable connections and gave him practical solutions.

“This conference really reinforced how important it is for diaspora communities to network with a variety of other organisations. We have to really learn what each other is doing in order for us to become more effective.

“We were able to make very valuable contacts: we spoke with Amnesty International staff, an officer from the International Organisation for Migration, as well as with many presenters, speakers and various agency delegates.

“We found the conference very inspiring, and we were moved by the participants’ determination to go back to their original country to make a change.

“I was also heartened to see presentations by young people. After all, we’re all in the same boat. If the boat sinks, we all sink.”

THEMATIC SUMMARIES

The following section summarises discussions during the six different thematic streams of the conference. It highlights key learnings, issues and debates, and calls to action that were raised during workshops and interactive sessions.

Stream #1

Human Development

Diaspora communities have historically been overlooked as players on the global development stage. However, this has changed considerably over the past couple of years as more information has come to light about diasporas contributions to poverty alleviation and human development in their countries of origin. It is increasingly recognised that diaspora communities play a significant role not just as sources of financing, but also as development partners contributing to human development



Dr. Melissa Phillips (DLN/University of Melbourne)

Key learnings

- There is growing acknowledgement that the engagement of diasporas as transnational actors in development is not 'new'. Rather, it is now emerging as a focus area that is visible to mainstream development actors.
- Diaspora communities have an advantage through their connection to their country of origin, which includes their rich contextual knowledge and people-to-people ties.
- Diaspora-led development comes in many forms and is not solely a matter of financial remittances. Although the role of financial remittances remains critical in addressing basic needs, diasporas also contribute significantly in regards to their philanthropy (in-kind donations), mentoring, volunteering, shared learning, advocacy, campaigns (including through social media), and community mobilisation.
- Diasporas play a role in building cultural diversity and contributing to social cohesion in Australia, which is a culturally diverse community with over 300 different spoken languages.
- It must be acknowledged that it is no longer 'business as usual' in how we address human development challenges – diasporas represent a 'coalition of the willing' and 'bridge-connectors' to address poverty.

Issues or debates

- An engaged diaspora can be an asset, particularly when offering a channel of access to networks of human and financial capital that can be valuable resources in development practice. However, it is challenging to assess and quantify the value and impact of diaspora engagement. As is often observed by practitioners and scholars in this area, "no one-size-fits-all".
- Who drives the human development agenda? Whose voices are represented? Diasporas do not drive the human development agenda, but they can and do support it.
- The need to apply a systems-thinking approach to how we engage in human development:

How are we changing the systems and policies that inhibit efficiency and effectiveness in tackling development?

- Ensuring active engagement and participation of diasporas in human development, understanding how mainstream actors engage with diasporas, whilst acknowledging questions of neutrality, political motivations and the diverse agenda of diaspora engagement.
- How do we build more bridges between diaspora communities and governments for improved development outcomes?

Calls to action

1. A database of diaspora organisations in Australia should be developed. This should be done in order to create more opportunities that enable, encourage and engage safe spaces that empower diasporas to visibly engage in international development, and particularly contribute to human development,
2. Policy makers should ensure diaspora organisations are included in coordination structures and other relevant fora. Diaspora communities represent a largely untapped, potential resource for human development. There is a need for development actors and policy makers to recognise the value-add of diasporas in poverty alleviation globally.
3. There should be increased opportunities for humanitarian organisations and development partners to deepen engagement and relationships with diaspora organisations. This should be done in order to enhance human development, including through the development of pilot projects and partnerships which ensure that values, principles and aspirations are shared by all human development actors.
4. Diasporas should be supported to engage with each other through mapping, linking and shared learning, including by sharing stories of human development and engagement in their country of origin. (See also call to action #9)



'We Want Peace' presenters: Abe Nouk, Sarah Williams, Ibby Deng, Akur (Veronica) Deng Barr and Ezeldin Deng

Stream #2

Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

The engagement of diasporas in conflict resolution and peacebuilding settings has been widely recognised during the past decade for its positive outcomes. Diaspora organisations have consistently played a political, social and economic role in complex emergency scenarios, and this is yet to be fully recognised and utilised.

