

**Diaspora NGOs and the United Nations
Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations**

By

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Disclaimer

The research has been conducted by Kenneth Oguzie, a masters degree student of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011. The issues highlighted by respondents in this paper are not necessarily the views of the diaspora NGOs that have been specifically mentioned in this paper. The research was conducted in the context of an internship and aims to highlight key problem faced by diaspora NGOs in the execution of their programs. As a result, the opinions and ideas expressed in the research do not reflect that of the United Nations or any subsidiary bodies. There are solely opinions of Kenneth Oguzie, who interned at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Non Governmental Organisation Branch (DESA NGO Branch). Any comments or questions should be addressed to the author.

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Introduction

Remittances have made positive contributions to poverty reduction, Economic growth and social development in recipient countries by answering basic needs, enabling investment in housing, health and education, and enabling transfers of knowledge, skills and networks from returned migrants and Diasporas which is valuable in promoting the development of the countries and communities of origin.

This is an excerpt from the report produced on proceedings from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) during the “Expert Meeting on Maximizing the Development Impact of Remittances” which was held on 14 - 15 February 2011 in Geneva, Switzerland. At the meeting attended by Member States, United Nations representatives together with intergovernmental organisations, there was an acknowledgement for the developmental potentials of diaspora remittances and the need for engagement of diaspora in National Development Strategies. In addition, it was agreed that the United Nations and Member States would work towards building partnership and collaboration platforms with migrants and diaspora organizations.

Objectives

This paper aims to highlight the effect of the increasing number of diaspora Non-Governmental Organisations in consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with respect to development in Sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights a few examples of these organisations that are actively contributing to the development agenda in the region and to the Millennium Development Goals in general. The research would also draw analysis from the responses of diaspora NGOs with ECOSOC consultative status on problems affecting their functional capacity and

suggestions on avenues through which the United Nations could support their activities.

It concludes with recommendations on strategies which ECOSOC could consider adopting to improve the quality of the diaspora NGOs contributions through building their capacities, increasing support and strengthening partnership.

Key Concepts of Analysis

Diaspora and Migrants are terms which are used interchangeably by researchers, academics and development agencies, although they are analytical distinctions between both terminologies. The major difference lies in their characteristics, while ¹ “diaspora” comprises individuals dispersed from an original homeland for economic and political reasons, while maintaining a commitment to their homelands and retaining a “collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity” ² “Migrants” on the other hand consists of individuals living away from their homelands and maintaining a severed relationship with their root society. For the sake of this paper, both terms would be used interchangeably following the tradition of previous papers written on the subject. Diaspora engagement with their homelands can take multiple forms; mainly as ³ individuals and families, hometown associations, ethnic associations, development NGOs, political groups, etc. This paper focuses on NGOs that are working in development issues within Sub-Saharan Africa and that are mainly comprised of diaspora Members.

ECOSOC is the ⁴ principal organ in the United Nations responsible ⁴ for coordinating economic, social and related work of the 14 United nations specialized agencies, functional commissions and five regional commissions. Consultative status with the

¹ Cohen, R. (2008) *Global Diasporas : an Introduction* ,second edition, Routledge: London

² Hutchinson, J & Smith, A. (1996). *Ethnicity*, Oxford University Press, New York

³ (De Haas, H. (2007) ‘Turning the tide? Why development will not stop migration’, *Development and Change*,38,5,819-841

⁴ <http://www.un.org/ecosoc/about>

Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) is an accreditation framework that gives NGOs access to the meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies as well as the Human Rights Council. This framework is governed by ECOSOC resolution 1996/31. NGOs are granted Consultative status by the Council, following recommendations by the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations which is in charge of considering applications for status.

Methodology

This research was conducted using Primary and Secondary data obtained from multiple sources. The primary source of data was the⁵ DESA/NGO Branch database (Integrated Civil Society Organisations “ICSO”). Data was also collected from a range of United Nations agencies and affiliates, including reports and papers presented at conferences and the General Assembly. In addition, other sources of information included grey literature and a range of online texts, articles and published Journals.

In terms of Secondary Research, due to the limited time under which it was conducted, open ended questions were sent to numerous diaspora NGOs and the responses obtained from four of these NGOs were used for the analysis of the paper.

Questions attempted to identify the operational issues faced by these diaspora NGOs in the implementation of their programmes and in what ways ECOSOC and the United Nations in general could contribute towards their capacity building. The responses obtained included those from two diaspora NGOs involved in Economic affairs and two others involved in Social Affairs and remittances. These are indications that the results of this research could be viewed as inconclusive but nevertheless a good starting point towards issues faced by the diaspora NGOs with ECOSOC status and constitutes a good entry point for future research.

