

IN DEPTH

Diaspora Participation in Peacebuilding

Metka Herzog and Lisa Ott

swisspeace

The general approach to diasporas was until recently to either ignore them entirely, or to see their intentions, power and capacity with suspicion and scepticism. Currently, the trend is changing towards seeing diaspora with a peacemaker potential, including them in all phases of peacebuilding, either for normative or utility reasons. Based on inclusive and victim-centred approaches, diaspora communities are sought after by policymakers and civil society actors as partners in peacebuilding projects; however still seen with suspicion and dependent on the willingness of countries of origin and international community as to which diaspora group and in what form they will be engaged.

This synthesis highlights the engagement of diaspora and internally displaced people (IDPs) in the peacebuilding efforts of Syria and Colombia, drawing on our own as well as our swisspeace colleagues' experience and a review of literature on diaspora mobilization and transitional justice. Furthermore, it discusses the challenges and opportunities faced by diaspora actors in navigating their roles in peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the importance of collaboration, inclusivity, and sustainable partnerships. Overall, this paper underscores the indispensable contribution of diaspora communities to building long-term and sustainable peace.

The reasons why 'diasporas clearly matter for homeland peacebuilding' (Shain & Barth 2003, 45) are both moral, on the grounds of deservingness, and seen as adding value to peacebuilding. Because of their multi-sited embeddedness (Horst, 2018), diaspora are credited with invaluable context-specific knowledge of the country of origin and as a potential bridge-builder through their networks in the countries of settlement. Not only

may they contribute to peace with their unique perspectives, experiences and skills, but including them and their voices, also as victims and survivors, in reconciliation can be a contribution to recognition and thus symbolic reparations.

The calls for greater inclusion of the local actors and the importance of the right to truth in international law create a space for IDPs and diaspora to participate in conflict transformation and peace processes. This has further implications for influencing diasporas' stake in the homeland's future in a post-conflict reconstruction setting (Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2016) and can contribute to the search for durable solutions to peace and displacement.

“Including diasporas and their voices in reconciliation, their unique perspectives, experiences and skills, also as victims and survivors, is a contribution to recognition and thus symbolic reparations”

Diaspora communities, defined here by their political mobilization, have historically maintained strong ties to their homeland while simultaneously integrating into their countries of settlement. They come into existence through political mobilization by diasporic political entrepreneurs. As transnational actors, diasporas are deemed to possess unique resources, networks, and experiences that make them integral to peacebuilding processes in conflict-affected regions.

Considering that peacebuilders and human rights activists are among the most vulnerable to face forced displacement (Peace Direct, 2022), it is critical to recognize the agency and leadership potential among diaspora. With their contextual knowledge and a personal stake in peacebuilding, they are well placed to exert influence on the homeland's political situation. This can be done directly, by participating in peace negotiations or interacting with political actors and peacebuilders on the ground, or

indirectly through advocacy, lobbying to raise awareness of conflict-related issues and to mobilize international support. Cultural diplomacy and reconciliation initiatives are another key aspect of diaspora peacebuilding, as many communities use art, music, and storytelling to promote dialogue, healing, and understanding among conflicting parties (Kalnazarova, 2020). Furthermore, including diaspora communities who have been displaced by conflict in reconciliation initiatives plays an important role in the creation of comprehensive and accurate record of past crimes (Koinova & Karabegovic, 2016).

“Considering that peacebuilders and human rights activists are among the most vulnerable to face forced displacement it is critical to recognize the agency and leadership potential among diaspora”

This paper explores the shifting claims from the national to the global, focusing on examples from Syria and Colombia, two countries that have experienced protracted conflicts and have seen significant diaspora engagement in efforts to build sustainable peace. We highlight research and engagement by swisspeace with displaced Syrians in Germany and internally displaced in Syria as the first example (Mayoraz, 2023) and with Colombian diaspora in Switzerland (Beristain, Franco and Ott 2023, Wiesman 2023).

