

Capacity-building and diasporic civil society

1. Introduction

In 2019 the European Union Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF), commenced its operation. A key feature of EUDiF is the Capacity Development Lab (CDL), which “aims to equip diaspora organisations in Europe, partner countries and regional organisations with skills, tools, and knowledge, empowering them to, ultimately, foster diaspora engagement” (EUDiF 2021). This emphasis on capacity-building reflects the ways in which diasporic communities are engaged by the global development industry, moving from a dominant focus on financial capital to also considering how diasporic civil society, and within this human capital and social remittances, can contribute to their countries of heritage.

Whilst diasporic communities have had, and continue to have, longstanding engagement with explicitly political processes, in this viewpoint we focus on the global development industry, defined by Baillie Smith & Jenkins (2012:640) as the “complex of state and non-state actors, donors and NGOs focused on planned intervention in the Global South”. This focus then frames the temporalities of this piece, yet it is also important to acknowledge the longer histories of diasporic engagement, both in terms of development and humanitarian interventions, for example the Eritrean Relief Association (see Duffield & Prendergast, 1994) and in the context of the capacity-building, for example the expansion of the social movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) outside of India from the 1940s onwards (Pathak, 2019). Within the global development context diaspora have become more prominent as potential development actors over the last twenty years, with influential (Western-based) scholars articulating the myriad ways in which diasporic communities continue to shape their homelands (Meyer et al. 1997; Nyberg-Sorenson et al. 2003; Saxenian 2007). Dominant (Western) discourses of the diaspora-development nexus then focus on diasporic communities from the ‘global South’ residing in the ‘global North¹’, detailing the potential of diasporic communities to transfer knowledge, skills, remittances and investments (Tan et al. 2018; Trotz & Mullings 2013).

¹ Usage of the terms global North and South within development discourse often differentiates countries based on geographical location, but also refers to the global South as “countries that have been marginalised in the international political and economic system” (Fiddian-Qasimiyeh 2020; Medie & Kang 2018: 37-38).

Whilst the geographies of the global development industry are more complex than Baillie Smith & Jenkins (2012) articulate – for example the rise of South-South co-operation and ‘non-traditional donors’ – this piece concentrates the Westernised governance of diasporic-led development and the ways in which diasporic communities are situated within Western-centric development initiatives (see also: Boyle & Ho 2017). This is not to deny the importance of wider diasporic geographies (Dickinson 2012), histories (Walton 2015) or other state or non-state development actors, rather our focus is on this particular set of development actors and the migratory histories and geographies associated with their involvement.

In this piece we comment on the ways in which Northern development agencies are engaging with diasporic communities; a move away from the dominance of financial remittances, which were so lauded in the early 2000s, to greater emphasis on social capital and capacity-building. We firstly provide an overview of the varying ways diasporic civil society capacity-building is operationalised within the global development context by Northern bilateral and multilateral and voluntary sector agencies. We then proffer some notes of caution regarding this capacity-building by discussing the implications of such interventions for wider development. We conclude that firstly, understanding the extent to which the capacity-building agenda employed by Northern agencies further entrenches intersectional inequalities and exclusionary epistemic practices requires further research.

2. Diasporic civil society and global development

Diasporas, as transnational socially constructed collectives that maintain identifications with a real or imagined homelands, are thought of as ‘the fourth pillar’ of development cooperation (Guribye & Tharmalingam 2017 172). With greater recognition of the varied forms and networks associated with diasporic-centred development, such as lobbying, investment, skills transfer, and humanitarian relief Northern development agency support since the early 2010s has focused on diasporas as partners in the delivery of a wide range of social, economic and political goods to their countries of heritage (see: The Global Compact for Migration 2018). Historically marginalised civil society stakeholders within the global development industry, diasporic organisations, such as hometown associations, are theorised through their ability to link societies with ‘homelands’. Such organisations are valued for offering contextual understanding, local networks, cultural affinity, and the ability to act as a bridge between international agencies in the global North and communities and civil society in the global South. The professional knowledge, experience, and expertise that diasporic communities may bring to the development arena continue to be valued by wider development actors, for example the long running United Nations Volunteers TOKTEN programme aims to mobilise the technical knowledge of ‘expatriate professionals’ to countries of the global South,

and more recently the EUDiF Diaspora Professionals 4 Development (DP4D) programme envisioned diaspora engagement through a “small-scale human capital transfer initiative” (EUDiF, 2022). Whilst global development policy makers may often articulate diasporic engagement in uncritical ways, diasporic-led interventions have been critiqued for fostering socio-economic, gendered, class-based and geographical inequalities (Lampert, 2011; Mohan, 2006), with concerns also voiced about the role of diasporic communities in sustaining conflict and injustice (Pailey, 2021).

