A diaspora is a community of people living outside their country of origin. Since the 1980s, the dynamics of rapid globalisation and the patterns of the labour migration process have considerably increased the diaspora population and transnational communities around the world. This wave of labour migration was largely a voluntary initiative, as people moved abroad in pursuit of economic advantage and a better life. This immigration tendency is fittingly described by the economist J.K. Galbraith as “the oldest action against poverty”. However, since the 1990s, a different wave of migration has been in motion. In this wave, people have been forced to flee their home countries by protracted wars and violent conflicts. This is a forced migration rather than a voluntary movement of people, as the conditions at home make it impossible for them to remain there. The people in this pattern of migration are

Above: Congolese Africans held a demonstration in Downing Street, London demanding free and fair elections in the Congo in 2005.
generally referred to as “conflict-generated diaspora”. The total number of the African diaspora who live mainly in Europe and North America is estimated to be around 3.8 million people. Amounting to 2.9% of the world’s population, the contemporary diaspora – particularly those who are in the rich Western countries such as the Netherlands – have the capacity to mobilise substantial financial resources, extensive transnational networks, powerful international forces and political connections that span the globe. It is this enormous potential on a global scale that enables the diaspora to make a difference to the situations in the homelands in different respects.

The long-distance involvement by the diaspora in the course of events in their respective countries of origin has been facilitated by the current globalisation processes. Thanks to inexpensive transportation and rapid communication, the diaspora are exerting an ever-greater influence on the politics of their homelands. This advantage enables diaspora communities to build up vast transnational networks (criss-crossing countries and continents), linking the process of globalisation to the local conditions of their respective countries of origin. Likewise, it enables the individuals and groups in the diaspora communities to build up intersecting social, economic and political bridges that link their new places of residence with their original homelands. In this regard, the contemporary diaspora are becoming one of the main global forces shaping the directions and trends of migration and development in the 21st century. This article examines the untapped resource of the African diaspora to contribute to enhancing peace, and their potential to act as agents for the promotion of peace in Africa.

**Diasporas as Potential Peace Brokers**

Diasporas are critical agents of peace and can – and do – make significant contributions to peacebuilding, conflict transformation and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in their respective homelands. To maximise this immense potential, diasporas should be tapped in a more creative and effective manner. Given that the diaspora are salient emerging actors within migration and development, it is important to partner and join forces with them in the promotion of peace in their respective homelands. Diasporas as potential peace actors have been acknowledged more and more by international bodies such as the United Nations. Yet, the potential of their peacemaking capacity has not at all been harnessed actively to foster the resolution and transformation of conflicts in their countries of origin. Diasporas can be part of the solution, if they are seen as potential strategic actors and valuable bridge-builders to be aligned with efforts to promote peace.
in their homelands in Africa. The incorporation of the diasporas as peacemaking actors in the homelands in a more structured and formal manner would widen and greatly strengthen the capacity of peace forces active in their respective countries of origin. More importantly, diasporas can play a role as capacity builders as well as advisors and peace brokers. Furthermore, it should be understood that, in the same way that the diasporas contribute to development, they can also contribute to peacebuilding in their home countries. Importantly, peace is a precondition for development.

In this regard, there is an urgent need to develop knowledge that gives us better insight into how the long-distance peacebuilding activities initiated by diaspora organisations and groups can be structurally integrated into the existing peacemaking frameworks and processes. Thus far, these are exclusively implemented by mainstream donor development agencies, government institutions, international and regional organisations and United Nations (UN) bodies active in their countries of origin. The objectives of this are joining forces for peace and widening the civil society peace constituency in the European Union (EU) countries and beyond, with respect to Africa. This can be possible if the diasporas are recognised as the fourth external peacebuilding group of actors active in the domestic peace process after international organisations, governments and mainstream donor agencies.

**Diaspora Contribution to Peacebuilding**

Most of the African diasporas in the Netherlands (and probably in other countries in Europe) come from seven countries located in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa region and severely affected by protracted civil wars and other violent conflicts. These countries are Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan in the Horn of Africa region; and Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the Great Lakes region. This affirms the direct relation between violent conflicts and the increasing number of Africans migrating to Europe since 1990.

