

## A Missing Link? Diaspora's Place in an Enhanced International Humanitarian System

### Report of the DEMAC Conference, 3 October 2016 Copenhagen

#### Introduction

This conference on diaspora's place in humanitarian action was the final activity of **Phase I** of the DEMAC (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination) project, mainly funded by the EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (June 2015 until October 2016). Convened by the DEMAC consortium, the conference brought together EU and international representatives from government, civil society, diaspora organisations, humanitarian organisations, and research institutes to explore and discuss opportunities and strengths related to diaspora humanitarianism. Case studies from multiple contexts and reflections on the overall issue of a more inclusive humanitarian system were presented during a series of keynote speeches, plenary sessions and panel discussions.

Representatives from multiple diaspora and international organisations attended the event which was opened by Andreas Kamm (Secretary General, Danish Refugee Council), Morten Jespersen (Ambassador, Under-Secretary General for Global Development and Cooperation, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Emil Bech Andersen (Deputy Head of Policy and Strategy, ECHO). Their comments emphasised:

- Increased need for emergency assistance when protracted displacement is at an all-time high.
- As the World Humanitarian Summit demonstrated, we must work towards a more inclusive and sustainable humanitarian system with a broad range of actors – a system that “leaves no one behind”. This was reinforced through World Humanitarian Summit commitments to **localisation** of aid and **partnerships**.
- Specifically on the diaspora: they offer a unique way to strengthen ties between countries of origin/settlement and establish and/or maintain direct access to people in need.
- We need to recognise the **distinctiveness** and **mutual strengths** between diaspora organizations and institutional actors, to complement each other's work in order to amplify impact and achieve a more comprehensive humanitarian response. Better cooperation thereby is not a “one-way street” but requires commitment and work on both sides. Donors need to ensure accountability to taxpayers and demonstrate an effective response while diaspora organisations may need to focus on transparency.
- There is a need to develop **guiding principles** and improve linkages between diaspora information flows and the wider humanitarian system.



A full recording of the conference can be seen online [here](#). What follows is a **synthesis of key issues** that emerged from the day's proceedings.

## Distinctiveness of Diaspora Organisations

Generally, diasporas are understood to be “a particular national community that has undergone dispersion, taken active steps to preserve their identity as a distinctive community and have an ongoing orientation towards the homeland<sup>1</sup>. As collectives of diasporas, diaspora organisations face a challenge as to whether they want to become

the same as (I)NGOs or find ways to maintain their distinctiveness within the humanitarian system. Diaspora organisations should be enabled to make qualified choices as to how and in what they wish to engage, rather than seeking an ‘auto-piloted’



move towards the mainstream. Towards that end, it was noted that organizational capacity strengthening should be key, and that emphasis should be placed on **sustainable learning through mechanisms such as mentoring and secondments**, rather than one-off trainings. Values should be central to a diaspora organization’s strategy and outlook, retaining their unique identity and mandate. Diaspora organisations should also consider their role vis-à-vis local response systems and actors, to ensure that they **become a bridge and not another layer in an already crowded humanitarian system**.

## Labelling and Language

Labelling and language emerged as important discussion topic over the course of the day. There is a need to translate the donor language into something that the diaspora and other local level actors can understand. One example of good practice is that Syria cluster meetings in Gaziantep are held in Arabic. On terminology and labelling, it was agreed that we need to be cautious with the dichotomy of conventional vs. diaspora actors, if we want to bring diaspora organisations and other humanitarian actors closer together whilst still promoting that diasporas are actors in their own right. Furthermore, diaspora organisations can be conduits for explaining donor language and concepts of humanitarian assistance to local NGOs that helps to build the capacity of local organisation.

