

IN DEPTH

From the margins to the mainstream: integrating the diaspora into peacebuilding through public policy

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The concept of diaspora engagement in political reform, peacebuilding, and reconciliation is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that has gained increasing attention in recent years. Diasporas, characterised by their transnational ties, hold significant political capital that can be leveraged for positive change in both their host countries and countries of origin. Contrary to viewing diasporas as threats, recognising their potential as active contributors to peace and development efforts is essential for harnessing their unique resources and perspectives.

Diasporas are major contributors to their countries of origin, not only in terms of financial support but also through political and social engagement. Their involvement in development and humanitarian response activities has been extensively documented^[1], showcasing their growing global impact. The emergence of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus underscores the interconnected nature of humanitarian relief, development programmes, and peacebuilding initiatives. This emphasises the need for coherent approaches to addressing vulnerability throughout crises and afterwards. While the diaspora's role as a humanitarian actor has gained recognition in recent years, there is still a need to further explore their contributions to peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

The diaspora can play diverse roles in both host and homeland contexts. Understanding the heterogeneity within and between diaspora communities, as well as the generational dynamics of diaspora activism, is crucial for comprehensively assessing their impact. Additionally, factors such as access to political rights, integration level, and recognition of their potential impact their capacity to influence policy-making mechanisms and peace processes.

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To effectively harness the potential of diasporas in peacebuilding and reconciliation frameworks that facilitate their positive engagement must be established. Addressing challenges such as inclusivity within diaspora communities and maintaining neutrality is essential for maximising their contributions. Neutrality refers to the need to finding common ground and avoiding internal conflicts within the diaspora community. It is about creating a space where everyone feels welcome to participate, regardless of their political inclinations or opinions on a specific contentious issue. This can be achieved, for example, by avoiding involvement in homeland politics altogether or encouraging open discussions on various issues while maintaining a respectful environment where people can disagree without resorting to hostility.

By creating collaborative environments and comprehensive policy frameworks, diasporas can be empowered to promote participation in development processes, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace and prosperity globally. In this paper we will look at what policy frameworks and initiatives already exist to support diaspora engagement and peacebuilding and propose recommendations to bridge existing gaps.

Policy framework for diaspora engagement in peacebuilding

The role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding efforts has gained recognition at various levels of policymaking, ranging from global to local initiatives. As the world faces complex challenges related to conflict and sustainable development, leveraging the potential of diasporas has emerged as a crucial strategy for fostering peace, resilience, and inclusive development. Policy frameworks are beginning to acknowledge the potential of diasporas in peacebuilding activities. This section explores the evolving policy frameworks at the global, European Union (EU), and regional levels, emphasising the importance of recognising and involving diaspora communities in peacebuilding efforts.

At the global level, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN in 2015, represents a significant step forward. This framework emphasises a holistic approach to end poverty and set the world on a sustainable path to prosperity, peace and social justice. SDG 16 specifically focuses on achieving “peace, justice and strong institutions,” recognising the crucial role of these elements in fostering a sustainable future. Unfortunately, while SDG 16 acknowledges the interconnectedness between peacebuilding and sustainable development, it lacks explicit recognition of the diaspora’s potential in these efforts. This recognition is still lacking in the 2023 “New Agenda for Peace“. In parallel, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) underscores the importance of diaspora engagement in achieving sustainable development and fostering peace.

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Objective 19 underlines the role migrants and the diaspora can play in peace and reconciliation processes in their countries of origin, especially women in peacebuilding. It calls for policies that enable migrant and diaspora women to fully participate in society, including in political decision-making, peacebuilding and community dialogue

in countries of origin, transit and destination and for the creation of safe public spaces for them to do so. This objective acknowledges diaspora's extensive social and economic networks that can be leveraged for disaster response, facilitating the channelling of critical resources in times of crisis. Additionally, their familiarity with their homeland's culture proves invaluable in developing long-term solutions that address the root causes of conflict and promote sustainable recovery.

Diasporas can also foster cultural exchange and understanding between their communities in the host country and their country of origin, helping young generations to rediscover their history from a different perspective than their parent's personal experience (see example of Rwanda).

