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Why Engage Diasporas?

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# WHY ENGAGE DIASPORAS?[1]

**Abstract**

This paper evaluates arguments for and against diaspora engagement policies, focusing on three main areas: origin-state interests, the mutual obligations between states and emigrants, and the cooperation among sending-states, receiving-states and migrants themselves. Firstly, it argues that globalization and transnationalism present imperatives and opportunities for migrant-sending states to pursue their interests by engaging their diasporas. Secondly, it argues that mutual obligations between sending states and emigrants call for better diaspora policy making. Thirdly, it argues that better diaspora policies are a necessary part of strengthening global migration governance. Better diaspora policy does not mean more diaspora policy but more coherent diaspora policy, in order to avoid the arbitrary inefficiencies and injustices which currently characterise state-diaspora relations in many parts of the world.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been increasing interest in relations between migrant-sending states and 'their' diasporas. This interest has taken the form of both empirical research and normative critique. On one hand, there has been an exponential increase in the output of literature on transnationalism (e.g. see Vertovec and Cohen 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), and an increasing proportion of this literature is focusing on so-called political transnationalism (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Bauböck 2003). While much of this literature still focuses on the bottom-up transnational political activities of migrants themselves (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), some research is dedicated to the orientation of migrant-sending states towards transnational migration (e.g. see Østergaard-Nielsen 2003b; Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003; Smith 2003; Brand 2006; Cano and Delano 2007; Margheritis 2007; Gamlen 2006).

On the other hand, the popularity of these studies is not due to pure academic interest (if there is such a thing), but also results from their significance to questions confronting policy makers at various levels searching for ways of understanding and reacting to a world being transformed by migration. Within the field of state-diaspora relations, there has been a growing tension between studies that criticise states for interfering with their diasporas in various ways (Basch, et al. 1994; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999; Fitzgerald 2006), and those who celebrate "diaspora engagement" (Ionescu 2006; De Haas 2006; Van Hear et al. 2004; Newland and Patrick 2004; Fullilove and Flutter 2004; Lowell, et al. 2004; Sriskandarajah and Drew 2006; Kuznetsov 2006). This tension is rarely brought out in the open through systematic normative analysis. It is most often signalled by studies which, like ships passing in the night, treat a similar range of phenomena but remain encased within separate sets of normative assumptions.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to systematically review and evaluate some of the main arguments for and against diaspora engagement policies. The paper concludes that better diaspora policies are needed in order to avoid the arbitrary inefficiencies and injustices which currently characterise state-diaspora relations in many parts of the world.

## Defining 'diaspora'

The meaning of the term diaspora has been debated extensively since its popularity in academic and policy discourse began to boom in the late 1960s. Scholars have debated whether or not the term should refer to specific historical groups – especially but not only the Jews – or whether it applies more widely. At one extreme, some scholars have argued that the term should only refer to 'victim' groups dispersed through coercion, who maintain an antagonistic relationship with their host societies (for discussion see Safran 1991, 1999; Cohen 1995, 1996). At the other extreme, many researchers use the term very loosely to refer to refer to any group residing outside its place of

origin – and even to any group exhibiting the same characteristic – for example there have been references to a 'gay diaspora' (and even, oddly, to an 'egg and cream diaspora'; Tölölyan 1994, 2000).

Some argue that trans-border groups, or so-called 'stranded minorities' where the border has moved and the ethnic groups have remained stationary, do not qualify as diaspora (Cohen 1997). The "homeland" towards in question may be real or imagined, and the group's "orientation" towards it may take the form of varying levels of transnational identifications, or of transnational activities, or a mixture of both (see Snel et al. 2006). Self ascription is important (Vertovec 2005): people who share a characteristic but don't define themselves or each other according to that characteristic should not necessarily be thought of as members of a diaspora.

The current consensus on definitional criteria seems to be that the essential features of a diaspora group are: dispersion to two or more locations; ongoing orientation towards a 'homeland'; and group boundary maintenance over time (Butler 2001; Brubaker 2005). This fairly accommodating definition of the term diaspora remains true to archetypical cases such as the Jews, and also permits its use in relation to specific non-traditional emigrant groups as part of discussions about globalization and transnationalism (Reis 2004; Hugo 2006). It is also specific enough to avoid the conceptual inflation to which scholars generally attribute a diminishment in the term's analytical value.

