DIASPORA VOICES

CONTENTS

"My words are like scars that remind me of the sharp pain of the moment. These stories must be told, must be told, must be told."

Juliane Okot Bitek — Vancouver writer

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the value of diaspora as an agent of change is long overdue.

As a plural, diverse and cosmopolitan society comprising strong diaspora communities that maintain their close connection to their roots while still being Canadian, Canada is uniquely positioned to bridge international communities.

An important public conversation began through the Engaging Diasporas for Development: Tapping the Trans-Local Potential for Change project funded by CIDA and led by Simon Fraser University, with community partners CUSO-VSO and the BC Council for International Education.

The project's three main goals were:

•To raise awareness about Canada's role in international development and the impact and potential of diaspora Canadians in fulfilling that role;
•To connect members of various diaspora for the purpose of sharing their successes, challenges and resources;
•To articulate the benefit of engaging diaspora in development and in tapping our trans-local potential for change.

Through a series of public dialogues, workshops and media presentations on different aspects of development, including poverty reduction, global health, education, youth engagement and peace-building, Engaging Diasporas for Development has been a powerful forum for inspiring stories of change.

In this collection, we have gathered the many voices from diaspora-driven development projects that local communities in the Vancouver region are planning and implementing with local communities in the global south. They offer exciting evidence of the collective value of previously unrecognized and undervalued efforts to offer support to individuals and their communities. The voices are calling the Canadian public's attention to this previously untapped asset within our society. We are humbled by the passion, commitment and capacity inherent in the diaspora.

In Illuminating the ways in which multi-generational diaspora connect local grassroots efforts, these voices create a bridge between the global north and south. The looping-back effect benefits Canada as much as it does those regions around the world where diaspora are making a difference. The diaspora are the connectors who help Canadians develop empathy for people living on the other side of the globe, thereby inspiring action, solidarity and a more just and egalitarian world.

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DEFINITIONS

Agency of diaspora refers to ways in which people can make a difference through their actions, particularly in relation to problems in their countries of attachment.

Cultural fluency means having local knowledge, cultural understanding, and community networks that are critical to creating a development project that meets the needs of the people it is targeting.

Development is about creating space for choice to address uneven income distribution and poverty more broadly.

Commonality lens recognizes what we can learn from the similarity in community development issues such as equality, health care and other challenges and responses in both north and south and how we can work to overcome them.

Looping effect refers to the ways in which Canadian-based diasporas' experiences and interchanges in the global south are transforming health practices, education, community economic development, poverty reduction, and peace-building practices and understandings in the north. Working in development has a looping effect and creates impacts in regions of attachment and in Canada, creating capacity for leadership, management and strategic planning, as well as promoting settlement and a sense of belonging.

Diaspora originally referred to the scattering of Jewish people beginning in the 6th century BC, but diaspora now refers to the large-scale dispersal of a people from an original homeland. Diaspora may also refer to an individual or group who perceives an attachment to two or more homelands. This definition implies a sense of agency and relexivity.

Diaspora-driven development occurs when the diasporic networks and connections between Canada and communities of origin are mobilized to facilitate change. These networks and connections are strengthened by fluid identities, hybridity and an intimate understanding of more than one "home."

Local knowledge refers to diaspora members' knowledge and expertise in two locales, which enables them to build bridges between "here" and "there."

Reflexivity is the ability to reflect critically about oneself and one's broader social structures.

Trans-locality refers to individuals and groups working at grassroots and local community levels. It is "globalization from below" with people simultaneously being and acting in multiple localities across and within national boundaries.

Remittances are monies that are sent, primarily through familial networks, to supplement household incomes. Remittances can meet individuals' basic needs, enable investment in local enterprise, or provide for social development of families and their communities.

The Chinese diaspora in Vancouver have played an important role in the development of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. There are about 400,000 Canadians of Chinese descent in the Lower Mainland. Many of them maintain good connections with their home countries and they have contributed to development overseas by bringing capital, market intelligence and entrepreneurial spirit from here to there. In addition, Chinese-Canadians have been instrumental in helping Canadian companies reach out to Chinese markets.

Thomas Tam, former CEO, S.U.C.C.E.S.S.

Diaspora are responding to the realities and needs of their home communities with the necessary knowledge and resources – and are producing formidable results.

Shaheen Nanji, SFU International

The diaspora have become visible to people who make decisions (e.g., the international development community). They are starting to appreciate the people they are trying to help, and to recognize the long-standing problem of people on the ground not feeling included.

Associate Professor June Francis, SFU

When I go to schools here to talk about global citizenship, the kids always tell me that they don't think their five dollars is going to help. I can tell them that I come from there and it will. It's incredibly powerful, adding your voice and your actions to a cause. Once you tell your story, you never know – someone, somewhere just might want to come through.

James Kamau, Youth Initiative Canada
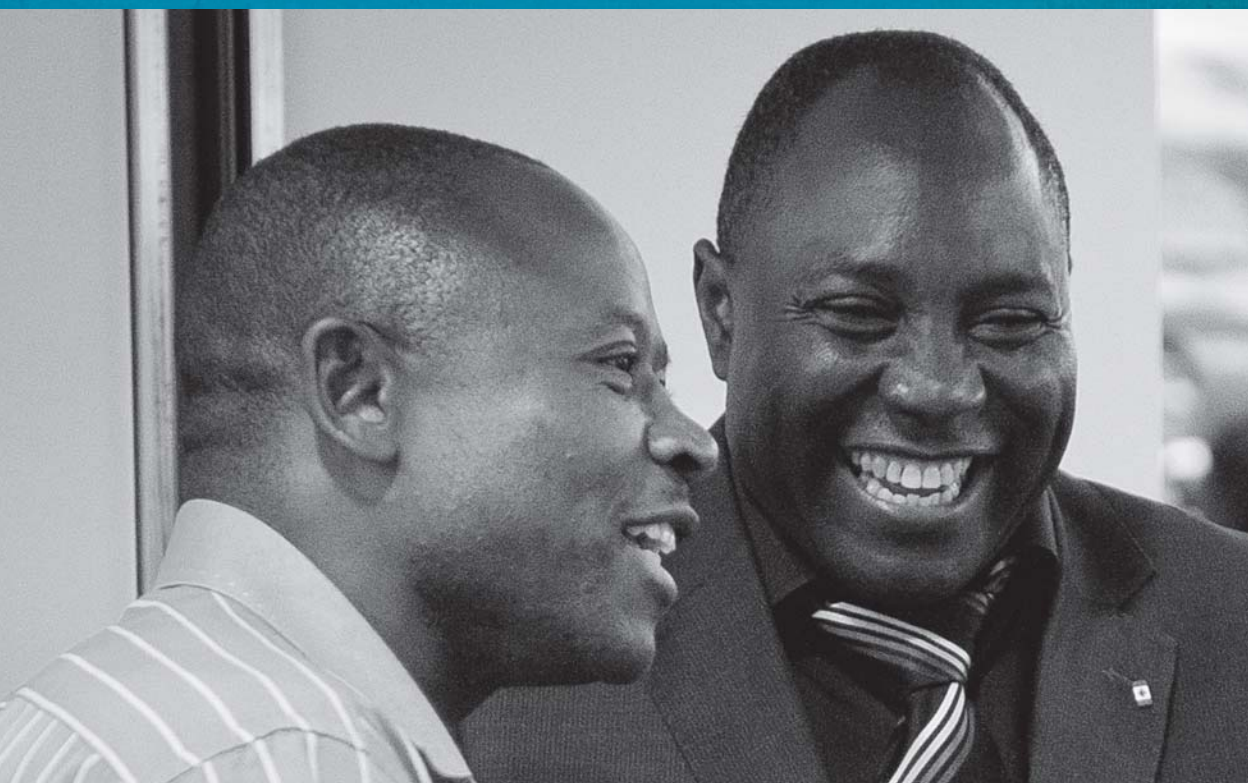
The diaspora – whether acting as a group or as individuals – are motivated to go out of their way to form networks and to do something about development needs. The diaspora don't wait for the donors or traditional agencies, but ask, "What can we do?" And then they act.