Within the European Union, the New European Consensus on Development, adopted in 2017, reflects the key themes of the 2030 Agenda and explicitly recognises the diaspora as a major actor in development processes. Organised around the "five Ps" – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership – the consensus acknowledges the diverse capital that the diaspora brings. This document underlines the need for collaboration and establishing partnerships to leverage the diaspora's potential for sustainable development, which inherently includes peacebuilding efforts. In line with the 2030 Agenda, the EU has committed itself to promoting peace, prosperity, and social justice globally. Additionally, the EU emphasises the role of women and girls as key agents of development and change, highlighting their contributions to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and humanitarian response.

Additionally, the Council of Europe (CoE) underscores the importance of diaspora engagement in peacebuilding and state-building processes. Diaspora groups are recognised as transnational actors who contribute to building and strengthening peace, development, trade, human rights, and cultural exchanges. However, the potential of diaspora members in state-building processes is often underestimated or overlooked, leading to a lack of systematic collection of information and evaluation of diaspora activities. The CoE Parliamentary Network on Diaspora Policies recommends measures aimed at strengthening the potential of diaspora involvement in state-building processes. These measures include active participation in political, cultural,

and social life in both host countries and countries of origin. By enhancing diaspora involvement in state-building, policymakers can leverage their expertise and networks to foster peace, stability, and inclusive development.

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Beyond the global and European levels, regional organisations such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Commonwealth, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have also highlighted the importance of diaspora engagement in peacebuilding and development. For example, SICA promotes regional integration to achieve peace, freedom, democracy, and development in Central America. Similarly, the Commonwealth aims to promote development, democracy, and peace among its 54 member states. SADC focuses on sustainable economic growth, good governance, and durable peace and security among its fifteen southern African member states.

The importance of integration and access to political rights for diaspora members

Integration and access to political rights are fundamental aspects of fostering inclusive societies and ensuring the full participation of diaspora members in their countries of residence but also in their countries of origin. This section delves into the importance of integration and political rights for diaspora members, highlighting policy frameworks and initiatives aimed at facilitating their inclusion and participation.

The EU’s Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027 outlines a robust framework to enhance integration policies across member states. This plan aims to

contribute to the broader social inclusion agenda, drawing on strategies in education, culture, employment, non-discrimination, and equality. By working closely with member states, local authorities, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders, the EU seeks to strengthen integration efforts and promote the active participation of migrants and the diaspora in society.

The EU emphasises the role of civil society organisations, educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders in achieving comprehensive integration policies. Building strong partnerships is crucial for enhancing the integration process, and the EU actively supports civil society through regular consultation and dialogue. Increased opportunities for EU funding under the Multi-annual Financial Framework further incentivise member states to involve various stakeholders, including diaspora organisations, in designing and implementing integration programmes.

Objective 19 of the GCM, mentioned previously, also underlines the need to facilitate political participation and engagement of the diaspora in their countries of origin and residence as an essential feature for ensuring their voices are heard and their interests represented. This includes involvement in peace and reconciliation processes, participation in elections, and contributing to political reforms. Establishing voting registries for citizens abroad and providing opportunities for parliamentary representation are critical steps towards enabling the diaspora to exercise their political rights effectively and contribute to the democratic process.

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While many countries allow voting from abroad and dual citizenship, conflict ridden countries can be more cautious in granting such rights to avoid diaspora “interference”

in internal politics. Challenges to building trust after decades-long civil wars and political conflicts, red tape, and resistance to change (due to inflexibility and/or limited capacity) have, often, impeded further implementation of participatory initiatives. In Colombia, for example, diaspora engagement faces challenges stemming from decades-long conflict and political divisions. Despite efforts to form associations and engage in collective action, trust issues and fragmented diaspora dynamics hinder effective participation. Red tape and bureaucratic hurdles further complicate diaspora initiatives, highlighting the need for streamlined mechanisms to facilitate engagement.

Such attempts do however exist, leading to various level of achievements. In the next section we will see concrete examples of national initiatives put in place to try to improve diaspora's political participation with the aim to supporting peacebuilding.

