Article

Migrants as agents of development: Diaspora engagement discourse and practice in Europe

Giulia Sinatti
International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, The Netherlands

Cindy Horst
Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This article analyses how European governments and civil society actors engage diasporas in Europe as agents for the development of their countries of origin. Through a critical examination of diaspora engagement discourse and practice in various European countries, we identify three implicit understandings. First, development is conceived of as the planned activities of Western professional development actors; second, diasporas are seen as actual communities rooted in a national 'home' and sharing a group identity; and third, migration is regarded as binary mobility. We argue that these interpretations are informed by notions of ethnic or national rootedness in given places and that they lead to further assumptions about why, and in pursuit of what goals, diasporas engage. We conclude that such essentialized understandings limit the potential of diaspora engagement as a means of innovating the development industry by broadening understandings of what development entails and how it can be done.

Keywords

Diaspora, development, migration, place, ethnicity, identity, return

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the relationship between migration and development has returned to the fore as a major development-policy issue. Although the debate has swung between optimism and pessimism since the 1950s, optimistic

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Corresponding author:
Cindy Horst, PRIO, Hausmannsgate 7, PO Box 9229, Grønland, Oslo 0134, Norway.
Email: cindy@prio.no

views began to dominate in the 1990s and 2000s (De Haas, 2010). It is now widely acknowledged that, through transnational activities such as the sending of remittances and through (temporary) return, migrants make significant contributions to the development of their countries of origin (De Haas, 2010; Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002; Portes, 2009; Van Naerssen et al., 2011).

An increased focus on the role of diasporas as new agents in the development arena was noticeable in the first decade of the new millennium, when enthusiasm about migrants' potential for complementing mainstream development efforts rose among key development actors. This came at a time of increased debate on aid effectiveness and growing interest in 'new development actors', including non-traditional donors and diasporas. This interest was further strengthened by emerging diaspora investment trends and awareness, since the publication of the 2003 Global Financial report of the World Bank, that remittances far outweigh official development assistance (Raghuram, 2009: 104).

Authorities in countries of origin and residence, international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have since attempted to channel migrants' transfers of financial, social and human capital towards planned development (Faist, 2008; Piper, 2009; Raghuram, 2009). In this paper, 'diaspora engagement' is operationalized as the initiatives set up in pursuit of this aim, and we argue that a closer examination is needed of what these initiatives assume diaspora and development to be.

As we will further outline in the next section of this article, several European countries have issued policy documents underlining the importance of involving migrants in international development cooperation, and they have devised programmes and schemes to facilitate this process. In the wake of these developments, the question arises of how the 'diaspora' that these measures wish to target is understood.

According to some of the most authoritative efforts to provide a systematic definition of diasporas, they are transnational communities of a particular kind, characterized by having experienced movement from an original homeland; a collective myth of home and strong ethnic-group consciousness; a sustained network of social relationships with group members; and, in some definitions, expectations of return to the homeland (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991; Van Hear, 1998). Such definitions can be applied to a vast range of communities, including the historic case of the Jewish diaspora, emigrant groups who are involved in homeland politics from a distance, and transnational ethnic communities formed by labour migrants who maintain ties with their home country (Brubaker, 2005). This ease with which 'diaspora' is used as a synonym for a range of phenomena makes the term at once powerful and exposed to conceptual problems (Tölölyan, 1996).

Critics have argued that the 'diaspora' concept is not so much useful as a descriptive and analytical academic category, but should rather be studied as a socially constituted formation (Brubaker, 2005). One of the main criticisms that inspired this viewpoint is that the concept suggests an actual community, whereas those who are considered to be part of a diaspora are, in fact, often heavily divided,

do not act in unity and may have as much in common with people outside the group as inside (Turner and Kleist, 2013). And yet, today, migrants who engage with their country of origin transnationally have appropriated the term and, as Kleist argues, make claims 'in the name of the diaspora' (2008a: 308). Policymakers and practitioners similarly make claims on behalf of or addressing the diaspora and its role in development. In this sense, while 'shaping the image of migrant and ethnic groups as actors of development policy... [i]nternational and supranational organisations have offered themselves as entrepreneurs framing "diaspora"' (Weinar, 2010: 74).