Key learnings

- Living outside their countries of origin offers diaspora organisations a space to challenge authoritarian regimes and hybrid democracies, which are the main sources of displacement and forced migration.
- Diasporas can play a key role in truth and accountability when it comes to peacebuilding. They can also support and enhance mechanisms within transitional justice initiatives.
- Diasporas participate in the social component of peacebuilding efforts in both conflict-affected and settlement countries. Diasporas are involved in social grassroots projects that contribute to reconciliation amongst the affected populations, and that are integral to wider transitional justice efforts. The work of diasporas can support social cohesion as a strategy to overcome the aftermath of conflict.
- Diasporas in Australia have also been beneficiaries of innovative projects to consolidate a sustainable peace environment. Technology has also been a critical tool for diaspora organisations, particularly in their use of social media, film and photography. These types of media cross national borders and unite groups working on peacebuilding, by connecting diaspora organisations to amplify their message and to enhance learning.
- The involvement of diaspora organisations in all these areas can be elevated through the current international push for localisation, which governments and the aid community alike have formally committed to support. In addition, the work towards supporting the Sustainable Development Goal for peace is also a framework to synthesize diaspora initiatives and government priorities.
- It should be recognised that choosing not to engage diaspora organisations is a political decision in itself. We need to dare to engage to leverage the success of our multicultural society and see this as effective and inclusive civic participation.

Calls to action

- 5.** The engagement of diaspora organisations should be recognised as going far beyond just sending remittances and that peacebuilding takes place in many locations. There is space for the Australian Government to incorporate diasporas as an active participant in both the planning and execution of aid, development and peace and security initiatives.
- 6.** Engagement with diaspora organisations should be proactive and inclusive. Although there are calls for diaspora organisations to be more involved in briefing aid groups and military before they head into disaster of conflicts zones, stakeholders need to move beyond a simple information sharing model of engagement. There is opportunity for models of diaspora engagement in peacebuilding to be explored more systematically.
- 7.** Stakeholders in Australia should pilot ways to engage diasporas in implementing the localisation agenda as articulated at the World Humanitarian Summit. (See also call to action #16)

Issues or debates

- Although the Australian Aid Program stands at about AUD\$ 4 billion (2016-2017) and focuses on regional stability, the role of diasporas within it is limited to sharing information during crises. Australia's Aid Program focuses its efforts on good governance, education, economic growth and resilience rather than conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives, which are the areas where diasporas could be involved.

Stream #3

Human Rights

Diasporas are uniquely well placed to identify and raise awareness of human rights issues in their countries of origin or transit. Diasporas have an in-depth understanding of the political and cultural context in their countries of origin, and also have direct links with people and communities in those countries. Having said this they do not face the same barriers that people in-country face, such as fears of retribution from government for speaking publicly about human rights issues. Many Australian actors concerned with international human rights issues, including INGOs and governments agencies, are starting to become more interested in working with diasporas as agents for change in their home countries.



(L-R) Komi Bana & Haroun Kafi (Nuba Mountains International)

Key learnings

- Diasporas can be powerful players that address and also raise awareness of human rights issues. Other human rights actors, such as NGOs, governments, the private sector and civil society groups need to engage better with diasporas.
- International pressure from diasporas can be a major contributor to change, and diasporas are committed to improving human rights in their country of origin.
- Many diasporas have experienced human rights violations themselves and thus they may have a stronger impetus to effect change, which is arguably greater than the general desire to alleviate suffering for others.
- Diasporas can use their invisibility to get past barriers and obtain information that INGOs and governments cannot. They can also play a role in advocacy that may not be open to civilians in-country. For example, in Iran people cannot talk about the choice on wearing of the hijab, however Iranian women outside of Iran can talk more openly about the differences in opinions.
- Diasporas can be a bridge across societies, benefiting both host and donor countries. This position could allow for greater dialogue on human rights issues.
- Social media has enormous potential to link diasporas with each other, with diasporas in other countries, and with their communities back home. For example, the 'Republic of Silence' Facebook group links Afghan diasporas from all around the world.