Building the capacity of diasporic civil society is a crucial part of contemporary global development interventions. This is articulated within the migration-development funding priorities of several European development agencies (see Kleist 2014), the Global Compact for Migration (2018, Objective 19) and most recently in the Global Diaspora Summit 2022 (International Organisation of Migration (IOM) 2022). Whilst there is no universally agreed-upon definition within the global development sector capacity-building is commonly used to connote the development of individuals and organisations thought to be lacking the ability to generate desired outcomes. Originally theorized from a Freirian perspective of empowerment, dominant contemporary discourses of capacity-building within the development sector often refer to a transformation of civil society relations, with for example the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) focusing on capacity-building to ensure that diasporic organisations can “implement the grants in a good and accountable way” and “define their organisational ambitions”, with capacity-building designed to help them “reach those ambitions” (DRC 2021). Capacity-building then describes the articulation of social relationships between groups in ways that embody desired processes and outcomes. It is to this point that this piece will now turn, detailing three forms of diaspora civil society capacity-building employed by Northern bilateral and multilateral agencies; firstly, organisational transformation, secondly developing diasporic civil society networks and finally re-positioning diaspora organisations as ‘capacity-builders’, before asking (critically) what are the implications of this focus on capacity-building for diasporic-centred development?

3. Building the capacity of diasporic civil society

3i. Training diasporic organisations

Capacity-building approaches are hypothesised to produce long-term changes to the development landscape (Eade, 2007; Ika & Donnelly, 2017). Capacity-building, therefore, often attends to building organisational knowledge and skills to enable organisations to advocate more effectively for the concerns they value and further their (transnational) work, for example through enhancing structures of management, accountability, and/or

leadership and techno-managerial interventions such as access to grants, the delivery of programmes and ability to scale up projects.

This emphasis on organisational transformation is articulated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC). As part of their Global Programme Migration and Development (GPMD) one of SDC's three main focuses is: "Developing capabilities: The GPMD strengthens the organisational skills of members of migrant organisations, ensuring that their ideas and plans can be implemented. This requires project management skills and awareness of the added value that migrants create in terms of development cooperation." (SDC 2021). The SDC also details the Bosnia I Herzegovina (BiH) Platform project currently being conducted as an example of an initiative aimed at strengthening the "diaspora associations' role as development actors" (SDC 2021).

Similarly, the Thematic Working Group 3 of the Global Diaspora Summit 2022 (International Organisation of Migration 2022a) recommends leadership development programs targeted to "enhance the operational and leadership capabilities of diaspora civil society networks and organisations" (18) as one aspect of equipping "diaspora organisations and networks... to emerge as influencers for the domestic development of their homelands" (5). Both examples demonstrate that organisational transformation through capacity-building initiatives can be framed as one of many mode(s) through which diasporic civil society is being (re)shaped, and steered in particular directions, potentially separating those able (or willing) to have their capacity built in particular ways from those who are not.

Whilst the above examples highlight the utility of capacity-building in developing very particular knowledge and skills, there are questions to be asked about what happens to the organisations that are unable to meet the varying requirements for different framings of capacity-building. For example, the Citizens & Diaspora Organisations Directorate (CIDO) of the African Union notes that African diaspora civil society organisations with humanitarian goals tend to be thought of as philanthropic and may not receive the same support to pursue their goals (African Union 2020). Capacity-building in this context therefore has the potential to perpetuate the (blurred) boundaries between perceptions of 'professional' and 'amateur' (Kleist 2014) and it is possible that voices become lost as perceptions of organisational legitimacy alter.

