

Diaspora transnational activities and home country regime conditions
Obstacles to Eritrean diaspora contribution to local development in Eritrea

By Antony Otieno Ong'ayo¹

2015

¹ International Development Studies Utrecht University The Netherlands. E-mail: A.O.Ongayo@uu.nl
Chapter appeared in "Eritrea – Von der Befreiung zur Unterdrückung". Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland, Hamburg (2015), ISSN 1430-6530. pp 146-151

Introduction

Diasporas of different backgrounds are noted to maintain linkages with the countries of origin in ways that entail multiple and simultaneous transnational networks. Most acknowledged are relations with family and next of kin, culture, sentimental and material links (Sheffer, 2003). Still the most significant determinant factor in the diaspora ties with country of origin is the position of the state on the role of diasporas. The government policies and relations with its diasporas are very significant for the return of diasporas and their engagement in the local development processes. The relations can be cooperative or antagonistic depending on how a group emerged in the diaspora. These relations can lead to restrictive or open policies for diaspora engagement.

Diaspora engagement has received mixed attention with one strand of literature focusing on the role in conflicts (Demmers, 2002) and another emphasizing their role in peace building and development (Van Hear, 2003). However, diaspora ability to return and make a contribution through transnational activities depends on the political environment in the country of origin. Eritrean diasporas fall into the category of political and conflict-induced diasporas (Lyons, 2007). Eritrean diaspora relations with the government are characterized by long-distance nationalism (Glick Schiller, 2002) and a more controlling approach by the ruling party. Eritreans make contributions to the home country through mandatory remittance. Still they maintain ambivalent contact and relations with Eritrea and the regime.

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which Eritrean Diasporas maintain link with the country of origin and what development outcomes are likely within the current circumstances of constricted political space (see Ong'ayo, 2014b). Understanding the extent to which Eritrean diaspora can collectively engage in local development processes in the country of origin this requires exploration of the complex relationships between local, national, and transnational forces in the construction of identity politics and the interests served by such a politics. While located far from home, the Eritrean government closely monitors Eritrean diasporas with different tools deployed in this process.

This paper is organised as follows. Section one provides an overview of the influence of political context in Eritrea on long distance relations between Eritrean diaspora and country of origin. Section two examines the nature of Eritrean diaspora collective organising. Section three analyses the nature of Eritrean diaspora engagement with country of origin and how this impact on their involvement with local communities. The final section summarizes of the main conclusion points.

Political context in Eritrea and emergence of Eritrean diaspora

Eritrean diasporas in the Netherlands can be traced back to the regime conditions in Ethiopia prior to independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The liberation struggles waged by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the 1960s and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) against the Derg regime, the civil war that ensued in 1980s-1990s, and forced conscription (Bereketeab, 2004), forced many Eritreans to flee the country. In recent years Eritrea refugees continue to leave the country with majority heading towards regional countries that act as transit routes namely Sudan, Ethiopia and across

to the Middle East and eventually to European countries (table 1). In the first half of 2014 Eritrean refugees have been heading to Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands as popular destinations in Europe.

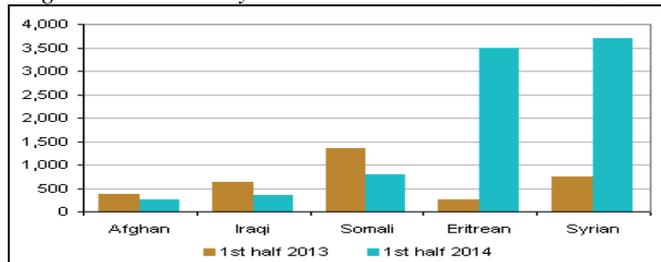
Table 1 Top 5 countries of residence for Eritrean migrants (2013)

Country	Numbers
Sudan	144 170
Saudi Arabia	39 834
United States of America	36 565
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	20 172
United Arab Emirates	17 404
Total	258 145

Source; UNDESA (2014)

As at 2014 there were about 2595 Eritreans in the Netherlands. As figure 1 shows the arrival of Eritrean refugees to the Netherlands has increased significantly from 2013, with first half of 2014 recording the second highest (3,500) after Syrians (CBS, 2014). Up to 3,000 Eritreans flee every month in escape from harsh regime conditions, human rights abuses, torture and detentions (Tecele and Hepner, 2013). An estimated 95% of the refugees held hostages in the Sinai are Eritreans (Van Reisen et al. 2013). This is because Eritreans encounter strict controls in terms of legal exit from the country (Bozzini, 2011).