⁵ <http://esango.un.org/civilsociety/login.do>

The research initially highlights the overall importance of diaspora in the development agenda and a section of the paper is dedicated towards identifying key operational issues faced by NGOs in the implementation of their programmes. A major distinction is made between Social remittance Non Governmental Organisations (SRNGO) and Economic remittance Non Governmental Organisation (ERNGO) for the purpose of clarity in the paper and to highlight the differences in the forms of their contribution, more information on the work of these diaspora NGOs can be found in the appendix of this paper. Major recommendations are also made at the end of the paper based on the results obtained from respondents and from a wide variety of sources.

Importance of Diaspora in the Development agenda

In recent years, much more focus has shifted to diaspora NGOs as drivers of development. The discussion has centred chiefly on their characteristic of constantly sending financial remittance to their homelands, useful for feeding, housing, education, etc. They have also been involved in Hometown Associations usually formed in the Global north and pool financial resources together to embark on development projects in their hometowns.

Analysis on diaspora contribution would be viewed in the perspectives of economic remittance and social remittances as a framework for this paper. This is necessary to unpack the context of these remittances and to identify their development impacts.

Economic Remittances are mostly financial resources transferred by diaspora to their homelands, both individually, as a group (Hometown Associations) or as NGO Associations remitting money for a range of Community Development Projects. These remittances are transferred with a vision to increase standards of living,

education, infrastructure and housing. It has been proven that remittances ⁶ increase per capita income and reduces the percentage of people living on less than \$1 a day.

Social Remittances involve the export of new cultures, ideas and values from their new place of settlement back to their homelands, facilitated by their movement of communication. These include diaspora NGOs taking on the role of civil society and involving in lobbying and advocacy campaigns on subjects such as democracy, gender equality, human rights, political debates, etc in their homelands, most of which stem from their 'positive' experiences in their new place of settlement.

Some writers have argued on the negative effects of migration especially with reference to skill shortage in poor countries (brain drain), increased inequalities in their homeland due to financial remittances to certain families, or even uneven community development. However, the benefits of diaspora remittances could be seen to outweigh the demerits. Due to the limited scope of this paper, both sides of the argument are not analyzed.

Diaspora and the United Nations

The 2011 United Nations conference on Trade and Development held in Geneva focused on maximising the development impact of remittances. Delegates and policy makers explored ways of maximising the development impact of remittances and leveraging its role in poverty reduction in poor countries.⁷ It was also agreed that the United Nations and other international organisations would stay committed towards supporting the diaspora and diaspora organisations through the identification and sharing of policies and experiences in channelling remittances towards homeland

⁶ Mohan , G. (2002) 'diaspora and development', in J Robinson (ed.) Development and displacement , Oxford University Press , Oxford , 77-140

⁷ Report from the (UN Trade and Development Board "Trade and Development Commission Expert Meeting on Maximising the Development Impact of Remittances" available on http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ciem4d3_en.pdf (accessed on 28 July 2011)

development.⁸The reports from the conference highlighted the important role of migrants in the economy, investment and development of developing countries necessary for achieving the Millennium Development Goals through sustained remittance transfer. The committee recommended partnership, coordination and support from other international organisations to work together with diaspora and diaspora organisations to ensure “remittance flows worked for development”.

These contributions were also echoed by the President of the United Nations General Assembly at the High Level Expert Forum Expert Forum focusing on “Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora”, Toronto, Canada, October 19-20, 2006 as⁹ he acknowledged the role of diaspora communities and organisations as agents of progress and development and called on governments, the private sector, civil society, academia, and the media to form new partnerships with the diaspora to develop innovative solutions as a way of achieving the Millennium Development Goals and sustainable development in their poor countries.

Issues identified by SRNGO

These constitute diaspora NGOs with a focus on implementing projects and programmes related to Social Affairs in their homelands. As mentioned earlier, some of these remittances include promoting gender equality, improved education and human rights. These activities are mostly carried out based on a range of advocacy and lobbying campaigns directed at their home government or international organisations. A summary of key problems hindering these NGOs from maximising their impact as identified by them is detailed below.