3ii. Developing networks and shaping the civil society ecosystem

Whilst some capacity-building initiatives attend to individual and organisational strengthening, capacity-building also directs attention to diasporic civil society as an ecosystem to be developed and strengthened. Capacity-building initiatives can then concentrate on the development of networks and the facilitation of synergies between organisations. This is an integral part of the EUDiF capacity development lab, for example, with the “fostering of multi-stakeholder partnerships” and the “facilitat[ing] of networks and partnerships” articulated as key elements of the programme (EUDiF 2021a). A CDL grant for the Armenian General Benevolent Union (in Europe) (AGBU), for example includes a “peer exchange session and partnership building for AGBU to gain insights from influential diaspora actors on how to run successful diaspora mentorship programme” (EUDiF 2021a). This desire to facilitate the development of networks can also be seen in the SDC’s BiH Diaspora Platform project, in which the “i-platform serves as a bridge-builder among the heterogeneous members of the BiH diaspora in Switzerland and between the two countries, facilitating partnerships, know-how transfer, and investments” (SDC 2021). These examples demonstrate the hope to build collaborations between different actors, for example academia, business, and diaspora organisations, and across multiple geographies for ‘mutual benefit’, with this mode of capacity-building aiming to reshape wider civic assemblages.

3iii. Re-positioning diasporic civil society as capacity-builders

Diasporic organisations can also be (re)positioned as capacity-builders themselves, bridging the gap, perhaps uncomfortably, between International NGOs and civil society groups in their country of heritage. Whilst there is perhaps debate about whether this bridging is desirable, this position is well illustrated by the Danish Refugee Council’s (DRC) Diaspora Support Programme (DiPs) programme, which is funded by Danida, Denmark’s development cooperation activity. DiPS is the funding mechanism for Afghan and Somali diaspora organisations in Denmark to support positive change in their countries of heritage. Following ten years of concentrating on the impacts of diasporic-led projects, in 2021 DiPS announced that there will be a shift in focus to “increase its efforts to strengthen the capacities of diaspora civil society organisations” (DRC 2021).

Within the DiPS programme there is also emphasis on the potential of diasporic organisations to build the capacity of the partner organisations, with a 2019 evaluation commenting that “assumed knowledge and skills transfers between diaspora organisations and local partners did not always happen as expected” (Nordic Consulting Group 2019). This articulates the hoped-for flow of knowledge and skills between diasporic organisations and local partners, with these relations seen as a mode through which to enhance the capacity of local partner organisations. This asks important questions about the relationships between diasporic organisations and local partners, both in

the sense of this ‘failure’ of capacity-building, but also more broadly in understanding the particular social relations through which development is conducted. Diasporic organisations can then be placed as both capacity builders and in need of having their own capacity built, in both cases rearranging or reproducing particular (intersectional) power dynamics that exist between different scales of civil society groups and donor agencies.

4. What are the implications of diasporic capacity-building for wider development?

So far, this commentary has considered some of the different forms of diasporic capacity-building employed by (some) Northern bilateral and multilateral development agencies, including organisational strengthening, network facilitation and diaspora organisations themselves as capacity-builders. In this section we outline some notes of caution and future research questions regarding diasporic capacity-building.

Capacity-building has the potential to disrupt or reproduce myriad existing inequalities, within the global North, between global North and South, within diasporic communities, between diasporic groups and local communities, and within countries and regions of heritage, with these inequalities existing along intersecting lines of class, gender, ethnic group and political and socio-economic position. There is concern that a capacity-building approach will constrain who is able to participate in development and produce exclusive, homogenous accounts of who counts as ‘diaspora’, with some diasporic communities, who are able and willing to engage in capacity-building more accepted and valued within development spaces (de Bruyn & Huyse 2008). This speaks to wider concerns about knowledge production and labour in development, the globalization of such knowledge, and the (re)production of hierarchies of knowledge. Diasporic capacity building also has the potential to exacerbate developmental inequalities within and between people and countries, with for example, regions and communities with significant inflows of material, social, financial and political resources experiencing greater developmental interventions regardless of relative ‘need’.

