

NOTE/COMMENT

DIASPORA PEOPLES/HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS, NATION-STATES AND DEVELOPMENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

Diaspora theory posits that the mobilization of migrants by countries of origin can have a significant effect on the development process of that country. (Koser 2003). This theory is derived from a largely economic and state-centric mode of development analysis that emphasizes the role of immigrants in their countries of origin through both remittances and resource loss owing to the ‘brain drain’ phenomena (Parnwell 1993, Appleyard 1989, Taylor 1999, Todaro 2002). Migrants from a specific geographic area are assumed to organize within their host country to support the development of their hometown; these migrant groups are known as hometown associations (HTAs). Diaspora theory, therefore, suggests that diaspora peoples, in a pattern similar to that of HTAs, can be mobilized by the home country to support the country’s development processes. The key resulting development idea from Diaspora theory is that, through increased formalization of remittance channels, home countries will see even more positive effects. Indeed, migrant remittances, calculated by the IMF to include worker remittances¹, compensation of employees² and migrant transfers³, have risen from less than \$18.23 billion⁴ in 1970 to \$70 billion in the early years of the 21st century. (Taylor 1999, Todaro 2002). Further, this is likely to be an underestimate, as these numbers represent merely the formal remittance channels. Thus the development of countries of origin is clearly economically linked to its migrants.

This paper will show why this state-centric mode of analysis fails to provide a sound basis for constructing a development strategy out of the state-Diaspora relationship. Diaspora

¹ Workers remittances, the value of monetary transfers sent home from workers abroad for more than one year, are usually under-approximated since a significant portion of the transfers are sent not electronically, but through physical delivery when migrants return to the home country so as to save costs.

² Compensation of employees is the gross earnings of foreigners residing abroad for fewer than 12 months, including the value of in-kind benefits such as housing and transportation.

³ Migrant transfers refer to the net worth of migrants who have moved from one country to another.

⁴ This figure is adjusted into 2003 real terms.

theory does not take into account the specific social context of migrants' relation to their state of origin. The prevalence of corruption, lack of accountability by the governments of many less developed countries, and the issue of minorities at war with the state create negative state-migrant relations that undermine the state's ability to mobilize migrants for its development goals. While migrants are willing to remit to their former hometowns, it is not guaranteed that they will remit for the development of the state. This paper argues that to fully evaluate the potential of the state-migrant relationship, it is necessary to study Diaspora peoples not only as potential sponsors of home state development, but in addition, as migrants with diverse motivations and complex relationships with the home state. To do so, two case studies are deployed: the Somali and Eritrean diasporas. In sum, the broader framework for viewing HTAs that is adopted in this paper provides a more nuanced understanding of their likely impact on home countries and should importantly guide the formulation of relevant policies.

II. ASSESSING THE REALITIES OF DIASPORA COMMUNITIES/HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF SOMALIA AND ERITREA

It is argued that "members' adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of coethnicity with others of a similar background" (Cohen 1997, ix). This 'link' maintains a claim on members' loyalty and emotion that may be strongly or weakly articulated in a given circumstance or historic period (Ibid.). However, the word "diaspora," connoting gigantic movements of peoples, is more of an ideological designation than a realistic one. Rather, Diaspora peoples may or may not belong to small migrant associations with shared cultures or values. Though these peoples might be mass exile groups, they seldom relocate together. Even in

a mass exodus, those affected tend to scatter outside of the country of origin; some stay within the continent while others migrate beyond the continent (Peil 1995). In the Diaspora, communities break into smaller sub-groups that may identify as Hometown Associations or sometimes use ethnic, religious or racial categorization to define their associations. For example, the Somali Association in Boston, discussed below, is only one small group that belongs to the worldwide Somali Diaspora.

Somali Diaspora

The Somali Diaspora, like others, exhibits diversity in a multiplicity of ways (Koser 2003, Perouse de Montclos 2003). While some Somali migrants left as refugees fleeing civil wars, others left Somalia for economic reasons (Perouse de Montclos 2003). Distinct communities settled in different countries, spreading out primarily across the United Kingdom, Italy, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia (OECD 1998).