Political engagement of displaced Syrians

Syria has seen massive displacement, with millions of Syrians now living as refugees or IDPs. This experience of displacement poses significant challenges for their inclusion in peacebuilding and political processes. While the Syrian uprising in 2011 acted as a unifying factor that politicised Syrians abroad, the conflict escalation, with rising ethnicization and radicalisation in Syria also affected the patterns of diaspora mobilisation in Europe (Danish Refugee Council 2018). Political, ethnic and religious fragmentation, and the resulting lack of trust between Syrian groups, thwart

constructive organisation, which is further paralysed by the extraterritorial power of the authoritarian country of origin.

At the international level, the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2254 made inclusivity one of its eight guiding principles for effective mediation. Participation of the Syrian people is considered utmost important for determining the country's future, including in the pursuit of safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPS to their home areas. As the UN Special Envoy for Syria in 2016, Staffan de Mistura, launched the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), this involved inviting Syrian civil society actors, including those in diaspora, to share their views with the mediation team in parallel with the formal negotiations (Turkmani & Theros, 2019). From the outset, swisspeace was tasked with facilitating the participation of civil society in the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva through the CSSR. With the political process of the formal talks at a standstill, this mechanism has allowed the various members of civil society to continue to exchange views and to exert pressure on the parties to the conflict to work towards a political solution within the CSSR (Siegfried, 2019).

“Despite the obstacles, Syrian diaspora and internally displaced people have found ways to engage in the civic and political life of their country from afar”

However, even with an organized and institutionalized space for civil society actors which is considered to set new standards for inclusive mediation practice (Hellmüller & Zahar, 2018), the civil society was in practice excluded from contributing to operative decisions (Mayoraz, 2023). Syrian diaspora, particularly those who have been displaced by the conflict, may lack the political influence or leverage to effectively advocate for their rights and interests in formal peacebuilding settings. Most refugees and IDPs, who position themselves against the Assad government, risk losing their space in Syrian society and are not progressing in discussions on vital issues such as safe and dignified returns to Syria.

The role of the displaced as a potential actor is largely defined by the recognition of the state of origin (Toivanen & Baser, 2020), which shows the instrumentalised use of diasporas for their agendas aimed at controlling populations abroad. While the Syrian government has occasionally expressed willingness to engage with Syrian refugees and encourage their return to the country, this rhetoric is often coupled with calls for loyalty to the government and may be seen as an attempt to bolster support for the regime rather than a genuine interest in including them in peacebuilding processes.

Despite the obstacles, Syrian diaspora and IDPs have found ways to engage in the civic and political life of their country from afar, focusing on informal forms of participation. This includes providing humanitarian aid and support to refugees (Mayoraz, 2023). Through fundraising and coordination with international NGOs, they have supplied food, medical supplies, and educational resources to civilians in war-torn regions.

The younger diaspora who was involved in the Syrian uprising tends to be more focused on advocacy and raising international awareness and support for opposition actors (Mayoraz, 2023). They have organized protests, media campaigns, and lobbying efforts to highlight human rights abuses and pressure governments and international organizations to act. For example, the support by the Syrian torture survivors, human rights lawyers and activists provided to the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) in launching universal jurisdiction cases against members of the Syrian government as part of the Koblenz trials can be seen as a form of peacebuilding through justice (ECCHR, x). While the trials were conducted by the German judiciary, the Syrian diaspora played a crucial role in supporting the legal process, providing evidence of atrocities committed by the Syrian government, expertise, and advocacy to ensure that justice was served for the victims of human rights abuses. Enjoying relative autonomy as they operate from abroad, the Syrian diaspora could gather information and testify, which would not be possible for the Syrian population at home (Cavallaro, 2022).