Having spent rather long defining terms, diaspora theorists are beginning to turn to more interesting questions about why diaspora communities emerge and dissipate. Dufoix, for example, points out that diasporas are not necessarily pre-existing groups with static characteristics that meet or do not meet specific academic criteria, but instead can be heterogeneous populations that are self-consciously imagined and developed into collectivities through the projects of émigrés and states (Dufoix 2008). Diaspora studies should spend more time explicating these processes.

With this in mind, this study approaches "diaspora" as an umbrella term for the many extra-territorial groups that, through processes of interacting with their origin state, are in various stages of formation. These include temporary or transnational migrants who spread their time between their sending state and elsewhere and fall more or less arbitrarily into one or other policy category of the origin state. They also include longer-term but still first-generation emigrants settled in another country, and descendants of emigrants who – in certain places at certain times – identify as diasporic or even as members of a fully fledged diaspora "community".

This approach emphasizes that diasporas are not homogenous entities any more than states are unitary actors. However, just as it is meaningful to draw a ring around a heterogeneous set of territorially-based institutions and practices and call it "the state", it is meaningful to draw a ring around the heterogeneous set of extra-territorial individuals and groups impacted by that state, calling it "the diaspora". These analytical units are useful because they lead to interesting questions about how and why state policies can *make* heterogeneous extra-territorial populations *into*

members of a diaspora who share a state-centric identity. For example, they allow one to examine how different state mechanisms apply to different extra-territorial groups, and how – through an "instituted process" – this leads to different "thicknesses" of diasporic membership (Smith 2003).

## Why engage diasporas?

One important question is, what kinds of policies 'make' diasporas? Or in other words, what are diaspora policies? In this paper diaspora policies are defined as state institutions and practices that apply to members of that state's society who reside outside its borders. These range from state-sponsored celebrations and awards for expatriates, to bureaucratic units dedicated to the diaspora, to external voting rights and bilateral agreements on social security and pension transferability, right through to the range of mechanisms through which origin states attempt to extract finances, expertise, and influence from their diasporas. In short, they consist of that portion of the state machinery which protrudes beyond territory. Diaspora policies are most often interpreted as facets of 'external' or 'extra-territorial citizenship' (Bauböck 1994; Laguerre 1998; Itzigsohn 2000; Lee 2004; Glick Schiller 2005; Barry 2006): by incorporating the diaspora into the state, these policies redefine or reconfigure what it means to be a member of 'national society'.

There have been a number of different attempts to taxonomize diaspora policies. For example, Østergaard -Nielsen (2003a) and Chander (2006) adopt a straightforward distinction between economic, political and cultural devices of sending states. In the same vein, Barry (2006) identifies legal, economic and political instruments that apply to emigrant citizens. Levitt and De la Dehesa (2003) distinguish between bureaucratic reforms, investment policies, political rights, state services abroad, and symbolic politics. Gamlen (2006) classifies diaspora policies according to how they contribute to expanding citizenship beyond territorial borders, distinguishing two types: 'community building policies' aimed at cultivating or recognizing diaspora communities, and mechanisms aimed at extending membership privileges and obligations to these diaspora communities.

However, it is important to note that there has been an overemphasis on what is novel, transformative or otherwise normal about diaspora policies – and not enough recognition that "all states are to a certain extent deterritorialized" (as Chulwoo Lee has hypothesized[2]). The tools themselves are commonplace; it is the techniques to use them that remain underdeveloped. Relatively few governments see diaspora policy as a distinct issue area, and they do not deliberately pursue coherence between the different state mechanisms through which they impact on diasporas. Most of what goes on is ad hoc and arbitrary, and reflects the different interests and historical trajectories of different institutions. For example, bilateral agreements and consular services reflect

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[2] Personal communication, 2006.

foreign policy imperatives despite the fact that emigrant citizens are their end users. Migration policies have domestic scope, despite the fact that every immigrant is also an emigrant. Electoral systems may incorporate diaspora participation, but legislative processes generally do not. The result is that, when it comes to the diaspora dimension of policies and institutions, inefficient and unjust outcomes that would be subject to thought, planning and oversight in a domestic context, are overlooked in diaspora contexts. Thus, improving diaspora policies is in large part a matter of improving the coherence of what is already taking place in the area of state-diaspora relations, rather than doing something entirely new.

