

April 2014



Exploring Effective Collaboration between the Diaspora and the Academic Community



By Paul Asquith, AFFORD/CAS and Aleja Taddesse, AFFORD

OVERVIEW

In recent years, there has been a growing academic interest in the study of diasporas, and how they contribute to their 'home' and 'host' societies. In particular, the nexus between migration and development has arisen as an important area for researchers and policy-makers alike. While collaboration between the academic community and diaspora organisations and practitioners is crucial to improve research in these areas, the engagement between the two parties remains uneven. There appears to be a significant disconnect between researchers and diaspora activists, causing the latter to feel excluded from research on the very diaspora that they are part of.

This policy brief seeks to identify key issues in, and challenges to, academic engagement with the diaspora, and makes recommendations for improving collaboration between the diaspora and the academic community in order to strengthen research on diasporas, migration, and development. It draws on the findings of a research seminar on academic collaboration with the diaspora, organised by CAS and AFFORD in November 2013. Although this policy brief is informed by the experiences of the African diaspora in particular, it is likely that there will be common issues affecting academic engagement with other diaspora communities.

DIASPORAS, MIGRATION, AND DEVELOPMENT: RESEARCH AND THE KEY PLAYERS

The academic focus on the diaspora, which has developed over the last twenty years, broadly focuses on three areas: the sociology of diasporas, especially in the context of transnationalism and globalisation; migration, migration policy, and integration; and diaspora contributions to development in countries of origin. These last two areas combined form an important research and policy area in its own right: 'migration and development', which seeks to understand the impact of migration on development and vice versa.

Both 'development' and 'diaspora' are contested terms, and their meanings, analytical validity and limitations are discussed in a vast body of academic literature.¹ The increased academic interest in issues of migration resulted in new interdisciplinary fields of study, such as 'development studies' and 'migration studies'. Examples of UK-based hubs for research on diasporas, migration, and development are the Centre for Migration Studies at SOAS, the Centre for Migration Policy and



Photo © Aubrey Fagon

Society (COMPAS) at Oxford University, and the (DfID-funded) 'Migrating out of Poverty Programme' at the University of Sussex.

Research on migration and development is also conducted and commissioned by NGOs (e.g. Oxfam Novib, Comic Relief), government departments (e.g. DfID in the UK, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ethiopia), and intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the International Organisation for Migration and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development).

As for diaspora organisations, a small number conduct their own research, but their limited capacity and resources can hinder their ability to participate in research processes and shape research agendas.²

"Much of the research on remittances in particular has focused on their development impact, the extent to which remittances are used for private consumption, and how they may increase socio-economic inequalities. This in itself can be a source of frustration for some diaspora practitioners and activists, who find that these important financial contributions are not recognised as 'development'."

DIASPORAS, MIGRATION, AND DEVELOPMENT: AREAS OF RESEARCH

Terms like 'diaspora development', 'brain circulation' (as opposed to 'brain-drain'), and 'managed migration', have increasingly become part of the vocabulary of academics and policy-makers alike.³ This is partly attributable to political interest in migration (often as a domestic issue) and international

development (as an instrument of both foreign and domestic policy). Another factor has been the growing awareness of the contributions diaspora communities make to their countries of origin.⁴

Pailey (2013) sets out four main areas that the research community have focused on in relation to diasporas and development: diasporas and remittances; diaspora foreign direct investment; diaspora philanthropy; and diaspora knowledge transfers.⁵ It is noteworthy that of these four areas, three fall under the rubric of 'diaspora financial capital'. Indeed, World Bank figures from the early 2000s onwards, demonstrating the growing scale of these contributions (\$51.8 billion in formal remittances in 2010 to Africa alone, outstripping bilateral aid flows), have arguably driven this interest amongst academics and policy-makers.⁶

Much of the research on remittances in particular has focused on their development impact, the extent to which remittances are used for private consumption, and how they may increase socio-economic inequalities. This in itself can be a source of frustration for some diaspora practitioners and activists, who find that these important financial contributions are not recognised as 'development'. Similarly, it can be argued that this privileging of diaspora financial capital has had the effect of ignoring other forms of diaspora capital (e.g. skills, knowledge, social capital, and voluntarism) and their impact in countries of origin.