Associate Professor James Busumtwi-Sam, SFU

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION

The standard definition of poverty in the first of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is based on income. It seeks to "halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day." Why one dollar a day? Many years ago, one dollar, or its equivalent, was the minimum that an average person required to be able to live at all. The reasoning behind this idea of relieving poverty is that people need to have at their disposal enough goods or money to feed themselves adequately. It is a very minimalist notion of "having enough," and it is not clear whether it includes an allowance for clothing, shelter or heat (which can be a problem even in very warm climates such as North India where some people die of exposure every winter).

Being poor or becoming poor is not, in general, because of choices that people make but because of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Economic growth is essential to reduce poverty, provided it generates productive and reasonably stable employment. It needs to be supported by the public provision of education that equips people to take on more productive work and to deal effectively with the state so that they can secure what they are entitled to as citizens. This is reflected in the second MDG: "Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, girls and boys alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." Of equal importance is the third MDG: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015." Female literacy pays very high dividends in children's health and education, and in civic action. Gender equality is of basic significance in the fight against poverty.

Economic growth also needs to be supported by the public provision of basic health care, so that people have greater protection against episodes of ill health and their potentially crippling consequences. The MDGs concerned with child health, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS all relate to this vital aspect of tackling poverty.

(adapted from a paper by Professor John Harris, Director of the School for International Studies, SFU)

Reducing poverty is about creating the conditions for choice, for self-respect, for self-organizing, and for creating the confidence and organizational capacity to make demands on the state and to mobilize for change. While the diaspora's contribution to poverty reduction and economic development are considerable, these efforts are not intended to substitute for donor resources, government services, or for the development of national and international policies conducive to poverty reduction. By focusing on the role of diaspora, we must be careful not to transfer responsibility for development and poverty alleviation away from humanity as a whole and the rich world in particular.

Associate Professor Alexander Dawson, SFU
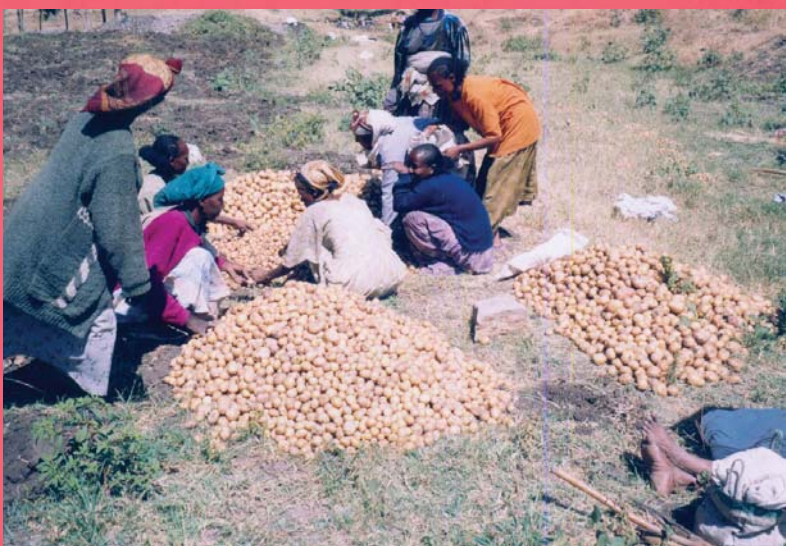
Atakilt Haimanot, PhD is from Ethiopia and has considerable experience managing community and agricultural projects. Now living in the Vancouver area, Atakilt supports the work of the Society for the Rehabilitation of the Horn of Africa (SRHA). SRHA was established in 1996 as a non-governmental, non-profit, and non-political organization that operates at a grassroots to intermediate level.

"SRHA is centered on poverty reduction and is run by volunteers with experience in international urban and rural development co-op programs. Its projects focus on four elements: food security, skill training and education for youth, capacity building, and the development of women… When the diaspora speaks the language and follows the norms and culture of the country, then the locals will accept him or her as a son or daughter, a brother or sister, or a friend… They are likely to follow his or her advice. SRHA has learned that in seeking the good for others you find your own."

Kaye Kerlande was born and raised in Montreal and moved to Vancouver 10 years ago. Her parents are Haitian and have shared their cultural heritage with her. After the 2009 earthquake in Haiti, Kaye founded Hearts Hands Minds for Haiti to raise funds and awareness of the people suffering.

"After I learned that a few family members had passed away in the earthquake, I started asking myself the question, 'What can I do?' I do a little bit of sewing and I make jewelry and was making hearts for a project at school. My teacher said, 'Why not make hearts for Haiti?' That's how Hearts Hands and Minds for Haiti was born."

Lorie Corcuera, a first-generation Canadian born to Filipino parents, is a co-founder and director of Enspire Foundation, a Vancouver-based non-profit organization working in an impoverished suburb of Manila.

