1. Introduction

The international humanitarian system is facing an unprecedented number of crises. With numerous countries experiencing protracted humanitarian crises – whether natural or man-made crises - the humanitarian community is compelled to come up with new and innovative ways to meet the growing needs of affected populations around the world. At the same time, the number and variety of humanitarian actors has proliferated in the last few years, challenging the humanitarian community to reach out and recognize the unique contributions each kind of actor can bring to the table.

Calls to engage the diaspora in humanitarian action are grounded in this shifting humanitarian context, where humanitarians are looking to involve a multitude of stakeholders for a more sustainable and effective response. With increased telecommunications and mobility, diaspora communities are growing and becoming increasingly engaged in their countries of origin. Despite widespread interest in diaspora’s potential to engage as humanitarian actors, their engagement and role in humanitarian response has not been systematically explored and coordinated with other actors to maximize its impacts.

Diasporas are already actively involved in many levels of humanitarian and post-crisis efforts. At the same time, some diaspora groups will have limited resources and capacities, may be poorly connected to existing humanitarian initiatives, and may be unknown to the humanitarian community, including the UN and NGOs. In this respect, it is worthwhile to see how best the humanitarian community can work with them in order to leverage and maximize their positive impacts and build further opportunities for engagement. Improving such coordination could help improve the impact of all actors’ actions to address the crisis, and extend to better addressing the needs of the affected population.

Already acknowledged as an important development actor, diaspora groups can also play a significant role in pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis contexts, fuelled by feelings of loyalty, solidarity, and commitment to their country of origin. These feelings may lead to sustained engagement during a crisis, beyond humanitarian response into political transitions and broader development processes. Diaspora’s potential informational advantage with regard to the linguistic, cultural, environmental, political, and economic links with their country of origin may position them to provide unique contributions to the humanitarian community. They are best placed having ties already with people and communities in their areas of origin. As a result, recognising the role of diaspora and partnering with them in the humanitarian context can be considered an innovative approach to maximize the impact of assistance.
As noted earlier, the link between diaspora and development has received much more extensive deliberation than has the link between diaspora and humanitarian response. The ongoing Global Forum on Migration and Development highlighted this link through its fora and including through the *Handbook on Engaging Diaspora in Development Activities in Host and Home Countries*¹ as a policy tool for practitioners. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has provided some considerable thought and discussion on the subject including through its Diaspora Ministerial Conference (June, 2013)² which brought together more than 500 delegates to share their experiences and good practices in engaging diaspora for development in countries of origin and destination, and the ECOSOC Humanitarian Segment side-event on “The role of diaspora during and after crisis situations” (June 2014)³, which acknowledged that diaspora groups have a role to play before, during and after crisis situations.

Diasporas’ heterogeneity, their understanding and adherence to humanitarian principles and their political affiliations may pose critical questions to humanitarian organizations willing to engage with diasporas. In particular, the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and accountability must be carefully thought through.

Given that diasporas are already involved in humanitarian relief and post crisis recovery, this paper aims to identify those key questions to be considered in order to best engage the humanitarian community and diaspora groups to improve joint humanitarian responses. Also recognizing that governments retain the primary responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance in their own country, the paper attempts to critically examine the potential positive and negative aspects of diaspora engagement in humanitarian response.

2. Who are diasporas

This paper will work off the broad understanding that diaspora refers 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 populations, 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. In this regard, diasporas are not homogenous in terms of skill sets, capacity and political views. Their methods of engagement in humanitarian assistance may vary from individual interventions to collective efforts.

3. Current engagement of diaspora in humanitarian response and post crisis contexts

² http://www.iom.int/cms/idmdmc
³ https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/ECOSOC%20HAS%20Side%20Event%20Concept%20Note%20IOM_Final.pdf
Behind the national and local responses, diasporas are often the first international responders when a crisis hits. In the acute stage of a crisis, diasporas often send money to their family, friends and communities to help them cope better. Remittances sent by diaspora have proven to be countercyclical, increasing in the onset of a disaster\(^4\), 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, diasporas provide assistance with the hopes that suffering can be mitigated and recovery accelerated. Many do this through use of websites, on-line donation platforms, SMS donations, volunteerism, translations, and in-kind donations including through sending food and non-food items. In addition, diaspora media outlets including through social media platforms also manage to mobilize community efforts in times of crisis in the countries of origins. Others provide assistance through relocation of their family members and friends from disaster areas.

