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## **DIIS Brief**

# **African Diaspora and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Africa**

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Many domestic conflicts in numerous countries in Africa have not only been regionalised but they are also largely internationalised among other factors through the activities of diaspora groupings. Available evidence suggests that homeland conflicts also directly affect the lives and well-being of the diaspora despite the fact that they are far away from the conflict zones. This reality therefore makes it imperative to address also the international dimension of the conflict, particularly the critical role that African diaspora groups play with regard to homeland conflicts. The connection between the African diaspora's activities and the dynamics of conflict in their homelands is a dimension that has been largely overlooked in research and policy analysis despite its critical significance.

Normally, in policy discussions on conflict in Africa, diasporas are mentioned only in passing remarks as negative agents in the process, without further substantiation. However, the long-distance activities undertaken by the African diaspora have both positive and negative impacts on the conflict dynamics in their homelands. This realisation makes it imperative to mainstream strategically the long-distance diaspora's activities in the formulation of policy options and proposals designed to promote peace and security, political stability and good governance in their respective countries of origin in Africa. This is with the aim to facilitate a process that will enable the African diaspora in the EU countries to become more of a force for constructive conflict transformation in their respective countries of origin. The ultimate goal of such policy consideration is to contribute to transforming the negative and destructive activities of the diaspora into positive and constructive gains for the homeland in Africa.

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## **Introduction**

Diasporas are one of the contemporary global forces shaping the directions and trends in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. This makes it imperative to build up knowledge and insights about the long distance activities of the diaspora in order to influence the course of the direction. There are limited studies on some of the older diasporas which however focus disproportionately on negative practices of minority militants in them which do not reflect the total picture of their overall activities. For instance, most of the available studies on the subject are largely informed by the activities of Irish, Sri Lankan Tamils, Sikhs and Kurds in the diaspora. There is hardly any documented knowledge and information about the long-distance activities undertaken by the Congolese, Rwandese and Sudanese and others in the diaspora and their impacts on the course of political events in their respective countries of origin. One explanation is the comparatively late emergence of the African diaspora communities. The phenomenon of the contemporary African diaspora is of very recent origin. It is largely the result of violent conflicts and wars that have flared up in many African countries since the early 1990s. More importantly, it is because of their recent origin -- now just a decade old -- that we know very little about the activities of the African diaspora as compared with the older and well-established diaspora. This is an area which is still waiting to be explored as the interactions of the African diaspora with their homelands in Africa have not yet been sufficiently studied.

Yet, as has been suggested if a country has a large diaspora abroad its chances of prolonged conflict are high.

This reality therefore compels us to gain insights and build up knowledge about the activities of the African diaspora in the EU countries in the conflicts in homeland. A knowledge that will equip us to explore possibilities of a new attitude that would enable African diaspora groups to relate to one another and to the conflict back home in new and more constructive ways.

## **A brief backdrop**

This policy brief gives a short expose of a large research project on the African diaspora in the Netherlands that we have been engaged in since 2002. The research focuses on different aspects that the African diasporas interact with the homeland through long-distance activities which could

have an impact (both positive or negative) on the socio-political dynamics on the ground. Regarding the conflict aspect, a preliminary policy-oriented report has already been produced from which most of the information in this policy brief is extracted.<sup>1</sup> This policy research is a response to two important considerations.

The first consideration that the research is responding to is the grave imbalance of the existing considerable information and knowledge about the conflict dynamics on the ground and the very little that is currently known about the activities of the African diaspora both positive and negative with regard to the homeland. Yet it is now becoming apparent that diaspora groupings, thanks to inexpensive transportation and rapid communication, are exerting increasing influence on the politics of their homelands, sometimes with destructive consequences. The diasporas that matter and we need to know more about their long-distance activities that could have a considerable impact of the situation on the ground as has been suggested are those located in the rich Western countries. The location enables them to mobilise substantial financial resources, extensive transnational networks, powerful international forces, and political connections that span the globe and through which they could make a difference to the situation in the homeland for better or for worse in different respects. Furthermore, it is now a given fact that a certain number (militant minorities) among the diaspora groupings residing in different Western countries finance homeland insurgencies engaged in violent conflicts. For instance, it has been suggested that during the Cold War period it was rival superpowers and their allies who financed insurgent groups that waged wars against an incumbent government of a given country who was perceived as an enemy. However, since the Cold War ended, the financial support from external countries to locally operating rebel groups has drastically declined. It is now becoming apparent that some global operating diaspora groups have taken over the function of this destabilising enterprise.