The political and ethnic affiliations of the migrants were determining factors for where the immigrants chose to settle. Political and ethnic affiliations are highly correlated in Somali society, thus a majority of Somalis who left in the 1990s after the ousting of President Mahammad Siad Barre, a member of the Darod clan, were from the Darod clans, while the refugees who fled in the late 1980s were largely from the anti-Barre Isaaq clans. On a more micro level, sub-groups also settled in distinct areas, so that the Darod clans in the Netherlands are mainly Mijertein, while the Marehan make up most of the Somali communities in Sweden (Perouse de Montclos 2003). Due to the social divisions that preceded immigration, divisions, stereotyping and tensions remain among communities in the new country of residence (Birindelli and Bonifazi 1993). In Canada, for example, such ethnic tension was visible to such an extent

that the government was compelled to intervene to establish a cross-clan organization named *Midaynta* or ‘Unity’.

The immigration goals of the Somali Diaspora are as varied as are their clans: some are homeward looking while others have intentions of permanent settlement (Perouse de Montclos 2003, 38-44). Perouse de Montclos argues that due to the diversity of the Somali Diaspora, the community has not yet developed a unified, long-term political vision. As such, most associations in host countries are concerned primarily with short term needs such as “helping newcomers to settle, providing advise on administrative formalities, providing services in vocational training, linguistic upgrading, social and psychological support, and defending their civil rights and cultural traditions” (Ibid., 39). It is evident that Perouse de Montclos examines the activities of the Somali Diaspora from a Diaspora theory perspective. He assumes that the role of associations should exceed these stated activities, since diasporic groups must be defined by a development-relationship with the homeland, rather than simply as a supportive community within a host country.

Furthermore, there are strong indications that the first generation of foreign-born Somalis, called *tolows*, unlike their parents, seem increasingly disinclined to remit money to the ‘home’ country. The *tolows* are naturally coming of age in a hybrid culture which is in part the resident culture and in part the culture imparted by the migrant parents (Ibid., 39). Due to their acculturation to distinct resident cultures, the *tolows* in the United States acquire a different identity from those in Sweden, further undermining a diasporic identity. Thus, there are dispersals that have led to permanent migration and hybridity, evolving into new cultural identities (Ifekwunigwe 2003). Joan Scott affirms this view when she states that identities are “ambiguous” and “subject to redefinition, resistance and change” (Scott 1995, 11). The

attribution of homeward orientation for new Diasporas may be unfounded in the long term even though contemporary technological advancement makes possible the ability to lead a transnational life. The motivation for immigration, the transitional circumstances of the migrants, and the inevitable phenomenon of evolving identities must all be taken into consideration to accurately understand the role of immigrants in the development of their state of origin.

Eritrean Case

The relationship between the Eritrean government and Diaspora has been held as the archetype of a state's ability to mobilize its diasporic community. However, a closer examination of this relationship reveals the inaccuracy of such a designation. In Mobilizing New African Diasporas: The Eritrean Case Study, Khalid Koser examines how a state can utilize its Diaspora people for development goals. He argues that the Eritrean state capitalized on the pre-war link between the Eritrean Diaspora and the government to mobilize support from the Diaspora and finance the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict (Koser 2003). In the post-independence era, the state has intensified its efforts to enhance its relationship with the Diaspora. These efforts have been carried out primarily through re-opening political offices, which had been closed upon independence, in the principal countries of the Diaspora, US, Germany and Saudi Arabia; revitalization of Eritrean relief associations; and the participation of the government in the annual events organized by Eritreans in different countries by sending representatives. (Ibid., add page number).

Koser's analysis of Eritrea's mobilization of the Diaspora is modeled after Robert Smith's analysis of Mexico's attempts to develop links with Mexican immigrants in the United States. Smith characterizes this process as the Mexican state 'institutionalizing the diaspora' so

as to tap into the wealth of the migrants, establish control over the autonomous linkages that have grown between civil society in Mexico and migrants, and channel, co-opt and reorganize the disaffected energies of the Mexicans in the United States (Smith 1998).

While Koser acknowledges diaspora communities' growing disillusionment with the government, and the emerging religious, ethnic and political factions in the post-independence era, he ignores the long-term implications of these developments. It is highly possible that these developments will gradually grow to imitate the Somali case where loyalty to some form of collectivity will supersede loyalty to the state, and foreign born generations will have a weaker sense of affiliation with the Eritrean state and consequently decrease remitting.