"Ever since I was a child, my parents instilled in me that I was really really lucky to be living in Canada…Enspire started its work in the Philippines by sponsoring children's education. After a few years, it built a library, and now it has undertaken a project to construct 60 houses in a new community for needy families. It works through a well-established local organization (Pagaalay ng Puso Foundation) that it found through the Filipino diaspora in Vancouver. Our ties mean we know where the money is going."

The diaspora are the original micro-financiers. For example, in Jamaica, remittances account for 13 percent of the country's GDP.

Associate Professor June Francis, SFU

Antonio Arreaga-Valdes is the Honorary Consul General of Costa Rica in Vancouver and is the co-founder of the Ethno-Business Council, which represents businesses in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the globe. Its role is to improve the management and performance of these businesses through the dissemination of best practices honed in Canada. As a member of the diaspora in Canada, Antonio has been acting as a conduit for the transfer of knowledge, a transfer that is by no means unidirectional.

"I think of what I do here in Canada and in Central America as being a bridge, linking expertise, knowledge and information between the two regions. I work to 'tropicalize' Canadian know-how and I try to look at strength through co-operation. For example, the majority of hotels in Central America are less than 30 years old. So we have brought this know-how that we learned in Canada and developed it for the Caribbean for Costa Rica. Sixty percent of the people who own and manage those hotels are women and they are family-oriented. So they are doing very well and the training they are receiving now is very, very good."

Sumana Wijeratna moved with her family to Canada in 2002 from Sri Lanka, where she worked for 11 years with the Urban Development Authority as an urban planner in the municipal offices and for another six years as the deputy director for regional offices. After settling in Surrey, Sumana brought her international development experience to the Vancouver-based International Centre for Sustainable Cities (ICSC), where she was able to offer her networks and local knowledge of Sri Lanka. This collaboration soon led to ICSC developing three successful community environmental management and sustainable planning projects in Sri Lanka.

"I have since founded the VanLanka Foundation (VLF) that works with private, government and community-level partners in Sri Lanka and attempts to involve the Sri Lankan community here in the Vancouver area and the larger Canadian community. Currently we work with a remote rural settlement in Thambavita; a tsunami-and war-affected fishing community at Kallarawa; and a low-income urban slum community in Wilgoda. Our key work areas are education, small business for youth and women, and food security."

Miriam Egwalu emigrated from Uganda to Canada in 1996. She is the mother of three girls and is very passionate about the care, nutrition and upbringing of children. She works as a senior quality assurance inspector for a pharmaceutical firm that specializes in natural vitamins and minerals. After visiting her village in Northern Uganda in 2005 for the first time since settling in Canada, she saw many mothers and grandmothers taking care of young children with no resources and much adversity.

"When I interviewed one of the older ladies in the village, she informed me that most of the women get no support from their husbands who have moved to cities. Others, like her, are widowed with numerous children to support. She was left with six kids to take care of. Her oldest daughter was not going to school because she needed her to help in the garden and to do other chores. A charity organization supports the other five kids so that they can go to school."

When Miriam asked the woman what she could do to help her to be self-sufficient, the woman replied that she could not do farm work like the younger women, and asked for 200,000 Ugandan shillings (equivalent to $100 Canadian) so that she could open a store. Before returning to Canada, Miriam gave her the $100.

Businesses don't just create jobs: they create dignity. People who work for a living have a stronger sense of self-worth. The diaspora are in a particularly strong position to promote business development in developing countries. The diaspora have intimate knowledge of the markets in at least two localities, and can therefore overcome what marketers refer to as "the liability of foreignness."

Associate Professor June Francis, SFU

Miriam refers to this solution as "the power of $100," which was brought into clear relief when she later returned to Uganda with her 12-year-old daughter. "I was amazed by how much the $100 had helped this lady. She had a small stall by the roadside and was busy selling small grocery items. She was also renting a sewing machine and was earning money as a seamstress, often making school uniforms that allow children to attend school. Although there is free elementary education in Uganda, no kid is allowed in class without a uniform and this is one of the main reasons that kids drop out of school."

Miriam's daughter had never been to Africa before and asked Miriam why kids were going to school with ripped uniforms and no shoes. "I told her that they could not afford new uniforms, so she immediately pulled out $25 Canadian and offered it to a girl with a ripped uniform. She promised the head teacher that when she returned to Canada, she would baby-sit and walk dogs in order to help more kids get school uniforms."

When Miriam and her daughter returned home, they started saving money for this project. "Today we have managed to dress over 20 kids with school uniforms and have thereby helped them stay in school." Their goal is to help every child in her village who cannot afford a school uniform. Miriam also plans to help one woman a year start a money-generating project so that she can take care of her children.

GLOBAL HEALTH

There is a vicious cycle in the relationship between poverty and ill-health: poverty contributes to ill-health and ill-health leads to poverty. *Dying for Change: Poor People's Experience of Health and Ill-Health*, a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, notes that poverty creates ill-health because poor people tend to live in environments that lack decent shelter, clean water, and sanitation. Poverty creates hunger, which in turn leaves people vulnerable to disease. Poverty denies people access to reliable health services and affordable medicines, and the illiteracy associated with poverty leaves people poorly informed about health risks.

Thus, the deprivations, exclusions and inequities associated with poverty and global inequalities have been highlighted as the biggest obstacles to promoting health worldwide.

Diasporic contributions to health can be situated within the context of debates over health equity and the challenges to realizing the health-related UN MDGs Health is central to the global agenda of reducing poverty and is an important measure of human well-being. The explicit focus of three of the eight MDGs, health issues are acknowledged as central to the attainment of other key goals, including eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, gender equality, and environmental sustainability.

In its 2008 report, *Primary Health Care – Now More Than Ever*, WHO has identified four key elements for improving access to primary health care:

- *Reducing exclusion and social disparities (universal coverage reforms)*
- *Organizing health services around people's needs and expectations (service delivery reforms)*
- *Integrating health into all sectors (public policy reforms)*
- *Pursuing collaborative models of policy dialogue (leadership reforms)*

Across these reforms is the imperative of engaging citizens and increasing stakeholder participation.

(adapted from a paper by Associate Professor James Busumtwi-Sam, Department of Political Science, SFU)

Doctors need to stay in their country and push for change. It is difficult, but we need to find ways to make social change. Leaving the country is not a good option for achieving this.

