

GUIDE TO

LEADERSHIP

FOR DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS



Practices and experiences from
Five Danish Diaspora Organizations

With contributions from:
Afghan Cultural Association, Dansomala, IFTIN,
Hela Afghan Youth Association & SSPDO.

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Foreword

This guide is one of three guides developed by DRC and CISU in close collaboration with five experienced diaspora organizations: SSPDO, DanSomala, the Afghan Cultural Association, IFTIN, and Hela Afghan Youth Association. They have been developed as part of the project Peer to Peer Organizational Development.

Together, the experienced diaspora organizations identified the three most important themes that they believe have been crucial to their long-term existence and sustainability. For each theme, they formulated the main challenges, and for each challenge, they outlined the key lessons learned and recommendations.

Although many topics were discussed and analyzed, the three most important are:



The content of the three guides is further illustrated in three accompanying videos – see: [LINK](#).

In addition to the organizations' own experiences and recommendations, each guide presents links to existing tools and guidelines developed by other, more formal Danish actors.

The primary target group for the guides and videos is other diaspora organizations in Denmark – with a clear focus on leaders and board members.

We (DRC, CISU, SSPDO, DanSomala, the Afghan Cultural Association, IFTIN, and Hela Afghan Youth Association) hope that you find the content useful and inspiring.

Enjoy.

Challenges related to the leadership of volunteer-based diaspora organizations

Providing effective leadership for volunteer-based diaspora organizations, without doubt, one of the greatest challenges faced by their leaders.

Leading a volunteer-based diaspora organization requires a wide range of personal abilities combined with extensive skills and knowledge. It demands a blend of strong personal leadership qualities and social/interpersonal competencies, together with dedication, perseverance, and a broad spectrum of expertise in areas such as financial management, volunteer coordination, regulations, proposal writing, and, not least, a wide network of contacts.

The fact that the leaders of diaspora organizations are themselves volunteers is often overlooked by members and volunteers, as well as by external partners. This frequently leads to unreasonable expectations and requests for services and immediate responses.

Specific aspects related to the leadership of volunteer-based diaspora organizations:



Workload

The workload can be heavy and at times stressful, as the chairperson often ends up bearing the ultimate responsibility for all aspects of the organizations' operations. It is common for chairpersons of small organizations to spend evenings and nights completing necessary tasks—without always having the required skills or resources.



Financial management with fluctuating income

Income in many organizations often fluctuate between periods where finances rely on membership fees and periods where the organizations implement projects funded by larger grants from external donors (DiPS, CISU, DERF, etc.). It is particularly challenging when a grant from an external donor ends and no new external funding is in sight. This situation can often negatively affect the engagement of volunteers in the organizations.



Ensuring continuity and renewal of leadership

Chairpersons often find it difficult to pass on their role and responsibilities to others in the organizations—not because they are unwilling, but because others may find it challenging to take on the role. This reluctance typically stems from a degree of anxiety about assuming responsibility for leading the organizations after it has been successfully managed by the same person for many years (often the organization’s founder).



Sharing ownership of the organizations and key decisions

It can be challenging for the leaders to ensure that all members are heard and feel a sense of ownership in relation to important decisions. Members’ motivation for joining the organization is often linked to the services provided, and not necessarily to a desire to take responsibility or strengthen the organizations’ vision.



Maintaining personal motivation

During periods of heavy workload, financial difficulties, challenges in cooperation with local partners, internal issues, lack of support, and similar pressures, it can be tempting to consider giving up, finding a replacement, or even closing the organization. Continuing—especially when the organization faces adversity—requires exceptional discipline and dedication to its work.



We used a model known as dual leadership—but ideally, volunteer-based organizations should adopt shared leadership to give everyone the opportunity to participate in decision-making.

— Hela Afghan Youth Association

Experiences and recommendations for effective leadership in diaspora organizations

To address the leadership challenges faced by diaspora organizations, the participating organizations formulated the following experiences and recommendations:

1. A strong board or leadership group is essential

A diaspora organization cannot be led or managed by a single individual.

While the chairperson’s competencies and skills are crucial for providing effective leadership, the chairperson will always depend on strong support and commitment from a board or leadership group to cover all aspects of the organizations’ governance and operations.

When electing a board or establishing a leadership group, the following aspects are emphasized:

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Engagement, responsibility, and ownership

Members of the board or leadership group should demonstrate a high level of engagement, responsibility, and ownership to ensure that the chairperson is never left alone with the task of leading the organization.



Practical support

To reduce the chairperson’s workload, members should always be ready to engage proactively and provide practical support in any task.



Trust and interpersonal chemistry

It is important that there is strong trust and good interpersonal chemistry between board members and the chairperson. This should be taken into consideration when forming the board or leadership group.

2. The board or leadership group should complement one another

A broad range of competencies and skills is essential for a well-functioning volunteer-based organization. It is therefore important that the board or leadership group, as far as possible, represents the necessary competencies and abilities required to provide the best possible support to the chairperson. These may include strategic leadership, volunteer management and motivation, administration and finance, networking (both in Denmark and in the country of origin), proposal writing, communication, social media, and more.

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Establishing the board or leadership group

When forming the board or leadership group, it is recommended to prioritize members who collectively possess a wide range of competencies that are central to the organization's operations.

3. The workload must be distributed

In addition to having a dedicated board or leadership group that can take on necessary tasks, the chairperson can be relieved in several other ways.

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Ambitious young people with strong skills

Make an effort to identify and involve ambitious young individuals with strong competencies in areas such as communication and social media, proposal writing, report writing, Excel, and similar skills, and integrate them into the organization's community and activities.



