THE ROLE OF DIASPORA IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

SUMMARY

Introduction

In the light of the unprecedented humanitarian crises that the world is currently facing, humanitarian organizations have been put under immense pressure, and are struggling to meet the ongoing demand for assistance and services in increasingly complex political situations. At the same time, the number and variety of humanitarian actors continues to proliferate, challenging the humanitarian community to reach out and recognize the unique contributions each actor can bring to the table.

Calls to engage diaspora in humanitarian action are grounded in this shifting humanitarian context, where humanitarians are looking to involve a multitude of stakeholders for an effective response. With better telecommunications and increasing mobility, diaspora communities are growing and becoming ever more engaged in their countries of origin. However, the role of diaspora communities in humanitarian response has not been systematically explored or coordinated with other humanitarian actors.

The purpose of the event “The Role of Diaspora in Humanitarian Response” organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) held on 3 June 2015 at UNHQ in New York was to establish a platform for a constructive and open discussion, bringing together various perspectives on the issue. Speakers and participants representing governments, diaspora organizations, humanitarian organizations and academia raised key challenges and opportunities in engaging diaspora in humanitarian response. While there were some common areas of agreement, the event itself also highlighted others where further thought and discussion are necessary. This paper serves as a summary of the discussions held at the event and as a contribution towards the World Humanitarian Summit. The following are some of the key themes raised during the course of the event.

Who are the diaspora?

Discussions at this event highlighted early on that there are as many different references of diaspora. In the absence of any commonly agreed definition, participants referred to the subject as “diaspora” referring to a group of migrants or an individual (including descendants of migrants), whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background. The term diaspora conveys the idea of transnational communities, living in one place, while still maintaining relations with their homelands. The concept of diaspora is contextual and the definition of its boundaries can be contested. Within in this frame of thought is recognition that diaspora groups are not homogenous in terms of skill sets, capacity or political views – which was illustrated throughout the event’s discussions.
Their methods of engagement in humanitarian assistance range from individual interventions to collective efforts, many of which were raised during the course of the event.

While diaspora is often discussed as one broad national group, recent crises have shown that these groups are not typically homogenous entities. They do not necessarily share the same political, religious, ethnic background, or social attitudes, nor the same skill sets and capacities. At times, there is a multiplicity of diaspora organizations, which do not identify or even talk with each other, and engaging with one may create tensions or frustration from others. Their methods of engagement in humanitarian assistance may vary from individual interventions to collective efforts. Engagement may also evolve over the time of the crisis, particularly for crises of a political nature. This can also be tied in with concerns regarding the impartiality aspect of the humanitarian principles, and not only impact how the diaspora groups collaborate with one another, but also influences where and who receives assistance. As long as people are divided by differences in opinion on core subjects such as faith and political affiliation, it is likely that these factors will impact the assistance provided by these diaspora groups, as well as how it is received by its beneficiaries. The diversity of diaspora communities has to be taken into account in order to grasp the multi-faceted complexities that their involvement may entail so that these can be effectively addressed.

**Current engagement of diaspora groups**

Diaspora groups are already playing a significant role in development and humanitarian fields in the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis contexts. With the growing number of humanitarian emergencies and many of these crises being protracted, diaspora groups are increasingly engaged and tend to remain more actively involved for longer periods of time than humanitarian organizations. In many cases, diaspora groups can access those areas where the international community and humanitarian organizations cannot reach affected populations. This has been witnessed particularly in recent years in countries and regions where political turmoil and volatile security situations have hindered larger humanitarian organizations from providing the assistance that is required. In cases like these, the involvement of diaspora groups has been essential.

Diaspora groups’ engagement in humanitarian response should not be seen as a static action. Rather the context and length of a crisis can determine the nature of diaspora groups’ engagement, which may evolve over the period of the crisis itself. Natural disasters, armed conflict, political conflicts and complex crises each generate unique issues to be considered when contemplating diaspora groups’ engagement. In politicized conflicts, engagement with diaspora groups may be challenging both because it could compromise an organization’s relationship with the host government, and because the engagement itself may not be in line with humanitarian principles. At other times, diaspora groups may afford better access to those affected that others may not achieve. In cases of conflict situations when the community itself is fragmented, diaspora groups may be seen as being aligned with one or the other party to the conflict. The dialogue is then rendered very complex.

