



Diaspora and its Significance

For Rahela Trust by Wahid Halimi & Nargis Sadiq

Abstract

Diasporas in the West have been playing important roles in transferring knowledge and skills to their societies back-home. India is one of those successful cases. It has the largest diaspora in the world, dispersed in over 100 countries. Communicating with people back in India, sending remittances, and transferring knowledge and skills through investment in India, has been having a significantly positive impact on the Indian economy. Afghanistan, despite billions of aids, was not able to develop and inject the aids to move its static economy traditionally reliant on agriculture. The Afghan diaspora in the West lack coordination and cooperation. It is required to develop a workable strategy that will respond to the priorities of Afghans back-home, such as the provision of intermediate education sessions through online classes, which is the most viable option.

Diaspora and Development – Afghanistan

In our contemporary globalised world, diaspora communities play an increasingly important developmental role in transferring knowledge, skills, and resources to their societies back home. Like many other under-developed societies, Afghanistan has been also receiving a lot of aids and remittances from abroad. The ongoing political turmoil in the country, where women are deprived of their very basic rights, from education to healthcare, and participation in governance, compels both the Afghan diaspora and the international community to shape new strategies and take intensive actions tailored to the needs and priorities back in Afghanistan. Today technology has changed our lives. Internet can get us to where it seemed impossible only two decades ago. As one young Afghan girl told us, *“If they don't let us go to school, we will bring the school home.”* Probably, this is what she was referring to, and it is a big hint for shaping developmental strategies.

This article, accordingly, endeavours to assess the significance and structure of the Afghan diaspora and provide guidance on how it can mobilize to contribute to developmental processes in Afghanistan - particularly to women's education – during a time of extreme oppression and insecurity. Our research methodology, due to obvious constraints, relies on a desk review of existing literature, and uses one diaspora case, the Indian Diaspora, as a useful model. We argue that the Afghan diaspora is widely dispersed and lacks a unified social hub for coordination and cooperation. Furthermore, it is observed that the international donor

and development community has underutilized this educated core of Afghan society; a missed opportunity that can be corrected.

Throughout history, Human beings have been communicating, exchanging ideas, adapting lifestyles, trading, and transferring knowledge in different ways. The Westphalian peace that led to the birth of nation-states in Europe invented organised modern states with strong engines of production. Technology, through developing scientific skills and the transfer of knowledge, enabled Western societies to invest in their comparative advantages. In line with these developments, non-western countries, such as India, with its strong diaspora hubs in different parts of the world, had the opportunity to transfer massive knowledge and deliver skills to the Indian state.

“Diasporas can play an important role in the economic development of their countries of origin. Beyond their well-known role as senders of remittances, diasporas can also promote trade and foreign direct investment, create businesses, and spur entrepreneurship, and transfer new knowledge and skills.”

In the mid-20th century, when the British government was handing over India, government institutions built by the United Kingdom were largely run by competent Indian civil servants themselves. Transfer of knowledge and skills did not stop there. Most Indian citizens living abroad had been contributing ‘back-home’ in myriad ways. Today, India with the largest diaspora community across the globe brings home the largest remittance value (\$87 billion) in the world. This represents only the hard cash sent by the diaspora to the home country. While remittances have raised poor and middle-class standards of living in India, the diaspora community has also helped driven the modernization of India’s educational system and technology transfer. India today provides the best private healthcare, as well as public health services, for the second most populous state in the world. Its booming tech sector absorbs more foreign direct investments (FDI) from the West than any other Asian hubs.

Unfortunately, despite pumping millions of aid dollars since 2001, the Afghan economic cycle has remained static and reliant on its traditional agricultural limits. Government institutions remained weak and plagued by corruption. Neither the Afghan government nor the international community were able to lay the foundations for strong economic institutions and build local capacities to participate meaningfully in the global production cycle. By the end of 2021, the only important achievement was a relatively strong number of new university graduates. As the production cycle has yet to find its comparative advantage and lacks the skills and knowledge to build an economic infrastructure, the society continues to suffer from a high rate of unemployment and a labour surplus in the market. These shortcomings are lessons to be learned and provide the platform for the Afghan diaspora to engage more productively in Afghan economic and social development processes.

The Afghan diaspora is dynamic in many respects. Their improved economic status and access to higher education, and cultural connectivity to Afghanistan, can play a significant role in contributing to development projects in Afghanistan. Currently, the size of the Afghan diaspora is six and a half million persons – equivalent to 18.4% of the Afghan total population (Die *Bundesregierung*, 2018). Accordingly a total of 462 organisations have been established by the Afghan diaspora in Europe. Respectively, Germany hosts (129), Sweden (133), UK (104)

and Denmark (96) organisations, excluding Australia and the Americas. Most of these organisations are young, and were founded after 2010, which makes their connections to Afghanistan strong and recent.

“Supporting integration of Afghans into host communities is more prominent in Sweden (74%) and the UK (42%) as opposed to Germany (22%) and Denmark (17%). Diaspora members remain connected to events in Afghanistan, though there is mixed engagement with humanitarian and development activities. German and British ADOs are significantly more engaged in Afghanistan (63% and 40%, respectively) when compared to Swedish (7%) and Danish (19%) organisations”.