Another research focus in relation to the diaspora has been that of migration and migration policy. In an increasingly globalised world, migration has become a fact of life for many. At the same time, migration has turned into an increasingly politicised subject for governments, both domestically and internationally. Leaving aside the tendency of policy-makers (and some researchers) to conflate 'migrants' and 'diasporas', there has thus been increasing research interest in issues such as labour mobility, 'migration management', and integration.⁷ Through their portrayal of the diaspora's role in development, some academics and policy-makers risk instrumentalising the diaspora. For instance, Weinar (2010) points to the recent rise of the diaspora as an actor

within migration policy.⁸ This can be viewed as part of a wider trend, in which policy makers regard the diaspora as a panacea for global development. Such a view is all the more salient in the context of a global recession and the shortfall in international aid funding, which has seen an increased focus from policy makers on remittances as a source of financial capital for development.⁹

In the same vein, the resonance of migration as a sensitive political issue has led to a view of migrants and diaspora (between whom the lines are blurred in political discourse) as a potential threat to national security. In the UK, this is with particular reference to border management and counter-terrorism.¹⁰

It is important to engage the diaspora in challenging such instances of instrumentalisation through research, in order to avoid the diaspora being seen as a force which can replace the capacity of states to act or deliver.¹¹

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE COLLABORATION

If one of the main drivers for closer collaboration with the diaspora is to produce better research, one of the principal challenges is the inherent

“If one of the main drivers for closer collaboration with the diaspora is to produce better research, one of the principal challenges is the inherent asymmetry between the capacity of academic centres to conduct research, and that of diaspora groups and practitioners.”



Photo © Aubrey Fagon

asymmetry between the capacity of academic centres to conduct research, and that of diaspora groups and practitioners. This imbalance can be problematic for the research community in the sense that it may entail engaging with non-academic approaches that sometimes lack rigour.

Much research is an extractive process, and some of the great debates within the social sciences from the late 20th century onwards have been around issues of representation and agency, the extent to which it is appropriate for groups or communities to be ‘objects’ of study (rather than ‘subjects’), and the need for more participatory research methodologies.¹² A recurrent complaint from diaspora and minority groups in this regard is the way in which they may be consulted on a given research topic – a report or article is written and published, but there is no or limited ongoing engagement or practical impact. Ways of mitigating this include the academic community undertaking more outreach and community development activities (even if this is just a case of feeding back research on diaspora communities in community contexts), as well as closer alignment of research priorities and outcomes as part of joint research projects. From within academia, on the other hand, there are concerns that diaspora practitioners can be susceptible to bias by virtue of being ‘too close to the material’, as well as suspicion of the value (and analytical validity) of diaspora development practices. Therefore, there is a need to manage the tension that can exist between the research priorities of academic institutions and those of diaspora practitioners (and activists in particular).

Also relevant here are the historical and structural barriers preventing diaspora communities from accessing and engaging the academy more broadly, which can engender mistrust and suspicion. In this respect, networks of diaspora academics such as the African Diaspora Academics Network (ADAN) in the UK can play a useful bridging role, and academic institutions should consider working more closely with such networks to facilitate better engagement with diaspora communities.

Many of these challenges are not necessarily new issues for the academic community, but their relevance to research on the diaspora should be carefully considered. There remains a need for more long-term commitment and resources to build research capacity within the diaspora sector in order to complement the research priorities of academic centres, and develop collaborative research projects.¹³ This would not only improve the quality of research that the diasporas undertake as part of joint research projects, but could also have a multiplier effect, as future research undertaken by diaspora groups and practitioners themselves would be more robust and more useful to researchers and policy-makers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The academic community has shown increasing interest in diasporas, migration, and development over the last twenty years, but their ability to engage the diaspora effectively in such research is hindered by a number of challenges. Nevertheless, there remain real opportunities for the academic community and diaspora groups and practitioners to work more effectively together. Closer collaboration can help not only develop our knowledge of the diaspora as important stakeholders in development, but also identify new areas for future research.