## Localisation

As noted above, at the WHS a number of donor institutions, UN agencies and international organisations launched the [Grand Bargain](#) agreement, committing among other things towards a greater localisation of aid that aims to strengthen the resilience of local communities and to support local and national responders on the frontline. Diaspora organisations should be seen as part of frontline responses, enabled by their organisational fluidity to mobilize and contextualize themselves quickly towards assisting communities in crisis. Diaspora engagement in crisis response takes different forms, with the most acknowledged one being the quick sending of remittances, marking diasporas as one of the first



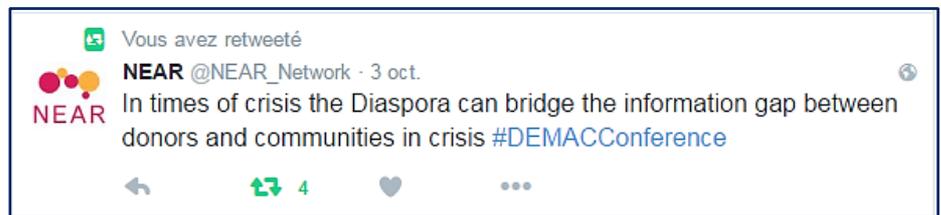
international responders in times of emergency. To engage effectively, diaspora organisations must work with local structures. Often, relations between diaspora and local structures/organisations pre-date a crisis, further enabling a

<sup>1</sup> Will Jones, Oxford University (2016) cited in ‘Not for Profits Must Partner With Diaspora Communities’ available at <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2016/09/not-profits-must-partner-diaspora-communities/>

quick, joint response. In other situations, diasporas must engage in relationship building before engaging to provide assistance. Trust building and transparency are key factors for building relationships, be they diaspora-to-local or else, and diasporas should reflect on the fact that they don't necessarily represent local voices best. However, due to their knowledge of language and culture and often pre-existing personal links to communities, diasporas are uniquely placed to partner with and/or support local responders. Addressing the needs of beneficiaries and putting people's voices in the centre is key. While local NGOs may be better placed to raise local people's needs and voices, the transnational diaspora is uniquely placed to understand the language of need as well as the language of aid, and thus has an important role to play in **translating the voices of people in need**, making them heard in the humanitarian system.

### Mutual strengths

The distinctiveness of diaspora organisations was emphasised throughout the conference and the need to focus on complementarity where diaspora organisations and other humanitarian actors map areas of mutual interest, technical



expertise and strengths in relation to the needs of beneficiaries. From this motives can be understood that are based on what each actor can bring to the partnership and mutual capacity in order to promote a strengths-based approach that addresses the humanitarian need which must remain the central concern. To do this diaspora organisations need to learn the language of the international humanitarian system first. However this can be 'a chicken or egg' dilemma – if you don't have the money to start you don't have the capacity to fulfil requirements and implement activities that help you to demonstrate capacity.

Some diaspora organisations have grown and professionalized in a way that they are becoming increasingly similar to any other humanitarian actor in the field. The question is whether this is desirable and how diaspora organisations can avoid inheriting the other humanitarian actor's weaknesses. Challenges of growth and direction are issues many INGOs are facing. Donors supporting diaspora organisations should recognise and value their unique flexibility, adaptability and knowledge of local contexts. Related to this, assumptions about humanitarian principles must be interrogated. The principles guiding humanitarian assistance are meant to be a tool, not a dogma, and often, they cannot be applied in their ideal form and actors have to make very difficult choices. Here all actors, including diaspora organisations, have to be very transparent and honest about how they are applied.

### Partnership

There was broad consensus that diaspora organisations should be seen as partners, not as contractors or implementers – and work with other actors in a spirit of *equitable partnership*. That necessitates an understanding of what a diaspora organisation and/or other humanitarian actor brings to the partnership. However, what it means



for diaspora organisations to work as partners, and what partnership principles they would like to follow, is a topic that warrants further exploration. At the conference, diaspora organisations reported receiving funding from INGOs

and reporting on that funding back to INGOs, which then 'copy and paste' the report towards the donor. This has left diaspora organisations feel that they are doing the "donkey work" with very limited recognition given to them, which raised the question as to why INGOs cannot promote the work of diaspora organisations in their reports and

visibility. Often, local organizations develop innovative approaches and implement contextualized, effective projects – but recognition is mainly given to the organisation administering relations to the donor. Attention needs to be directed as to how to make sure that the diaspora organisation/or local actor has ownership and visibility. It is this visibility of actual work done which would increase trust from the donor and engender accountability. Additionally being able to document achievements by diaspora organisations will help to build an evidence base for their added-value in humanitarian work and reduce the systemic invisibility of their action. In this regard, media were mentioned as a necessary partner to engage with.