I will now highlight three main arguments about why good diaspora policies are important to policy makers at the national and supranational or global level. Firstly, I will highlight the argument that migrant-sending countries' *interests* are served by better diaspora policies. This is an empirically-based efficiency argument, that draws attention on one hand to the imperatives that transnationalism presents to the existing state institutions and policies, and on the other hand to opportunities arising from the supposed connections between migration and development. Secondly, I will highlight the normative argument that migrant-sending states have an obligation to treat their diasporas fairly, which means ensuring that their inevitable impacts on diasporas are not arbitrary, exploitative or preferential. Thirdly and finally I will highlight the argument that cooperation in the global governance of migration requires good governance in the area of state-diaspora relations.


## Interests

There are at least two reasons why it is in the interests of migrant-sending states to form better diaspora policies: firstly because the involvement of diasporas presents sending states with certain policy *imperatives,* and secondly because such policies may offer unique *opportunities*.


### *Imperatives*

As populations become increasing mobile and transnational, political, economic and social dynamics in migrant sending countries undergo profound transformations (seeVertovec, 2004). Institutions that fail to adapt inevitably lose their relevance and legitimacy. For example, the increasing prevalence of extra-territorial political participation  influences the composition of legislatures (see Bauböck, 2005; Collyer and Vathi, 2007; Rubion-Marin, 2006; Spiro, 2006). However, because expatriates usually have to vote for a candidate who represents the geographical electorate where they *used to* live, rather than in someone who represents their current geographical location, elected representatives face a conflict of interests, and it can be unclear whether they are over- or under-serving extra-territorial voters.

In the realm of economic policy, inward and outward migration patterns interact in complex ways with labour market dynamics, and trade and investment patterns – yet economic policy-makers only have decent data on inward migration. They tend not to systematically study the economic impact of their diasporas unless it is a blindingly obvious one (for example, when GDP would be decimated without remittances). Relationships between different types of transnational involvement – such as identification with the homeland or social, economic and political connectedness – interact in ways that economic policy makers are only beginning to understand.

Similarly, social policy has to grapple with the populations that are increasingly mobile and spread their lives across two or more nation-states (and therefore welfare states, tax and fiscal systems) (Lunt, et al. 2006). This raises important questions surrounding the provision of public goods such education and healthcare. For example, brain drain can be interpreted as a classic free rider problem: it is individually rational for graduates to emigrate for higher wages, but collectively irrational for states to educate people who spend their working lives in a foreign tax jurisdiction. The absence of parents who retire abroad can increase burdens on young families working and caring for children, with implications for public childcare services. Conversely, outflows of young people who leave permanently increases the number of elderly people with no family support, who then turn to the state for care provision. If not applied coherently and consistently, mechanisms such as bilateral agreements on social security and double taxation can create incentives to free riders and welfare shoppers.

In short, the impact of diasporas on existing public institutions and policies is a complex area, and one that is becoming increasingly important – but it is also one that has traditionally been approached in an arbitrary and ad hoc manner, based on migration data that only shows half the picture. The emigrants are invisible.

*Opportunities*

The argument that diaspora engagement policies are an opportunity to further national interests can be summarized in one phrase: migration and development. The main thrust of the argument is that specific types of policy intervention can enhance flows of remittances, investments, knowledge transfers and political influence through diaspora groups back into their homelands.

The significance of remittances has become a cornerstone of migration and development literature. To repeat one of the best known development mantras, in 2004 the total value of global remittances to developing countries was estimated at US$160 billion, over five times the level in 1990. In some cases, remittances can be larger than both foreign direct investment (FDI) and official development assistance (ODA) (Goldin, et al. 2006). In total, remittances are second only to foreign direct investment as a source of hard currency for low- and lower-middle-income countries. Remittances have been found to powerfully affect levels of poverty and consumption among

recipients. They also tend to be stable or countercyclical to other capital flows, so they can help to stabilize local economies during times of recession or other crises. Because of this, there is little controversy among developing country governments about the aggregate benefits that remittances offer to their economies (Goldin, et al. 2006).

