



The McLeod Group



DIASPORAS AND DEVELOPMENT – A CAUTIONARY NOTE

Among OECD member states, Canada is home to the fastest growing population of immigrants and, as a result, of ‘diaspora communities.’ Statistics Canada predicts that by 2031 almost half of the population (46%) over the age of 15 will be foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent.¹ Such a diverse mix of populations has important implications. This applies domestically and abroad because of the expanded range of interests and new ties this diversification represents, notably across a range of Canadian foreign policy issues, from development to diplomacy and investment.

Diaspora – A Conceptual Definition

The term ‘diaspora’ refers to the movement of specific populations from their original homeland to other geographic areas. Since the 1980s the term has specifically been used in the context of refugees and immigrant populations who have left their country of birth either voluntarily or involuntarily. The term implies a sense of displacement and the belief or, as some call it, the ‘myth’ that the homeland is the true home to which they will one day return.

Expanded definitions of ‘diaspora’ go beyond first-generation immigrants and refugees. Often they refer to descendants and to members of shared communities (religious or ethnic). In this expanded definition, diasporas share a strong sense of meaningful connection with their (imagined) ‘homeland’ and cultural distinctness – and also with others who share in this identity. For example Indo-Canadians and Indo-Australians are different diasporas having both shared and different characteristics. All of this implies multiple linkages across national borders, allowing for nuanced identities and understandings of connection.

Involving diaspora communities in foreign and development policy and programs is currently seen as an innovative way to engage new and influential actors in a world that is shifting away from traditional models of governance. Such an approach, however, needs to be addressed with caution and understanding.

Key Issues

- Diaspora groups are in the unique position of being ‘connected’ to both Canada and the homeland they left behind, and potentially to other countries via dispersed family ties. The connection can be by way of family, financial investments and inheritance, remittances,

The McLeod Group works to strengthen Canada’s contribution to a better world.

The McLeod Group is made up of professionals with many years of experience in government, civil society and academia, working across the fields of international development, diplomacy and foreign policy. We work with others who value human rights, inclusion, equality and sustainable development to advance Canadian policy and action on international cooperation and foreign affairs.

260 Metcalfe Street, Suite 6A, Ottawa, ON, K2P 1R6

McLeodGroup.ca | mcleodgroup12@gmail.com | [@theMcLeodGroup](https://www.instagram.com/theMcLeodGroup)

altruistic objectives, or simply an emotional attachment to one's country of origin. The digital revolution has enhanced this connectivity through social media and cheaper communication technologies, allowing members of diaspora communities to be constantly connected to their homeland and each other.

- Diaspora groups are not only those who physically immigrated to Canada; their children born in Canada also identify, at least in part, with the diaspora. The term may also refer to cultural and religious communities that lack a physical geography (for instance, Kurdish expatriates from Syria or Turkey). Not all immigrants or migrant communities identify with the 'diaspora', however, and some may not share the same meaningful connection or identity.
- 'Diaspora' should also be understood to include Canadians abroad. In addition to 'Snowbirds' and other Canadian-born citizens living abroad, this group includes naturalized citizens who have returned to the homeland or who have relocated elsewhere. A high proportion, if not most, still identify as Canadians when living abroad.

Diasporas and Development – the Link

Members of diaspora communities have the potential to contribute to the development of their homelands either directly or indirectly, as individuals or as groups, and by contributing to Canadian governmental and non-governmental efforts.

- Immigrants bring a range of skills and knowledge to Canada, and they may do the same if they return to their homeland.
- For the homeland, diaspora communities send remittances to families, private businesses and community groups. This has prompted many homeland countries to create Ministries of Diaspora as a way to tap into these financial and technical resources and to reverse the effects of the immigration brain drain. Mexico's *Tres por Uno* program is an example: For every peso sent as a remittance by the Mexican diaspora, the

government matches with three pesos at the municipal, state and federal levels.²

- Diaspora communities contribute generously to charity and philanthropic initiatives both in Canada and the homeland. Responses to the Haiti earthquake in 2010 and the Philippines typhoon in 2013 are good illustrations.
- Diasporas in Canada 'connect' with their homeland through a range of associations and networks that promote business and trade, culture and technical knowledge.
- These networks can give diaspora groups unique insight into and access to countries that Canada might not otherwise have.

Remittances

The total remittance outflow from Canada, including to developed nations, was an estimated US\$23 billion in 2010-11. The highest outflow was to China and India, while the Philippines and United Kingdom were almost at par in third place. Countries in the Horn of Africa received the lowest level of remittances from Canada.

