

Diaspora mobilisation in a conflict setting

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Valorisation

The Global Compact on Refugees, together with the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) can be considered as important milestones in the history of global migration governance, for making important contributions to enhanced cooperation and dialogue on international migration. Both frameworks are based on a people-centred and whole-of-society approach, which represents two of the main guiding principles. Placing individuals at the core, the people-centred approach seeks to promote the well-being of migrants and the members of communities in countries of origin, transit and destination and, therefore, puts a strong emphasis on the human dimension inherent to the migration experience. As such, refugees, migrants and diaspora groups are not perceived only as objects of protection, but as important stakeholders in their own right, who should be included in key forum and decision-making processes.

Increasingly, the development potential of diaspora groups is being recognised, and diverse actors ranging from government institutions to international organisations and other civil society actors develop and implement policies in order to promote the participation of diaspora actors in development processes. For instance, objective number 19 of the GCM aims to create conditions for migrants and diaspora groups to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries. Recognising that migration is of relevance to the sustainable development of countries of origin, transit and destination, the objective is to empower migrants and diaspora groups to catalyse their development contributions in different spheres and contexts. This objective stresses the importance of research to investigate the impact of non-financial contributions of migrants and diaspora groups, including social and civic engagement, to develop evidence-based policies and to strengthen global policy discussions. Attention is also given to the promotion of political participation and engagement of migrants in their countries of origin, including in peace and reconciliation processes, in elections and political reforms.

As such, the findings of this dissertation yield a range of practical considerations relevant to policymakers and stakeholders who seek to engage with diaspora actors. From a scientific point of view, the objective of this dissertation is to unpack the diverse processes and mechanisms that shaped the emergence and trajectories of Syrian diaspora mobilisation in Germany over the course of the Syrian conflict. In doing so, this study contributed to a gap in research, as it sheds light on the temporal dimensions of the mobilisation process. In addition, by laying the emphasis on the opportunity structures both in the country of origin as well as in the destination country, the study explored the relational space of mobilisation, in

which sending and receiving country dynamics intersect and mutually affect each other, as well as the strategic choices of diaspora political entrepreneurs made in response to them. The research highlights that diasporic actors are not passive prisoners of the transnational political opportunity structures, but individually and collectively negotiate the opportunities and constraints present in the transnational space. The dissertation therefore highlights the co-constitutive nature of diaspora mobilisation, through which diaspora groups and conflicts co-construct each other.

The findings of the dissertation suggest that a conflict- and context-sensitive approach in engaging with diaspora groups requires an awareness of the potential risks and limitations as well as of the socio-political dynamics present in the process of diaspora mobilisation. This includes not only a sophisticated understanding of the conflict dynamics, including knowledge about the different actors (local and transnational), but also an investment of time and the creation of a space for trust and confidence building. An inclusive approach, with participation of diaspora groups with diverse backgrounds and interests can encourage dialogue between the different fractions, which is an important step towards societal reconciliation and a peaceful solution of the conflict within the diaspora. On the other hand, underlying conflict lines might hamper effective and constructive programme implementation and may, in the worst case, contribute to further entrenchment of societal divisions among diaspora groups.

Projects, in which different groups and members of the Syrian diaspora are involved, need to create a space for reflecting on strategies and joint future actions (rather than reactions), to generate sustainable impacts. This also means that stakeholders should not search for a unified voice and representation among Syrian diaspora actors but rather create a space for discussion and debates, in which diversity (instead of uniformity) leads to future ways of cooperation and action. A participatory approach should also recognise the political nature of diaspora mobilisation and provide a space for contestation and debate. The level of politicisation is commonly a key concern for policymakers when cooperating with diaspora groups in conflict settings, since a potential lack in compliance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality can undermine the fundamental foundations for peacebuilding, development cooperation, and humanitarian action. However, this study has shown that politicised collective identities are a crucial driver of diaspora mobilisation and that a plurality of positions, aspirations and interests is not necessarily something negative, but that if constructively approached, can lead to social change and transformation.