Issues or debates

- Some national governments may take the view that those who live abroad have no right to interfere with homeland issues.
- Diaspora organisations can be political. Mainstream actors can be wary of engaging with them because of uncertainty about diasporas' political motivations or ideology. The counter-argument to this concern was that these actors do not always interrogate the motivations of other organised groups, and it was acknowledged that government actors are never non-political.
- While diaspora organisations may not have 'one voice', governments are much more likely to take note and listen to what they have to say if they have a unified position. Similarly, some NGOs raised concerns that they do not have capacity to reach out to every diaspora organisation in Australia; they would ideally need diasporas to coordinate and unify.
- Diasporas can be positive or negative forces. Sometimes diasporas may extend or preserve a conflict because they do not have to deal with the messy

business of compromise, as they are not as directly impacted as people in-country.

- If an NGO works with one diaspora organisation, will they cause rifts in the community by favouring one ethnic group over another? Ensuring the engagement with different organisations may provide more credibility to this effect.
- There is no single representative diaspora. Civil conflicts pit neighbour against neighbour and diasporas are not immune to this. Furthermore, diasporas can be more conservative than the communities that they left, representing views not widely held in origin communities. Diasporas, particularly those who have not returned to countries of origin for many years, can also maintain the values and opinions of a past culture that may no longer exist, preserving an identity which is frozen in time.
- To assist diasporas, other actors should set up platforms for discussions and engagements and not dictate agendas. However, there is still a risk that diasporas may be used by certain stakeholders for others' political ends.

Calls to action

8. The Australian government and Australian NGOs should increase and formalise their engagement with diasporas. It was also discussed that Australia should learn from what has already happened in other parts of the world so that steps can be skipped in the process of formalising engagement. In advancing Australia's engagement with diasporas the DLN could work towards documenting lessons learned and best practices internationally.

9. Some participants identified that the first step towards greater engagement is to map and profile diaspora organisations in Australia. This would allow the Australian government, NGOs and diasporas themselves to see which diaspora organisations or organisations exist, what they are doing, and identify opportunities for collaboration. (See also Call to action #4).

10. There is a need for better communication channels between diasporas and other actors. For example, better communication between NGOs and diasporas should be established so that both are aware of what the other is doing and can consequently complement each other's efforts (see Call to action #1). This should include diaspora organisations sharing examples of their involvement in human rights work with other actors.

CASE STUDY 2

BUILDING A DIASPORA-LED ORGANISATION

Jeremy Liyanage is the Executive Director of Bridging Lanka and moved the audience to tears with his passion and authenticity

Words and pictures by Lara McKinley

“MY OVERWHELMING PASSION IS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE LAND OF MY BIRTH”

How one man’s determination has built a diaspora-led organisation designed to connect Sri Lankans abroad with development projects in their home country.

Jeremy Liyanage said he had a tough childhood in the rural Queensland town of Crows Nest, just outside of Toowoomba. His family arrived from Sri Lanka in 1967; his uncle was the parish priest.

“My parents could see trouble coming for Sri Lanka. Things were brewing, darkness was gathering. It was a huge move — we had a good life in Sri Lanka.”

“It was rough for us all. My mum just cried and cried,” he said. “I always knew I would go back and I was determined to learn as much as I could so I could be valuable.

“My overwhelming passion is to contribute to the land of my birth.”

It took him years — Jeremy could not work in Sri Lanka during the war — but now he is doing just that. In 2010 he set up Bridging Lanka, a small community-led organisation kick-started with his super funds.

Jeremy started to work in Mannar, in the country’s north. He was invited by the local chamber of commerce and was able to draw on his experience in local government in Australia to develop a participatory ten-year community development plan for the town.

He said the town had few resources and many of the NGOs had left. “People said everything was messed up after the war.”

Jeremy said he was quite surprised by the results. “People wanted very practical, tangible things. The number-one priority was urban planning. Fixing the roads, addressing flooding, things like that. We thought it would be something more basic, like food or housing, but they wanted a larger vision.

“Most of the priorities we had no expertise or background in, but we’ve learnt those disciplines and have been able to work systematically through those priorities.

“It’s all values based. We had no recipes or agenda, but have tried to build on what we’ve learned on the ground.”

Bridging Lanka now has seven local staff and more than 30 programs ranging from social enterprise development, sustainable tourism, livelihood for widows, animal welfare, peace-building and reconciliation, and of course, improving the local infrastructure.

He said the work is challenging and the divisions caused by the war are still very much present.