It is also important to question the limitations of capacity-building within the contemporary political context. Whilst welcomed by some states and institutions, there are questions to be asked about the connections between capacity-building and wider civic space. If the wider space for civil society is squeezed or repressed, both in the country of heritage and of residence, then the impact of capacity-building initiatives may be limited, even if such measures might purport to support marginalised diaspora members (IOM 2022b). This is because, through the intended social capital effects of capacity-building, civil society networks may coalesce around specific agendas

relevant to narrowly defined development agendas, which may be at odds with more welfare orientated or socio-cultural interests. In the context of Northern bi or multilateral development agency support there is also a danger that increased diasporic capacity in this context may be met with resistance particularly by governments who see interventions and activities of diasporic civil societies as an infringement and externalization of national issues, undermining potential developmental achievements. Furthermore, diaspora engagement can be met with local resistance, especially where it undermines local capacity (Pailey 2020). It is therefore important to understand the socio-political context in which diasporic intervention is likely to take place, and for capacity-building to take this into account.

Finally, approaching capacity-building as a technical issue creates a space for diasporic civil society as knowable only within the parameters of certain skill sets, thereby de-valuing community experiences and everyday knowledge. Thus, diaspora organisations and individuals valued for their expertise in one context may be less able to use that knowledge to contribute to another. This emphasis on diasporas as reducible to sets of skills that are relevant only within the framework of priority economic development sectors also implies a call to map, monitor, and measure that expertise, bounding the possibilities of diaspora engagement in development in tightly circumscribed ways (see for example the human capital module of the IOM Diaspora Mapping Toolkit 2022a). It also has led to calls for home country governments to emulate initiatives that quantify and verify diaspora civil society organisations into lists of registries (IOM 2022b), with implications for the legitimisation of certain civil society actors. Within the context of greater reliance on digital tools and data, this also introduces a role for new platforms and technologies as intermediaries mediating the relationship between diasporic civil society actors, home country governments, and other network partners (see for example the diaspora experts registry of EUDiF). In this context, participation in diasporic civil society space becomes defined through those diaspora and non-diaspora local users who can be “connected”, whilst also subjecting them to screening, datafication, and visualization within a neoliberal governance framework. This can entrench modes of surveillance within diasporic civic space whilst de-valuing other relevant experiences, voices, and knowledge around development.

5. Conclusion

Diasporic-centred development continues to play a key role in the development arena. This viewpoint has considered capacity-building as a mode through which diasporic organisations are engaged in the development landscape by Northern bi and multilateral agencies, and the different forms this engagement can take. Capacity-

building in the development sphere connotes an emphasis on the acquisition (and usage) of (professionalised) knowledge and skills to increase organisational legitimacy. As such, it has been critiqued as an exercise of power, largely because of the ways that capacity is both defined and assessed as a technical issue within narrow framings of development, resulting in exclusionary practices around development knowledge.

Whilst this shift has been explored in reference to the civil society sector broadly, a capacity-building approach towards diasporic organisations produces particular concerns about the dynamics that are created through the global stretching of norms and practices across diasporic spaces. Positioned between the international and the domestic, and the global and the local, diaspora civil society actors traverse multiple positionalities and bring with them diverse knowledge. Capacity-building directed at diaspora organisations, therefore, has the potential to shape the wider civic ecosystem around diaspora-led development by bringing together a broader range of stakeholders collaborating around development and its meanings and practices. Within this context, this commentary has raised several concerns, including the ways diaspora capacity-building might continue to (re)produce inequalities and hierarchies even as diaspora-led development is proffered to offer more locally appropriate development solutions.

Greater focus on capacity-building also has implications for the wider development landscape. Attending to the impacts of capacity-building approaches, particularly when aimed at diasporic organisations, provides opportunities to reflect on global power relations, the politics of race and belonging, and narratives of knowledge production within global development. It opens up questions about the extent to which the capacity-building agenda further entrenches exclusionary practices in diaspora-centred development approaches and the possibilities for 'Southern' approaches to diasporic-centred development. These reflections then offer a starting point to question whether a capacity-building approach can be reformulated into something that considers the complex of power dynamics, is more equitable and is able to challenge epistemic injustices within the development landscape (Mitchell et al. 2020).

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