The second consideration that the research is responding to is the policy change agenda among several EU countries such the Netherlands since 2003 that has developed for the first time a regional policy approach to Africa that sees countries as parts of a region. The premise of this new policy is that sustainable development is not possible without peace and stability. This is for the simple reason that peace and stability is a prerequisite for sound governance, economic growth,

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<sup>1</sup> See Abdullah A. Mohamoud, "Mobilising African Diaspora for the Promotion of Peace in Africa", Policy Report for the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sub Sahara Department (Amsterdam: SAHAN Research Bureau, May 2005).

sustainable development and social progress. It is in line with this regional policy approach that the Netherlands government has chosen as a policy priority Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa regions regarding conflict prevention and conflict resolution. The policy justification is that the countries in these two regions are those most affected by the enduring cross-border conflicts on the continent. This new policy approach is very sensible since some of the intractable conflicts in Africa have now developed into networked wars linking diverse groups who are active in different countries. It therefore makes it imperative to deal with these intersecting wars not only at a country, but also at a regional level. However, the new regional policy approach has shortcomings. For instance, the domestic conflicts in most of the countries in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa regions have not only been regionalised but they are also largely internationalised among other factors through the activities of diaspora groupings. This reality therefore makes it necessary to address also the international dimension of the conflict, particularly the critical role that African diaspora groups play with regard to homeland conflicts. For instance, it will be a serious contradiction if the peace efforts undertaken by the EU countries, mainstream donor organisations and civil society associations on the ground in these countries are destabilised by subversive activities sponsored by some destructive African diaspora residing in Europe. It is also important to know if certain activities undertaken by the diaspora are promoting peace initiatives on the ground so as to develop policy strategies at embassies level geared to support and strengthen the process.

The focus of this policy brief is on the conflict-generated diaspora from Africa in the Netherlands originating in the conflict-plagued countries located in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa regions. More countries in these two regions have experienced violent conflicts than anywhere else on the continent. Some of these countries like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan in the Horn of Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda in the Great Lakes region are still in the grip of violent conflicts either in the form of domestic power struggles or in border disputes. Some of these conflicts, as in Sudan, are of long duration with devastating results. The ravages of conflict have manifested themselves in the disruption of economic production, fragmentation of social fabrics, displacement of many people and enforcement of some of them to flee abroad in search of security and protection. A characteristic that these individuals share is that most of them are displaced from their original homeland because of protracted violent conflicts. They are therefore conceptually referred to 'conflict-generated diasporas'. This

conflict-generated group constitutes the largest number of the African diaspora in the Netherlands.

This brief first describes how the present policy debates on the diasporic activities and interactions in the homelands are conducted. The debates centre on the discussion of whether the long-distance activities undertaken by the diaspora help perpetuate or resolve conflicts in the homelands. The brief then examines the role of the diaspora in conflict dynamics in the homeland through four significant dimensions. The four critical areas through which the diaspora interact with the homeland dynamics that are of policy interests are:

- Remittance and conflict in the homeland
- Diaspora political involvement in the homeland
- Diaspora civic-oriented involvement in the homeland
- Diaspora lobbying in the host country

### **Current policy debates**

The current policy debates on diaspora activities centre around the discussion of whether their long-distance interactions exacerbate or moderate the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands. The debates advance contested policy strands. One policy strand holds the view that the activities of the diaspora largely reinforce the dynamics that make homeland conflicts more protracted. Diaspora makes the life of those left behind much more difficult because of their militant and hard-line attitude to the conflict in the homeland which prevents a peaceful settlement. This is the predominant paradigm on the subject. The position of this policy strand stresses the malign impact of diaspora interactions in the homeland domestic political and power struggles. It thus focuses disproportionately on the negative impact of the long-distance diaspora involvement in the homeland. The main focus of this policy camp is on the political role that diaspora play with regard to homeland conflicts. This point of departure generally links the activities of the diaspora with security issues and then concentrates more on global rather than homeland security concerns.