“Sri Lanka went through decades of violent and bloody civil war. For people who went through it, it’s hard to forget those memories,” he said. As he spoke, these memories deeply affected him as well.

However, he said his team is nimble and innovative, and by working locally can deliver projects at a fraction of the cost of the government or larger NGOs.

Jeremy added that the conference has helped him build networks and connect with government, NGOs and the academic world. “Making these connections will be very helpful to us. There’s a lot of things that we are doing, but there’s also things that we can improve and change and be fertilized by these new connections.

“The diaspora here in Australia is a largely unrecognised entity but I think we hold some of the answers to a very complex world.”

But he also acknowledged the challenge. To NGOs and government agencies he cautioned, “We, the diaspora, work in very different ways. Don’t corral us or make us like you.”

The conference, he said is a great first step. “We are hoping that this diaspora movement will grow and gain more prominence particularly in the eyes of the Australian government.

Stream #4

Economic Development

This stream explored the role of diasporas in economic development of their origin countries and the ways that other actors, including official donors, international NGOs and business councils can support their involvement. A particular focus was on how the flow of remittances can be facilitated and used most effectively for social and economic development. The sheer scale of officially recorded remittances to developing countries, estimated by the World Bank (2014) to be some \$427 billion and thus dwarfing official development assistance (recorded by the OECD as \$137 billion), highlights their critical role played and indicates their potential. It was argued that, for a number of countries, economic survival is dependent on the smooth flow of remittances.

Key learnings

- Diasporas can be critical to the economic development of countries of origin. A speaker from the Somalian diaspora noted roughly 80% of start-up capital is from members of the diaspora. This investment can come from either individual or collective sources. It was highlighted that diaspora investors want to “make money, that this is not a charity but they love their country too”.
- The economic, regulatory and security environment in many developing countries can seriously affect the willingness of the private sector to invest. Diasporas can play an important role in pressuring governments in countries of origin to improve ease of business conditions. It was argued that even in the most difficult security environments, that there are islands of stability.
- Remittances can help bridge funding gaps and there is a need for settlement countries to better facilitate the flow of remittances. This has implications for the regulation of such flows through banking or non-banking financial institutions. In some instances it also has implications for the operation of anti-terrorism and money laundering restrictions.

- Diaspora members can assist external investors. They have unique skills, knowledge and expertise which can be employed. They can act as brokers, acting as a go-between between investors, governments and communities.

- Australian government representatives have an understandable focus on facilitating trade and investment opportunities for Australia and Australian companies. There are examples of donor government facilitation of investment in developing countries, such as the Norwegian Investment Fund for Developing Countries (NORFUND).

Issues or debates

- There is a need to clarify the role of the official Australian development cooperation program in fostering economic development in developing countries and in facilitating diaspora community involvement in these processes.
- There is a need for greater visibility of diaspora communities’ role in economic development. Such investment is taking place but is often “under the radar” and thus unacknowledged.

Calls to action

- 11.** The importance and value of remittances needs to be understood by all development actors. Ensuring the facilitation of safe and speedy flow of remittances from diasporas to family and community members is one of the most effective ways that donor governments can assist in the economic and social development of developing countries.
- 12.** Governments and aid donors should investigate ways that remittance flows can be used as productively as possible, in particular for investment rather than consumption.

Mele-Ane Havea (Small Giants)

“I am really interested to learn about how diasporas can contribute to economic development in their home countries and also work out what kind of economic development we are contributing to.”



Stream #5

Humanitarian Issues & Response

Diaspora organisations sometimes have greater access to affected populations in humanitarian crises than mainstream actors, and this provides an opportunity to complement the work of the UN and INGOs in this space. In the context of the shortcomings of the humanitarian system, and the prevalent 'funding crisis', looking more closely at what communities are doing for themselves not just locally but also transnationally could result in more effective and efficient response programs. With the increasing focus of the Australian government on diaspora communities and how they can contribute to the aid sector, the time is right to consider engagements with diasporas as models of innovative partnerships between traditional and non-traditional actors.