While there is an increasing recognition of the importance of understanding 'diaspora' as a concept for claims making and mobilizing, there is still very little research that explores these processes. A few studies have looked at how diasporas mobilize (Kleist, 2008a, 2008b), and there is some work on the mobilizing efforts of countries of origin (Mügge, 2013; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Ragazzi, 2009). But the attempts of Western governments, international agencies and NGOs to mobilize diasporas for development have so far been understudied. In this article, we aim to address this gap by exploring in what ways European development actors engage with and mobilize diasporas. We analyse how these mobilizing efforts build on understandings of diasporas as actual communities, rooted in a national 'home' and sharing a group identity, and we critically evaluate the implications of this understanding.

The article is based on research among actors involved in diaspora engagement policy and practice at the supranational level and in selected European national contexts (France, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom).[1] Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with government employees, intergovernmental and international agency officials, and NGO workers. These actors were selected based on pilot studies that established which governmental institutions and NGOs had policies and practices related to diasporas and development. Our main questions were related to the policies that the institutions and organizations had in place in relation to diaspora engagement and how such policies were put into practice. We were particularly interested in individuals' views on these topics, in order to analyse discourses on diaspora engagement in development. Furthermore, relevant policy documents were analysed and public events were attended to observe interactions between development and diaspora actors. Analysis was supported by software for qualitative data analysis.

Despite differences across countries in the emergence of diaspora–engagement measures, this research shows that policies and programmes display remarkable similarities and rest on similar understandings of diasporas. The findings suggest that there are certain perceptions of rootedness and belonging to a national place and people underlying the European migration–development debate generally and diaspora–engagement discourse specifically. There are a number of implicit understandings about how the ethnic belonging of migrants and their children is tied to place – but only to the place from which they (or their parents) originated – rooted

in an essentialist sedentary bias that assumes a natural relationship between people and place. These understandings lead to the notion that migrants establish direct and exclusive relationships between a place of origin and destination, and that migration ultimately and ideally leads to return – what we call a 'binary mobility' bias. Migrants' connections with their countries of origin, however, may be much broader and more complex. Biased assumptions about belonging and identification can generate problematic expectations for diaspora engagement and limit diaspora engagement to certain types of activities.

In the following section, we explore the increased popularity of diaspora engagement in European policy and practice. Another section discusses underlying understandings of development in a narrow sense as official development assistance. In the section that follows, we analyse how diasporas are understood as actual communities with roots to one national home and with a strong shared group identity. The subsequent section explores the underlying understandings of migration and its binary mobility bias, assuming a direct line from the place of origin to the place of residence and back again to the former. We conclude with the argument that, while we have studied the 'diaspora' concept as a category of mobilization, European actors attempting to engage diasporas for development use the concept to relate to what are seen as actual communities. Their perceptions of diasporas are, in various respects, essentialized and do insufficient justice to the diversity of experiences and practices of diasporas engaging in development.

Diaspora and development policy and practice in Europe

The migration–development nexus has received attention at the European Union level since the early 2000s and has been on the agenda in a number of European countries for decades. A wide range of documents has been written on migration and development, with increasing mention of the role of diasporas. In several European Commission documents, diasporas are represented as new 'agents of change' (Turner and Kleist, 2013). The 2005 communication on migration and development (European Commission, 2005), for instance, recognizes the potential of diaspora organizations to become prominent actors and calls for stronger voluntary involvement of diaspora members in the development of their countries of origin. Furthermore, the European Union's more recent working paper outlining its global approach to migration and mobility indicates that:

> At both EU and Member States level, the contribution of diaspora organizations to development policy and practice are increasingly valued. As initiators of development projects in countries of origin, they have established themselves as *agents for development* vis-a-vis both policy makers and donors [emphasis added]. (European Commission, 2011: 4)

Interest in the migration–development nexus has been widespread also in European member states. France and the Netherlands, for example, have coupled a long-lasting concern for migration–development linkages with explicit efforts to

involve diaspora associations in the development of their homelands. Since the 1970s, the French approach to *co-développement* has been characterized by differ-ent trends focusing at various times on immigrant integration, return and home-land development (Panizzon, 2011). More recent French *co-développement* emphasizes the involvement of migrant communities and other public and civil society actors at the local level as key implementation partners and co-funds migrant associations' contributions to public goods (Grillo and Riccio, 2004). The Netherlands also has a long history in this field, with migration and develop-ment first linked in Dutch politics and practice as far back as the 1970s (De Haas, 2006). Recent formulations of migration–development linkages include an explicit concern for diaspora initiatives that, as expressed in a 2008 Dutch policy memo-randum on migration and development, may complement the work of regular development organizations (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Justice, 2008: 54).