Dr. Kojo Assante, Korle-Bu Neuroscience Foundation

Marj Ratel is a Vancouver-based neuroscience nurse who worked with her Ghanaian partners in Canada and Ghana and with a multinational team to form the Korle-Bu Neuroscience Foundation (KBNF) project. KBNF provides the people of Ghana with medical support for brain and spinal injuries and disease. When the High Commissioner of Ghana was visiting Vancouver and Marj showed him all the beds being donated for the hospital in Ghana, he asked what was wrong with them and was astonished to hear that they were in good working order.

Derek Agyapong-Poku had been searching for a way to give back to Africa. With the knowledge he gained in administration and financial management while attending university in Canada, he is now President of Excellence in Africa, the active wing of KBNF in Ghana. While this Ghanaian project has its roots as a medical mission, it is a significant contributor to sustainable public-health policy and planning in Ghana.

Dr. Kojo Assante became interested in fetal alcohol syndrome after many years of working in Northern BC and Uganda. The people involved in KBNF invited him to participate and he agreed that it was a good idea. He is painfully aware that many people in Ghana are dying because of a lack of services that Canadians take for granted.

Mohammed Zaman, PhD, executive director of the Society for Bangladesh Climate Justice, is one of 6,000 members of the Bangladesh Diaspora in the Vancouver area, all of whom are concerned about the well-being of their homeland, a region that faces a devastating coastal sea-level rise by 2050.

"The Society for Bangladesh Climate Justice aims to raise awareness inside and outside of Bangladesh about the urgent need for mitigation and adaptation efforts to prevent what will be a global human health crisis due to climate change migration of millions of people. This work involves fund-raising, advocating for public policy change, research and networking with diaspora around the world."

Steven Pi was president of the University of British Columbia Chinese Varsity Club when an earthquake struck the city of Sichuan in May 2008, killing almost 100,000 people. The UBC group held a fundraising dinner to raise money for victims of the earthquake. Their fundraising efforts were so successful that the group was inspired to form Hands Across the World, a Vancouver-based non-profit organizations working to raise awareness of the serious issues plaguing the world today.

Dr. Lyren Chiu is founder and president of the Canadian Research Institute of Spirituality and Healing (CRISH). She has 25 years' experience and training in both mental health care and spirituality. CRISH is an international charity organization with 1,000 professional members who are interested in spirituality and healing. Lyren is actively bringing the values and practices of integrated healing to Canadian society.

"Our current project is called Beautiful Minds and it introduces traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and Chinese massage into mainstream neighbourhood centres."

When my son turned 13, he raised $500 to commemorate the death of my mother and pledged it to a charitable cause. This small sum of money and the efforts of a volunteer youth group in Surrey provided clean drinking water for 15 families, and a computer resources center in a remote rural village in Sri Lanka.

Sumana Wijeratna, founder of the VanLanka Foundation

Dr. Shafique Pirani is a pediatric orthopedic surgeon with a clinical practice at the Royal Columbian Hospital in the Metro Vancouver region. A self-identified member of the Ismaili Diaspora, Shafique was born in Uganda but left that country with the rest of the Ismaili community in 1972. Approximately 25,000 Ismailis relocated to Canada, with approximately 10,000 settling in the Vancouver area.

Shafique is the founder and project director of the Uganda Sustainable Clubfoot Care Project (USCCP), a project whose aim is not only to care for the one in 1,000 children who suffer from this debilitating congenital bone disorder, but also to create the institutional capacity within Uganda to identify and treat clubfoot on a permanent basis. The project is in its 11th year and is expected to conclude within four years when doctors and paramedical workers across Uganda will have developed the capacity to diagnose and therapeutically reverse clubfoot.

"The USCCP began in 1999. While taking my young family to visit Uganda I became more aware of the plight of children with clubfoot. The standard of care for the condition had been surgery, but in Uganda surgeries were rare and of poor quality. Meanwhile, the Ponseti method, a non-surgical method for treating clubfoot, was finally gaining traction as a viable alternative to surgery. For children born into impoverished societies like Uganda, the difference between surgery and non-invasive therapy is the difference between non-treatment and treatment."

Unlike numerous other medical missions to impoverished regions, the USCCP addresses a specific problem for an entire nation rather than a general problem for a smaller population. Shafique points out that in these more conventional medical missions, "a team of doctors and support staff will travel to a location carrying with them a supply of medical equipment to provide care for either a specific disorder or range of disorders until that supply of equipment is exhausted."

When they first began the USCCP, the team envisioned going to Uganda to promote development in the health-care system. It was not until later that they came to realize that they were learning valuable lessons that would be applicable in Canada. Once they recognized that it was a two-way exchange, a degree of egalitarianism permeated the project and Ugandans began to take ownership.

EDUCATION

Diaspora are lending their voices and their efforts to support education as an engine of personal empowerment and community development. They are creating safe and nurturing learning spaces for young people, building basic infrastructure for schools, equipping schools with libraries and technology, teaching through sports and media training, math education, and supporting basic literacy needs of adults.

Education and human-capital development – including literacy, basic education, higher education, and workforce enhancement – are critical to any country's evolution.

The English word "education" comes from a Latin root, "ducere," which means to draw out, or to lead forward. From a certain perspective, education can seem like a necessity, almost as important as food, water or family. It can offer access to work, security and even personal fulfillment.

Nadia Chaney, poet, artist, and SFU graduate student

Jean de Dieu Tuyisenge, a Health Sciences student at SFU, is a sponsored refugee from Rwanda and president of EduAfrica, a non-profit organization he organized with his university friends. Jean feels privileged to be living in Vancouver and studying at SFU.

"When you come out from poverty with skills and knowledge and the ability to make change, you should do it. It's not good if we do nothing to make a change. I also realized that I could not do it alone, so I joined with other SFU students. It is hard to help individuals — so many are in need — but partnerships with other associations bring people together so that they can help themselves, rather than relying on the aid of outsiders. This helps them to get out of poverty, and to be able to pay the fees to send their children to school. So far we have helped two older students (in their 20s) go to school by paying their tuition. We plan to send perhaps 20 students to technical or trade school this January to learn vocational skills. This will help them to get a job. For now our focus is on Rwanda, but if we succeed there we will expand to other countries."

Muhammad Iqbal, PhD, born in a Pakistani village, is Professor Emeritus from the University of British Columbia. For over more than a decade, he and his wife have worked tirelessly to promote health and education in Pakistan through the Maria-Helena Foundation, which they established. Their foundation has subsequently established 11 self-sustaining co-ed primary schools and three vocational schools in Pakistan.

"We do bricks and mortar projects, building a permanent primary school. It costs between 60,000 - 80,000 USD per school, which is cheap compared to costs here. Each school has 300 students and all of the teachers are women.