The other policy strand challenges the proposition of the first camp. It accuses the first camp of magnifying disproportionately the negative aspects of the diaspora, so that they overshadow their positive activities. It also blames the first camp for concentrating largely on the activities of the militant and hard-line groups in the diaspora. Yet the hard-line groups within the diaspora, although their activities are often visible, are neither the majority nor do they represent the whole diaspora of any given country. There are many diaspora groupings with different political and social-economic aspirations, and as such the diaspora should be carefully disaggregated. This last policy strand does not deny that some diaspora groupings sponsor subversive activities in their respective countries of origin but they stress that it should be seen in its proportional context. It therefore suggests that adopting creative policy strategies that turn the destructive activities of the diaspora into constructive gains for the people in the homeland can reverse this negative tendency. This policy strand is with the view that positive activities of diaspora have a moderating influence on conflict dynamics in the homeland.

The rest of the brief gives a short summary on the activities of the African diaspora in the Netherlands in their home countries within the framework of the four specific sets of policy areas noted above. The four policy areas are selected because of their direct link with the interactions of the African diaspora both in the homeland and in the host-land. African diaspora interact with the homeland in diverse ways but in the context of this study four policy areas are identified because of their prominence. Within the framework of these four policy areas that this study attempts to provide a better understanding to the extent that the activities of the African diaspora in the Netherlands validate and inform empirically the conceptual debates advanced by the rival policy camps discussed above.

### **Remittance and conflict in the homeland**

The study discovered that African diaspora in the Netherlands are involved in two forms of financial remittance to their homelands. These are *individual and collective remittances*. Individual remittances are mainly sent to families and relatives to meet subsistence needs, health care, housing, and paying school fees, etc. A number of interviewees explained that it is impossible for individual remittances to be used to finance conflict efforts. This is particularly true in countries in conflict or which have just emerged from conflict where civil wars have destroyed the economic

livelihood, the basic public services have broken down and the majority of the people are unemployed. It is, rather, collective remittances with which we should be concerned, they say. Collective remittances (money collected from the diaspora for a particular purpose) sent by the African diaspora groups to finance both community welfare activities and conflict efforts. What is not yet clear is what proportion of those collective remittances is used to finance conflict in the homelands. The answer to this question is difficult to determine as the diaspora interviewed in this study could not provide satisfactory responses. Consequently, this question will require further investigation in the homeland through extensive interviews with diverse political groups, actors, civil society organisations, human rights groups, journalists, peace activists and locally operating international NGOs and agencies. It also requires the active involvement of and monitoring by the Netherlands and the other EU embassies based in the capitals of the target countries so as to ascertain the volume of the diaspora remittances that are allocated to the continuation of conflict in the homelands.

It is thus imperative to gain more detailed insights into how much of the collective remittances sent by the African diaspora in the EU countries finance conflicts in the homelands. Obtaining this information is essential as it will enable the policy makers concerned to formulate targeted policy interventions against the diaspora groupings that finance the activities of violent and destructive lawless rebels and militias which perpetuate conflicts in the homeland. The ultimate objective is to design policy instruments that should maximise the benefits of the diaspora remittances for the promotion of peace and poverty reduction among the poor and vulnerable populations in the homelands, while minimising their negative effects.

### **Diaspora political involvement in the homeland**

The second policy area covers the political involvement of the diaspora in homeland politics. It is an area that has not yet been sufficiently studied. It is also an area like the financial remittances in which the African diaspora are actively involved with both positive and negative effect in the homeland. The study showed that the African diaspora in the Netherlands largely relate to the development in the homeland through political channels instead of civil society or other non-political channels. The reason given is that most of the conflict-generated African diaspora were forced to leave home as a result of the political problems which resulted in violent conflicts and

civil wars. However relating to the homeland along political lines makes the diaspora part of the divisive politics waged by the rival militias and groupings in the homeland and that compromises their neutrality even if some of them are neutral. The diaspora can be more effective in promoting peace in the homeland if they stop relating to homeland development through political activities. Peace can also be promoted through development and through the networks of domestic peace activists, civic institutions and actors. And this is what some diaspora organisations interviewed are currently doing as is related in the main body of the report.