Several other European countries have also advanced an interest in migration and development generally, and diaspora contributions more specifically. There is a growing recognition that diasporas have an important place in the economic and political collaboration between countries of settlement and of origin. At times, this is based on innovative reflections on the changing nature of citizenship in present-day Europe. In Norway, for example, white papers on development cooperation and foreign policy in 2009 highlight the potential that diaspora engagement might offer the country, with the paper on foreign policy presenting the most innovative views:

> The increase in migration flows and the new 'we' offer new opportunities. Norwegian society will benefit from a policy that utilises the positive effects of migration, for example through increased participation in foreign policy and development cooper-ation. Multiculturalism can be seen as a strategic political resource. We must be aware that, in future, identities will transcend national boundaries and that many people will have strong ties to several countries and communities. (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009: 77)[2]

While there are many differences in how European and national-level migration–development policies are put into practice in different countries (De Haas, 2006), we emphasize here some of the remarkable similarities in focus and approach. In general, efforts to engage diasporas in development work take the form of a purposely designed and overall small portion of official development assistance. Moreover, as we have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Horst et al., 2010), policies and practices favouring diaspora engagement across Europe are based on similar sets of activities. In particular, capacity building for diaspora organizations; organizational development for platform and umbrella associations; and activities that stimulate the return–development nexus are common practices that European development actors engage in to mobilize and support diaspora actors. As we will explore in this article, these three types of activities are informed by underlying understandings of development, diaspora and migration. They are all particularly

influenced by essentialized perceptions of diasporas as rooted in national places and functioning as actual, coherent communities – a perception that clashes with the realities of diaspora engagement.

The focus on capacity building originates from understandings of development as a professional, Western endeavour. Activities that focus on supporting umbrella organizations relate to understandings of diaspora as actual communities, rooted in national places and sharing a group identity with those originating from the same place. The more recent interest in the return–development nexus is closely linked to persisting understandings of migration in terms of binary mobility between countries of origin and residence. In what follows, we will explore each of these underlying understandings in greater detail.

Understandings of development: Official development assistance

Development is an all-encompassing concept that expresses positive societal change. Nonetheless, it is often used in a much more narrow sense to refer to (the change that is generated by) planned activities of professional development actors. The weight put on 'the ideas and world of development aid as a distinct area of practice, conducted by development organizations staffed by development professionals, and often informed by academics engaged in development studies' ignores the fact that such development aid may not have great significance as a driver of change (Bakewell, 2008: 1342–3). Furthermore, such a focus does not allow for a genuine evaluation of the impact of other types of activities, such as diaspora–engagement initiatives, on development in the broader sense of societal transformation.

This exclusive understanding of development also inevitably leads to the conclusion that diaspora organizations – in similar ways to many other small, civil-society organizations – lack the technical skills to compete in the official development world. As such, it is not surprising that capacity building is one of the main activities focused on by European development actors in their initiatives to cooperate with diaspora organizations. Among our informants, an employee in a large NGO states clearly:

> In the migration and development debate, there seems to be little recognition of the fact that development is a discipline. Diasporas and fresh organizations make the same mistakes; they operate according to the same logics, the same reasoning. On the technical side, there is a lot of knowledge on what works in development, what works best in what context. There are hundreds of instruments, standards and such.

The concept of development, then, is often synonymous with official development assistance; an undertaking carried out by professionals. In Europe there are clear understandings of who these professionals are. Such understandings were summed up quite succinctly in a current affairs programme that was broadcasted on

Norwegian television about Mama Hawa, a Somali-Canadian development worker who received the Nansen Peace Price. The journalist remarked on the choice of the winner: 'Not a western development worker who does good things in Africa this time, but one of *them*, an African woman who helps her own people so that they can help themselves tomorrow [emphasis implied]'.

