This one-day conference brought together academics, activists, and members of diaspora communities. The term diaspora literally means “dispersal of peoples” and is defined here as “individuals and groups, with a history of migration, whose attachment to two or more locations within or across national boundaries is expressed through organized activities, connections and networks.”

While the discourse of international development has begun to recognise the potential of involving diaspora as agents of change, issues of sustainability and environmental impact are often missing from the assessment of outcomes and impact in the Global South. The purpose of the conference was to explore three terms: “development”, “sustainability” and “diaspora” which are often seen as separate areas of focus, leading to different ways of describing issues, communities, and the projects in which they are engaged.

The conference explored issues of identity, belonging, and activism at the local and international level. Consisting of four panels, the main themes were diaspora as agents of change, transnational networks for change, diaspora driven development, and extractive industries.

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: ON JUST SUSTAINABILITIES (JULIAN AGYEMAN)**

The keynote address by Professor Julian Agyeman provided a set of unifying themes for the panels that followed. The concept of “just sustainabilities” involves an improved quality of life, meeting the needs of past and future generations, and the principles of justice and equity. Encompassing more than environmental sustainability alone, it recognises the link between environmental degradation and human inequality. Countries where the gap between the rich and the poor is most pronounced are also those with the highest carbon footprint. The features of “just sustainability” are context specific, and will necessarily vary from one place to another.
Recognising the conference focus on diaspora populations in Canada, Professor Agyeman applied the concept of just sustainabilities to four main areas: Food, Space and Place, and Cultural Diversity.

**Food:**
The sustainable food movement, exemplified by the “farmer’s market”, has so far been led by a predominantly white, middle class demographic. This movement has often been linked to the admonition “don’t eat anything your grandmother wouldn’t recognise as food.” However, this fails to recognise that the heritage foods of diaspora populations may be unavailable, and that the prices attached to farmer’s markets are frequently unaffordable to less affluent individuals, including recent immigrants and the workers who produce the food. In addition to basic issues of access, food is also performative — affirming cultural identity and history. Diaspora populations then have a role to play in expanding the contours of the sustainable food movement.

**Space and Place:**
Economic inequality, with its associated life opportunities and limitations, is often linked to geographic location. Parks are among the few public spaces in which people from different classes can meet, but their design and regulation may affect various members of the community unequally. Apparently innocuous rules like banning the use of fire in a park may have a large impact on cultural minorities for whom gathering around a fire is a major part of social activity. Similarly, a park that introduces long grass sections may repel some park users who come from countries where long grass represents the hazard of snakebite. It matters how park spaces are designed and how well they respond to the needs of the whole community. In order to do this, cultural diversity must be a part of park boards and management.

**Cultural Diversity:**
The presence of multi-ethnic populations in our cities represents an opportunity. Professor Agyeman raised the question of how thinking about just sustainabilities encourages us to embrace inter-culturalism. Instead of encounters with cultural difference being a side effect, inter-culturalism is an active policy in which cities would prioritise projects that promote the intersection of people from different cultures. The design of culturally inclusive space in cities involves the rethinking of the function and design of institutions to ensure they truly represent and foster our increasingly diverse populations.
This panel discussed the various factors that affect the self-perception of diaspora communities, and their willingness to engage in civic activity or invest in their country of origin.

The Indian diaspora in Canada numbers over one million, of which 60% are Punjabis. In British Columbia, Punjabis are 85% of the Indian diaspora. Uncertainty about the security of their citizenship in Canada has encouraged many Punjabis to maintain strong ties with their village communities in India. This trend has been strengthened by the Indian government’s policies designed to encourage investment and ongoing ties among the Indian diaspora.

A community sense of identity, and the extent of perceived belonging are reflected in literature too. When aspects of religious and cultural identity such as turbans are treated as a barrier to economic and social integration, it has an impact on the extent to which minority communities feel they have a stable future. The perception of welcome, in country of residence affects behaviour of diaspora communities and extent of civic engagement.