Key learnings

- Diaspora community members have high responsiveness, flexibility and cross-cultural empathy that allow them to operate across two or more contexts effectively. Having understood and navigated the nuances of different contexts and easily transforming between them, they know how to operate within these different social and cultural environments.
- The cultural insights of diasporas and their ability to act as intercultural interpreters are valuable resources for cultural sensitisation training for aid organisations. Engaging diasporas as consultants for pre-deployment training can assist aid workers to transition more effectively into their roles, particularly in high-pressure environments such as humanitarian response contexts.
- A systems thinking approach is required for program design, in order to highlight and draw out the different non-traditional stakeholder groups that are available for any given humanitarian response. For example, during the Ebola crisis, Sierra Leone diaspora actors reached across all communities both nationally and internationally; however, they were not effectively engaged by other actors.

Issues or debates

- Diaspora humanitarian motivations, modalities and values can differ from dominant humanitarian principles and values (e.g., International Committee of the Red Cross), which are established and grounded in western Christian tradition.
- Diaspora humanitarianism is often motivated by solidarity and nationalism, and rooted in alleviating the suffering of "familiar strangers".
- It is important to understanding that diaspora humanitarianism is unique and shouldn't be made to fit into other forms of humanitarian action.
- For an array of reasons diaspora organisations are seen to lack credibility or legitimacy as actors and some governments may not accept assistance from diasporas.
- There is currently inadequate or non-existent sharing of information between diasporas and INGOs in planning and responding to humanitarian crises.

- 'Spontaneous volunteering' is an issue that emerges after a disaster, where well-meaning individuals are driven to volunteer their skills and time for recovery efforts. However spontaneous volunteering is a high risk approach, where normal vetting and preparation processes cannot be met. INGOs actively advocate against this as normal duty of care processes and checks can't be guaranteed. A more thorough system is required to facilitate diaspora volunteering, such as pre-screening and training, or specifically targeting appropriately skilled diaspora members as part of deployment human resource inputs.

- The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) held in May 2016 presented a targeted focus on the 'localisation agenda' – an agenda that promotes the leadership and ownership of local actors in development and humanitarian efforts. This agenda presents a real opportunity for diaspora groups and organisations. Diaspora groups and organisations, in their roles as a bridge between host and home country agendas, can assist humanitarian agencies in understanding how the localisation agenda will affect their organisations operations and programming.

- A key WHS output that underpins the localisation agenda is the Grand Bargain. The Grand Bargain is the largest humanitarian financing tool that included a target to ensure that 25% of all humanitarian financing will go directly to national/local organisations. Local actors have historically received less than 2% of annual humanitarian assistance. This is an area that diaspora groups engaging in development and/or humanitarian activities can work closely with humanitarian agencies in partnership to facilitate projects and activities that meet the criteria of Grand Bargain commitments.

Calls to action

13. There is a range of immediate ways INGOs and NGOs can directly engage with diaspora organisations for more effective humanitarian response strategies, including by engaging with diasporas to ensure that actions are culturally appropriate and programs are effectively designed.

14. Mainstream or traditional humanitarian actors can design a robust systems approach to engaging with diaspora organisations for humanitarian response activities. They can actively target diaspora members for recruitment and training for deployment, assist with key messages and communications and include diaspora organisations as part of appeals mechanisms, or develop a diaspora skills database which can be drawn on to facilitate rapid recruitment of members of diasporas during humanitarian response.

15. The DLN could work with government to understand perceived risks of diaspora engagement to develop strategies to minimise these risks by potentially hosting bilateral discussions or roundtables.

16. Stakeholders should engage with diasporas to see how they can play a connecting role between organisations and help facilitate the direction and structure of funding through the localisation agenda. (See also Call to action #7)

Stream #6

Settlement in Host Countries

Diasporas are agents for change in their countries of residence (i.e. Australia). They support those who are new to Australia, provide a bridge for those seeking to migrate as they leverage transnational linkages and understandings of countries of origin, assist transit and residence to build communities, provide migration/ asylum advice, assist in settlement of new arrivals and build community harmony and forge new identities.