Figure 1 Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands 2013-2014



Source: CBS 2014

Eritrean diaspora collective organising in the Netherlands

Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands the community is composed of several groups along political, ethnic (Tigrinya, Hamasen, Sahawa, Kunama among others) and religious (Christians and Muslims). A conservative estimate suggests some 30 groupings mainly operational in the cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. A variety of motives (box 1) and contextual factors influence collective organising among Eritreans in the Netherlands.

Box 1: Motives for collective organising by Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands

- Welfare of the community members
- Maintaining of Culture and traditions
- Advocating for the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers
- Democratisation and respect for human rights in Eritrea
- To change socio-economic conditions in Eritrea through philanthropy

Source: Adapted from Ong'ayo (2014a).

A major motive, is advocacy for the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands and democratisation and respect of human rights in Eritrea².

² Interview with the leader of Eritreans for Justice and Democracy - Benelux, Utrecht, 2008

Examples include Eritreans for Justice and Democracy - Benelux (EJDB), Eritrean Association Amsterdam and Environment, the Eritrean Platform Netherlands and Eritrean Liberation Front-RC (ELF-RC). The main political party in Eritrea the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is also represented in the diaspora and enlisted as a diaspora organisation.

From an institutional perspective, Eritrean diaspora organisations in the Netherlands have access to Political Opportunity Structures (Ong'ayo 2014a/b) that includes favourable policy, institutional and legislative framework. Subsidies provided by the Dutch institutions and development agencies at the national and local government levels also facilitate diaspora participation in policy processes. However very few Eritrean organisations have access to subsidies and are hardly involved in host country policy processes such as the annual policy consultation meetings at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs or diaspora platforms such a Diaspora Forum for development (DFD). Eritreans undertake fundraising for within their community, which is a sign of self-reliance but also lack of knowledge about subsidies available through different institutions.³ These traits have implications for transnational engagement since they shape activity choices and strategies.

Transnational activities towards the country of origin

Eritrean diaspora in the Netherlands have broad networks and are highly connected at the transnational level by modern technology, especially the use of internet. ICT has significant influence on diaspora networks (Vertovec, 2004), as it brings together groups and individuals originating from one particular country or region. Through the Internet and digital media diasporas maintain linkages with countries of origin (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

The relationships between Eritrean diasporas and country of origin is an ambivalent one in terms of loyalty (voluntary or involuntary). It is always in constant shift based on political and policy choices of the government and migrants' transnational political practices. The relationship is rather dominated by coercion (direct and indirect) as the government largely focus on the diasporas for the purpose of mobilisation and surveillance (Bozzini, 2011). This derives from the high premium that government places on its diaspora namely the 20% diaspora contribution during the armed struggle against Ethiopia and post war 2% tax which has been institutionalised with embassies and consulates as collection points abroad (Hepner, 2009). Some Eritrean groups question the rationale for continued payment, when the Ethiopian-Eritrean war is over⁴. However, payment of this tax determines access to public services and other opportunities including investment or engaging local development.

Eritrean diaspora engagement with the country of origin dates back to the struggles for independence, continued direct and indirect contributions to the local economy through remittances and political support from a distance. Diaspora remittances serve as a major earner of foreign exchange that ends up in banks controlled by the government. Diasporas sympathetic to the regime also serves the interest of the regime in image management and taking on opponents of the regime especially spies within the Eritrean diaspora communities (see Bozzini, 2011). These agents continue the policy of surveillance during the asylum.⁵ These observations

³ Ibid

⁴ Interview with Eritrean community in Amsterdam and environment, Amsterdam, 2008

⁵ Interview with Eritrean asylum seeker, Amsterdam, 2014

reveal the role of high-ranking military officials in border crossings through laissez-passers (Bozzini, 2011) and human trafficking (Van Reisen et al. 2013). Eritrean diaspora relations with the government confirm that diaspora networks act as important 'facilitators of internal, inter-state, and worldwide political, cultural and economic connections' (Sheffer 2003)

Eritreans operate in a politically constricted space (Ong'ayo, 2014b). Opposition groups mainly undertake activities that focus on democracy and human rights.⁶ Others include petitions, demonstration and mobilisation, lobbying and advocacy to influence policy in the host countries. For example in 2002 exiled Eritrean opposition parties, NGOs and diaspora organisations protested the Dutch aid to Eritrea on the grounds that such support undermines efforts by groups that fight for democracy and human rights in Eritrea.

Nature of engagement with country of origin institutions and local communities

Diaspora transnational activities between the country of residence and origin largely depend on diaspora motives, experiences in the host society, and conditions in the countries of origin. Consequently diasporas engage in collective organising as an instrument for realising both individual and groups objectives. The motivations linked to the countries of origin are often influenced by the political and economic marginalisation and exclusionary policies that constituted the main drivers of migration.