⁸ Report from the UN Trade and Development Board “Trade and Development Commission Expert Meeting on Maximising the Development Impact of Remittances” available on http://www.unctad.org/en/docs/ciem4d3_en.pdf (accessed on 28 July 2011)

⁹ Final report from the United Nations University for peace expert Forum focusing on “Capacity Building for Peace and Development: Roles of Diaspora” available on http://www.gordonfn.org/resfiles/UPEACE_conference_report.pdf (accessed on 01 August 2011)

1. Lack of recognition by their homelands

The NGOs stressed that the impact of their work and activities is constantly neglected by the government of their homeland and this has negatively limited the support that they get from the State. They emphasised that the success in the execution of most of their projects is dependent on certain infrastructure which could be provided by their state government, but which they have frequently failed to do. A few respondents cited examples of conducting campaigns targeted at raising awareness on the dangers of child abortion and distribution of contraceptives. When they contacted the government of their home countries to provide public venues to run these campaign or permission to visit certain primary schools, they felt the government were rather unsupportive and created huge obstacles in the form of “unnecessary” bureaucracy.

2. Absence of consultation in local policy making

A few of the respondents were of the opinion that although they made important contributions to their home countries through advocacy and lobbying, the government of their homeland rarely invited them during consultations stages prior to policy making . They stressed that since their activity involved constant research and recommendations into important issues such as child protection, human rights, etc., they were of the opinion that the government ought to engage more frequently with their organisations and harness their contributions especially as they are composed of members residing outside their homelands, who bring a wealth of international experience, have experienced the “best and worst of both worlds” and have shared a strong desire to improve the lives of people living in their homelands.

3. Insufficient number of United Nations events focusing on Specialised NGOs

The NGOs highlighted the fact that even though they frequently attend United Nations events and take part in side events with the opportunity to meet other Diaspora NGOs involved in similar activities, this is insufficient in terms of knowledge sharing and learning from best practices. They emphasised that the United Nations and other international organisations should increase the number of events specifically for NGOs with similar activities and not just general events. They further suggested on organising events and more consultation forums with diaspora NGOs as they could play the role of intermediaries in the execution of United Nations projects in their homeland.

Issues identified by ERNGO

These are predominantly composed of diaspora NGOs involved in tangible economic activities geared towards improving the lives of poor people in their homeland. Most of these are achieved through economic remittances which are mostly utilised in construction, building and development projects that can be quantified.

1. Limited partnership and collaboration avenues with the United Nations

This issue was raised by a few of the respondents highlighting the issue of limited partnership with the United Nations. They stressed that since the majority of their work involved the implementation of projects such as constructing water taps, building schools, etc, that the United Nations also implements directly or indirectly through numerous agencies, the latter should collaborate much more with their organisation to support them financially (among other capacity building actions) as they are frequently plagued with problems of funding and insufficient external support from international agencies.

2. Limited sources of funding

This issue was raised by all the respondents as they explained that their limited capacities were due to insufficient funds required to run their projects. They emphasised that majority of the funds utilised for development projects in their homeland predominantly come from donations obtained from members of the diaspora. In addition, they have often been perceived by the international organisations as a “normal” NGO which should source for its own funds from external donors. Some of the respondents suggested that if the United Nations gave them much more adequate recognition and promoted their work, it would go a long way in attracting donor agencies to support them financially, which ultimately help build their capacities and increase the quality of their contributions to the work of the United Nations.

Recommendations

The diaspora NGOs have raised key issues and recommendations for analysis by the United Nations and other international organisations.

The issue of recognition and collaboration highlights how the diaspora NGOs feel isolated from development discourse and in forums designed for formulating poverty reduction in Sub Saharan Africa. As suggested by these NGOs, the United Nations on its part should aim to integrate the work of these NGOs into their development strategies and learn from the experiences of the individuals who have lived in their homelands prior to relocating to their new place of abode. In addition, they urged the United Nations to put more pressure on their home government to create a platform for engaging with diaspora NGOs during their own policy making process. This could be useful as their professional and personal experience living in developed countries is a major asset in the development aspirations of the home countries.

The issue of limited funding goes a long way in reducing the capacity of these NGOs. The recognition and promotion of their work would create a high level of trust

amongst donor agencies and enable them fund the projects initiated by these NGOs. Also, the recognition would also create better relationship with their home government who could also offer additional funding to match those already generated by the diaspora NGOs for use in development projects. This stretches to the areas of advocacy and lobbying which requires a strong “voice” as a pre-requisite; more engagement with diaspora NGOs invariably amplifies their voices in the homelands and enables the government to pay more attention and offer support to their campaigns and areas of advocacy.