The available data demonstrates that many domestic conflicts in numerous countries in Africa have not only been regionalised but they are also largely internationalised, among other factors through the activities of diaspora groupings. Homeland conflicts also directly affect the lives and well-being of the diaspora, despite the fact that they are far away from the conflict...
zones. The bond that the African diaspora has with their countries of origin is that, even though they have left their homelands physically, they remain tied emotionally. The African diaspora have come to realise that they are in a unique strategic position in this ever-globalising world, as they are scattered in different economic and power centres around the globe. The huge presence of African diaspora in powerful political centres such as London, Paris, New York and Washington, DC, where global policy decisions are made, has an especially important strategic significance. Their strategic position enables the African diaspora to facilitate the process of transnational activities and networks, and also allows them to act as bridge-builders between host countries like the Netherlands and their respective countries of origin. This reality, therefore, makes it imperative to address the international dimension of conflicts, particularly the critical role that African diaspora groups play in homeland conflicts. The connection between the African diaspora’s activities and the dynamics of conflict in their homelands is a dimension that has been largely overlooked in research and policy analysis, despite its critical significance.

There is ample evidence that demonstrates the positive influence of the diaspora to peacebuilding in their homelands. Their influence impacts general attitudes of society, thereby changing perceptions of freedom, tolerance, human rights, governance and political practices. For instance, the diaspora proactively transmit valuable new political ideas to their homelands. Living in spaces of democratic privilege enable the diaspora to transfer or bring back intellectual capacities, new technological skills, and valuable and innovative ideas and practices that can aid the promotion of peace in Africa. More specifically, the African diaspora contribute to peace and political stability in the homeland indirectly, through the construction of civil society groups in the homeland and through business engagement. Civil society construction is promoted through the creation of advanced websites for information sharing, through the promotion of dialogue between rival groups, and through the provision of training in peacemaking tools and techniques. For example, Tynes (2007) shows how the Sierra Leone diaspora has managed to create “...collective discourse and/or actions [that] are aimed towards the building, binding, maintenance, rebuilding or rebinding of the nation.” This was done through the Leonenet discussion forum.

Another example is the Netherlands-based foundation, Burundian Women for Peace and
Development (BWPD), which has set up ‘multipurpose centres’ in the province of Kirundo to promote dialogue between Hutus and Tutsis. This has proved highly successful in catalysing the conflict-resolution process, so much so that it has won the support of major international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Inter-Church Organisation for Development Co-operation (ICCO) and Oxfam Novib.

The creation of civic administrations at district levels in the areas where the local NGOs they support operate is also a major contribution to the capacity-building of civil society networks in the homeland. Diaspora organisations also set up local-level community and welfare projects, which support education and health projects and microcredit schemes for marginalised groups. Another form of contribution to peacebuilding is business development in the regions of origin, directly addressing the economic causes of conflict.

**Prevailing Myths**

The contribution of the African diaspora to the promotion of peace in their respective countries of origin is an aspect that is largely overlooked, and has not received proper attention. This is due to the prevailing myth that the long-distance activities undertaken by the diasporas exacerbate the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands. Unfortunately, this myth dominates the discourse on the topic, which largely influences the policy attitude towards diasporas in a negative way. In practice, this is one of the chief reasons that prevents the mainstream donor NGOs, international institutions and governments in both home and host countries from working with the diasporas, as they see them to be destructive rather than constructive forces. This is, however, a partial representation of the reality. Existing evidence suggests that the long-distance activities undertaken by the African diaspora have both positive and negative impacts on the conflict dynamics in their homelands. More significantly, most of the African diaspora organisations studied in the Netherlands affirm that their positive contribution to homeland situations outweighs their negative involvement. Furthermore, there are many diaspora groupings with different political and socio-political aspirations and, as such, the diaspora should be carefully disaggregated. This analysis will increase awareness of the peacebuilding activities of the diaspora. In turn, such awareness will help the diaspora to be seen as potential strategic actors and valuable bridge-builders in their efforts to foster the resolution and transformation of conflicts in their respective countries of origin.

It is also imperative, as Johannsen notes: "...diaspora groups have the facility of utilizing their personal and institutional contacts with their country of origin to support peace constituencies in the conflict region. Furthermore, diaspora groups could offer a strategic opportunity to make contact with violent actors in the conflict zone as they have access to wider circles. Winning over diaspora groups for non-violent modes of conflict can complement local initiatives and strengthen capacities for indigenous constructive conflict management."

Furthermore, having better insight into the peacebuilding potential of the diaspora will lead to two major developments. Firstly, it will lead to the construction of creative policies and mechanisms to transform the negative engagements of the diaspora to positive and constructive gains. Secondly, it will lead to further mobilisation of the largely untapped and under-utilised potential of silent diaspora groups in Europe; groups who can be made aware of their value in contributing to peacebuilding in their respective homelands. Therefore, disaggregation of the diaspora with regards to their peacebuilding activities will have mutual benefit to their mobilisation, as well as benefit for the formulation and adoption of tailored policies for institutions that are involved in engaging the diaspora in development cooperation.