The South African diaspora in Canada, by contrast, seem to display very little interest in investment or development projects in their country of origin. They exceed 120,000 in number, and immigration to Canada peaked in 1994 when the ANC was elected in South Africa, ending white minority rule. A study surveying 2000 members of this community found that 80% saw no future role in South Africa, and displayed a sense of hostility toward the policies of its government. The other 20% of respondents did demonstrate strong interest in ongoing ties to the country through remittances and development projects. Nevertheless, the respondents maintained a strong self of South African identity, despite ranking Canada as preferable on all socio-economic and political indicators. This study suggests that not all diaspora communities are natural agents of change in their countries of origin.

In closing remarks, the importance of not reifying diaspora communities as development actors was emphasized, along with the significance of the factors which caused the migration of diaspora communities in affecting their future actions.

1 The panel was moderated by James Busumtwi-Sam, Professor, Political Science & Director, Institute for Diaspora Research & Engagement at SFU. Panelists included: Satwinder Bains, Director, Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies, University of the Fraser Valley; Jonathan Crush, Research Chair, Global Migration and Development, Balsillie School of International Affairs; and Ruby Rana. Research Fellow, Marie Curie, European Union Project.
NETWORKING LUNCH

During the lunch session, attendees and panelists discussed the following questions:

• Diaspora as agents of change – what does this mean to you?
• In your view, what is at the nexus between diaspora, sustainability, and development?
• What can we do to advance and harness the power of this nexus?

For the result of this discussion, please click HERE [www.sfu.ca/diaspora-institute/events/conference.html]

PANEL 2: BRAIN CIRCULATION: NETWORKS FOR CHANGE

In the opening remarks, the assumption that the phenomenon of “brain drain” was necessarily negative was questioned. While the movement of educated and technically qualified individuals out of a country represents a loss, these people may represent potential new networks and opportunities for connections with other countries.

One area in which diaspora communities can potentially create an impact is advocating greater accountability and better practices in the global clothing industry. The regulation of labour conditions in countries that produce clothing for western markets is ineffective. Disasters like the Rana Plaza fire in Bangladesh have resulted in voluntary accords signed by some western companies, which fail to cover the many workers in subcontract factories. These accords also lack proactive policies to implement the rights of the workers they are supposed to protect. International regulation, through the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and domestic policies in countries of production are ineffective. As a result, activism and public pressure toward better regulation and even fair trade clothing are the most promising drivers of reform. In this the local knowledge of certain diaspora communities — such as Bangladeshis— is invaluable.

Another area for potential diaspora impact is sharing information about the effects of global warming in their countries of origin and advocating for climate justice. While Bangladesh is perhaps one of the most severely affected countries, conflicting media accounts of the severity of future environmental impact have paralysed advocacy for environmental reform. The diaspora can play a role in changing the narrative by providing detail on other pressing issues in Bangladesh and information on the ways in which Bangladesh can be a model for successful adaptation and resilience in the face of climate change.

A third method for leveraging the skills and abilities of diaspora communities is direct volunteering. A representative from Cuso International discussed the ways in which
diaspora members can use their sense of connection, knowledge of local language and culture, and desire to contribute to their countries of origin to build capacity and skills in those countries. Diaspora volunteers face a unique set of challenges in terms of their own expectations, and the perceptions of local communities they volunteer with, but these can be navigated through responsive training and preparation, which Cuso has been developing.

2 This panel was moderated by June Francis, Associate Professor, Beedie School of Business, SFU. Panelists included: Andy Hira, Professor, Department of Political Science, SFU; Nana Osei, Program Advisor, Africa Diaspora Program, Cuso International; Anis Rahman, Sessional Instructor, School of Communication, SFU; and Harun Rashid, Professor, School of Environmental and Resource Management, SFU.

PANEL 3: “DIASPORA DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT” AND GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY

In this panel, the impact that diaspora involvement can make on the effectiveness of development projects was the main focus.

In Rwanda, the effectiveness of aid money may be greatly enhanced if diaspora members with strong knowledge of local conditions and potential problems direct it. This has been the experience of Grace Rwanda Society, a diaspora organisation that has a very limited operating budget. Nevertheless, utilising the concept of philanthropic social business it has been able to leverage limited capital to increase the capacity of existing civil society organisations, investing profits in community development.

In Pakistan, the overall literacy rate is below 46%, and for girls it may be lower than 26%. Education is therefore an area with great transformative potential. The system of education provision is currently divided among government schools, private schools, and religious organisations. Government schools are chronically underfunded — facing staff absences and very poor quality of educational provision as a result. Private schools are unaffordable for many Pakistanis, which leaves a large share of education in the hands of religious organisations, through madrassas.