Many countries have implemented policies to facilitate and capture remittances. These policies range from increasing access to remittance infrastructure and opening up competition in the remittance market (as the World Bank advocated in its 2006 Report; World Bank 2005); to matching each dollar remitted through official channels with state funds (as in Mexico's *tres por uno* scheme); to duty free allowances on good brought home (along the lines of the Philippines' *balikbayan* boxes); to free passport issuance for remittances over certain amounts (in India and Pakistan).

Enthusiasm for remittances as a development panacea has been tempered by the reminder that they are private, not public, funds. State interference in the form of efforts to 'channel' remittances into national development goals are frowned upon, and it is warned that donor states should not see remittances as a substitute for development aid.

Many countries, whether developing countries like India and China or developed OECD members like Ireland and New Zealand, turn to well-connected expatriates to help attract FDI. For example, the Irish Development Agency pursued an aggressive strategy utilizing Irish-American business connections and arguments about the availability of skilled expatriate labour in order to attract computer-chip giant Intel to Ireland. As an outgrowth of recommendations from Boston Consulting Group surrounding how to increase FDI, New Zealand has set up a 'World Class New Zealander' network of high profile business-people in key markets, hoping to attract wealthy expatriates and 'friends of New Zealand' to invest in the country.

The rise of 'New Growth' economic theories, which conceive of knowledge as the engine of growth, has stimulated interest in promoting transfers of knowledge and technologies from abroad in order to promote economic growth at home. There are two main types of policy. One is based on facilitating returns of a temporary (or sometimes long-term) nature, by providing consultancy or fellowship opportunities for expatriate researchers - the classic example being UNDP's long-standing TOKTEN programme. The other type of knowledge transfer policy is based around cultivating what are sometimes called 'diaspora knowledge networks' – dispersed networks of researchers from the home country who collaborate on scientific projects in the hope of benefiting their home country (Kuznetsov 2006).

In sum, there are imperatives for states to adapt to a transnational world through transnational policy-making, and there may be developmental advantages to doing so. However, these empirical, interest-based arguments are susceptible to at least two rebuttals. Firstly, the empirical link between emigration and development in the sending country is not universally

accepted, and it is wise to ask whose interests are really served by asserting such a connection. Is it really a grand bargain among sending states, receiving states and migrants, or are the odds stacked in favour of elites in more powerful receiving countries? Is the 'migration and development' case really *evidence* that national interests can converge over migration, or is it more an *argument* that nation-states should be less self-interested and more open to cooperation for an (imagined?) global collective interest? This leads to the second rebuttal: even if it is empirically true that the interests of states are served by diaspora policies, do these interests trump the territorial norms around which politics is – at least in theory – organized? The following section looks at these normative arguments and counter arguments for diaspora policies.

### *Obligations*

There are three main normative arguments why states should not engage their diasporas; I will call these arguments *external non-interference*, *internal non-interference*, and *non-preference*. *External non-interference* refers to the international norm that one state should not interfere with a population living within the territory of another state. One could argue that when a migrant-sending state makes policies towards its diaspora, it violates the sovereignty of the receiving state. *Internal non-interference* refers to the liberal norm that someone who does not consent to the authority of the government in one place should be free to leave that place without interference. One could argue that when a migrant-sending state makes diaspora policies, it effectively asserts authority over migrants wherever they are. *Non-preference* refers to the notion that a state should privilege people within its own territory over people who live outside its territory. One could argue that when a state allows diasporas to vote or grants them other social rights in the home country, they are privileging non-resident 'outsiders' at the expense of resident 'insiders'.