Source: Canadian International Development Platform, 'Aid and Remittances from Canada', <http://cidpnsi.ca/blog/portfolio/aid-and-remittances-from-canada/>.

Issues in Diaspora Engagement

Despite the enormous potential for international development that diaspora communities may have, certain complex issues need to be considered:

- Immigrant integration and 'multicultural mosaics' create a dichotomy for diaspora groups that may be torn between creating a new life for themselves in a new culture – i.e., 'becoming Canadian' – and maintaining an allegiance to their homeland. In terms of foreign policy, this may pose issues among and between groups from countries whose relationship with Canada is strained.
- Many diaspora communities may want to avoid involvement in Canadian foreign policy objectives because they disagree with them, because they are

wary of possible immigration and citizenship implications or because they want to avoid racial or ethnic backlash in Canada. Many came to Canada to become Canadians, not hyphenated Canadians available to service Canadian foreign policies, even those that are development related.

- Tighter immigration and citizenship policies can create disharmony between and within diaspora communities within Canada.
- The conflict that some diaspora communities have fled remains alive among their ranks in Canada. Recent developments in the war against terror have implicated members of specific diaspora communities in Canada, creating the myth that certain groups may be ‘importing conflict’ into Canada.³ This can lead to serious levels of disaffection within these communities and to potential conflict with non-diaspora groups, often among youth.
- Diaspora contributions vary depending on demographics. For instance, those who migrated to Canada several decades ago may not be as connected to the homeland as those who arrived more recently. Some may want to become involved, while others who came as refugees or to escape persecution may want to avoid any involvement.
- Members of diaspora communities returning to their homeland are not always greeted with open arms. There have been cases of resentment towards people returning as privileged investors and ‘experts’, particularly those returning to less-

developed countries. Inappropriate promotion of such efforts could prove counterproductive.

- It is frequently stated that remittances are significantly greater than foreign aid, as though the two are synonymous. In any case, the statement is only selectively true, most notably in the case of remittances to India and the Philippines. It is not true, however, in the case of Canada’s primary aid recipients. Remittances should not be confused with development assistance. Remittances may be important to families and in terms of a country’s foreign exchange, but they do not build schools, vaccinate children or fight Ebola.⁴

Recommendations for Diaspora Engagement

While diaspora communities can undoubtedly contribute in meaningful ways to Canada’s international development efforts, saying so does not make it so. Diaspora communities cannot be taken for granted in terms of the economic, intellectual or political roles they can or do play.

- It should not be assumed that all or even most diaspora communities want to be involved in Canada’s international policies and programs.
- Any policy-related engagement with diaspora groups must be designed strategically and geared towards a broad demographic, with different contexts, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. A universal approach to diaspora

CONCRETE ACTION FOR GOVERNMENT

In 2011, an important study of diaspora communities and Canadian foreign policy made several recommendations for government:

1. Help immigrants succeed
2. Understand the composition of diaspora groups
3. Implement measures that support diaspora initiatives
4. Build government capacity to understand and work with diaspora communities
5. Build diaspora groups’ capacity to understand and engage in foreign policy priorities
6. Create and/or support umbrella diaspora organizations

Source: *Tapping Our Potential: Diaspora Communities and Canadian Foreign Policy*, Toronto: The Mosaic Institute and the Walter & Duncan Gordon Foundation, 2011.

engagement is unlikely to be successful.

- Engaging with diaspora youth in Canada, both those born here of immigrant parents, as well as those who have recently migrated, can be important in enhancing Canada's long-term international goals.
- Much more research is needed into how diaspora groups can enhance Canadian development

interests overseas. This must be part of an *inclusive* process that sees these groups as Canadian citizens with unique potential and knowledge, and as members of communities with diverse and sometimes contrary views on Canada's international engagement. Treating them as an 'asset' to be 'harnessed' as part of Canada's foreign policy is unlikely to yield positive results.

Notes

¹ Statistics Canada, 'Ethnic diversity and immigration', <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-402-x/2011000/chap/imm/imm-eng.htm> (accessed September 26, 2014).

² Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, '3x1 para Migrantes', http://www.sedesol.gob.mx/es/SEDESOL/Programa_3x1_para_Migrantes (accessed December 1, 2014).

³ See 'The Perception and Reality of 'Imported Conflict' in Canada', Toronto: The Mosaic Institute, 2014.

⁴ A considerable amount of work has been done on these issues by Michael Clemens at the Center for Global Development. See <http://www.cgdev.org/search/Michael%20clemens>