This quotation reflects in a number of ways implicit attitudes about development assistance. Understandings of development are based on racialized perceptions of who engages in development activities and who benefits from them (Easterly, 2006; Escobar, 1995), complicating the position of diaspora in the development field.[3] The use of 'them', stressed by the reporter in his oral report, is most telling. It raises questions about who is understood to be 'us' and who is understood as 'them'. The quotation suggests that 'us' includes Westerners, who do development work. The 'them' are the populations of less-developed countries (i.e. those who suffer) who are helped by Western development workers. Such a distinction excludes both the possibility that 'they' can help (Horst, 2008) or that 'we' can suffer. Furthermore, helping others becomes something that is linked to race or ethnicity rather than to humanity. The urge to help in the case of the Western development worker is linked to a professional call, whereas the African woman cited here 'helps her own people'. Additionally, while Western development assistance is seen to be based on neutral, planned and rational development processes, people's engagement with their countries of origin is understood rather as 'charity' or 'philanthropy'. In an interview, a government employee underscores: 'There is confusion between development and charity. Many diaspora engage in charity rather than development. It is important not to look down on charity – charity is also important. But that is different, and cannot be supported with development funding'.

This way of labelling diaspora activities is often related to an understanding of these activities as being small in scale and carried out by volunteers. The 'charity' label furthermore implies certain assumptions about diasporas' motivations to engage. These motivations are seen to be influenced by the place and people their assistance targets, and diaspora commitment is thus framed in national and, at times, ethnic terms. There is a common understanding that most diaspora-led development initiatives are local actions, targeting families, home towns or regions of origin. These loyalties and obligations are seen as biased and partial, thus separating diaspora-led development initiatives from professional development activities. As two of our informants stress:

> The scepticism is also rooted in the fact that the diaspora is divided into ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds. They are emotionally involved in their country of origin and this makes them complicated to cooperate with.

> Sometimes I see migrants bringing their informal and personalized way of working into development work. This is not always good, because it's about 'who knows who', or 'who is a family member'.

Such an analysis does not take into account that a shared sense of humanity might underpin the urge to assist, the wish to help others as fellow human beings. Instead it assumes that nationality or ethnicity is a defining feature of the relationship between helper and helped, thus questioning the professionalism and neutrality of such assistance in the case of those who are 'one of them'.

The underlying understandings of development discussed in this section have led European policymakers and practitioners to emphasize capacity building as an essential component of diaspora engagement policy and practice. This approach suggests that the main preoccupation may be to favour the incorporation of migrants into the development industry by providing them with the required skills or frameworks, rather than to strengthen development outcomes for countries of origin (Sinatti, forthcoming) or broaden the industry's own understanding of what development entails. Diaspora–engagement perspectives analysed in this article may thus reveal a greater concern for the 'migration' than the 'development' side of the equation. In what follows, we will dig deeper into the impact of these and related perceptions of ethnic and national identity on diaspora discourse in Europe.

Understandings of diaspora: Actual communities with national roots and a shared group identity

European development actors by and large understand the diaspora as an actual community rather than as 'a concept of a political nature that might be at once *claimed by* and *attributed to* different groups and subjects [emphasis original]' (Kleist, 2008a: 307). Diaspora groups are mostly defined in relation to a home – a place where they originate from – and in terms of a strong, ethnic-group consciousness – a people. The idea that people belong to specific places or identify with others with whom they share a given place of origin is an important part of what has become known as the 'sedentary bias' (Bakewell, 2008; Malkki, 1992), according to which people are naturally inclined not to move. We argue that such a bias is built on a profoundly essentialized understanding of ethnicity and belonging, and that it ignores significant advances that have been made in theorization about the relationship between people, place and identity.

Debates in the social sciences have focused for decades on how the geographic mobility of people today forces them to redefine their homes and identifications with places, or deterritorialized spaces, that they might or might not corporeally inhabit. A wave of post-modern and post-colonial thinkers has argued that, since the onset of globalization, mobility has eroded the importance of spatially bounded worlds and allowed deterritorialized identities to emerge. Among some of the most influential authors in this discussion, Clifford suggests that identities are forged through movement itself, or 'routes', against the formerly predominant view that culture is instituted in localized communities, or 'roots' (1997).

The conflation between territories and belonging that is implicit in diaspora–engagement policy and practice leaves room for several potential contradictions.