In Pakistan, five years of primary school counts as basic education. We have given 200 two-dollar scholarships to pay for school fees. We are starting a new school for girls at the middle school to high school levels. Higher education for women leads to development gains by reducing population and maternal and child mortality, and decreasing violence against women."

Randolph-Dalton Hyman, a PhD candidate in education at SFU, brings his passion and skill as a dancer to reinvigorate traditional African dance education in Jamaica, his birthplace. "Without passion we are not really living. It was through dance that I discovered myself. It took me to a world of spirituality, of politics, of discovery, and to a sense of who I was and where I was going."

Norma McKenzie and her family moved to Canada from Guyana in 1968, and after a full career she decided to work for CUSO-VSO. She served for two years in Malawi, four years in her homeland of Guyana, and two years in Ethiopia. During her service, Norma set up more than a dozen libraries and trained many teachers, always making sure that her libraries were inclusive, especially for people who learn in unique ways.

"In Guyana I conducted special literacy classes for women in the afternoons, as it was particularly distressing for me to learn that many young, bright women in the rural area in which I worked could not read and write. Though English is the official language of the country, in most areas people speak a Creole that is sometimes difficult to understand from one region of the country to the other. Using standard English is the most efficient way of solving the problem.

I felt more at home in Guyana than I've felt in other countries. Perhaps this was because I had lived there for the first 35 years of my life. I realized I had acquired too many things over my years in Canada. In developing countries, people live with less and they are happier. I have become less sure of myself and of what I thought I knew. I have learned that people all have to make their way in the world at their own pace and that my role is one of support."

Tariq Ghuman volunteers for Humanity First, an organization with a mission to serve disaster-struck and socially disadvantaged individuals and families in the poorer countries of the world. Assistance can include providing clean drinking water, offering famine relief, building schools and hospitals – whatever is needed.

"As a global citizen, I have responsibility toward others. If I have more education, I have more responsibility. If I have more wealth, I have more responsibility. If I'm in a position of power I should make decisions that affect others' lives very wisely. I think at a global level, act at local level."

Omar Kaywan is a member of Beacon of Hope for Afghan Children Society, which works to create opportunities for children in Afghanistan.

"Education is the enabler. Our programs focus on street children who are tasked with being the breadwinners of their families through selling whatever they can find. Through the support of Beacon of Hope, their families receive nutritious food and these children are able to go to school full-time, in addition to receiving extra-curricular tutoring in math and English."

Chantal Kasongo

was born in Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and now lives in Coquitlam, BC. Determined to help widowed women and orphaned children in her hometown, Chantal has single-handedly raised the funds to build Shiloh Place for her people who have lost husbands, fathers, land and livelihoods.

"The project has been in my heart for many years. I have so far created a committee that includes the town mayor. It has taken a lot of saving and sacrifice, but I have been able to send enough money to purchase the required land and to build the first of several homes in the Shiloh Place compound.

Africa has no shortage of orphaned children, and widowed women are among the most forgotten, displaced and disadvantaged people in all of Africa. I myself am a widow and understand very well the traditions of African cultures whereby women lose any entitlement to their late husbands' property, including a place to live. These women live miserable lives and are too often left with nothing more than the sole burden of raising children in poverty."

Amos and Edith Kambere

are from Uganda and founded the Umoja Operation Compassion Society in 2002. The Surrey-based organization has partnered with the Surrey Pacific Academy, the Dunamis Education Society, and a Ugandan NGO, — The Rwentutu Foundation — to establish an elementary school in Uganda.

In addition, Umoja has helped other members of the diaspora engage with development in their countries of origin. They recently assisted a Vancouverite of Kenyan origin to return to his home region and construct a well, that provides water for an entire village. This project was completed at the surprisingly low cost of $2,500.

"We have set up a micro-finance system that, with a humble capital base of $1,000, has provided loans to 30 Tanzanian women in three years. My son had raised $1,000 through dance events to build a mess hall for children in Uganda. Our small projects can be very effective."

Joselyne Niyizigama John, a native of Burundi in East Central Africa, was forced to flee her home at the same age that most children enter the first grade. While a civil war raged in Burundi, Joselyne and her family of 12 spent 14 years in refugee camps, first in Tanzania and then Malawi.

Now an SFU Health Sciences student and recipient of World University Services of Canada's Student Refugee Program, education means one thing to Joselyne: freedom. "It creates life choices and opportunities, especially for individuals who are in impossible situations. When you are in the camps, all you can think about is how you can't go anywhere."

Shortly after arriving in Canada and beginning her studies, Joselyne formed the Dzaleka Project named after the Malawi refugee camp where she lived for six years. The Dzaleka Project is a student group that aims to raise funds and bring awareness to refugee issues.

"I love to do actions that inspire others to do more, dream more and become more. I am grateful for the ability to inspire with knowledge and empower through opportunities that education facilitates. I have a strong desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others."

Cecil and Ruth Hershler are from South Africa and are founders of Education without Borders. Now living in Canada, they have a 40 involvement with a school in the township of Gugulethu, South Africa.

"We started working with this school in the early 1970s when we were privileged white university students. We promised the principal, the staff and the students that we would never, never break our commitment to that school. We've gone through rebuilding the school, introducing art programs, visioning with the teachers and students and now, focusing on academics."

Concerned about the region's 60-percent unemployment rate, the Hershlers also want to give young people the choice of completing trades-training rather than the conventional focus on academics.

"We are the voice of that school and we will not stop until every single graduate student is trained, and becomes the future of South Africa."

Charles Quist-Adade, PhD, originally from Ghana, is now a professor at Kwantlen University in Surrey, BC.

"I was barely five when my auntie 'borrowed' me to live with her in Teawiah in a remote part of the Eastern Region of Ghana. By age eight, I was already growing cocoa beans and seedlings on my auntie and uncle's farms. I did this for more than 10 years. If you have recently eaten chocolate or drunk a cup of cocoa, chances are that it contained beans from the cocoa trees I planted some 30 years ago in Teawiah. The cocoa beans I planted as a child are providing nourishment to you and hundreds of thousands of your compatriots, and offering employment to even more Canadians who work in the chocolate industry. That is not all. Money set aside by cocoa farmers in Ghana in the form of the Cocoa Marketing Board Scholarship Scheme financed my education. And here I am today, an instructor in Canada, helping in my own small way to educate the future leaders of this country, my new-found home."