Diasporas also contribute to the transition from crisis to post-crisis phases. Countries that have been affected by civil war, armed conflict, natural disasters or other crises are faced with the difficult task of rebuilding physical, institutional and social infrastructure essential to community stabilization. Diasporas are sometimes in a position to either temporarily or permanently return to their countries of origin during the transitional and post-crisis period to aid in capacity building through various sectors, for examples as medical specialists following a health crisis. Others provide advice on development initiatives or resiliency measures to help counteract any future disasters.\(^5\)

4. **Critical considerations for engaging diaspora in humanitarian response**

Diasporas are motivated by their link to their country of origin in times of crises, and it is important to acknowledge that diaspora engagement could have a positive impact but this is not always the case. This may result in engagement that can sustain the conflict. Diaspora groups wishing to engage in humanitarian action must be cognizant of their responsibilities as part of the overall humanitarian response. Humanitarians looking to engage diaspora in humanitarian response should be aware of diaspora groups’ particularities, as well as some critical questions that should be raised before working with such groups. In determining engagement in humanitarian action, both the diaspora groups and others working on humanitarian action must consider a variety of issues. Some of these issues include, but are not limited to:

a) **Humanitarian Principles, Legitimacy, and Accountability**

In terms of immediate humanitarian response, the international humanitarian community is guided in their action by the four humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, 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. Adherence to these humanitarian principles is one important component of the humanitarian sector’s overall legitimacy and accountability. By extension, the partners humanitarians choose to work with must also abide by the same standards. Diasporas who are, or who appear to be politicized in a crisis, generate important questions for humanitarians. How might the humanitarian community be able to assess diaspora’s adherence to these fundamental principles? And are diaspora obligated to adhere to these humanitarian principles?

b) Type and phase of crisis

The context of a crisis can determine the nature of diaspora engagement. Natural disasters, armed conflict, political conflicts and complex crises each generate unique issues to be considered when contemplating diaspora engagement. In politicized conflicts, engagement with the diaspora 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.

In natural disasters, diaspora groups could provide a key line of support for humanitarian relief, as well as in transition in the post-crisis phase towards reconstruction and development. In transition/post conflict recovery phases, humanitarians might work with the diaspora to help rebuild institutions and social infrastructure that are critical to long term stability.

c) Fragmentation

There is a lack of structures in place which would facilitate dialogue and planning of engagement of diaspora groups, which also presents challenges to formal cooperation. Generally, there is a multiplicity of diaspora organizations, which do not identify or talk with each other in an efficient way and engaging with one may create tensions or frustration from others. The dialogue is then rendered very complex.

d) Perceptions of Local Community

Diaspora groups often are able to identify with local concerns and speak local languages which allows for increased understanding, better targeted response and sometimes increased access. However, it is important to highlight 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”. Noting how gender roles have been changed in the diaspora can also add another dimension of complexity. It is worthwhile to acknowledge real or perceived competition between locals and diaspora, whether on ethnic, political or economic loyalties.
e) Perception of Local and National Governments

The existing relationships between the government and their diaspora groups, as well as the different government structures in place to handle diaspora issues must be examined. In some cases, countries have established specific departments within government to specifically engage with their diaspora. Governments sometimes prefer to involve their nationals (including diaspora) in the humanitarian and post crisis response over international actors to increase the national ownership of the response. In these cases, diaspora may be considered more favourably than the international humanitarian community which, in some situations, is seen as an imposition with little regard to national leadership. However, in other contexts, the national or local government may be apprehensive of diaspora engagement as they may be unsure of their motives and ensuing implications. In a similar regard, diaspora communities themselves may be reluctant to work with their government in conflict situations.

f) Perception of Governments where diasporas reside

Depending on the political context, governments of countries in which the diaspora members reside may be apprehensive about diaspora engaging in their country of origin. For example, the political positioning of the diaspora group may conflict with the position taken by the host government. With increased xenophobia and cultural stereotypes, there are concerns over strong diaspora links during a political crisis or conflict including on the effects of the stability of the country or residence. In other contexts, having diaspora engage in their country of origin may be beneficial to the host government as diaspora’s engagement in peacebuilding efforts, conflict mediation, or act as election monitors, represents the views of their host government.

5. Next Step

In order to better understand diaspora engagement in humanitarian response, governments, diaspora groups, humanitarian organizations must have an open dialogue. Diversity within the humanitarian community with all of their different strengths, including of diaspora groups, can be positive for humanitarian response. Working together could be beneficial for an improved humanitarian system however humanitarian principles must be upheld.

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