Furthermore, in situations where legitimacy is an issue for international actors, diaspora organisations may be seen as a cheap vehicle for legitimacy. Here, diasporas should consider not to create NGOs who then compete with local organizations, but should take on leadership in a more strategic way by working with local organisations and other humanitarian actors as a bridge. Ultimately diaspora organisations are a valuable resource bringing to the table access and networks as well as a contextual understanding. But it is important that they – as well as local actors – aren't utilized as tools of implementation, carrying the risks, but are seen as equitable and complementary partners who add value and have a seat at the table. Yet, collaboration is not an end in itself and should be pursued only when it creates values.

### Important strategic advantages of diaspora humanitarianism

It is very clear that diaspora organisations have local networks; insights into local culture; wide legitimacy; can respond quickly; and they can provide local ownership. Raising awareness of ones work is important and therefore it is essential to highlight the **value added** by diaspora engagement. Another added value is the financial flexibility of diaspora actors, who often are able to immediately utilize own funds based on needs brought before them by affected communities. By comparison, funding from donor organisations channelled through other humanitarian actors often takes time to reach people in need. Diaspora organisations have a unique **advantage to contribute to coordinated needs assessments**



as they possess contextual knowledge that includes an ability to map local actors. To participate at this level of coordination, diaspora organisations should work towards a greater intra-diasporic representation, establishing structures that enable them to speak with one voice in order to represent their interests as a credible partner. One example of this is the Syria Relief Network created to foster cooperation and communication between local actors including diaspora, as well as the Syria NGO Forum. In turn, similar coordination forums already established should proactively seek to enable diaspora organisations to join despite potential difficulties to live up to formalistic organisational requirements.

ESTIMATE OF ANNUAL REMITTANCES TO SOMALIA IS ROUGHLY US 1.6 BILLION (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2012), COMPARED TO US 800 MILLION FROM FOREIGN AID (2013).

## Conclusions and way forward

If we view **the humanitarian system as an eco-system**, diaspora organisations form one unique part whose distinctiveness to respond quickly, bring insights into local cultures and tap into local networks makes them an integral bridge between local communities, local organisations and other humanitarian actors.

The subject matter of the conference stimulated wide and varied discussions as can be seen from the key issues highlighted above. In below table, we have attempted to extract the key recommendations to guide the way forward.

### 'Traditional' Humanitarian system

Doors need to be opened to diaspora organisations by donors, other humanitarian actors including INGOs. Include and recognise the work already being done and acknowledge in funding, planning and delivery.

Include Diaspora focal points in organisations/institutions to create and strengthen partnerships and delivery to beneficiaries.

Facilitate inclusion of Diaspora and local actors in coordination forums/clusters.

Ensure counter terrorism legislation doesn't negatively impact diaspora support to affected communities.

Ensure risks are divided equally and not on local and diaspora actors only.

### Diaspora

Diaspora organisations should avoid 'deficit thinking' and see the value of these skills, access, and social and human capital as a tangible contribution they bring to support humanitarian crises .

Diaspora organisations with relative (or partial) financial independence should see this as an opportunity to be innovative, and re-assert their strategic advantage.

Transparency and accountability should be strengthened through systems, and track record established

Foster links with local NGOs and forge partnerships. Be the bridge to local actors and not an additional layer.

Link with other Diaspora organisations to network, take advantage of peer-to-peer learning, and collaborations.

The DEMARC programme wish to thanks all involved for the making the conference a success and the DEMARC team looks forward to Phase II with a range of activities which all will strive to pursue most if not all of the recommendations from the conference.