Many of the speakers did highlight that typical considerations by the humanitarian community of diaspora engagement focuses on remittances particularly during the acute stage of a crisis when
diaspora groups often send money to their families, friends and communities to help them cope better. Remittances sent by diaspora groups have proven to be countercyclical, increasing in the onset of a disaster\(^1\), and providing a lifeline of support to families, friends and communities at a time where other financial sources are not available. From natural disasters to conflicts, diaspora groups provide assistance with the hopes that suffering can be mitigated and recovery accelerated. Many do this through use of websites, online donation platforms, SMS donations, volunteerism, translations, and in-kind donations including food and non-food items. In addition, diaspora groups’ media outlets and social media platforms also manage to mobilize community efforts in times of crisis in countries of origins.

The discussions highlighted that remittances have had substantial impacts in countries of origin where close cooperation with the government has resulted in a comprehensive framework for diaspora groups to be involved in humanitarian assistance and development. In the light of several ongoing protracted crises happening worldwide, there is a widening funding gap between what is required and what is provided and several speakers did note that this ‘donor fatigue’ can be bridged by diaspora groups. However, this also raises concerns regarding funding transfers at a time where financial institutions are careful about transactions to high-risk countries due to volatile security situations and the low revenue nature of these transfers, thus affecting people’s ability to access these funds when they are most needed. This issue will dominate future conversations on remittances and financial flows.

**Diaspora groups’ engagement beyond remittances**

While the event did highlight that diaspora groups do have the ability to impact humanitarian response through their financial remittances, it was also acknowledged that diaspora groups can and wish to be seen as more than just remittance providers. Beyond their financial and material value, diaspora groups also bring intellectual, political, social, and cultural capital. By having in-depth knowledge of the country, speaking the language, and familiarity with social, cultural, and religious norms, diaspora groups have a much stronger link to their respective countries of origin than other humanitarian organizations. Furthermore, diaspora groups often do not have the same stigma attached to them as international organizations, which are often associated with Western governments and power. Diaspora groups, because of their personal link, tend to remain committed to their country of origin long after other humanitarian organizations have completed their engagement. At the same time however, it was raised by others that in a financially difficult environment diaspora groups have access to sectors not traditionally funding other humanitarian organizations.

**Humanitarian Principles**

While the involvement of diaspora groups was seen as worthwhile, many speakers also raised concerns related to the adherence to humanitarian principles. Unlike international humanitarian organizations, independent diaspora groups do not necessarily have to function within the established frameworks of the core humanitarian principles of neutrality, humanity, impartiality, and independence. These principles distinguish life-saving humanitarian assistance from other political and military objectives, and

aim to ensure that people receive assistance based on their needs without discrimination. It was largely agreed that adherence to these humanitarian principles is one important component of the humanitarian sector's overall legitimacy and accountability. Some argued that while some diaspora groups do not abide by the standard humanitarian principles, many diaspora groups have their own set of principles and ideas on transparency and fairness; but others cautioned that these may have underlying bias motivations and do not ensure accountability and impartiality. This raised the question of to what extent diaspora groups have a ‘free rein’ to act. Depending upon the objective of a particular diaspora organization, carrying out humanitarian programming may result in a conflict between adherence to the principles and the core work. International humanitarian actors need to be aware of this when coordinating with diaspora groups during humanitarian response, owning to the potential conflicts-of-interest and adherence to humanitarian principles.

**Perceptions of local communities**

In addition to lack of obligations towards humanitarian principles, other factors were raised at the event, such as detachment from the current situation, outdated knowledge of the country, and a shift in perspective that is not compatible with the local norms. Others highlighted the possible frictions and differences in objectives between diaspora groups and the communities of origin that they are aiming to assist. Local communities may view diaspora as deserters, who no longer understand the complexities of the situation at “home”. It is worthwhile to acknowledge real or perceived competition between locals and diaspora, whether along ethnic, political or economic lines. Nonetheless, the intellectual and financial capital that diaspora groups can bring to the table, particularly their specific skillset and ability to think outside of the box, can and should be leveraged by humanitarian organizations.

**Perceptions of governments**

The event highlighted examples of some of the existing relationships between governments and diaspora groups, including the different government structures that engage with diaspora groups whether in the country of origin or destination. In some cases, countries of origin have established specific departments within government to specifically engage with their diaspora groups, taking into consideration their nationals’ wish and ability to contribute to a humanitarian response. It was cautioned however that some governments may be apprehensive of diaspora groups’ engagement as they may be unsure of their motives and ensuing implications.