Trends in conflict countries and national policies

In the pursuit of sustainable development and peacebuilding, countries facing conflict and post-conflict situations can adopt specific policies and frameworks to harness the potential of their diaspora communities. This section explores trends in conflict countries and their national policies, highlighting initiatives aimed at leveraging diaspora engagement for development and reconciliation. The examples proposed are taken from the EUDiF [global mapping on diaspora engagement](#) and additional research pieces produced under the project. The following examples show how governments have officially granted a peacebuilding role to their diaspora by including them in their national policies.

Both Georgia and Chad recognise the importance of diaspora integration in the host country, in their national development agendas. Chad's National Development Plan emphasises promoting diaspora integration as a strategic objective, reflecting a broader commitment to governance and peacebuilding. Similarly, Georgia's migration strategy prioritises creating an inclusive environment for the diaspora, leveraging their contributions for socioeconomic development and in particular to facilitate peaceful cohabitation of various religions, cultural and ethnic groups. This reflects both countries ongoing challenges linked to political divisions and instability.

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Ethiopia and Kenya have developed comprehensive policy frameworks to engage their diaspora communities in national development and peacebuilding efforts. The Horn of Africa is one of the most conflict-affected regions globally and each country in the region has experienced political turmoil for decades. Ethiopia’s diaspora policy focuses on strengthening relationships between citizens abroad and promoting advocacy for national development. It also aims to strengthen participation in the democratisation and peace building process for individual and national gains, create a conducive environment for joint development, and uphold the diaspora’s rights and interests abroad. Kenya’s foreign policy emphasises diaspora diplomacy, recognising the diverse skills and expertise of Kenyans living abroad as valuable assets for national transformation. Kenya’s Third Medium-Term Plan underlines the importance of diaspora contribution to security, peace building and conflict resolution.

Rwanda’s diaspora engagement related policies and frameworks have developed from its troubled past. They aspire to maintain peace and reconciliation as well as to harness different forms of diaspora capital. The focus is on promoting cohesion, as can be seen for example in the National Strategy for Transformation 2017-2024 and Rwanda’s Diaspora Policy (2009). Rwanda’s government has actively engaged its diaspora community, recognising their role in rebuilding the nation post-conflict. To allow the diaspora to take up that role, Rwanda’s Vision 2020 strategy includes measures such as facilitating the right to regain citizenship which is key to give the diaspora full access to political participation. However, underlying tensions related to historical ethnic divisions persist, impacting peacebuilding efforts.

In Somalia, it is interesting to note that the latest National Development Plan (2020-2024) shifted from giving a clear role to the diaspora in terms of enabling peace and security to understanding the humanitarian-development nexus and the diaspora's role in times of crisis. These changing roles follow the evolution of the peace-making process and related priorities in the country.

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Additionally, Lebanon's diaspora plays a significant role in supporting the country amidst sociopolitical challenges. This can be linked to the Lebanese policy of “concord” vis-à-vis the diaspora. Although proper legislative support is still lacking, the “concord” approach can be translated as the government's support to diasporic networks and organisations across religions and ethnicities. Among other, it motivates its expatriates to exercise their democratic rights. Accordingly, the diaspora, particularly during periods of civil unrest, demonstrates a strong sense of solidarity and commitment to addressing Lebanon's systemic issues. Through peaceful protests, fundraising initiatives, and advocacy campaigns, the diaspora amplifies voices for change and contributes to grassroots movements for reform.

However, even when there are favourable dispositions towards diaspora engagement, challenges persist in some contexts. For example, in Sudan, conflict disrupts ambitious development projects aimed at addressing critical healthcare challenges. Despite efforts to collaborate with international partners and diaspora communities, conflict and political instability blocks initiatives such as capacity building for healthcare professionals. The recurring nature of conflict impedes sustainable development, underscoring the need for long-term peacebuilding strategies.

Diaspora as peacebuilders: promising practices

In the field of diaspora engagement and peacebuilding, several promising practices and initiatives stand out, showcasing the diverse ways in which diaspora communities contribute to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and sustainable development.