Education is key, and I want to emphasize that we need to look at it from the perspective of the developing world. When you come to a developed country, you get access to opportunities that people back home do not have. You get your diaspora connecting to their local village and this impact expands and helps to develop the whole nation.

Amos Kambere, co-founder of the Umoja Operation Compassion Society

Umeeda Umedaly Switlo has worked with CUSO-VSO for nearly four years as the public engagement officer for the Western Region of Canada and the US.

"I decided to work with CUSO to effect change, and being from Uganda, I really had a deep connection with that region. I had left the country as a refugee in 1972. We had lost everything and my family was scattered around the world. My late husband had passed away from HIV/AIDS and that disease was taking a real toll on the people around the world. I wanted to make a difference and lead a purposeful life.

Thirty-six years later, I traveled to Uganda on a communications assignment for CUSO. I took my daughter Nareena with me and was hoping she would make some connection to Africa. At the airport, they asked me to pay for the usual tourist visa. I refused to pay, saying that I was Ugandan. When I left my country, people were shot for challenging anyone with a gun, so it took guts to do this. I was very emotional and the official, instead of harassing me, welcomed me home. I can't tell you what a transformative event that was for me.

One has to make peace with the country in a personal way when you are a refugee. I believe that only after that can you effect sincere change."

Upon returning to Canada, Umeeda was even more determined to help. She saw CUSO as an organization that was preparing to engage diaspora in development by promoting deeper links between partner organizations in the south with those in Canada. Umeeda was appointed to the diaspora committee and found CUSO to be inclusive in its assessment and recruitment of volunteers, and in the diversity of its staff.

"It was a special moment for me when Nareena, an anthropologist, joined CUSO and was assigned to Zanzibar. She was born in Canada and now she was making a journey to the very place where many people of Indian ancestry had landed in Africa – the place they called home for four generations. She learned Swahili and I believe this experience means she can relate to me and her grandparents in a deeper way."

This year Umeeda went to work with The Umbrella of People with Disabilities in the Fight against HIV and AIDS (UPHLS) in Rwanda. Working as an advocate for the rights of people with physical, sensory, mental or intellectual impairments, this assignment "matches my need to make a difference in HIV/AIDS and brings me very close to Uganda again."

Education is reality changing. The World University Service of Canada scholarship has given me a chance for an education to regain my freedom and to discover opportunities to empower others. The challenge remains, however, of bridging the gap between my past and present to determine my true identity. I am building a connection to my country. I hope to return one day to meet it.

Joselyne Niyizigama John, SFU Health Sciences student

Nadia Chaney, a Canadian-born poet and artist, has roots in India. Having worked with at-risk youth in Vancouver for nine years, Nadia has taken her expertise in arts-based youth empowerment to work with Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYEglobal.org) in Bangalore, India.

"In 2009 PYE partnered with Dream a Dream in Bangalore. There was an implicit notion of cultural resonance when it was decided that I would travel to India to train teachers and youth workers in our creative communities model.

In the past I've felt Indian in Canada and Canadian in India. Working with Dream a Dream I engaged my artistic and community passions and in so doing, some of my questions of identity made a little more sense. Bringing my Canadian arts facilitation to India and coming back with new knowledge of Indian arts facilitation allowed me, on a very personal level, to develop a more complex and robust sense of belonging."

Sabrina Meherally is a passionate young philanthropist who believes that sustainability is an essential component of development. After volunteering in Tanzania with The House of Learning (HOL), a non-governmental and non-profit centre founded and funded by a local couple in the Kilimanjaro Region, she started the group 'Friends of HOL'. Friends of HOL is a grassroots organization that assists in providing free education to underprivileged children at the House of Learning through the development of a social enterprise. Our goal is for HOL to be a self-sustaining educational centre that operates independently, without external funding, and provides superior quality education in a fun and healthy learning environment. With my mother being born in East Africa, I feel a strong connection to the region, and believe that through this work I can make a lasting impact and help a worthy cause."

Members of the diaspora are capable of collaborating with people in their regions of origin without government assistance. Hawala is an informal but famously effective system of remittance transmission in Somalia. The Canadian government should identify collaborative arrangements like this and support them. They should also sponsor immigrant and diaspora youth to travel to their regions of origin to interact with youth there. The conversations that result from such meetings are a key means by which members of the diaspora can promote the transfer of knowledge.

Hawa Mire, Youth Point Media

EMPOWERING YOUTH

Harnessing the vision, intelligence, creativity and energy of youth is essential to an evolving society, whether in the north or the south. The diaspora play a critical role in empowering youth who are living in impoverished countries, as well as immigrant youth trying to find their way in communities across Canada. Such empowerment can take many forms – career training, tutoring in the English language, financial education, media training, leadership development, social action education, arts facilitation, and entrepreneurial training, to name a few. But perhaps its most important dimension is enabling all youth to believe in themselves and in their dreams for the future.

Hila Wesa is a young lawyer who immigrated to Canada
from Afghanistan as a child. Her father, Tooryalai Wesa, is Governor of Kandahar, Afghanistan and a former researcher at UBC's Institute for Asian Studies and the Centre for Policy Studies in Education.

Collaborating with other young Canadians of Afghan descent, Hila co-founded BC Young Afghans (BCYA), a program designed to provide educational support to young Afghan immigrants living in the Lower Mainland.

"We established BCYA to address some of the challenges we experienced as young immigrants to Canada. I came to Canada when I was 12 years old. It was a critical period in my life in terms of becoming either disinterested or engaged with education. The goal of BCYA is to connect with Afghan immigrant youth in that age group and to provide them with the extra help, mentorship and tutoring in the English language that might set them on a path to success. While we're concentrating on Afghan youth in the Lower Mainland, a longer-term goal is to foster connections with students in Afghanistan as well.

Hawa and Nasra Mire are sisters born to Somali
parents who came to Canada as children. Now in their early 20s, both young women have been involved in various youth-oriented programs and projects in the Vancouver area for many years.

"In 2007 we founded Point Youth Media, which aims to inspire and engage young 'racialized' people in the Lower Mainland, and young people in Uganda, through film and photography. We also plan to create satellite programs in Nairobi and Arusha.

The objective of the program is to provide youth with different types of media through which to tell their stories and to teach other youth. The program consists of a number of theoretical workshops on film and photography followed by extended practical application sessions.

The intent is to train youth to become facilitators so that they might eventually carry on the program independently. Point Youth Media prides itself in being a youth-driven organization, with participants playing a leading role in determining the specific programs and activities that will be undertaken."