Key learnings

- Diaspora organisations play a vital but largely invisible role in the settlement of their community members in Australia. Despite this lack of recognition, diasporas play an important role in supporting the social participation, economic wellbeing, independence, personal wellbeing, life satisfaction and community connectedness of new refugee communities in particular.
- In the context of forced migration, it is natural for refugees in host countries to seek what is familiar in order to build bridges and to help them understand their new reality. They do this by drawing strength from their shared experiences, language and cultural understandings. The high level of volunteering and a desire to give back to both other new arrivals and the broader Australian community play an important role in the establishment and momentum of diaspora organisations providing settlement support.
- There is a need to shift the paradigm of governments, host communities and settlement service providers, in order for them to recognise the role of diaspora communities as agents for settlement of new arrivals. Refugee community-based organisations, individuals and groups need to be seen beyond service recipients, but rather as vital partners in the resettlement process.
- Evidence of the inherent strength of communities was provided in the example of the settlement of the Burmese-Karen community in Nhill Victoria employed by the Luv-a-Duck poultry farm.

Issues or debates

- Some challenges include; rebuilding robust organisational structures, securing resources, accessing

decision makers, navigating and brokering solutions within a complex funding and service system, and remaining responsive to the changing needs and expectations of communities with dwindling volunteer capacity.

- The skills that some refugee diasporas bring to Australia are not matched to the local opportunities and needs due to inadequate transition support to facilitate rural resettlement. For instance, there has been a strong willingness from some African communities to make use of their agricultural skills and resettle in country areas due to the increasing cost of living in cities. However, language barriers, unemployment, community isolation and lack of access to essential settlement services in some rural areas have meant that the transition has been challenging and their skills are not utilised.

Calls to action

17. There is a need to research the strength of diaspora communities so that recognition of skills, capacity and the experience of diaspora communities, individual and organisations lead to more cost effective yet crucial contribution to settlement outcomes.
18. There is an urgent need for continuous dialogue on how to make receiving communities conducive for the next generation of diasporas, by strengthening a conversation with established diaspora in regional areas.
19. Advocacy should be strengthened to ensure that diasporas are engaged at decision-making levels such as with funding bodies, government and NGOs that work with new arrivals. The role of diaspora organisations should also be incorporated in the national settlement framework.
20. A strengths-based approach, combined with integrated and strategic resettlement programs can enable refugee communities to play a vital role in resettlement. Incorporating education, work experience and other skills in developing support programs assists refugees to meaningfully retain self-determination in a new context. As a result, the experiences and work of diaspora organisations in supporting settlement should be documented further.

Adibeh Abdo-Attia
(Syrian Orthodox Women's Association)

"When you work with the community, with NGOs you have to have that sort of networking. OK where I can get help, where I can get funding, where I can get services for our members."



KEY CONFERENCE LEARNINGS

Drawing on the issues, debates and calls to action that were discussed during the two days of the conference, the following are key learnings and steps forward for strengthening the voices of diaspora organisations in Australia working for peace, development and humanitarian response.

KEY LEARNINGS

Diasporas have unique potential:

Diasporas have high responsiveness, flexibility, contextual knowledge, people-to-people links and empathy that can enable them to operate across two or more contexts effectively. They understand and easily navigate the nuances of different contexts and know how to operate within different social and cultural environments effectively. Diasporas are positioned to action and implement specialised or sensitive projects that other development, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors might find challenging to do.

Diaspora-led action for change comes in many forms:

Diasporas are involved in business development, philanthropy, mentoring, volunteering, advocacy and campaigning, funding and the facilitation of aid projects, as well as community mobilisation.

Diasporas represent potential for new modes of action:

In the face of global challenges, development, peacebuilding and humanitarian response can no longer be 'business as usual'. Diasporas represent a 'coalition of the willing' and 'bridge-connectors' that can animate and innovate in new and cost-effective ways. For example, the localisation agenda that came out of The Grand Bargain presents a real opportunity for diaspora organisations, with 25% of all humanitarian funding set to go directly to national/local organisations.

Diasporas are legitimate stakeholders:

Diasporas can offer much to policy and practice both in Australia and internationally. Diasporas are not 'new' actors—they have been working in development, peacebuilding and humanitarian work for a long time—but are only recently being recognised in Australia. A great deal of work needs to be done for diasporas to be recognised and engaged as legitimate stakeholders.

Diversity:

Diaspora communities are not homogenous and cannot speak with 'one voice', even if different stakeholders would like them to take a unified position. Work needs to be done to understand the challenges and the struggles faced by diaspora communities. Issues related to representation, transparency, accountability and capacity within diaspora organisations should also be acknowledged and addressed.