There are problems with all three arguments. Firstly, migrant-receiving states do not necessarily feel violated by the diaspora policies of migrant-sending states. Sometimes they welcome these policies because they supplement resources that have been stretched by a large inflow of migrants. For example, local and municipal governments often welcome the efforts of migrant-sending states to provide health and education assistance to immigrants, because this means that they do not have to fight for central state funds to provide those services themselves. Though there are plenty of cases where long-standing ethnic rivalries or territorial disputes engender suspicion of irredentism or fifth columnism (such as the case of Hungary's Status Law), there are also plenty of instances where bilateral relations are warm enough in other areas to prevent diaspora policies from becoming a point of serious bilateral conflict (such as – arguably – Mexico's emigration policies under NAFTA).

Secondly, diasporas are not always exiles – they have not necessarily rejected the government of their homeland, and even if they have they may not have renounced their role in its

politics and institutions. Diaspora groups may be actively involved in politics and seeking incorporation into the state system, and it is therefore problematic to portray them as non-members towards whom the home state must maintain a policy of 'no policy'. On the other hand, if non-residents do wish to escape the reach of the sending state, they have the option of naturalizing in their host country and avoiding any contact with any institutions connected to their homeland. These institutions do not have any coercive power in the host country, so they are relatively easy to escape from.

Thirdly, and for similar reasons, it is not simple to label diasporas as 'outsiders' whose interests should be discounted against those of residents. As increasingly mobile populations move in and out of countries, making contributions in one place and drawing on public resources in other places, it is as much a mistake to differentiate diaspora populations too strictly from domestic ones as to ignore the differences between them. Diasporas often contribute to and draw on the public good in their home country and therefore there are strong arguments that they should be considered part of it. This is a good time to discuss normative arguments *for* diaspora policies.

There are two arguments that states should intervene in diaspora populations in specific ways. Firstly, migrant-sending states should ensure that people who leave still fulfil any outstanding obligations to their sending state. For example, one could argue that people who benefit from publicly subsidised education and healthcare in their dependent youth or old age should be obliged to contribute to the economy during their working lives – even if their career takes them to another country – and that there should be regulatory mechanisms to enforce this reciprocity. As Jagdish Bagwhati, who proposed expatriate tax has remained a topic of debate since the 1960s, rights and obligations must go together (Bhagwati, 2003).

Secondly, the reverse argument for diaspora policies is also valid: migrant-sending states inevitably exert control over diasporas in various ways, and therefore they are obliged to treat diasporas fairly and take their interests into consideration when making decisions. One important example where this argument applies is in the area of pension transferability: many countries have national pension plans that discriminate against people who pay taxes during their working lives but are not eligible for full pensions if they decide to retire in another country (Clark 2002).

In sum, while there are arguments that sending-state policies cannot legitimately apply to extra-territorial populations, it is an empirical fact that such policies do exist, and arguable that policy makers should focus on *how*, rather than *whether,* they should operate.


### Co-operation

Arguments about national interests and the norms governing relations between states and their citizens abroad operate within a communitarian normative framework: they assume that moral

obligations operate within specific cultural – in this case national – contexts; that members of one's community should occupy a higher moral standing in one's estimation than non-members.

However, there are also cosmopolitan arguments for engaging diasporas. These are based on the view that humans of whatever nationality belong to a common moral community which should organize its affairs in order to promote the good of all, regardless of nationality. One strand of cosmopolitan thinking concerns itself with the desirability of political organization at the world scale – or to use the contemporary parlance, "global governance" (Rosenau 1999). Recent discussions surrounding globalization have highlighted the absence of a multilateral framework for regulating migration at the global level, and proponents of global governance have argued that such a framework is necessary to ensure states cooperate rather than pursuing their own national interests at the expense of the greater global good (Betts Forthcoming).

There are at least two cosmopolitan arguments for engaging diasporas; I will refer to them as *global efficiency* and *global multiculturalism*. Global efficiency refers to the argument that cooperation in global migration governance is not possible unless the policies of migrant-sending states are addressed at the same time as those of receiving-states. Both global governance debates and migration studies debates have tended to assume that migration policy is all about regulating inflows of people. This view tends to exclude migrant-sending states from the picture. However, relations between migrant-sending states and diasporas already play a major role in governing international migration: these relations influence how migrants identify and organize themselves, how migrants relate to their sending and receiving states, and how these states interact. To focus on immigration policy is to see half of the picture of global migration governance: every *im*migrant is also an emigrant, with ties to a society and state of origin – ties which should not be overlooked when considering how to increase the efficiency and equity of migration outcomes for the various actors concerned. In short, if global policy makers are serious about improving the way migration is governed at the global level, they must find ways of improving how migrant-sending states relate to their diasporas, and reconciling these relationships with migration policies in receiving states.

