
Engaging Canada in Realizing the Potential of Diaspora in Development A Backgrounder

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This post was written by Shaheen Nanji, Director of International Development at Simon Fraser University and Co-Director of Engaging Diaspora in Development.

As we approach the [final dialogue](#) (on September 14, 2011) of the *Engaging Diaspora in Development: Tapping our Trans-local Potential for Change* project we'd like to share some of what we've learned through our dialogues, workshops, and research. Most notable for me has been the capacity, passion, and resourcefulness of members of the diaspora who are engaged in creating a better world. I guessed we'd see all of this... I just couldn't have anticipated the extent to which this capacity exists and the tremendous potential it creates for Canada and beyond.

Members of the diaspora have the networks, skill, and will to contribute to the development of their communities of attachment or origin in a variety of ways. Although most official and academic attention has focused on the measurable economic impacts of remittances, diaspora development efforts are much broader and the

impacts do not necessarily have immediately quantifiable outcomes. There are four main mechanisms by which diaspora transform their communities of attachment: (1) knowledge application through knowledge transfer, capacity development, and 'brain circulation'; (2) social development through philanthropy and volunteerism; (3) political influence through political participation, cultural diplomacy, awareness-raising, and conflict transformation; and (4) financial development through remittances, fund-raising, investments, and business networks.



Canada relies on immigration to meet its labour needs and the demands of an ageing population. The ability of Canada to assist with the integration of immigrants not only enables a more settled citizenry, but also offers opportunities for greater and more effective diaspora-driven transnational engagement. Increasing the cosmopolitanism and cultural fluency within domestic institutions and structures could potentially deepen and enhance Canadian foreign policy and global engagement. Moreover, a more active engagement of immigrants and diasporic communities can enable Canada to benefit from diaspora's nuanced understanding borne of firsthand experience, extensive networks, and conviction to contribute to Canadian internationalism, and to have that engagement reflect the diversity and capacity of all Canadians.

Over the course of the project we've heard so many inspiring and remarkable stories of commitment, capacity and challenge – a small sample of these is available through this blog series. Members of the diaspora who choose to mobilize their transnational networks are impassioned by their attachment to their families and communities in distant places, by their collective responsibility for the wellbeing and success of their families and communities both in Canada and abroad, and by their understanding and experience of both places.



Diaspora ability to enact this commitment can be hampered by the trials of settlement and employment in their 'host' countries and the subtle and not-so-subtle barriers that they encounter. And so they require policies and institutions that facilitate their settlement and their ability to find work that matches their skills and qualifications, not only so they can better serve Canada and their communities of attachment, but also so they can realize their potential as Canadians. Some in the diaspora struggle to find the funding to carry out the work that they wish to do. Some require some capacity building to be able to scale-up the work they are already doing. Most yearn to create greater awareness of their experience and their communities and to be able to find an authentic role in bridging two worlds for mutual benefit.

Join us at the dialogue on September 14, 2011 as we explore these ideas and more in order to understand and unleash the potential those of us in the diaspora who are engaged in global development. To register, please [visit our website](#).