Finally, there is a need for much more specialised events tailored to the needs of diaspora NGOs. The results obtained from the NGOs highlighted their concern that attendance to general events by NGOs involved in various types of development activities restricts knowledge sharing and capacity building. The suggestions put forward included organising events tailored for NGOs in specific functional areas. A good example would be an event for NGOs working for child protection in Sub Saharan Africa; this, they believe, would ensure detailed experiences are shared and best practises emulated across the board.

Conclusion

The results of this research does not necessarily reflect all the issues faced by diaspora NGOs due to the limited amount of respondents, thus we can not make absolute conclusions based on the information in this paper.

The key points of this paper is to provide a clearer picture of operational problems that these diaspora NGOs have in implementing their development goals as well as their views on how the United Nations could support their contributions towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The responses obtained from diaspora NGOs based in various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa gives some indication on the commonness of these problems, though it still fails to raise conclusions based on it. The fact still remains: diaspora NGOs offer huge contributions to the development of their home countries and they have been tagged by numerous researchers and development practitioners as new agents of development. Thus, it is imperative that the United Nations, other international organisations, States and external donors explore the possibilities of integrating their work into development strategies and offer more support and partnership opportunities as a way of building their capacities and ensuring that their contributions is fully harnessed in the strive towards poverty eradication in the Global South

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Appendix

Sample Diaspora organisations contributing to the work of the United Nations (ECOSOC Status)

Foundation for Democracy in Africa

This is a diaspora NGO with headquarters in Washington, USA with field partners in Nigeria and Sierra Leone .It gained ECOSOC Special status in 2002 and has carried out a number of programs geared towards promoting participatory democracy, sustainable development and economic growth throughout Africa. It is also committed towards the implementation of culturally-based programs designed to strengthen and enhance democracy, freedom and economic plurality throughout Africa by running a range of advocacy and lobbying campaigns. The organisation works towards developing innovative culturally sensitive strategies and programs that are designed to enhance human and institutional capacity, create opportunities that reduce poverty, foster democracy and good governance, and accelerate development in select sectors of Africa's economy. They are also involved in providing technical expertise to NGOs and Civil Society organisations with similar aims through organising seminars, networking events and training geared towards strengthening the rule of law, democracy and governance, elections, elections administration, and political processes.

African Action on Aids (AAA)

The organisation has its headquarters in New York, USA and branches in Austria and Cameroon. It was set up by members of the Cameroonian diaspora and obtained

special Consultative Status in 2003. AAA is committed towards the creation of a positive environment that enables local communities (CVECA, Schools, health Centres) to prevent diseases including HIV/AIDS and Malaria through education and health awareness campaigns designed to improve knowledge, basic hygiene and health status of youths and rural populations in general .It also provides scholarships funded by member contributions and donors, to teenage orphan girls studying in Cameroonian Schools.

African Citizens Development Foundation

The African Citizens Development Foundation (ACDF) is a diaspora NGO with headquarters in the United Kingdom and set up by members of the Nigerian diaspora living in the region. It obtained special Consultative Status in 2003 and is an advocacy NGO that works towards establishing projects and programmes to facilitate the promotion of culture that will respect and embrace rule of law as the best voluntary and peaceful means to activate and mobilise citizens towards noble mindedness.

ACDF promotes its advocacy work with a view to raising consciousness about the respect for rule of law to strengthen citizens to produce quality leadership, promote and sustain good governance in the African continent. The organisation also sensitizes African citizens globally to the importance of integrity in human development and encourages them to voluntarily embrace rule of law as a culture and as a key for human activation and mobilization to promote discipline and raise awareness on the importance of citizens' responsibilities as prerequisite for preserving the fundamental human rights. These are achieved through special education, counseling, provision of scholarship, and economic empowerment for women and girls etc

Africa Legal Aid (AFLA)

Africa Legal Aid (AFLA) is a Pan African NGO formed by legal experts of the African diaspora worldwide and obtained Special Consultative status in 2002. It has branches in the Netherlands, Ghana and South Africa. AAA is 10 devoted towards promoting and protecting individual and collective rights throughout Africa and to challenging the impunity of gross human rights violators. It works with the International Criminal Court (ICC), the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACmHPR), the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACtHPR) to protect the rights of both people living in Africa and members of the African diaspora.

Development Impact for Nigeria (DIFN)

DIFN was set up in 2000 by a group of Nigerian professionals living in the United Kingdom. Its goals include programme development in Nigeria and citizen participation especially in relation to achieving the Millennium Development Goals through the promotion of social enterprise in Nigeria , promoting volunteering programmes engaging UK-based Nigerians and other interested diaspora groups in the areas of youth & community work, social work, education ,social policy development and local government administration .