



Executive summary

Diaspora and migrant associations are often praised as new 'agents of change' for their contributions to development in their countries of origin. While much is known about Latin American hometown associations, there has been less focus on African diaspora associations. This DIIS Brief examines Somali and Ghanaian migrant associations in Denmark and their involvement in development. It shows how associations involve themselves on the basis of particular loyalties and emphasizes the importance of local partners and collaboration.

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African Diaspora Organizations and Homeland Development:

The case of Somali and Ghanaian associations in Denmark

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the development potential of migration has gained much interest among policy makers, international organizations, and researchers. The discourses of migration and development mostly focus on remittances, but there is also increasing attention to other kinds of contributions – for instance from diaspora¹ and migration associations. This Brief turns the attention to African migrant associations in Denmark, focusing on two case studies: Somali and Ghanaian associations, the two most numerous groups of African associations in the country. Based on research in Copenhagen, Ghana, Somaliland, and London, the Brief compares their structure and engagement in development activities as well as it presents policy recommendations. It presents two main conclusions: First, that while migrant associations do contribute to poverty alleviation and the provision of social services in their areas of origin, their contributions are usually based on particular affiliations and primarily focus on the areas of origin of the association. Second, that successful support to development projects via associations requires knowledge of and networks in both the Danish society and the receiving area. The Brief thus emphasizes the importance of local partners and collaboration for transnational development support. However, it also stresses that while migrant associations do make important contributions, they cannot replace larger development processes and actors.

AFRICAN DIASPORA ASSOCIATIONS IN DENMARK

There have been African associations in Denmark since the 1970s but – parallel to the rising

number of Africans in the country – the number increased from the 1990s. A recent survey² identified 120 African diaspora associations in Denmark from altogether 26 countries. The associations are primarily involved in everyday-oriented activities such as social, cultural, and information activities in Denmark (55 percent); development and relief projects in countries of origin (35 percent); and, to a lesser degree, religious activities (10 percent). Development and relief is thus the primary activity for about 1/3 of all African diaspora associations. However, the survey also shows that many everyday-oriented and religious associations support development projects as well; indeed an average of more than 60 percent of all associations are engaged in development activities in some way or the other. This is also the case for many Somali and Ghanaian associations.

Somali associations: a proliferation of associations and activities

The about 16,550 Somalis constitute the largest group of Africans in Denmark and are predominantly refugees or family re-united persons. Somalis started to come to Denmark in larger numbers from the 1990s, following the civil war in Somalia. There are at least 50 Somali associations in Denmark, constituting more than one third of all African associations in the country. The number of Somali associations started to proliferate from the middle of the 1990s, resulting in the establishment of associations all over the country, encouraged by Somali key persons as a means of participation in Danish society. From the beginning, some associations mainly focused on everyday life in Denmark, organizing regular social, cultural, educational or information activities,

¹ Diaspora can be defined as a population dispersed outside their or their ancestors' country of origin with which they identify and/or maintain contact. See also the DIIS Brief by O. Bakewell (2009): Which Diaspora for Whose Development? (<http://www.diis.dk/sw77847.asp>)

² For more details, see L. Trans and I. Vammen (2008): *African Diaspora Associations in Denmark: A Study of Their Development Activities and Potentials*, unpublished report.

whereas others were initiated in response to the situation in Somalia, supporting local relief or development projects, such as schools, hospitals, or water supply³. Many associations are collaborating with Danish NGOs, resource persons or volunteers, for instance in relation to information activities or application for funds. A few projects have received substantial funding for projects, for instance for AIDS prevention or return (see box 1). Furthermore, many Somali everyday-oriented associations are also supporting development projects in the Somali-speaking region, or they make collections to help out in cases of emergency. The distinction between associations focusing on local issues in Denmark and development-oriented associations is thus not clear-cut. And what is more, key persons in development-oriented associations also tend to be involved in integration activities and to hold jobs, showing that involvement in Danish society and transnational engagement are not contradictory but might well go hand in hand.

Somali associations are characterized by a high level of engagement as well as simultaneous kinds of activities in Denmark and the Somali-speaking region. However, the high number of associations has also resulted in competition over funding. Moreover, there is tension between some Somali associations, especially in relation to the civil war and the political situation in Somalia and Somaliland. The civil war and post-conflict situation thus spills over in the diaspora. Likewise, this situation makes it more difficult to obtain funding to – and carry through – larger projects because of the insecure and unpredictable situation, as well as it emphasizes the importance of local knowledge and networks.

³ See for instance N. Kleist (2008). *Agents of Development and Change. The Somali Diaspora at Work*. In R. Bardouille, M. Grieco & M. Ndulo (eds.), *Africa's Finances: the Contribution of Remittances* (pp. 97-115). Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Box 1: Promoting return to Somaliland

Somscan & UK Cooperative Associations is a transnational umbrella organization with eight member associations in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the UK. The aim of Somscan is to promote collective return to the seceded but unrecognized Republic of Somaliland through the establishment of a new neighbourhood in the outskirts of Burao in central Somaliland – as well as to promote development and reconciliation in the long run. Somscan has by their own means bought land on a collective basis and established electricity in the area. The organization contributed to an European Commission application submitted by the Danish Refugee Council, which resulted in a grant of 550.000 Euros in 2003 to upgrade the water supply in Burao and to renovate two schools in the vicinity of the Somscan area. Somscan was represented in the steering group of the EC grant, and water supply and school renovation has been successfully implemented. However, only few Somscan members have returned to Somaliland, because of the difficult situation in the area, especially in relation to employment, security, education, and health.