“With no clear path to peace, Syrian refugees in Europe expressed feelings of despair and

powerlessness and therefore oriented themselves towards small-scale humanitarian aid”

Given the lack of perspectives for a conflict resolution, the focus for Syrians in Germany also shifted towards supporting the integration of refugees in Germany (Mayoraz, 2023). Navigating a new life in Germany has been a difficult experience. First, refugees report reliving of traumatic experiences with severe consequences for their physical and mental health. Second, their insecurity and the lack of peace is perpetrated through the continued threat that people may face in destination countries (fear from the secret services monitoring activities abroad) and the continued concern for the ones left behind. Thirdly, there are uncertainties for asylum seekers who have not (yet) obtained long-term legal residence (Dijkema, Grossenbach and Herzog, 2024). Fear of being returned to Syria is very present among Syrians in Germany, therefore the question of not recognizing Syria as a safe space remains central in terms of advocacy goals (Mayoraz, 2023).

Clearly the stage of conflict influences diaspora participation (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017). With no clear path to peace, Syrian refugees in Europe expressed feelings of despair and powerlessness and therefore oriented themselves towards small-scale humanitarian aid and support to refugees. The second example of this paper will show how inclusion of the diaspora in peacebuilding can take different forms if a negotiated peace or settlement has been reached.

Participation of Colombian diaspora in dealing with the past and peacebuilding

More than five decades of internal armed conflict in Colombia have resulted in 6.8 million Colombians fleeing inside the country (UNHCR, 2024) and more than one million Colombians fleeing to neighbouring countries, other Latin American Countries, North America, Europe, Australia and beyond. As many of them had been politically active in Colombia, they continued their activism while on the move and when arriving in their countries of settlement. Thus, informal networks of solidarity, peacebuilding and of

political activists have existed outside of Colombia as early as the 1950s and 1960s.

From 2018-2022, the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition established on the basis of the 2016 Peace agreement between the Colombian government and the guerilla group FARC-EP, became the first truth commission world-wide which systematically conducted extra-territorial truth-seeking in the diaspora.

“The collection of over 2100 testimonies from the Colombian diaspora underlines the significant role that displaced populations can play in uncovering the truth and contributing to a nation’s healing and reconciliation process”

Its extraterritorial work to collect testimonies from the Colombian diaspora, demonstrates the potential of diaspora mobilization in dealing with the past (also referred to as transitional justice) processes which are an essential element of sustainable peacebuilding. The collection of over 2100 testimonies from the diaspora underlines the significant role that displaced populations can play in uncovering the truth about human rights violations and contributing to a nation’s healing and reconciliation process.

During 6-months preparation phase, Commissioner Carlos Martín Beristain was tasked to focus his efforts on the “Colombia outside of Colombia”, the diaspora, which is represented nearly in all countries of the world. Based on the previously existing international contacts in the CEV network, the Commissioner launched the process in more than 24 countries by travelling to each one of them, knocking doors and creating alliances.

When the Commission concluded its mandate in 2022, a full chapter of its final report entitled “The Truths of Exile. The Colombia out-side of Colombia” was dedicated to the

stories, resistance and challenges of the Colombians in exile. But beyond the publication of a written report, the process in many places had more far-reaching results: Several of the witnesses giving their testimony to the CEV in the process, mentioned that this was an important moment to officially experience recognition of their work, resistance and pain (Wiesman 2023). Also, a public ceremony which the CEV held in Bogotá to give visibility to the stories and struggles of those in exile, contributed to recognition. Also, in many instances, the process contributed to strengthen the communication and collaboration among victims (including across conflict lines).

“The innovative Colombian Truth Commissions’ process was largely bottom-up, learning-by-doing, step-by-step approach”

In other instances, expectations could not be met and the process led to frustrations as the pre-existing networks were weakened at least temporarily to some extent due to the temporary focus of the work on the CEV. After the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidency of Iván Duque, who did not value the peace agreement and did not prioritize its implementation, many felt exhausted and demotivated for some time.