Global multiculturalism refers to the argument that national communities should be able to govern their own affairs in ways that are compatible with the global greater good, but not in ways that are contradictory to it. This follows a similar line to Will Kymlicka's argument for liberal multiculturalism at the national level (Kymlicka 1995). Kymlicka distinguishes between types of minority cultural practices that states should protect and types which they should not protect. Under the label "external protection", he argues that states should enforce the liberty of ethnic minorities to pursue their cultural practices without interference from the majority culture. For example, this argument would justify a national law preventing employers from banning turbans in the workplace. On the other hand, under the label of "internal restriction" Kymlicka argues that states should not enforce minority cultural practices that restrict the liberty of their members. For

example, this argument would disallow a national law forcing females of a certain cultural background to undergo circumcision. Translating this line of argument to the global context would mean that states – including sending states – should be allowed to protect the rights of 'their' emigrants, but not to restrict their liberty. Such an argument could constitute a normative benchmark for the role of emigration states in the global governance of migration.

## Summary and implications

This paper has reviewed and evaluated some of the main arguments for and against diaspora engagement policies, focusing on three main areas: the interests of states, the mutual obligations between states and emigrants, and the cooperation between sending-states, receiving-states and migrants themselves. It has shown that migrant-sending states are confronted with imperatives and opportunities to pursue their interests through engaging their diasporas, but that these arguments alone do not necessarily override the territorial norm around which world politics are theoretically organized. When a migrant-sending state engages its diaspora it is prudent to ask at least three normative questions: does it violate the sovereignty of the receiving state (external interference)? Does it interfere with the liberty of emigrants to exit the political community (internal interference)?, and Does it allow outsiders too much say in local affairs (non-preference)?

The paper has argued that these normative arguments are susceptible to rebuttal. Firstly, whether or not receiving-states feel their sovereignty violated by a diaspora engagement policy depends on a wide range of contextual factors within the bilateral relationship. There are situations where receiving-states welcome the involvement of sending states in managing transnational migration. Secondly, it is not straightforward to suggest that all emigrants have exited the political community: many remain active as members, and the mutual obligations between them and public institutions in their home country should be considered an ongoing concern. Thirdly, along the same lines, it is simplistic to label diasporas as "outsiders" – it is sometimes the case that they hold a legitimate stake in the affairs of their home polity and would be unjustly disenfranchised if entirely excluded from its decision-making processes (Bauböck 2005).

In addition to these communitarian justifications of diaspora policies, this paper has presented more cosmopolitan normative arguments in favour of better diaspora policies. The first of these is that global efficiency is promoted by better global migration governance, which involves improving state-diaspora relations as much as it does state-immigrant relations and sending-to-receiving state relations. The second argument of this type is that 'global public culture' – if there is to be such a thing – needs to accommodate the identities and institutions of national communities through what might be thought of as 'global multiculturalism'.

It is one thing to argue that state *should* make better diaspora policies, yet another to explain how they *could*. While this question deserves fuller treatment elsewhere, this is an appropriate point at which to make a few comments in this regard. Firstly, it is important to emphasize that making *better* diaspora policies does not necessarily involve making *more* diaspora policies. Indeed, in many cases it involves less government intervention and more provision of the necessary infrastructures to facilitate transnational flows of various kinds – whether of benefits from diasporas to their homelands, or vice versa. Secondly, this paper has pointed out that the institutions and policies of states typically impact on diasporas in ad hoc, arbitrary and even inadvertent ways, resulting in outcomes that would not be tolerated 'at home' – where much greater thought, planning and oversight of policy processes usually prevents the most egregious inefficiencies and injustices from occurring. The general point, therefore, is that better diaspora policies are more coherent diaspora policies: policies which prevent the arbitrary injustices and inefficiencies which currently characterise the ways that states relate to their diasporas in many parts of the world.

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