Dedicated working groups

For larger tasks, it is recommended to establish dedicated working groups based on individuals' skills and interests. These may focus on areas such as organizing and hosting events, proposal writing, financial management, communication, and more.



Meaningful and engaging tasks

It is essential that young volunteers perceive the tasks as meaningful and interesting, and as a valuable opportunity to gain relevant experience, strengthen their CV, and potentially develop into valued members of the organization's leadership.

4. Fluctuating finances must be managed

Managing highly fluctuating finances is a significant challenge, but it is also a reality for most diaspora organizations that apply for funding from DiPS, CISU, DERF, and other similar donors. At times, organizations receive external funding to implement projects in countries of origin, while at other times they rely solely on income from membership fees.

Although fluctuating finances are not ideal for a volunteer-based organizations, they are a reality that many diaspora organizations must navigate. Over the years, various practices have been developed to address this:

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



It is important to distinguish between external donor funds and internal membership fees

It is advisable to clearly differentiate between the use of external donor funds and internal membership fees. External donor funds should be used for project activities in countries of origin, while membership fees should support activities in Denmark. Such a clear distinction ensures that activities for members in Denmark can continue even if activities in the country of origin must be paused.



International networks

International networks within the same diaspora group (from the same region, ethnic group, clan, or tribe) may agree to mobilize resources to support activities in countries of origin that benefit a specific geographic area. This is often seen in the form of fundraising for emergency relief efforts or local initiatives, as well as knowledge-based support (in areas such as health, education, etc.), which does not require substantial financial resources.



Local activities in Denmark

Submitting applications to foundations or municipalities to support local activities in Denmark can be an effective way to maintain a strong level of engagement and activity for the organization’s members in Denmark.

5. Continuity and renewal of leadership are important

To ensure a well-functioning organization, it is essential to maintain continuity and accumulate experience within the role of the chairperson. At the same time, the organization should be prepared to transfer the chairperson’s responsibilities when the time is right. The role is demanding, and there is a real risk of burnout or declining engagement—especially if the chairperson remains in the position for too long without sufficient support or sparring from members and the board or leadership group. It is therefore recommended to prepare for a smooth handover of responsibilities when needed.

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Leadership duo

Consider establishing a “duo” leadership model, in which the chairperson works closely with a dedicated deputy. This model ensures continuity, as the deputy can step in whenever necessary—for example, in situations involving challenges, illness, burnout, or other disruptions. At the same time, the chairperson receives support and has the opportunity to train a potential successor.



Collective leadership

Alternatively, leadership can be organized more collectively, so that in practice several individuals share the responsibilities associated with the chairperson’s role—even if only one person is formally appointed.

6. Members' sense of ownership should be nurtured and encouraged.

To ensure that the chairperson and the board or leadership team maintain strong support from the rest of the organization, many organizations make a deliberate and proactive effort to secure ongoing and close dialogue with their members. This is particularly important when addressing major challenges, making significant decisions, or launching new initiatives.

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Establishing a broader council

In addition to holding the annual general meeting, it is common practice to establish a broader, member-based council (an advisory group) to maintain continuous and close communication between members and the board. This strengthens the connection between the organization's leadership and its members, ensures broader ownership, provides a foundation for better decision-making, and serves as a motivating factor for members and volunteers.

7. The chairperson's motivation and energy should be maintained.

The chairperson is not only a leader of volunteers – they are also a volunteer themselves. There is no doubt that leading a diaspora organization is rewarding, meaningful, and motivating. However, even when the above recommendations are implemented, the leadership role will still involve hard work and stressful situations, which can ultimately lead to the risk of burnout and loss of motivation or energy.

EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



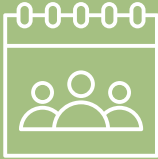
The role of the chairperson

It is important to recognize that the role of chairperson can entail a significant workload and numerous challenges. The chairperson should consider their professional and family situation before taking on the responsibility.



Leadership skills and motivation

As a candidate for the position of chairperson, it is highly advisable to reflect on one's own leadership skills and the motivation for seeking the role.



Motivating activities

Ensure that motivating activities for members are prioritized. These could include social events within the organization, organizing trips to the home country, and similar initiatives.



Personal network

Work on strengthening a personal network that can help maintain motivation. This network may be within the organization – for example, among other board or leadership team members – or outside the organization.



Peers from other diaspora organizations

It is common practice for chairpersons to meet with peers from other diaspora organizations to discuss challenges and solutions, or simply to exchange moral and personal support in handling difficult situations. Chairpersons often share many common experiences.

Relevant references

Boards of Functions:

Center for Frivilligt Socialt Arbejde (Center for Voluntary Social Work)

A searchable database featuring CFSA's guidelines and expert resources that assist volunteers and organizations in Denmark in finding valuable, tailored information and support.

Link: [Search CFSA's knowledge and advice](#)

DEMAC - Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination Initiative

DEMAC is a global initiative aimed at improving mutual knowledge, coordination, communication, and coherence between humanitarian diaspora actors and the institutional humanitarian system.

Link: [DEMAC Resource Library](#) & [DEMAC Good Practice Guide for Diaspora Organizations](#)

DRC Diaspora Toolkits

This series of toolkits provides practical guidance for diaspora actors in three key areas: diaspora fundraising, community outreach, and network and alliance building.

Link: [Toolkits for Diaspora Organizations](#)

Toolpaper: Sundhedstjek af bestyrelsen (Board Health Check)

As part of a series of courses for CISU member organizations, a collection of useful advice and tips on board work has been compiled and shared here. You and your board may find concrete recommendations and inspiration from others' solutions for your own organization's board.

Link: [Health Check of The Board Directors](#)

Fundraising:

See links in "Guide to projects in the country of origin".

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This guide is one of three developed under the project
“Peer to Peer Organizational Development”.