While the process was formally initiated by the CEV in Bogotá, the innovative, learning-by-doing, step-by-step approach, the different realities in the different host countries and the different funding situations meant that the process was also largely bottom-up (Franco and Ott 2023).

Conclusions

Examples of engagement of diaspora in the peacebuilding efforts of Syria and Colombia reveal both commonalities and discrepancies that highlight the complexities and potential of involving displaced populations in conflict resolution and dealing with the past.

The two illustrated initiatives which started as top-down UN or governmental actions demonstrate that bottom-up work still needs to be done. The feeling of ownership among the participants was strong and they were not just passive users or beneficiaries of either the CSSR or the CEV (Turkami and Theros, 2019, Franco and Ott 2023). Both processes have developed over time, with different participants playing an active role in the reframing of the design. The flexible architecture of the Colombian Truth Commission allowed for adjusting to the different realities in different host countries of the diaspora, while the CSSR developed from first having participation predominantly from those living outside of Syria to becoming more inclusive for the civil society from regime-controlled areas. With the developed sense of ownership, both processes led to positive outcomes in terms of breaking down of barriers and transforming conflicting views.

“A transnational perspective that recognises migrants offers an opportunity to build peaceful and inclusive societies in pursuit of long-term and sustainable peace for their countries of origin and residence”

As we underscore the importance of inclusion in the peacebuilding processes, our findings also show that bottom-up work entails a struggle for the individuals involved: to disagree and negotiate with other participants on the strategy, lobby towards above, and deal with the expectations that are not met. Complex and messy, conflict and peacebuilding are not clear-cut linear processes. This has implications.

Over the course of the conflict, at different stages of the conflict, at different stages of the implementation of peace agreements and in different political situations, the priorities of the diaspora change. Depending on the stage of the peace process, different activities for diaspora participation are needed. At the same time, as peace negotiation processes are complex and non-linear, it is difficult to have a clear information strategy towards the diaspora to clarify what the participation will lead to. It is therefore easy to

raise expectations that cannot be fully met.

Diaspora participation can also be exhausting, as refugees struggle to integrate in their new countries of residence. The peace-migration nexus therefore urges us to study peace and peacebuilding in different places and across borders (Krause and Segadlo, 2021), including in host countries. Recognising the different experiences that people have had in their countries of origin and that they may continue to have in host countries brings new narratives and perspectives.

Peacebuilding programmes and projects, such as truth and reconciliation initiatives, benefit from the inclusion of transnational voices as they can create spaces for bridging the different perspectives of those who have stayed, been displaced, fled or returned. A transnational perspective that recognises migrants, stayers and returnees as peacebuilders therefore offers an opportunity to build peaceful and inclusive societies in pursuit of long-term and sustainable peace for their countries of origin and destination.

About the authors

Metka Herzog

Research coordinator at [swisspeace](#), Swiss Peace Foundation, and teaches political science at the University of Basel. Her thematic interests are focused on highly skilled mobilities, politics of migration, and migrants' civic engagement. Metka holds an MSc in International Development Studies from Utrecht University and a PhD in Public Policy and Policy Analysis from Maastricht University.


Lisa Ott

Head of the [Dealing with the Past](#) (DwP) program at [swisspeace](#). She joined [swisspeace](#) in 2014 and focuses on victim participation, archives and DwP, enforced disappearances in the framework of the right to truth. She holds an MA and a PhD on

enforced disappearance in international law from the University of Lucerne, as well as a 'Certificat de Droit Transnational' from the University of Geneva.

Before joining swisspeace, she worked with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Colombia and Nepal monitoring the situation of human rights defenders at risk, reparations and land restitution in the context of the peace processes. She has also worked with NGOs in El Salvador on indigenous rights and on migration.

Photography

“Arpilleras” workshop of the “Cuerpos Gramaticales” activity with the Colombian diaspora in Barcelona,  2017. Author: Ingrid Guyon.