Firstly, there is the issue of geographical scale. Belonging is usually attributed to the nation-state level, whereas there are often specific localities that benefit from migrant contributions (Glick Schiller, 2009). Much of the discourse identifies the loyalties and obligations that migrants hold towards their countries of origin as the motivation justifying their engagement. Research shows, however, that for some diaspora communities, an assumed belonging to the nation-state of origin may be particularly problematic because of the strained political relationships they have towards their country of origin (Horst, 2013). When the nation-state is contested, demanding development engagement on the basis of national belonging is a political claim in itself, even if this is often not recognized by European development actors. As one of our informants expresses:

> I believe that for people who come from conflict stricken areas, it is very important to make them focus on development in their country of origin rather than the actual conflict itself. [...] This is why the link to the country of origin in a wider sense, and not only to one's own family, is important. It is important to get people involved in helping others in the country of origin, no matter what political factions they belong to. I see this as a unique opportunity for them to learn thinking in a more altruistic way.

Secondly, even when diaspora engagement deliberately justifies a local approach[4] that is better aligned with the often localized nature of migration (Skeldon, 2009), considering diasporas to be at one with their particular communities of origin ignores the different power relations that often exist within these communities. One of our informants argues:

> Sometimes hierarchy is very important in the culture, [and being a migrant gives them] status to organize something. [...] Because migrants have a high status and are privileged, they only engage with the privileged and do not necessarily involve people among the really poor or disempowered.

Rather than favouring home communities as a whole, migrants might impose their own agendas from the outside or, in a reverse situation, local actors may have the power to influence the practices of migrant transnational networks (Faist, 2008; Page et al., 2009). Factors like class and gender also can easily become invisible in analyses that focus on ethnicity and nation.

Thirdly, the conflation of territories and belonging leads to assumptions regarding what types of diaspora engagements are natural, largely thought of in national or ethnic terms. A review of the initiatives of diaspora associations across various European countries shows that their engagement towards the country of origin may, instead, be rooted in a wide range of affinities that go beyond the geographical links between individuals and their places of origin. Diaspora engagement may be stimulated, for instance, by belonging to a professional category, gender, age cohort or the like. Transnational engagement, in other words, may equally

motivate a village association to invest in agricultural infrastructure in migrants' place of origin in rural Morocco as it would an association of Nigerian doctors to support a Nigerian hospital in combating sickle cell disease, even when the hospital is not located in the city of origin of those Nigerian doctors.

The understanding of diasporas as actual communities reifies not only the assumption that they have roots in a certain place, but also that they share a group identity with those originating from the same place, often at the cost of other identities (such as being a doctor or a young woman). Yet various aspects of a person's identity play a role in determining their transnational engagements, including the physical connections that they have established to specific places, which are played out on different geographical and geo-ethnic levels (Lampert, 2009).

Thus, if assuming an automatic and unchanging link between place and belonging is problematic, taking for granted the relationship between migrants and a diasporic community of peers is equally so, and arguably the product of an essentialized bias. Viewing migration as a disruption to a stable, sedentary reality links to debates on the nature of migrants' affiliations with transnational or supranational identities. Diasporas, in particular, are seen as the basis of shared belonging among people touched by geographical dispersal. In the migration–development lexicon, diasporas are evoked as groups of people originating from a given nation-state (e.g. the Somali, Pakistani or Filipino diaspora). These diasporas, however, may not be as homogeneous as current thinking suggests.

When European government authorities, NGOs and international agencies attempt to cooperate with diasporas, the perceived levels of fragmentation within the groups often strike them. European actors feel they do not have the resources to engage with all the different groups. Thus, they will relate only to diaspora representatives, will often insist that migrants from a certain country cooperate (i.e. through umbrella organizations) and wish to maintain a neutral position in disputes between organizations. As the representative of a European NGO, interviewed in relation to work with diasporas, discusses:

> Within each diaspora group, you have a kind of mirror of the society or the community they came from. So the difficulties that you may find in the country of origin might also be reflected in communities as they are here. For us it is very important to clarify that [our organization] has a very neutral position in terms of politics, religion, ethnicity and things like that.