The study shows that the long-distance political involvement of the diaspora in homeland politics is double-edged, having both positive and negative sides. Positively speaking the diaspora interviewed explained that the 'meddling' of the diaspora in the politics of their home countries is not always negative. The simple fact, according to a number of interviewees, is that the diaspora are not a monolithic entity. Diaspora entertains diverse political views and brings different strategies of engagement to the politics of their homelands. For example, diaspora proactively support positive political forces in the homeland by transmitting valuable new political ideas and practices that help the promotion of democratic political life in the homeland. Diaspora contributes positively to the peace dialogue by making their expertise available to the conflicting parties in the homeland in order to help them settle their differences through negotiation. An example cited is the prominent role played by the Somali diaspora in the Nairobi peace negotiation between the political factions in 2003/2004. Somali diaspora made their expertise available to help enhance the articulation and negotiating capacities of the local protagonists.

Furthermore, during the post-conflict reconstruction period, the diaspora, due to their generally advanced educational levels, can assist the new governments in drafting treaties, agreements and constitutions, identifying policy priorities for social, economic and political reconstruction, and formulating strategies for implementation. They also provide advice to the governments in the homeland on diverse policy issues ranging from rebuilding justice systems to disarming the armed militias. It is in this way that the diaspora contributes to the rehabilitation of political institutions and civil administrations badly weakened or devastated by conflict. An example cited is that of the Eritrean diaspora which helped to draft the first constitution of the country after its separation from Ethiopia in 1993. In turn, the new government rewarded the Eritrean diaspora by giving them voting rights in future elections of the country.

By contrast, some diaspora attempt to seek a solution of political problems in the homeland by supporting rival political groups locked in deadly power struggles and do not want to encourage reconciliation for the common good. In so doing the diaspora have no qualms about providing financial resources, networks and war materials to political groupings that use violence as a means to their political ends. However, the rival domestic political groupings that diaspora sponsors pursue factional agendas that are detrimental to the collective nation-wide political interests in the homeland. In this respect, some diaspora support the fragmentation of politics which is having a destructive impact on the situation in the homeland. More damaging, the support of diaspora to violent rebel groups helps to boost the profile and financial powers of the self-styled war lords and faction leaders and this will ensure the perpetuation of the violent and destructive politics they pursue. It also ensures their domination in the domestic political theatre and prevents the emergence of an alternative non-violent political leadership in the homeland.

The study also discovered that that the behaviour of the diaspora is very much influenced by the domestic situation in the homeland. If the domestic situation in the homeland is stable, diaspora tend to invest in activities that ameliorate poverty and contribute to developments such as community welfare projects and business investment as well as civic-related initiatives. However, if the situation in the homeland is not stable, diaspora tend to invest in partisan and politically related activities that are destructive. Thus, there is a direct correlation between the domestic situation in the homeland and the long-distance behaviour of the diaspora. An example that can be noted is the different situation between Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In Ethiopia, as the study discovered, the members of the diaspora that returned from the Netherlands and other EU countries can now invest in the country because of the enabling political environment while in DRC it is not possible because the risk is too high.

### **Diaspora civic-oriented involvement in the homeland**

This is the third policy area and the one which has received the least policy attention. It is also the least studied in comparison to other policy areas. Yet, this area - as the diaspora interviewed noted - is where the activities of the diaspora are largely concentrated. It is also an area where the activities undertaken by diaspora directly contribute to peace-making efforts in the homeland. In this study, the rubric 'civic-oriented' includes activities such as community-oriented development

and business investment as these are central to the non-political involvement of the diaspora in the homeland domestic situations. Diaspora interviewed related that they contribute to peace and political stability in the homeland, for the most part, indirectly through *civil society*, *development* and *business* engagement. A simple answer that the diaspora interviewed provided is that they see themselves as natural allies of the civil society rather than the political society in the homeland. It is thus normal that they focus on civic-oriented activities and thereby help nurture and widen the civil society peace constituency in the homeland. The impact of this civic-oriented diaspora involvement in domestic development in the homeland can be better observed at sub-national, local and village rather than national levels. The diaspora interviewed hold the view that viable peace in the homeland needs to be initiated not only from the top-down, but also from the bottom up, in a spirit of diligence and complementarity. They therefore argue that peace building can only be effectively promoted if national, sub-national and local activities are simultaneously undertaken at different levels and are consciously linked between different strategic sites and actors. It is from this optic that African diaspora contribute to peace and conflict transformation efforts at sub-national and local levels through civil society construction, livelihood development and business investment in the homeland.