One notable example is the Conference on Diaspora Engagement in Sri Lanka's Post-war Development, Reconciliation, and Sustainable Peace. Organised by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), this conference delved into the complexities of diaspora engagement in post-war Sri Lanka. It emphasised the multifaceted nature of diaspora identities and their contributions beyond traditional narratives, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to diaspora involvement in peace and development initiatives. Still in Sri Lanka, International Alert, engages with civil society, local businesses, donors, and government entities to promote inclusive peacebuilding efforts. It facilitates dialogue, supports young politicians in advocating for peace, and promotes the positive role of the diaspora in reconciliation processes, both within their communities abroad and in Sri Lanka.

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Furthermore, grassroots initiatives like the Global Somali Diaspora's International Conference provide platforms for diaspora communities to convene, exchange ideas, and contribute to peacebuilding efforts. By bringing together Somali delegates from around the world, this conference fosters collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective action toward economic growth and sustainable peace.

In the field of humanitarian response and peacebuilding, initiatives such as DIASPEACE demonstrate the potential of diaspora networks in crisis situations. This EU-funded project studied the political activities of Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean diaspora organisations in Europe, shedding light on their contributions to conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts. Another example, in Sudan, diaspora responders have played a crucial role in supporting the situation, offering media advocacy, fundraising, and remote volunteering opportunities to address various challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, we wish to particularly highlight the important role played by women and youth in peacebuilding. Projects like Peace Therapist exemplify the innovative ways in which youth diaspora members leverage technology and expertise to provide psychosocial support to vulnerable populations. Founded by a young refugee team, Peace Therapist offers online therapy sessions in multiple languages, catering to refugees traumatised by war and natural disasters. Through such initiatives, diaspora communities harness their skills and resources to address mental health challenges and promote resilience among affected populations.

Similarly, Mujer diaspora (Diaspora Woman), a diaspora organisation founded by women from various backgrounds, and originating from the Truth, Memory and Reconciliation Commission of Colombian Women in the Diaspora, provides a dedicated space for women to engage in psychosocial healing, reconciliation efforts, and advocacy. With hubs in London, Barcelona, and other locations, the organisation addresses the exclusion of women's voices and experiences in peace processes, contributing to broader societal healing and empowerment.

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Overall, these examples underscore the importance of recognising and harnessing the diverse talents, experiences, and networks within diaspora communities to advance peacebuilding, reconciliation, and sustainable development efforts worldwide.

Conclusion and recommendations

Recognising the vital role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding is essential for achieving sustainable development and fostering resilient societies worldwide. Policy frameworks at the global, EU, regional and national levels underscore the significance of diaspora engagement, offering avenues for collaboration, resource mobilisation, and capacity building. By leveraging the diverse assets and networks of the diaspora, policymakers can strengthen peacebuilding efforts, advance inclusive development, and contribute to the attainment of the SDGs on a global scale.

Integration and access to political rights are indispensable for cultivating inclusive societies and empowering migrant communities. Initiatives outlined by the EU exemplify the critical role of policy frameworks in facilitating integration and enabling the diaspora to participate fully in political, social, and economic lives in their host and origin countries.

Lastly, national policies and frameworks in conflict countries increasingly recognise the pivotal role of diaspora communities in peacebuilding and development. Despite challenges like trust issues and bureaucratic hurdles, diaspora engagement remains pivotal for fostering resilience, reconciliation, and sustainable development in conflict-affected contexts.

[1] Aman, M. *Diaspora Organisations as Strategic Agents of Development*. African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC), 2014. Horst, C., Lubkemann, S. and Pailey, R.N. "The invisibility of a third humanitarian domain". In *The New Humanitarians in International Practice* (pp. 213-231), 2015. Routledge; Nagarajan, N., Smart, B. and Nwadiuko, J. "Diaspora engagement in humanitarian emergencies and beyond". *The Lancet*, 386(9998), pp.1015-1016, 2015. Plaza, S. and Ratha, D. eds. *Diaspora for development in Africa*. The World Bank, 2011.

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