The Maria Helena Foundation is an example of a small, diaspora run organisation contributing to educational provision in Pakistan. Funds are raised almost exclusively through family networks in Canada, and supervised closely to support a network of girls’ schools, thus ensuring the funds go where they are most needed.

In Sri Lanka, the diaspora-founded Van Lanka Foundation has used its knowledge of local challenges to work with farmers, encouraging them to decrease their reliance on

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genetically modified rice by creating their own seed banks. Further, Foundation members have conducted research on historical methods of irrigation in Sri Lanka to devise new solutions to current hydration challenges. The deep local knowledge of diaspora members in all of these organisations allowed them to identify particular development problems they could address, and also informed the particular strategies they devise to do so.

PANEL 4: EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRIES, GLOBAL TRENDS, AND INDIGENOUS/LOCAL INTERESTS

The tension between the economic benefits promised by extractive industries and the interests of local communities and Indigenous Peoples presents numerous challenges. In many countries, mining is experienced as a cause of social and environmental problems, often referred to as the “resource curse.” A significant fact is that 90% of investment in extractive industries comes from individuals in the upper end of the income bracket, while 60% of the world’s poor live in resource extraction environments. Clearly, the economic benefits of extraction are not evenly distributed, and may not much improve conditions in local communities.

In East Africa, where recent discovery of oil has raised expectations of wealth in a number of countries, the “resource curse” remains a risk. In many parts of this region, deep poverty, high infant mortality, and extreme ecological fragility affect the local population. This, combined with weak civil society, corruption, and poor governance greatly increase the risk that local communities will not benefit much from the profits of extraction. As a result, transparency in the contracts made between extractive industry players and East African governments is critical to ensuring accountability for how the profits are spent. There are many ways that East Africans in the diaspora can assist, by engaging in advocacy and lobbying companies for increased transparency in their contracts.

As a result of changes to Canadian regulations for extraction, mining companies are no longer legally required to invest in the local community or hire local labour. This is sometimes known as the “fly-over effect.” However, they still seek a “social license” to operate, which requires some form of buy-in from local communities. There are a number of strategies for responding to community concerns and increasing accountability that mining companies can adopt. These include addressing issues of equitable access and
use of water and energy, and preserving biodiversity in mined environments. Companies may voluntarily make “selective benefit” offers to local communities, in the absence of standard policies or agreements. Cooperation among communities surrounding a proposed mining site is critical in obtaining a fair share of economic benefits in agreements with mining companies. Without this communication, mining companies may reach wildly unequal arrangements with different communities.

For First Nations communities in Canada, the entry of fracking or extractive industry into their communities is often experienced as forcible. These communities have a strong connection to the environment in which they live, and see living in balance with the land and other life forms as an ethical requirement: a type of “interspecies binding agreement.” As a result, they see the stripping of resources and pollution of the land as a function of lawless corporate and political expediency, which fails to take into account the environmental legacy left for future generations.

4 This panel was moderated by Professor June Francis, Beedie School of Business, SFU. Panelists were Alex Awiti Director of the East Africa Institute, Aga Khan University, Professor David Parker, Executive in Residence at UBC, Professor Sean Markey, Associate Dean, Faculty of Environment, SFU and Professor annie ross, First Nations Studies, SFU.

CLOSING REMARKS:
ALEXANDER DAWSON, PROFESSOR & DIRECTOR, SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, SFU

“Diaspora” is a dangerous word if deployed carelessly. While in development and policy circles it may be associated with having particular knowledge about a community or a country, it may also re-inscribe an individual’s “otherness.” At what point does being identified as a diaspora member become a way of denying someone full membership and belonging as a Canadian? Diaspora membership is one way of being connected across geographic and political borders, but it is not the only way. In our increasingly interconnected world, we all have both potential impact and responsibility beyond our countries of residence. “Why should someone in Bangladesh suffer the consequences of my carbon footprint?” asked Professor Dawson. “Just because my ancestors did not come from there does not mean I am not connected to the consequences of my actions there.” Ultimately, a shared sense of ethics and commitment to addressing the challenges of development and environmental sustainability in our world is what unites us, above ethnic or civic affiliations.