James Kamau

Growing up in Nairobi, Kenya in a community fraught with violence, drugs and poverty, James Kamau quickly learned the importance of personal choice. His home community, Dagorettia Corner, is only a 10 minute walk from Kibera, the biggest slum in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While witnessing other young people in his community resort to drugs and crime, James chose team sports instead. He quickly learned that there were invaluable lessons to be learned from being a member of a team and, while still in high school, joined forces with four friends to start the Dagoretti Youth Development Organization to share these lessons with other youth. This community based soccer program was instantly popular, leading James and his friends to expand the organization to include environmental and life-skills programs, and even an after-school homework club. Their goal was to show young people that there was another option – one that did not include drugs and crime.

James went on to college to obtain a diploma in community development. His dedication to sport and hard work also earned him a place playing professional basketball for 10 years. His passion for sport as a tool for youth empowerment was so strong that he became an integral member of a movement that persuaded the Kenyan government to establish its first Ministry of Youth and Sport. Beyond providing opportunities for young people to learn the discipline that competitive sport entails, the Ministry is also mandated to provide entrepreneurial training opportunities for youth in Kenya, where young people account for more than 60 percent of the unemployed. As James explains, "If we can help these people start their own businesses, they can better support themselves and their families, and we will be on the right track to eradicating poverty."

It's no surprise that James was soon invited to join the African Youth Parliament, an organization of young activists "committed to building a peaceful, equitable and sustainable Africa." His involvement with this group allowed him to travel extensively, meeting with young people from one side of the continent to the other to hear about the types of challenges youth were experiencing in their communities.

"A community's youth are its vessels for change. So many young people have stamina, talent, energy, curiosity, a sense of adventure and invulnerability. They are resourceful and resilient even under the most difficult conditions. They're entrepreneurial and full of great ideas. But when you come from poverty, an idea will remain just that, an idea, unless you have some sort of collateral with which to build it."

Difficult as it was, James followed his own advice and made the move to Canada in the hope of transforming his own idea into a reality: to raise awareness in Canada and North America about the situation in Africa. After he settled in Vancouver, he founded a new organization, Youth Initiative Canada as a way of connecting his new life in Canada with the work he continues to do back home. YIC's mandate is about "encouraging global partnerships and sustainability for positive and meaningful youth development," and James continues to find ways for Canadians to get involved.

"I see my role as being the bridge [between Canada and Kenya]. If I can tell a story about a community program or initiative that's going on in Kenya, someone here in Vancouver may become interested. If they are, I can show them and connect them with people, organizations who are on the ground in Africa and we can

PEACEBUILDING

Despite divisions and fragmentations among the diaspora and despite external barriers to diaspora contribution, there are many ways that diaspora engage in conflict transformation and peace building. "Three-Track Diplomacy" offers a useful framework for diaspora engagement, with Track I being official agents of the state, Track II being NGOs and other civil society organizations, and Track III being individuals who work informally at the grassroots level. Diaspora may be involved at any of these three levels as effective agents of change.

Juliane Okot Bitek is a Vancouver writer born to Ugandan parents exiled in Kenya. In "*The Dry Season*," a work in progress, Juliane describes the experiences of three women who were kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army, a guerrilla group that has terrorized Northern Uganda, Sudan, Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1987.

"These women carry with them a heavy burden, including rejection by their own people when they return home to their villages. On return to Uganda, these women discover, much like the experiences of the diasporic people who return home, that the place and the people who remained static and often perfect in their memory, have ceased to exist."

Kawa Jabary was born in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. After being arrested in 1994 due to political activities, Kawa fled to Turkey and finally settled in Canada as a refugee. Returning to his country a few times since then, Kawa has made attempts to reach political activists in an effort to build a democratic, non-violent movement on the ground. Unfortunately it has not been easy: "What I've noticed is that the responsibility does not lie only with politicians. The culture of that region is influenced by violence."

During his last visit to Iraq, activists organizing rallies were convinced that the only option for removing corrupt individuals from power was through violent means. Kawa was glad that the violence didn't lead to a civil war, but he witnessed corruption and injustice in the way people were treated. "Demonstrators didn't get what they went to the streets for. They were forced to go back home, many of them were arrested, and some of them were put in jail and have been forced to stop organizing rallies in the future." Kawa also noted that in spite of these human rights violations, the Western media took no notice.

Reena Lazar is the executive director of the Vancouver-based organization, Peace it Together, which enables Israeli and Palestinian youth to participate in a dialogue and filmmaking program with Canadian counterparts.

"We unite youth from opposite sides of the spectrum," says Reena. Through dialogue and the production of short films about the conflict, Peace it Together uses filmmaking as a tool to engage, educate and empower, and to present alternative views of the conflict to broader audiences around the world.

"It's a unique opportunity for these young people to be able to exchange their thoughts and ideas in a safe and enabling environment such as Canada. It would be impossible for them to do this back in Israel or Palestine. That is why Canada and Canadians play such an important role."

Diaspora have an important contribution to make in facilitating peace-building processes. You can't make peace with your enemy without your enemy.