From a country of destination perspective, some governments rely on the diaspora groups residing in their country to help advise engagement and activities for the humanitarian response in particular countries. The diaspora groups can be used as a sounding board for those slow-moving crises, raising concerns with governments to help provide a humanitarian response. For those countries in which many different diaspora groups reside, providing them a platform for dialogue from which diaspora groups can learn from each other can provide capacity building for such groups.

**Partnerships, Capacity Building and Coordination**
Despite the increasing recognition of diaspora groups, there are no structured frameworks for their engagement to help improve coordination mechanisms with humanitarian organizations. Participants acknowledged areas where diaspora groups’ engagement could increase if there was joint facilitation with receiving communities and international and local actors. An attempt to fully ‘institutionalise’ these groups however holds the danger of exposing them to the same hindrances as international organizations, particularly in regards to access and bureaucracy.

Many speakers indicated that cooperation and partnerships between humanitarian organizations and diaspora groups could enhance efficiency and utilise the great potential of these smaller groups and organizations. An active engagement and exchange of ideas and perspectives can contribute to long-term development. In order to facilitate these partnerships and engagement, some argued that a shift in mind-set that encourages humanitarian organizations and diaspora groups to work together is needed, including through capacity building and training on humanitarian skills and principles. This can be expanded to include agile programming that moves from relief to development engagement where diaspora groups can also play key roles in preparedness, disaster risk reduction and peacebuilding, long-term development and capacity building.

Some acknowledged a lack of research concerning diaspora groups’ involvement in humanitarian assistance, particularly in regards to remittances; financial mapping may be a useful tool to collect more data. Establishing closer collaboration with financial institutions can help minimise the obstacles associated with transferring funds from diaspora groups to affected populations for both individuals and organizations was suggested.

The social and financial contributions of diaspora groups, as well as their specific skillset and capacity to think outside of the box, could be leveraged by humanitarian organizations. Some suggested that diaspora groups be allowed to contribute in an innovative ways through wealth generation, philanthropic means and through trust mechanisms. Governments can also play a vital role by strengthening their national policies and fully recognising diaspora groups and migrant contributions, as well as integrating diaspora groups into their national development programmes. Origin countries can develop policies that allow diaspora groups to contribute, going beyond simply viewing them as remittance senders, i.e. developing programs for the transfer of skills, where members of diaspora groups train and teach skills for humanitarian response to locals. Destination countries can engage diaspora groups during preparedness efforts to help contribute towards the response. For diaspora groups themselves, they should take opportunities to listen, learn and share best practices from one another.

**Conclusion**

Participants welcomed this event to raise key issues of commonalities and differences and encouraged a continuation of this discussion. It was acknowledged that diaspora groups will continue to be involved in humanitarian assistance regardless and including them in the discussions and in coordination processes related to the IASC and the Transformative Agenda can be mutually beneficial. Diaspora groups want substantive participation, whereby they act and speak for themselves and are
supported by advocates and the international community. At this point, the question is how to actively and appropriately engage with these groups as international organizations in order to mutually benefit from each other’s experiences, skillsets, and resources. This requires not only closer collaboration and open dialogue between all stakeholders, and possibly a shift in the traditional international humanitarian architecture. In this regard, many encouraged IOM’s role as a convenor of the different stakeholders to help continue discussions and actions with diaspora groups and humanitarian partners.

Nonetheless, critical factors have to be considered concerning motivations, neutrality, accountability, longevity of projects, and impartiality, as well as the distinctions made between international humanitarian organizations and diaspora groups in terms of adhering to humanitarian principles. It was recognized that not all diaspora groups adhere to humanitarian principles; however there was general consensus that there needed to be adherence to these principals when working as part of the coordinated international response.

For partnerships to work, common purpose is not enough. Humanitarian organizations and diaspora groups should undertake efforts to understand, acknowledge, and value each other’s initiatives and approaches. An increased understanding and a calibration of risks of diaspora engagement is necessary and partnerships have to be critically assessed. In order to integrate diaspora interventions in humanitarian response, policies, funding, support, and dialogue have to be increased in order for international organizations, local actors, the private sector, and government institutions, to form relationships that fully engage diaspora groups as equal partners.

July 2015