Photo © Aubrey Fagon

This policy brief makes the following recommendations in order to strengthen research in this area:

Academic Institutions:

- Commit time and resources on a long-term basis to build research capacity amongst diaspora organisations and practitioners (there is little to none at present).
- Develop more joint research projects with the diaspora sector, both to improve research outcomes and support diaspora engagement with the academy.
- Be willing to use their resources to initiate partnerships with the diaspora organisations, in a range of outreach and community development activities within diaspora communities.

Diaspora organisations:

- Use their resources to instigate partnerships with academic institutions, in a range of outreach and community development activities within diaspora communities.
- Provide project ideas that have practical applications for the diaspora to research students and final year students in academic institutions.
- Draw on existing networks of diaspora academics to facilitate access to, and engagement with, diaspora communities in research.

Diaspora Practitioners:

- Be actively involved in supporting/funding new partnerships between academic centres and diaspora organisations in areas of relevance (e.g. migration policy, diaspora voluntarism, diaspora development practices).

NOTES

¹ Amongst other see: Brubaker, R. (2005) 'The "diaspora" diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(1): 1-19; Adamson, F (2012) 'Constructing the diaspora: diaspora identity politics and transnational social Movements' In: *Politics from Afar: Transnational Diasporas and Networks*. New York: Columbia University Press; Cowen, M. and Shenton, R. (1995) 'Doctrines of development' In: *Power of Development*. London: Routledge; Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Kothari, U. (2005), 'Authority and expertise: the professionalisation of international development and the ordering of dissent', *Antipode*, 37(3): 425-446.

² <http://www.diasporavolunteeringalliance.org/about-us>

³ See, for example: Ansah, E.E. (2002), 'Theorising the brain drain', *African Issues*, 30(1): 21-24.

⁴ Mohapatra, S., Ratha, D., Özden C, Plaza, S., Shaw, W., Shimeles, A., (2011) *Leveraging Migration for Africa: Remittances, Skills and Investments*. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank.

⁵ Pailey, R. 'An Overview of Diaspora Development Research', presentation given at Africa-UK/ CAS Research Seminar, Nov 2013, [online] available at: <http://africa-uk.org/publications/robtel-neajai-pailey-overview-diaspora-and-development-research-challenges-and>

⁶ Adams, B. (2013) 'African diaspora remittances are better than foreign aid funds', *World Economics Journal*, 12/2013: 14(4).

⁷ Haas, de, H. (2006) *Engaging Diasporas, How governments and development agencies can support diaspora involvement in the development of origin countries*, [online] available at: <http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/pdfs/engaging-diasporas-hein-de-haas.pdf>

⁸ Weinar, A. (2010) 'Instrumentalising diasporas for development: International and European policy discourses'. In Baubock, R. and Faist, T. (eds.) *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

⁹ Also worth noting is that Africa's biggest AID donor is now Africans.

¹⁰ Cochrane F. (ed.) (forthcoming) *Remapping Understandings of Diaspora Identities, Behaviour and Relevance for International Security*. University of Kent: Conflict Analysis Research Centre.

¹¹ Pailey, R. (2013) *ibid*.

¹² Baubock, R. and Faist, T. (eds.) (2010) *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

¹³ One example of this would be the DoH/ University of Central Lancashire's 'Community Engagement Programme' from 2001 to 2005, which trained Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community members to undertake qualitative research on health equalities within their own communities.

Authors: Paul Asquith, AFFORD/CAS and Aleja Tadesse, AFFORD

The Centre for African Studies at SOAS, University of London is 'the largest centre of expertise on Africa outside Africa.' It assumes formal responsibility for coordinating, stimulating and promoting interdisciplinary study, research, and discussion on Africa within the University. soas.ac.uk/cas

Africa-UK supports UK based Africans to influence policy and practice affecting Africa's development. It encourages effective dialogue between the diaspora and decision makers; challenges policy perspectives that neglect realities on the ground; and recognises the crucial role the diaspora play in Africa's development. africa-uk.org

Implemented by:



Funded by:



Supported by:



The Baring Foundation