Reena Lazar
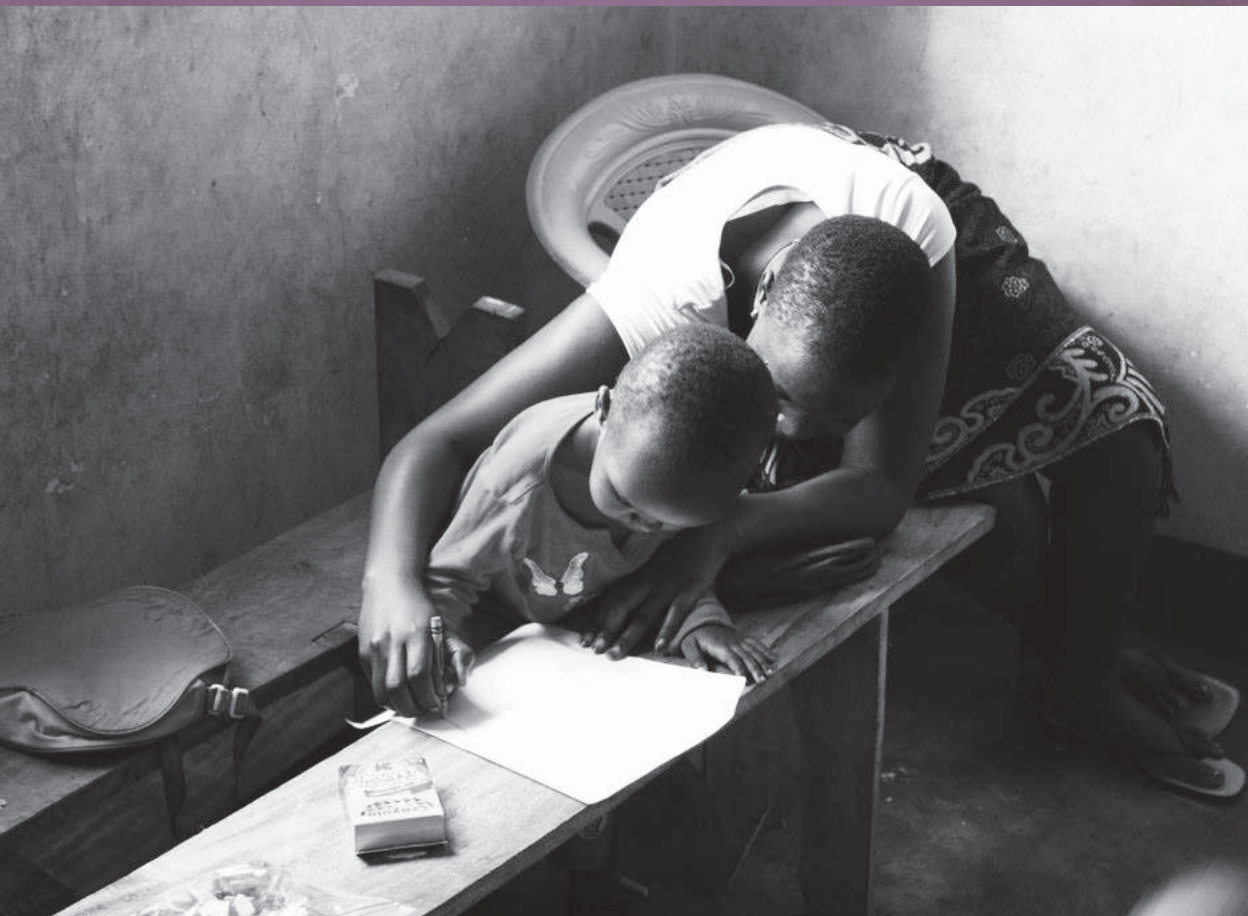
ENGAGED DIASPORA AND THE LOOPING EFFECT FOR CANADA

Jean de Dieu Hakizimana

The diaspora are a bridge between two realities – the north and the south – and they are strengthened by being Canadian. Jean's story illustrates these looping effects.

Eight months after civil war broke out in Rwanda in April 1994, Jean de Dieu Hakizimana returned to his village to discover that it had been burned to the ground and his family had been murdered. Hutu/Tutsi marriage usually meant a death sentence, as was the case for Jean's Hutu father and Tutsi mother and his four brothers and three sisters. "I don't know who killed my parents, but if I ever do see the murderer, to kill him in vengeance is not the solution."

Now living in Vancouver where he came as a refugee in 1997, Jean believes, "The Hutu and Tutsis should learn from the tragic lessons of history and say, 'I am sorry.' Justice cannot come without forgiveness from the heart."

Seventeen years after the Rwandan genocide and massacres, Jean is an instructor, interpreter, career and vocational counselor, and community organizer who assists individuals and organizations in implementing positive social change. With degrees in adult education, indigenous government, business administration and divinity, Jean creates dialogic learning environments that focus on social responsibility, public engagement, the corporate agenda, and lifelong learning.

Jean is the founder of Neighbourhood Care International (NCI), a coalition organization whose mission is to provide support to unaccompanied children, seniors and people with special needs through grass-roots projects that develop lifelong learning and self-sufficiency.

With support from UNESCO, the Province of British Columbia, and the City of Vancouver, Jean raised awareness of International Mother Language Day (IMLD) in Vancouver. He also ran for Abbotsford School Trustee in 2008 and was nominated in 2011 as the federal candidate for the Green Party of Canada in the riding of Vancouver South.

For more than 10 years, Jean has worked to raise awareness about the socio-politico-economic realities of African countries and the diaspora. In 2003 and 2004, he served as an official member to Industry Canada's delegation to Tanzania through the Sustainable Cities Initiative, aimed at enhancing sustainable economic development in Tanzanian cities. Jean's international activities also include working to assist the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tanzania, and serving on the management team for the Lumasi Camp, a Rwandese refugee camp of 300,000 people.

As well as being Kenyan, members of that diaspora in Vancouver are also part of an African community and, at the same time, no less Canadian than any other citizen of this country. The principal difference is that members of the diaspora feel an added responsibility to the people in the country they left behind. In fulfilling their responsibilities it is important for members of the diaspora to organize first as Canadians and then to recognize where they came from.

Dr. Peter Njenga – The Dr. Njenga Foundation for Sustainable HIV/AIDS Projects

LESSONS FROM A DIASPORA ENGAGED IN DEVELOPMENT

The diaspora offer a unique contribution to development and wisdom. Here are some of the suggestions raised in our public dialogues and learning workshops.

Recognize the Value of Local Knowledge

Diaspora may often have more access to the realities and nuances of local cultures. They are a bridge between worlds, and development is a mutually beneficial relationship. The North has much to learn from the South.

Support Small but Mighty Projects

Micro-finance systems with a humble capital base that provide small financial investments in local business can make a lasting difference in people's lives. In Jamaica, for example, $1,000 can support 37 women and their families for a year.

Knit Small Projects Together

While many organizations within the diaspora are doing similar things in the same regions of the world and opportunities for interconnections and synergies are not always available. Finding ways to bring people together as a collective might lead to more success in accessing funding and other supports.

Tap the Passion in Diaspora Youth

Many young people are looking for ways to connect with the diaspora, to get involved and be a part of meaningful change. Diapsora youth are reaching out to others to support and collaborate with, their innovative youth-focused initiatives.

Work Collaboratively with Local Partners

In today's world, communication is no barrier to partnerships among organizations and individuals who share the same vision. Engaging local partners who are tuned into the local realities and priorities means diaspora led development will be relevant and transformative. When the diaspora return to do work in their home countries, they go not only as teachers, but also as students.

"I wanted to start a program that would connect my life here with the work I do there. My goal is to raise awareness in Vancouver, in Canada, in North America, which are all privileged places, about the situation that is happening in Africa."

James Kamau, Youth Initiative Canada

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Umoja Compassion Society page 13

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Norma McKenzie page 30

PYE Global page 32]

Peace it Together page 39

Youth Initiative Canada page 42

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