Ghanaian associations: Welfare benefits and small development NGOs

In contrast to Somalia, Ghana is a peaceful democratic country with – for Africa – a relatively good economy, though poverty is a problem in large parts of the country. The Ghanaian population in Denmark is small with about 1,700 persons, mainly family re-united persons or students. However, there are at least 13 Ghanaian associations. Broadly speaking, these can be divided into ethno-national associations and small development NGOs. The former are typically based on ethnic or regional affiliation and provide venues for socialization, speaking the local language, celebration of social and cultural activi-

ties as well as supporting members in the event of childbirth or funerals – so-called welfare benefits. There are also a smaller number of nationally-based and ‘non-tribal’ associations with English as official language. Whereas a few associations make donations to Ghana in relation to annual or biennial festivals or events, none of these associations are supporting development projects in Ghana on a regular basis. This situation is in contrast to the Somali case as well as to Ghanaian associations in the UK and US, where transnational development support via associations is more common. This observation indicates that associational involvement in transnational development is furthered by the presence of a substantial migrant population from the same area. However, this does not mean that Ghanaians in Denmark are not engaged in transnational development initiatives, but rather that their mode of organization is different.

A number of individuals Ghanaians have established small NGOs which send used equipment to the founder’s home area in Ghana. These associations mainly consist of friends, relatives and colleagues, often with very few Ghanaian members. Their activities are usually supported by the so-called *Recycling for the South* grant, administered by Action Aid Denmark (*Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke*), which supports the renovation and shipment of used equipment to poor countries⁴.

Like in the Somali case, Ghanaian associational support to concrete development projects is based on particular loyalties and affiliation and requires local collaboration. Yet, misunderstandings and conflicts also occur. These relate to time and money spent on the collection, sending, reception and distribution of equipment, to unrealistic expectations to ‘the diaspora’ as well as local partners, and finally to conflicts over who should benefit from the support.

⁴ See <http://www.ms.dk/sw6029.asp>.

Box 2: Used computers and furniture from Denmark to Ghana

Kwaku is the founder of a small NGO that sends used computers and furniture to his hometown in Ghana. He starts by collecting discarded or superfluous equipment from Danish companies, which he stores at his work. The quality of the equipment is checked and then, with the help of family, friends and colleagues, Kwaku fills a container with hospital beds, tables, chairs, computers, and other items. The container is shipped to Ghana where it is received by a local NGO that oversees the items through port, unpacks the container and distributes its content to local schools and hospitals in Kwaku’s hometown. First, however, the NGO has assessed their capacity to use the equipment. Schools, for instance, must have electricity to be able to use the computers. Both Kwaku and the local NGO emphasize the importance of local collaboration. There are many examples of equipment, which ends up being stored or does not reach the right institutions. Therefore they both stress that one of the big challenges for migrant associations is to find the right local partner.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Both Somali and Ghanaian associations have a high level of associational involvement, and especially Somali associations are supporting development and reconstruction activities, mainly in relation to health, education or information activities. Migrant associations thereby contribute to poverty alleviation and the provision of social services in the gaps left by poor, weak or failed states as well as they contribute with new visions and ideas. However, in some cases, migrant associations also contribute to conflicts, or their pro-

jects may reflect status desires rather than local needs. Migrant associations are thus not automatically agents of change. Rather, the possible development effects of their activities depend on specific contexts and circumstances – not least on collaboration with local partners. Furthermore, migrant associations tend to support their hometown or home region, reflecting the importance of trust and local knowledge as well as local loyalties, such as ethnicity, clan, or hometown. This means that some areas do not benefit from associational development support. It also means that migrants and migrant associations cannot – and should not – take over states’ responsibility for development, though they certainly can and do play important parts and can challenge more established development actors.

The Brief also shows that many Somali associations are simultaneously engaged in integration in Denmark and transnational development activities in their country of origin, whereas Ghanaian associations are either involved in social and cultural activities in Denmark or development support in Ghana. In spite of this difference, it is a clear tendency for both groups that transnationally engaged persons *also* are involved in cultural or integration activities. Indeed, knowledge of and networks in Danish society as well as in the country of origin make transnational development project more likely to succeed – and local collaboration and partners are essential in this process.

Box 3: Policy recommendations

Capacity building of migrant associations to strengthen project planning and funding abilities.

Promote collaboration between Danish NGOs and African migrant associations.

Coordination of activities to avoid duplication and sharing of good and bad experiences.

Emphasis on local and trustworthy partners in receiving countries, local ownership, and on development projects that benefit the local population.

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