In principle, legal frameworks should be created that guarantee the right to political participation and representation of diaspora groups both in the contexts of

origin and destination. Programmes and policies promoting engagement with diaspora groups, should further create opportunities for 'real' participation, by enabling diaspora actors to (co-)determine and influence decision-making processes. Numerous measures that consider themselves as participatory, in reality tend to be deliberative in nature, since they do not offer any possibility of influencing decision-making processes. In some cases, actors may even instrumentalise diaspora groups for their own interest, and as a result, participation becomes pure decoration. Because participation in a 'real' sense grants target groups a formal, binding role in the decision-making process. For stakeholders this would demand that they allow for co-determination and at least a partial transfer of the decision-making authority.

Throughout the years of my doctoral research, various occasions arose which gave me the opportunity to share these important points with a larger and non-scientific audience. The research findings of this dissertation have been disseminated to the academic community as well as to policymakers on various occasions. I presented papers based on the different chapters of this dissertation at academic conferences, including the International Studies Association 60th Annual Convention in Toronto (2019), the "Democratizing Displacement" conference of the Refugee Studies Centre of the University of Oxford (2019), the "Path of resistance in the Middle East and North Africa" 14th SeSaMO Conference of the University of Turin (2019) and the "Dislocations and Cultural Conflicts: Migrations, Diaspora, Terrorism, Borders" conference of the Centre for Culture and Cultural Studies, Skopje (2016).

In addition, during my research journey, several opportunities for cooperation and dialogue with policymakers and other stakeholders arose, which enabled the dissemination of findings to a broader non-scientific audience. These contributions include inputs given at the "Sounding Board Meeting for Syrian Leadership Program in QICS" organised by GIZ, which discussed the role of Syrian diaspora groups in strengthening local leadership in Syria. Further, I presented findings of this dissertation at the GIZ Expert Forum "Return and Reintegration in the Migration Context", hosted by GIZ in Eschborn (2017), at the "Syrian diaspora business Forum" hosted by the World Bank group, GIZ, IOM and CMI in Eschborn, Germany (2017), as well as at the "Federal Conference on Local Development Cooperation" hosted by the Service Agency Communities in One World (2018). The dialogue event on the UN Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the UN Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) hosted by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Robert Bosch Foundation in Berlin in 2018, provided me with the opportunity to share some insights of this dissertation not only with high-level policymakers, but also with migrant and refugee-led civil society actors in

Germany. In addition, continuous cooperation with policymakers and other stakeholders, including the German development cooperation (GIZ), the Danish Refugee Council and the Swiss Development Cooperation, enabled me to develop evidence-based policy recommendations to inform their programming of diaspora engagement strategies.

The findings of this research are not only relevant to actors who seek to engage with Syrian diaspora groups, but also to the Syrian diaspora civil society itself. Given the focus on the socio-political dynamics of diaspora mobilisation, the dissertation investigates the processes of how fragmentations and divides emerge and unfold, what their nature is and how they are contested and performed by the various diaspora actors. Understanding the process and nature of fragmentations may help to transform diaspora struggles into a constructive way of dealing with diversity, which would enable diaspora groups to create common spaces, based on a collective and coordinated vision. A joint action by the diaspora civil society and a strong collective voice can lead to the advancement of political goals and thus promote empowerment through solidarity. The findings of the dissertation suggest that it is crucial to support the creation of online and offline platforms and spaces to ensure sustainable and effective interaction and exchange among different stakeholders involved in the Syrian issue.

Hence, another extremely important societal achievement of my research was to engage actively not only with political actors and the public, but also with Syrian diaspora groups themselves as well as with other migrant organisations. As part of the two research projects on Syrian diaspora mobilisation commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council, I participated in two conferences to share my findings and recommendations with Syrian civil society actors and other stakeholders based in different countries across Europe and the United States as well as from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. These events presented important spaces for mutual exchange and knowledge-sharing on the topic of Syrian diaspora mobilisation. By discussing lessons learnt, challenges and best practices in supporting the Syrian civil society, the conferences provided a space for Syrian-led organisations to reflect on future scenarios, joint strategies and plans for collective action rather than reactions. In addition, the discussions on the findings and recommendations of the studies offered a crucial opportunity for dialogue between researchers and diaspora actors and not only generated further insights and knowledge but also provided a space for the validation of my research results.