Schnapper speaks of increasing differentiation of dispersed populations under the surface of 'the objective relationships they maintain among themselves' and 'aspirations to a more or less mythic unity of "the people"' (1999: 237). She suggests we need to make a distinction between loyalties that are symbolic and those that inform everyday practices and exchanges. Migrants, in other words, may well identify symbolically with a diasporic community of peers or with the country of origin at large, but in their concrete behaviour they might transfer resources in favour of

specific geographical regions or cleavages within their societies of origin. Within a given migrant community, there may be significant differences in the ways in which individuals experience loyalties and affiliations with place, nation and diaspora (Sinatti, 2006). This has implications for the way certain diaspora groups engage in development in their country of origin, as well as for the way European actors aim to cooperate with them. In the words of one of our informants:

> Another challenge is that within these groups the persons are very different, and want different things, so keeping people together and making them cooperate can be difficult. For example, in [country of origin], people are used to having separate organizations based on the different clans and languages. But in [country of residence] they are meant to come together in the same congregations and work together, which is not always easy.

Furthermore, diaspora–engagement policies and programmes adopt a selective approach to what is legitimate, development-oriented action, over-emphasizing the initiatives promoted by diaspora associations. This not only fails to do justice to the diversity of contributions that migrants make to their countries of origin, but also acknowledges what is only a minor portion of such contributions. In Mexico, for instance, less than 5% of Mexican migrants actively sending remittances to relatives in their hometowns are members of a migrant association (Orozco and Welle, 2005).

In addition, diaspora members may have heterogeneous skills and resources that they can leverage to promote change in their countries of origin, which may or may not contribute to actual development (Castles, 2010). Generically targeting the diaspora, engagement policies and programmes do not always distinguish between emigrant communities that possess high human capital and those made up of mainly unskilled workers. On this point, for instance, Ho suggests that extraterritorial citizenship strategies implemented by sending states to mobilize elite emigrants show 'a troubling analytical slippage that conflates the idea of diaspora (long-distance identification with a homeland) with the emigrant populations targeted by such strategies' (2011: 3).

Understandings of migration: A binary mobility bias

In various countries in Europe, as well as on the level of the European Union, most recent policy documents on development cooperation increasingly focus on return, representing a new chapter within the migration–development debate that moves beyond diasporas while simultaneously drawing on the diaspora discourse. This interest in return is by no means new in Europe, as exemplified by the long tradition of linking development and return in the policies of France and the Netherlands. What is new is the broadening of the types of return that fall under the field of development cooperation.

For a long time, return migration programmes trying to mobilize diasporas for homeland development have typically relied on the voluntary deployment of qualified migrants in their country of origin to undertake technical (and often temporary) assignments. More recently, the interest in return has extended beyond this focus on the highly skilled. For instance, initiatives assisting migrant entrepreneurs in setting up businesses in the country of origin or supporting the long-term social and economic reintegration of returnees have multiplied. Among European member states, the Netherlands is one of the frontrunners of this thinking, exemplified in a June 2011 letter to Parliament from the Dutch Minister for European Affairs and International Cooperation and the Dutch Minister for Immigration and Asylum Policy on international migration and development:

> [R]eturn and deportation policy will be intensified. This objective will be pursued by the government as a whole in international and bilateral contacts with other countries. [. . .] The objective is to achieve both a higher volume and better quality of return, for example by returning families. Civil society will be invited to help design this framework, which will be financed from the migration and development budget. [. . .] Countries that can cooperate constructively with the Netherlands on return can expect support in wider migration issues. [. . .] If, however, countries of origin do not cooperate on the return of their own nationals, or do not cooperate enough, this may have consequences for bilateral cooperation, especially when it comes to any development funds channelled via the government.[5]

This passage reveals significant overlap, in the latest surge of interest in return, between return and the removal from destination countries of unwanted immigrants. The potential of these practices for homeland development, however, may be dubious (Van Houte and Davids, 2008). Migration–development and development assistance are increasingly utilized as countermeasures to secure sending countries' willingness to cooperate on readmission agreements (Cassarino, 2008; Sinatti, 2014). For the purposes of this article, the *types of return* being supported under current migration–development thinking are not the most relevant point. What is most noteworthy is that return *of any kind* is receiving increased attention within the debate. This is, in itself, significant for what it tells us about assumptions underpinning migration and development.