The involvement of the diaspora in the homeland through civic and development-oriented activities is an aspect whose importance regarding the transformation of homeland conflict is not yet recognised. This is because policy makers normally view and address conflict as something which is caused largely by political differences and rivalries. That is true but conflict is also caused by poverty and the competition for scarce resources at the grassroots levels. It is thus important to be recognised that some diaspora groupings and organisations contribute to the peace and political stability in the homeland through developing livelihoods at the local level. In many instances domestic conflicts in the homeland are caused not only by power struggles at the national level but are also triggered by unequal distribution of the national resources, extreme social and economic imbalances, marginalisation and grinding poverty at different societal levels. Diaspora interviewed stated that they address some of the economic causes of the conflicts and thereby make a positive contribution to the reduction and stabilisation of the social tensions of the economically marginalised groups at the bottom of society.

## **Diaspora lobbying in the host country**

Lobbying in the host country is the fourth significant dimension of diaspora interaction with the homeland dynamics. The diaspora have a long tradition of lobbying. Diaspora lobbies both for particularised and for collective ends. Furthermore, diaspora engage in both politically and non-politically oriented lobbying activities in the host country. The African diaspora in the Netherlands are involved in three kinds of lobbying activities. Firstly, they lobby against the governance practices of an incumbent government in the homeland of which they disapprove. Secondly, they lobby for factional interests or policies favourable to particular groups in the homeland. Thirdly, they lobby for collective ends on a continent-wide level such as pressing for debt cancellation, trade concessions, the opening of markets for products from Africa and enhanced aid budgets in the social services and the informal economy that cater for the poor.

The study showed that lobbying is an important tool used by the diaspora to influence the policy options and strategies of policy makers in the host countries. They also use lobbying to pressure homeland governments to adopt different domestic as well as foreign policies that suit their political preferences. The study also showed that most of the conflict-generated diaspora from Africa in the Netherlands coming from the conflict plagued countries located in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa regions use lobbying for factional interests which are for the most part not constructive. In other words, diaspora groupings acting as political wings abroad use lobbying as an important pressure tool to campaign for policies favourable to the political parties, rebel groups and armed militias to which they are linked with. The reason as to why the conflict-generated African diaspora in the Netherlands employ lobbying for factional interests is the collapse of central governments in their countries of origin because of civil wars. Thus, since there are no incumbent governments which they can lobby against they have to lobby for the cause of their warring comrades in the homeland - which only serves to perpetuate the political fragmentation in the homeland.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the policy research on the prevention of conflict and conflict resolution from a significant yet neglected perspective. This dimension which is normally

overlooked is the link between diaspora activities and dynamics of conflict in homeland. The study seeks to fill in this knowledge gap although it provides just a preliminary survey. The study thus sets a *staging point* for further research in this area in order to gain more information and better insights on the activities of the diaspora in their homeland situations. In other words, undertaking a wider empirical research on the long-distance activities by the African diaspora in the EU countries (both positive and negative) and their impact on the conflict dynamics in their countries of origin is imperative at this particular period of time. It is particularly important since the existing knowledge base regarding the activities of the African diaspora is not sufficient for sound policy formulations. For instance, the preliminary findings of this study revealed that in all the four areas through which the African diaspora interacts with the homeland that we have briefly examined here, except financial remittances, the knowledge base necessary for policy formulation is still very limited. The preliminary findings of this study are informed by a limited empirical research undertaking in the Netherlands. However, this is not representative and thus cannot provide a reliable analysis. More comparative empirical research and collection of hard data in other EU countries are required in order to reach reliable conclusions.

Understanding how the activities of the diaspora can reinforce dynamics that exacerbate or moderate homeland conflicts is important for practitioners and policy-makers interested in promoting conflict resolution in Africa. This is absolutely vital if the policy objective is to mobilise the financial resources, transnational networks and human capital of the sizeable number of African diaspora residing in the EU countries for the promotion of peace and political stability in their countries of origin.

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