



VOICES ACROSS BORDERS

Policymakers and diasporas in the UK
working for peace and development

Executive summary

Lucy Holdaway, Hen Wilkinson, Phil Champain and Paul Hoggett

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Executive summary

This report aims to deepen understanding of diaspora communities in the UK and improve partnerships between diasporas and policymakers on peacebuilding and development policy and practice.

It explores how the experience of diasporas in the UK is affected by conflict in their countries of origin, the nature of their continuing connections with these countries, and their perceptions and mobilisation around international engagement on development and peacebuilding processes. The report is based on the outcomes of focus group discussions and interviews with members of the Congolese, Pakistani, Somali and Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas together with interviews with desk officers in the EU and UK governments.

Experiences of diasporas

The diasporas we interviewed maintained strong connections, practical and emotional, to their country of origin. The legacy of leaving, particularly for those experiencing an abrupt departure because of conflict, left scars of dislocation and loss. Dealing with this as individuals and within families and communities was often presented as an ongoing challenge and one that in some cases led to inter-generational conflict and community tension. For many participants, this legacy of trauma continues to affect their ability to rebuild their lives in a country of safety. For others, it means that life is still not safe even in the UK. Dynamics within, and hostility and tensions between, communities, together with the targeting of some communities as potential state security risks, have all become part of the legacy of leaving the country of origin and affect diasporas' sense of belonging to the UK.

Connections between diaspora members and their country of origin on the whole remain strong throughout the generations. Relationships with family and communities “back home”, fuelled by concern for family members, ongoing financial support and business interests, ensure that life overseas is as much a part of daily life as other aspects of life in the UK. Widespread use of the internet, Facebook and mobile phones for news and contact offers the opportunity for both positive and negative interactions. It provides unprecedented levels of communication, both personal and political, through instant access to, and flow of, information between countries. However, it also has negative repercussions, communicating in minutes conflicts from one part of the globe to another – which, on occasion, has facilitated the violent

replaying of neighbourhood disputes “back home” on the streets in England. Political lines of connection remain visible. In some cases, political involvement by diasporas in their country of origin is extremely strong. For example, in the case of the Transitional Government of Somalia, which has four members who are British passport holders. In other cases, the culture and practice of politics is integrated into life in the UK, with lines of influence and allegiance in the country of origin mirrored in local politics in the UK.

Engagement on peacebuilding and development

International engagement with the country of origin was, on the whole, viewed with cynicism by the diaspora. It was perceived as being driven by self-interest on the part of the international community, whether that be jobs in the aid industry or political or investment opportunities for governments.

Yet diaspora members also spoke of the opportunity that engaging with government could present. The power and influence of the UK and EU governments was recognised as a force that, if interests are shared, could be harnessed for improving sustainable opportunities for peace and development in the country of origin.

Engagement is not without its complications. The different, sometimes competing, agendas of diaspora communities and the UK and EU governments, coupled with poor levels of awareness around priorities and agendas of the different parties at the table, have made the relationship between diasporas and government somewhat challenging. This is compounded by very different cultures of engagement. Working with diaspora groups from a variety of political cultures leads to unfamiliar modes of engagement and styles of lobbying. Similarly, for the diasporas, the British civil servant presents quite a different face to what they are used to. Finding compatibility and understanding in this is a challenge that needs to be addressed to ensure more effective working relationships.

Underpinning engagement is a set of assumptions that both the desk officer and the diaspora bring to the table. Assumptions about what each other can and can't do, the value and purpose of the engagement, and the risks and benefits this brings. Assumptions are influenced by wider societal stereotypes associated with both the diaspora community and international involvement overseas. This is complicated by the focus of single communities as security threats. The experiences that diasporas have domestically have an impact on their trust of, and ability to engage with, government authorities.

Similarly, seeing the diaspora through a security lens changes the nature and purpose of engagement by the government with diasporas, infusing it with underlying suspicion of the community.

Interaction with diasporas has most often been led by single teams within government. There was little evidence of coordination of knowledge, information and approaches between teams or government departments. This restricts learning from experiences of engagement and improving on this. It also fails to take into account the holistic nature of the diaspora experience; interactions, influences and challenges domestically (whether housing or security) are part of the same “diaspora continuum” that extends to interests overseas.

Currently, engagement on peacebuilding and development is done *to*, rather than *with*, diasporas. The diaspora and the desk officer see each other as potential lobbyists, information sources and investment opportunities, but rarely as partners in improving conditions overseas. This needs to change and a partnership approach adopted if all parties are to fulfil their self-declared mandate of improving conflict and development overseas.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report demonstrates the immediacy of impact that events in the country of origin have on life in the UK for diaspora communities. It also highlights the lines of influence and interaction between these communities and the country of origin. The conventional borders that demarcate our sense of place, belonging and engagement do not apply to these communities. Being able to both understand and engage with the complexity of the diaspora experience is key to maximising the opportunities evident in building processes for better practice overseas.

The interviews conducted with diaspora members highlighted ongoing interest, concern and anxiety related to these contexts. This intersects to differing degrees with policymakers who have a responsibility for international engagement in the countries concerned. If at the basis of their engagement is a concern for improving the impact of peacebuilding and development interventions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Pakistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka, then seeking collaboration offers the opportunity to utilise knowledge, skills and experience. Such collaboration can deepen the impact of interventions for both groups. The following recommendations are made to support this:

For policymakers:

- Map and analyse the different diaspora groups, their agendas and relationships with their country of origin in order to be able to establish appropriate partnerships with individuals and groups;
- Better utilise and analyse existing information within and outside of government to improve understanding and build a case for partnership with diasporas; and
- Collaborate across government to assess the impact that both domestic and foreign policy have on the diaspora experience and the implications of this for peacebuilding and development.

For the diaspora member:

- Strengthen ways of presenting the diversity of diaspora interests and needs so that policymakers can more easily engage;
- Seek to better understand the policies and priorities of the UK and EU governments in order to identify the fit with diaspora priorities; and
- Engage on peace and development interventions in regions that have the greatest need in addition to places with personal connections.

Research partners



About the research team

This research was carried out by: Abdul Rahim and Sam Tedcastle – Centre for Good Relations; Olau Thomassen, Sarah Shaw, M. Kamran Rashid and Ben Mussanzi wa Mussangu – Community Accord; Hen Wilkinson – Community Resolve; Tanya Hubbard, Beverley Martin, Marie Godin, Odia Wabenga and Thanges Paramsothy – Conflict and Change; Lucy Holdaway and Phil Champain – International Alert; and Paul Hoggett – University of the West of England.

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International Alert.

346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900

general@international-alert.org

www.international-alert.org

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