As Bakewell argues, the idea of development itself has sedentary roots (2008). It is based on the assumption that people are sedentary by nature and that migration is an anomaly resulting from lack of development. This sedentary bias, moreover, is linked to essentialized perceptions of ethnicity and belonging that affect understandings of diasporas and their development contributions. The importance currently attributed to return reinforces our analysis of sedentary and essentialized understandings, revealing that they extend also to the interpretation of migrant trajectories. Migration is deemed incapable of breaking the umbilical relationship between people and places. As a direct extension of such thinking, mobility trajectories are assumed to be intrinsically binary. They trace a line from a place of

departure in the country of origin to a place of arrival in a country of destination and back to the former through return.

Against this interpretation, a growing body of literature on transit and onward migration shows that migrants develop multi-directional, rather than binary, trajectories (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006; Jeffery and Murison, 2011; Van Liempt, 2011). Moreover, some migrant associations have a highly transnational nature and rely on coordination and exchange between co-nationals living in different locations. The Somali association Himilo Relief and Development Association, for instance, has established European offices in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom as well as African offices in Kenya and Somalia. The binary mobility bias means that complexities of transnational migrant connections and practices such as these are not taken into account.

The binary mobility bias also implies that return to the place of origin is seen as the natural inclination for every migrant. It is understood as desirable. People returning to their areas of origin allow for the restoration of the status quo in destination countries and ultimately close the migration cycle (Black and Koser, 1999). The coordinator of a project removing barriers to migrant investment in the country of origin interviewed for our research notes that because of the current economic crisis:

> Many people that migrated do not have jobs anymore so now they see it as more attractive to come back. And not only to return to the country, but to specifically return to their precise own area. It is an empowerment that implicates that people returning are not going to surrounding cities, where they are not from.

Implicit in the idea of return is that it should be accompanied by positive development effects in home areas. A major underlying assumption within the migration–development discourse has to do with how people's mobility aspirations and transnational commitments are conceptualized. Both Bakewell and Raghuram point at the divergence between the way in which development is understood by development organizations and by the people with whom they work. Development actors understand migration as a response to lack of development that breaks an otherwise sedentary norm. Meanwhile, migrants and origin communities may view migration as a means to achieve development rather than to escape from the lack of it (Bakewell, 2008). The resulting failure to understand that migration can be 'personally developmental, rather than nationally developmental' determines a focus on national development rather than on the development of nationals (Raghuram, 2009: 113).

As a direct extension of the sedentary bias and of visions of migration as a problem resulting from lack of development, development becomes the means that will allow people to remain in the origin country or return to it with improved development conditions. However, a concept that sees development as a cure for migration whilst also indicating migration, followed by return, as a cure for development carries blatant internal contradictions (Bakewell, 2008: 1355). Implicit in

the migration–development debate, in fact, is a separation between migration and development that is problematic in itself. This is because it indicates migration 'as something that can be extracted and managed separately to produce certain benefits for development' (Skeldon, 2009: 322). The focus on return assumes not only that people are rooted in places of ancestral origin, but also that they (wish to) return to them, thus confirming an interpretation of people being sedentary by nature. The view of migration as an event that breaks an otherwise sedentary norm is particularly problematic in the many societies where mobility is a normal part of life that is deeply rooted in people's livelihood strategies (De Haan, 1999; Horst, 2006; Monsutti, 2005). When intercontinental migration is considered, calls for new theories that better match the realities of migration in the post-industrial and post-Cold War era (Castles, 2010) have not resulted in significant shifts in the understanding of migration, which continues to be viewed as an exceptional event stemming from the development failure of sending areas and as establishing binary connections between a sending and a receiving place and, through return, back to the place of origin.

Conclusion

The concern on the part of European development actors for locally biased approaches of diaspora associations has to do with ideas of national belonging; of people having natural roots in certain places. It is related to the notion that migrants, because they come from a given country, will feel a natural urge to help in the development of that country. While this may indeed be the case, it is the assumption of inevitability within this notion that is problematic. As a consequence, diaspora initiatives that lead to social transformations on another level (i.e. local or transnational) are not considered development, but are instead labelled as 'biased'.

