



# Leveraging Diasporas in Public Health Emergencies

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There are an estimated 19 million African Diaspora globally. This is more than the populations of Libya and Liberia combined. The African Union defines its diaspora as ***people of African Origin who live outside the continent, and who, irrespective of their current nationality or citizenship are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the African Union.*** This definition encompasses all African migration; historic, current, forced, voluntary, economic or humanitarian.

Over the past decade, the involvement of the African diaspora in the development of their respective countries has significantly increased. As a result, state and non-state actors are increasingly recognizing the potential role of the diaspora in development and most recently in humanitarian crises. This interest is perhaps most reflected through the diaspora offices and ministries that countries have established.

## **The African Diaspora and the Ebola Crisis**

The role of the diaspora in development is viewed separately from their role in humanitarian assistance which is usually classified as philanthropy and too often taken for granted.

During the recent Ebola Crisis, the African Diaspora played a crucial role in enabling much needed humanitarian assistance. This assistance was in the form of: a) Advocacy and fundraising, b) Remittances and c) Innovative initiatives. Although not on the physical front-line of the crisis, the diaspora leveraged their varied knowledge and connections to raise awareness about the Ebola situation and the need for action, provided timely guidance on how help could be provided in a coordinated and effective way and fundraised for much needed necessities.

In the UK, The UK Sierra Leone Diaspora Ebola Task Force was instrumental in fundraising for frontline organizations such as [AdvocAid](#), the [Sierra Leone Ebola Emergency Response Fund](#), and King's College London's [Sierra Leone Partnership](#). Other famed campaigns included the

In the US, various African communities and organizations created a collaborative platform—Africa Responds and pooled resources, networks, and voices to respond to the outbreak. The platform mobilized and channeled more than \$100,000 to organizations working with grassroots communities.

#AfricaAgainstEbola that enlisted the NBA Africa and Idris Elba and the #WeHaveGotYourBack run by diaspora footballers, i.e. Yaya Toure and Carlton Cole.

Another diaspora contribution was in the form of increased remittances to the affected countries. Remittances are the most immediate source of

support to families during humanitarian crises. The World Bank estimates that the total remittances of Ebola stricken countries increased by 36% (more than USD 300 million) during the crisis in 2015. These figures do not capture remittances sent through informal channels which are estimated to account for 35-75% of all remittances.

From lunchboxes for the sick, raincoats for cyclists to implementing experimental research and shipping medical provisions, the African Diaspora deployed innovative strategies that helped to strengthen the Ebola Response even during lockdown.

Yet, these efforts were not immune from shortfalls. Key challenges faced by the diaspora included poor coordination due to lack of a unified network and logistical challenges especially with shipping (cargo was reserved for international organizations). Inside the affected countries, it was hard obtaining government passes that they needed to travel and work. Another key challenge was the anti-laundering regulations which resulted in many banks closing their operations which made it very expensive to send remittances through formal means.

## **How Lessons from the Diaspora Ebola Response Can Strengthen the Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

With the COVID-19 outbreak threatening to wipe out continental progress in all aspects of human life, there is a need to leverage the African Diaspora in order to front a strong response to the pandemic. There are several valuable lessons that were learnt from the Diaspora Ebola Response that can help inform the response to COVID-19. These include:

- 1. Diaspora as actors in Humanitarian Assistance:** There is need to broaden the humanitarian instruments beyond conventional stakeholders of humanitarian responses, namely: governments, individual donors, and the private sector. This will enable non-state actors including diaspora networks, and civil society actors to be utilized in improving the sufficiency and efficiency of humanitarian financing <sup>1</sup> (Swithern, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Sufficiency being increased resources from diverse donors and efficiency being smarter means of delivering them, Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, 2015

- 2. Establish a global Humanitarian Performance Review Mechanism (HPRM)** to measure performance and track the utilization of resources in humanitarian responses. Currently, most humanitarian organization go through a self-monitoring process. The HPRM can build on both SPHERE, UNICEF's Humanitarian Performance Monitoring (HPM), UNOACHA's Financial Tracking Service and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). The HPRM would be crucial in a) Harmonizing the processes of performance reporting; b) enhancing accountability to both the donors and the beneficiaries; c) identifying good practices and lessons learned.
  
- 3. Ease the flow of remittances** with a focus on reducing the cost of sending money. Remittances are perhaps the most immediate source of support for families and friends during humanitarian crises. A significant percentage of remittances remains undocumented and thus its impact is underrecognized. The COVID-19 pandemic is projected to result into a reduction in remittance flows due to reduced economic activities and reduction in wages. It is pertinent that measures are put in place to (a) exclude Money Transfer Operators (MTOs) from operating during lockdown; (b) reduce the cost of sending money and to make it convenient and safe to do. In particular, digital solutions that make it possible to send and receive money within the comfort of one's home should be promoted.
  
- 4. Power of Networks:** The African Diaspora Networks need to be better coordinated for better impact. Understanding the value of partnerships will result in increasing their reach in terms of resource mobilization, engagement with governments, facilitate cross learning and avoid duplication of initiatives. As part of efforts to support the building and strengthening of diaspora networks, the African Union through its Citizens and Diaspora Organizations Directorate (CIDO) is working with several diaspora networks to facilitate dialogue, strengthen diaspora collaboration, and to co-create initiatives.
  
- 5. AU engagement with the Diaspora during COVID19:** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CIDO is working on (a) Documenting the valuable work of Diasporas in humanitarian assistance, i.e. emergencies, pandemics, etc., in Africa and the Diaspora (b) Understanding the extent of collaboration and partnership between Diasporas with national government. (c) Organizing dialogues between conventional humanitarian actors and the diaspora to develop a criterion that qualifies Diasporas and/or diaspora organization to take part in humanitarian assistance.