More so, Koser's use of Eritrea as a quintessence of the possible marriage of state and diaspora for development purposes is historically misleading. The Eritrean Diaspora was and could be mobilized by the then informal Eritrean government specifically because of a sense of shared victimization as a people by their then state of origin, Ethiopia. It is highly doubtful whether, prior to Eritrean independence, the Eritrean Diaspora could have been effectively mobilized by the Ethiopian government to support the development of the Ethiopian state. Therefore, the past success of the Eritrean state in mobilizing Eritrean immigrants was not state-centered, but rather grounded in ethnic commonality relative to Ethiopians.

III. SOME INITIAL LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOMALI AND ERITREA CASE STUDIES

Using the Eritrean and Somali realities as indicators, development and migration scholars may need to reconsider the assumed powerful link between diaspora peoples and states of origin: it can no longer be taken for granted (Cohen 1997). Disadvantaged and politically active minorities are present in 116 of the 161 world's larger countries. They include about one-sixth of

the global population. These minority groups, Cohen argues, are only imperfectly or violently contained within the confines of a state as the multiplicity of secessionist movements and civil wars indicate. *Id.* Thus Diaspora peoples who belong to minority groups, if ‘homeward looking,’ are more likely to support their defined people-hood⁵ against the state. Furthermore, the Somali and Eritrean examples fortify Cohen’s assertion that diaspora communities are more likely to focus on peoples rather than a geographical location such as a state.

Finally, in new countries of residence where citizenship is relatively accessible or where fundamental rights are extended to immigrants such as the United States, France, Greece, Sweden or Finland, legal immigrants begin participating in the political process, while illegal immigrants invent ways to legalize themselves. Once legal status is obtained for a critical mass, new immigrants form important voting blocks, further integrating into the socio-politics of the new country (OECD 1998, Rachjman 1995). An indication of this trend is the rising importance of the Hispanic vote within contemporary American politics. Thus, there is evidence that immigrant communities are participating fully in the political life of new countries of residence. The ability to more easily integrate, assimilate and participate may contribute to the steady intergenerational weakening of migrants’ affinity to the state of origin.

IV. CONCLUSION

HTAs or Diaspora peoples cannot be assumed to be state-friendly even if they retain ties to their communities of origin. Thus, even homeward looking groups might not be interested in working with the state, since their remittance-objectives may aim to benefit their identified

⁵ By people-hood, I refer to an identification that is more culturally, religiously or ethnically based rather than one that is state-based. For example, the Tutsis in Sierra Leone can organize on the basis of being Tutsi rather than being from Rwanda, Burundi or Uganda. A Rwandan organization based on state-hood will accommodate the three ethnic

people-hood rather than the state. Additionally, any homeward looking project that might undermine a host state can be discouraged by that host state. For example, a more transparent remittance sending process that benefits a 'home' state may also lead the host country to create policies that discourage the remittance process. The host country may be disinclined to see new citizens redirect money in ways that will not ultimately yield revenue for the host country. These issues raise questions for the sustainability of a state-centric structure for global development.

Furthermore, scholars must acknowledge that some HTAs are embryonic socio-political groups within a new state. For example, Indians from Uganda, India and the Caribbean can organize and self identify to become the Indian Americans of the United States. In becoming Indian Americans, they establish themselves to become as American as the Jewish-, or European- Americans of older migrant generations. These earlier migrants still celebrate their cultural heritage and can show some allegiance to the nation state of origin, and yet maintain primary allegiance to their new country. As Ifekwunigwe rightly argues, theories and practices of lived Diaspora realities are more "fragmented, layered, and fluid, than the localized push and pull margin to center discourses of migration suggest." (2003).

Therefore, it must be acknowledged that migrant identities are not static, but rather constantly evolving in response to the state of the world and the political realities of the host and 'home' countries. As such, Diaspora theory, without a more nuanced understanding of migrant realities, may be falsely predicting a development pattern and proposing a development strategy that is highly vulnerable to failure.

groups of Hutus, Tutsis and Twas although the three ethnic groups can separately organize based on people-hood within a particular state in which case the cultural or ethnic identity is still the primary basis for organization.

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