Advances in studies of migration and diasporas support the recognition of a dialectical, rather than mutually exclusive, relationship between deterritorialization and reterritorialization, displacement and emplacement. This more nuanced understanding does not befit essentialized visions of migrants and their descendants belonging to their countries of origin or automatically identifying with co-nationals or co-ethnics in the diaspora. We argue that attempts of policymakers, international agencies and NGOs to cooperate with diasporas on development in an official capacity have largely ignored these theoretical advances that challenge the assumption that people's identities are derived from an ancestral, unchanging place – and only one such place. By proposing essentialized understandings of ethnicity and belonging, diaspora–engagement discourse generates over-simplistic expectations about why and where diaspora groups engage in development. In the latest turn of migration–development thinking, an increased focus on return migration further corroborates these biased understandings. The idea of return assumes that migration is disruption to a sedentary equilibrium and aims at restoring the original status quo. This interpretation rests on an equally essentialist assumption

that migrants wish to return to their places of ancestral origin because this is where they belong.

Migrants engage in mobility and establish social ties that cross the borders of nation states, leading to new realities where their routes (migration and travels) play a role in individual lives. At the same time, this does not imply that the local – the connections that migrants have to specific places – does not continue to be important in their lives (Featherstone et al., 2007). Networks are, in fact, always rooted in local realities that are of central importance to understand transnational practices, although these local realities are often numerous and not just those of ancestral origin. Alongside defending the view that place does still matter, transnational scholarship has also recognized that migrants develop multiple affiliations and loyalties. This suggests a path that lies somewhere in between the mutually exclusive interpretations of migrants belonging to deterritorialized social formations and to locally bound home communities (Brettell, 2006; Pries, 2009; Sinatti, 2006).

This article suggests that current diaspora–engagement efforts would benefit from understandings of diasporas and development that do better justice to these complex realities. We have argued for a reconceptualization of development as a process of social change that is linked to human mobility across a range of socio-spatial levels, and of diaspora as a mobilizing tool and an imagined, as opposed to an actual, community. If development is no longer seen as something that happens in a geographically defined space, or solely in developing countries, but rather for the *people* concerned (who may leave that space in order to gain greater development goals for themselves and others), a different picture emerges. Development, for instance, may have more to do with improving the lives of Liberians than with Liberia as a nation, and this improvement may be realized by moving from – rather than investing in and returning to – Liberia. Development, then, might be about creating better conditions for people rather than for places.

Migrants' spontaneous actions towards their origin countries have been pivotal in justifying the emergence of the diaspora–engagement discourse. Nonetheless, the programmes and policies that translate this discourse into practice exclude many migrant initiatives and contributions that do not qualify as 'development' in the current, prevailing sense of the concept. In fact, programmes and policies have taken a restrictive understanding of development as a distinct area of professional practice, and they have mainly attempted to channel migrants' transfers of financial, social and human capital towards this planned development. A reconceptualization beyond the narrow understanding of development as a Western intervention would allow for the exploration of new aspects of migrant contributions to societal transformations in countries of origin and residence. By considering development as a process of social change that is intrinsically linked to human mobility (Castles, 2010; Featherstone et al., 2007), this reconceptualization might lead to new and more innovative ways of putting the migration–development debate into practice.

Notes

1. Specifically, data are derived from research carried out in 2009–2010 for the Diasporas for peace. Patterns, trends and potential of long-distance diaspora involvement in conflict settings: Case studies from the Horn of Africa (DIASPEACE) project (funded under the EC 7th Framework programme, grant agreement no. 217335), as well as from research assignments conducted between 2010 and 2012 for the evaluation of diaspora-engagement initiatives undertaken for the Global Forum on Migration and Development, the Governments of France and Switzerland, the EC-funded Joint Migration and Development Initiative, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation and the United Nations Development Programme.
2. Interestingly, the latest white paper on development cooperation does not refer to diasporas, and only once does the word migration occur.
3. For an analysis of similar perceptions in humanitarianism, see Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013).
4. As, for instance, in French *co- développement*, or in the decentralized development approach underlying the EC-UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative.
5. Available at: http://www.government.nl/documents-and-publications/parliamentary-documents/2011/06/10/parliamentary-letter-of-10-june-2011-presenting-the-new-emphasis-of-migration-and-development-policy.html (accessed 17 August 2013).

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