**Working with the Diaspora**

There is now a growing realisation among the African diaspora in the West that they have a responsibility to do something for the continent that they left physically, but not emotionally. They also feel that they are now in strategic and unique positions to facilitate...
the process of transnational activities and networks, and act as development bridge-builders between the West and Africa. Furthermore, African diaspora organisations, groups and individuals occupy an inimitable space, as they live in two cultures, or between two cultures. This gives them the advantage of intimate knowledge about different social situations, local conditions and networks and cultural experiences in Africa to a far greater degree than people with only a Western background. The diaspora understand local contexts in their respective homelands, allowing them to combine both internal and external knowledge and experiences, and giving them viable comparative advantages and insights. The diaspora peace actors can also bring in new ways of dealing with conflicts in the homelands, and can widen the horizon and world view of local protagonists. Their unique position to mobilise substantial financial resources, extensive transnational networks, powerful international forces and political connections that span the globe is highly underrated. So far, the considerable latent potential of diasporas has not been harnessed for the promotion of peace in their respective homelands. Their strategic position could enable the individuals, groups and organisations of the African diaspora to channel new peacemaking attitudes, ideas, negotiation skills and conflict transformation techniques, innovative approaches and practices from host countries in Europe to their countries of origin.

Positive and Inspiring Examples

Narrating examples of peacemaking initiatives that African diaspora individuals, groups and organisations have initiated is important, as they provide unique lessons that can be learned as well as inspiring other diaspora organisations. Three examples of inspiring stories that are making a difference on the ground are briefly noted here.

- The first example is the Hope-Sierra Leone (H-SL) Foundation, established in Denmark by John Bangura, a Sierra Leonean in the diaspora. Bangura has initiated a unique and innovative approach to bring peace to his homeland. The peace efforts of this organisation targeted the forces with weapons, such as the police, military and paramilitary soldiers, in order to reconcile them. The underlying logic behind the project was that reconciling those who possess the means of violence can prevent the rivalry of the political elites, and thereby stem violent conflict. According to Bangura16, “We brought together warring factions to start working on ways to turn Sierra Leone’s social, political and economic fate around.”

- Another example is the Dutch-based foundation Himilo Relief and Development Association (HIRDA), set up by the Somalis in the diaspora. HIRDA contributes to peacebuilding in Somalia through the creation of sustainable livelihoods. It directly targets the youth, to prevent them from joining the many armed militia groups, by giving them vocational training as a viable option to earn a living without practicing violence.

- Finally, the organisation Concerned Liberian Women (CLW) was established by Liberian women in the Netherlands. They initiated this diaspora organisation with the conviction that, if Liberia is to move forward and away from strife, the diaspora must play a critical role in the peace and development process. The activities of the CLW range from the provision of education on women’s issues and human rights to advocating justice and non-violent means of resolving conflicts.

Conclusion

The fact that the African diaspora can play a significant role in the promotion of peace in their homelands cannot be denied. However, if these
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activities are to have a more significant effect, a few recommendations should be taken into consideration.

First, the number of peacebuilding actors needs to be widened. This should be done in a more structured and formal manner, by acknowledging the contribution of the diaspora at policy level.

Second, more attention needs to be paid to the fact that the African diaspora in Europe occupies a unique bridge-building position, and that creating a space within policy formulations for these groups will have significant effects on the promotion of peace in Africa.

Third, more knowledge needs to be generated on the contribution of the diaspora to peacebuilding, and specifically the enhancement of our understanding on how the long-distance activities undertaken by the diaspora help to exacerbate or moderate the dynamics of conflicts in the homelands.

Lastly, exploring how the African diaspora uses its accumulated social capital to contribute to the rebuilding of the post-conflict social institutions, political structures and the promotion of viable governance and democratic political life in their countries of origin is vital to the augmentation of their capacity.

It is imperative to design appropriate strategies through which the untapped potential of the diaspora can be effectively harnessed for the benefit of Africa. There is an urgent need to formulate options and ways that government policymakers and donor NGO practitioners can link up with the African diaspora as an added value. Furthermore, it is important to identify mechanisms and channels to enable the African diaspora to connect better with development in Africa. Addressing the long-distance activities undertaken by the African diaspora at the European Union (EU) level is necessary at this particular period in time. It is absolutely vital if we want to mobilise the financial resources, transnational networks and human capital of the sizeable African diaspora residing in the EU countries for the promotion of peace and political stability in their countries of origin. ▲

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Endnotes
6. Ibid.