According to UN data up to 2019, the total number of Afghan immigrants from successive waves had reached 5.12 million. Pakistan and Iran took in approximately 4.5 million Afghan immigrants, the remaining one million spread over Europe and North America. According to data from the Federal Statistical Office (*Destatis*), Germany hosts the largest number of Afghan nationals (263,000) in Europe, followed by the UK, Sweden and Netherlands respectively. Afghan diaspora organisations are primarily busy in providing services to newly arrived immigrants. Integrating the increasing number of newly arrived migrants and refugees is necessarily the main priority for most of these organizations, and has thus distracted them from investing in supporting activities back in Afghanistan. For example, Afghan Association *Paiwand* in Northwest London provides a number of services, such as advocacy, immigration advice, mental health and educational services in their local community. Directed by Fahima Zaheen, an Afghan activist, the organisation helps diaspora youths to get engaged in sports and creative art competitions, aiming to be seeds of hope for a brighter future.

Afghan Action is one of the very few organisations that match the recommendations of this article. Their Carpet Weaving Project is a great contribution to the Afghan economy, albeit on a very small in scale. Afghan Action, run by an Afghan woman named Zainab Homam, assists young Afghan men and women acquire skills which will enable them to set up businesses and secure their futures. The project trains participants in techniques to produce carpets in modern, traditional, and mixed designs. Training takes place in Kabul, and most importantly the wool is processed in Ghazni province for final production. The project produces a large array of rugs, including lounge and bedroom rugs, runners for halls, tabletop, and wall-hung rugs.

Omid International is another great initiative aimed at empowering female refugees through coaching, mentoring and job provision. Such activities could be delivered through online sessions to beneficiaries inside Afghanistan too, but only through coordination and cooperation within the Afghan diaspora in the developed societies.

In academia the Afghan diaspora is engaged with some great initiatives. For example, in cooperation with World University Service (WUS), a group of Afghans have already invested in an “Afghan Exile Online University (AEOU)” aiming to provide free education to Afghans inside the country. This is a perfect initiative, particularly if it can be *scaled*. Deeper cooperation and coordination between diaspora NGOs, with investment from international organizations, is necessary. NGOs like *Omid* which train graduates and create employment opportunities, need cooperate more effectively with organisations such as AEOU to create more productive

ecosystems and stronger multiplier effects. Transfer of knowledge and small donations provide stimulus to static economies in different ways; however, employment and the means of production require a holistic approach. There are a huge number of Afghan diaspora delivering aid to Afghanistan, but this research finds that the diaspora is sending fish, rather than teaching them how to catch the fish. Presently, the Afghan diaspora in Europe lacks a well-coordinated hub that could establish and align its skills and knowledge transfer strategy, with job employment or creation, for the needy population back home. NGOs operate on a very small level; at times we observe that many NGOs are duplicating and pursuing unaccomplished ends.

To make a difference and contribute strategically, the Afghan diaspora should focus on two fundamental steps. First and most importantly, the diaspora can establish a coordination body and register every single diaspora organisation working for Afghans abroad or in the country. This will provide the community with a pool of knowledge and increase the capacity for enhanced cooperation. Secondly, the magic behind technology and its blessings could be utilised to a greater extent in delivering knowledge and guidance to Afghan women. Although Afghanistan remains a conservative society, controlled by tribal influencers and so-called religious individuals, our contemporary global village is fortunate to have a phenomenal tool - *technology* - that cannot easily be stopped by borders and censorship. People, even in Afghanistan, are remarkably resourceful in communicating through the internet. This can be expanded. Through online sessions, both academics and NGOs can reach their beneficiaries, provide training, and creating online business environments. Providing basic internet services, and designing preliminary and intermediate education through online courses is a feasible first option to invest in.

Yes, our villages are no longer protected by muddy walls or forts. As it is said, “if there is a will, there is a way”.

References:

What We Know About Diaspora: [Accessed: 20/09/2002] available from:

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/what-we-know-about-diasporas-and-economic-development#>

[Afghan Diaspora to launch online university in Europe | Afghan](#)

[Why is the Indian diaspora important? - Quora](#)

[Diaspora As Development Actors: A Source Of Human And Social Capital For Local Development In Turkey \(cuny.eduturkishdiaspora-report-final.pdf \(feps-europe.eu\)\)](#)

Diaspora an Important factor in India's Development:

[Diaspora an important factor in India's development - Indian Century](#)

[1210 Words Essay on Role of Diaspora towards India's Development \(shareyouressays.com\)](#)

[Why is Indian diaspora important? ForumIAS Blog](#)

[210330-Policy-Brief-Diaspora-Sustainable-Development-Afghanistan.pdf \(cordaid.org\)](#)

[a_guide_to_afghan_diaspora_engagement_in_europe_.pdf \(vidc.org\)](#)

[diaspora_support_neuweb2.pdf \(vidc.org\)](#)

[Drc-study-afghan-diaspora-in-europe.pdf](#)

[Afghan diaspora in Europe: The agents of peace and development - University for Continuing Education Krems \(donau-uni.ac.at\)](#)

[Diaspora | Migration data portal](#)

[Afghan Diasporas in Britain and Germany: Dynamics, Engagements and Agency | SpringerLink](#)

[The Afghan Diaspora Initiative \(afghan-diaspora.eu\)](#)

https://www.vidc.org/fileadmin/michael/studien/a_guide_to_afghan_diaspora_engagement_in_europe_.pdf