As shown in the case of Eritrea, government and diaspora relations can be antagonistic, paternalistic and opportunistic at the same time. The regime attitude towards the diasporas derive from the development challenges in the country while others stem from the political establishment and system of governance. In such situations, diaspora engagement can be constrained. Eritrea pursues a tight control policy towards its diasporas thus compelling Eritrean diasporas to develop strategies for mitigating policy conditions and interests of high ranking officials and party affiliates in the diaspora if they wish to engage in development activities in Eritrea.

Conclusion

Diaspora transnational activities have been acknowledged to have the potentials for social transformation in the countries of origin. These are mainly derived from both individual and collective initiatives. However, the environment in which the diaspora operates in the country of residence, especially their visibility and ability to engage with communities, authorities and other institutions in the country of residence is also critical for diaspora transnational engagement. This is because through the Political Opportunity Structures in the country of residence diasporas are able to organise, mobilise and access subsidies for activities between the country of residence and origin.

For diasporas to make a difference in the country of origin, various formations must be in a position to return. Others include availability of frameworks for diaspora engagement, political will and policy choices that facilitate diaspora involvement in local development processes. Diaspora transnational activities can also be impacted upon by the fragmentation within the diaspora community. Fragmentation can result from diversity or different affiliations (political, ethnic and religious). Although

⁶ Interview with Eritreans for Justice and Democracy - Benelux, Utrecht, 2008

diversity within the diaspora is not a negative development, differences and conflicts within the diaspora community can be incongruent with host country policies that target diaspora engagement.

To the country of residence, the antagonistic relations between the diasporas and country of origin government can lead to challenges about social cohesion. Tensions between groups can turn counter productive to municipal policies that target integration and participation in a multicultural setting. Host countries are likely to encounter opposition from diaspora groups if the bilateral relations concerns about political developments in the origin country. Eritrean case illustrates how geo-political interests of host countries can clash with international community norms and practices for holding countries of origin accountable on human rights questions. These policy choices thus impact on diaspora transnational activities as fluctuating political and policy environment in Eritrea presents challenges of unpredictability and de-motivation for diaspora engagement due to government control and transnational surveillance on diasporas. In this case diaspora transnational activities are not possible in conditions of constricted political space. Eritrea thus loses the opportunities to harness diasporas development potential.

References

Bereketeab, R. (2004). Dynamics of National Service in Eritrea, *News from the Nordic Africa Institute* (1): 9-11.

Bozzini, D. (2011). Low-tech surveillance and the despotic state in Eritrea, *Surveillance and Society* 9(1-2): 93-113

Brinkerhoff, J. M. (2009). *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Central Bureau of Statistics Netherlands (CBS) (2014). Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands, Available from <http://www.cbs.nl> (accessed 18-12-2014)

Demmers, J. (2002). 'Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long, Distance Nationalism, and Delocalisation of Conflict Dynamics', *The Public*, 9 (1): 85–96

Glick-Schiller, N. (2002). "Long Distance Nationalism Defined", *Anthropology of Politics*, Joan Vincent ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell

Hepner, T.M. R. (2009). *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors, and Exiles. Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Lyons, T. (2007). Conflict–Generated Diasporas and Transnational Politics in Ethiopia, *Conflict, Security and Development* 7(4): 529–549

Ong'ayo A.O. (2014a). Facilitating diaspora contribution to development in the countries of origin by the EU and member states, The case of Ghanaian Diaspora

organisations in the Netherlands, Maastricht/Brussels: ECDPM, Discussion papers series No 162

Ong'ayo A.O. (2014b). *Diaspora Engagement in a Constricted Political Space, The Case of Ethiopian Diaspora Organisations in the Netherlands, Maastricht/Brussels: ECDPM, Discussion papers series No 168*

Sheffer, G. (2003). *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tecle, S. and Hepner, T.M.R. (2013). New Refugees, Development-Forced Displacement, And Transnational Governance In Eritrea And Exile. *Urban Anthropology* 42 (2-3): 377-410.

United Nations, DESA-Population Division and UNICEF (2014). *Migration Profiles - Common Set of Indicators. Eritrea – Migration Profiles*

Van Hear, N. (2003) *Refugee Diasporas, Remittances, Development and Conflict*, Oxford: COMPAS.

Van Reisen, M., Estefanos, M., and Rijken, C. (2013). *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond*, Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers

Vertovec, S. (2004). Cheap Calls: The Social Glue of Migrant Transnationalism, *Global Networks*, 4: 219–224