Valuing diasporas:

Stakeholders, including NGOs, governments, the private sector and civil society groups need to better engage and utilise the skills of diasporas. For example, these stakeholders should involve diasporas in cultural sensitisation training for aid organisations, include them in effective program design, consult with them to inform and enhance human rights advocacy, and also work with them to develop of business and trade links. However, there is a need for diasporas to set the agenda and not be 'made to fit' or instrumentalised to meet others' agendas.

Formal engagement with Australia's diasporas:

Diasporas can act as a bridge across societies, which benefits both host and donor countries. However, there is much work to be done in developing ways of ensuring formal and high-level engagement between policy-makers and diasporas in Australia, as well as in developing mutual understanding about the complexities, challenges and best models for effective diaspora engagement.

Visibility of diasporas' civic participation:

Diasporas make great contributions both locally and internationally which are largely unrecognised. A greater visibility and acknowledgement of the contribution of diasporas both in Australia and internationally would highlight their significant civic participation.



FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

As the conference was not structured to produce a series of concrete recommendations for particular stakeholders, these follow-up actions should be read as first or follow-up steps. The DLN intends to produce a series of policy briefs in 2017 to further develop the calls to action that came from this conference into fuller recommendations.


	Proposed Actions	Stakeholder
1	<p>The Diaspora Learning Network (DLN) to continue as an ongoing network, recruit new members and focus on developing the actions and work started at the conference.</p> <p>Those interested in joining the network can email DAA (info@diasporaaction.org.au)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diaspora Action Australia (DAA) to convene • Diaspora Learning Network (DLN) • All interested stakeholders
2	<p>Policy briefs building further on the themes and recommendations coming out of the conference to be developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DLN
3	<p>Expertise to be developed within the Australian Government about diaspora engagement, including how to engage diasporas in policy discussions and international programs.</p> <p>Lessons learned and best practices from other governments' experiences of diaspora engagement to be documented and shared so that thinking in Australia is informed by international experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) • DLN
4	<p>Bilateral discussions or roundtables to be planned on how to understand perceived risks of government engagement with diasporas and to develop strategies to minimise these risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DFAT • DLN
5	<p>A database of diaspora organisations and groups in Australia to be developed and shared with relevant stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DLN
6	<p>Further work to be done to create effective pathways for diaspora engagement in development, peacebuilding and humanitarian work, including through the exploration of the possible development of a diaspora skills database and diaspora-focused international volunteering program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DLN • International Volunteering Organisations
7	<p>Opportunities to be created for INGOs to deepen engagement and relationships with diaspora organisations, including through pilots and partnerships, to be developed and shared.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INGOs • Diasporas • DLN
8	<p>Information about diaspora organisations development, peacebuilding and humanitarian activities to be documented and shared with relevant stakeholders, including between diaspora organisations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DAA • Diasporas • DLN
9	<p>The Australian government, diaspora organisations and business councils and interested INGOs to work together to investigate ways that remittance flows can be enabled and used as productively as possible, in particular for investment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DLN • Diasporas • DFAT • INGOs
10	<p>Research to be undertaken and shared on the experiences of diaspora communities in supporting resettlement and settlement outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANGOs • Diasporas

SEVERAL FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS ARE SUBJECT TO FUNDING AVAILABILITY.

**“Change requires a will to struggle....
and that is something diaspora
communities can give more easily.
[Alongside] love for their home
countries and people.”**

(L-R) Denise Cauchi (DAA/DLN) & Hanan
Angalo (Nuba Mountains Association)





“The first step in successful collaboration is to understand one another’s experiences and learn from them. [When] the role diasporas play is more widely understood and accepted, [then] business as usual is no longer an option.”



“You get a lot of people talking to you, but I say listen. Listen to us carefully and then changes will happen.”



“All the keynote speakers were amazing and insightful, but particularly those from a diaspora community highlighting their work and the impact they have been able to make and create change. This highlighted to me the importance of engaging with these people, and what a valuable resource they are in affecting/creating change as they already have networks and are able to engage with communities more quickly and in non-traditional channels that are usually navigated by NGOs, and other organisations.”



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