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Diasporas engaging during the pandemic: international global exchanges in response to the Covid-19 crisis¹

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon that has challenged governments, international organisations, academics, and members of the civil society worldwide. In an effort to contribute to the alleviation of the pandemic and enhance the dialogue among diaspora experts, the International Organisation of Migration and iDiaspora organised three global exchanges. This policy brief argues that these platforms are particularly useful in times of crisis and restricted mobility because diasporas around the world have been able to share crucial information, give advice and create an open dialogue to inspire other migrants to develop their own initiatives against the pandemic.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon that has challenged governments, international organisations, academics, and members of the civil society worldwide. At the beginning of the outbreak in mid-March, governments opted to implement restrictive measures in order to prevent the spread of the virus such as closing borders and limiting the movement of people in general. Migrants have been particularly affected by these types of restrictions since on the one hand they could not return easily to their homeland (Mandraud, 2020) and on the other hand, vulnerable migrant populations have been particularly affected by the pandemic by not having access to health and social security (McKee Irwin and Del Monte, 2020).

In the pre-pandemic era, international organisations, NGOs, and governments, were already interested in producing research and platforms to better integrate migration into development policies (de Haas, 2006; ICMPD and ECDPM, 2013; JMDI, 2015). Since the 2000s, migrants and diasporas have been recognised as agents capable of enhancing development in both their homelands and hostlands through transnational links. Indeed, diasporas have the capacity to engage with their homeland societies and transform them through economic, social, and political exchanges. However,

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it is important to note that these channels and interconnections might be disrupted in times of crisis and the pandemic was not the exception.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the global population at different rhythms and intensities, but it has been challenging for the governments, international organisations, diasporic organisations, and migrant communities. In an effort to contribute to the alleviation of the crisis and provide an opportunity to diasporas across the world, the International Organisation of Migration organised three global exchanges through their initiative iDiaspora, a global engagement and knowledge exchange hub for diaspora communities (iDiaspora, 2019).

This policy brief aims to analyse the impact of these Global Forums in the relief of the Covid crisis. In order to do so, I will briefly discuss the specificities of the Covid crisis and its implications for international migration and in particular for diasporas. Second, I will introduce the Global Exchanges organised by the iDiaspora initiative and how they contributed to the exchange of good transnational practices to face the pandemic. I will argue that platforms such as iDiaspora are particularly useful in times of crisis and restricted mobility since through these virtual exchanges, migrant communities around the world have been able to share crucial information, give advice and create an open dialogue to inspire other migrants to develop their own initiatives against the pandemic.

The impact of Covid-19 on migrants

The pandemic has affected migrant communities and international mobility in different ways, nevertheless not all the countries have been affected equally. The coronavirus pandemic has revealed important flaws in the global health systems and the lack of access to social protection, especially in developing countries.

Overall, older people, people with chronic illnesses and healthcare workers are at greater risk of contracting the virus (WHO, 2020). In order to contain the spread of the virus, authorities have recommended to follow strict hygiene and social distancing measures. Nevertheless, for some people, as specifically for vulnerable migrants, these measures have been difficult or impossible to follow.

In the case of migrants, housing and employment conditions as well as access to health security are key factors influencing their risk of contracting the virus. Worldwide, migrants have different rights which can limit their access to social services as well as impact their living conditions. Therefore, their level of vulnerability differs and depends on their own capacities to cope with the dangers derived from the pandemic. Some migrants have come together to develop diasporic initiatives to support people from their communities either from their homelands or their hostlands.

The use of “diaspora” has proliferated in the last two decades (Brubaker, 2005). The current consensus to designate diasporas includes three main elements: the first is dispersion in space to two or more locations; the second, orientation towards a homeland and the third, boundary maintenance over time (Brubaker, 2005; Gamlen, 2011). It is relevant to note that diasporas are heterogeneous groups. As a result, members belonging to a same diaspora may have different interests and different forms of engaging with their homeland.

In times of crisis, diasporas engage with their homeland differently than in peaceful times (Smith and Stares, 2007). Indeed, the dynamics of crisis might change the access that migrants have to both resources and to political and social opportunities in their hostland. In addition, the emergency context might restrict the ability of migrants to congregate and organise initiatives to engage with their homeland. As for any crisis, during the Covid-19 outbreak, migrants had to learn to navigate new challenges and readapt to new norms such as mobility restrictions and the closure of so-called “non-essential” services in order to engage with their homelands. When responding to the current health crisis, diasporas have tried to inform the members of their communities about the evolution and prevention measures to reduce the spread of the virus. In addition, to alleviate the effects of the crisis, diaspora organisations have also provided humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable population within their community either in their homeland or their hostlands.

Global Exchanges organised by the iDiaspora

The International Organisation of Migration and iDiaspora organised three global diaspora virtual exchanges with two main objectives: 1) to create a space for collaboration where diaspora groups from around the world could share their best practices responding to the Covid-19 crisis and 2) to showcase the work already done by diasporic groups and enhance the cooperation between policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders involved in mainstreaming of migrant communities into the coronavirus crisis (IOM, 2020).

The first virtual exchange took place on the 22nd of April 2020 in English, the second one on the 20th of May in French and the third on the 10th of June in Spanish. The virtual discussions involved nearly 300 stakeholders including policymakers, researchers, members of the global civil society interested in maximising the potential of diasporas facing the pandemic worldwide.

In each meeting, panellists were able to present the work done by their organisations to support their respective communities in different countries and contexts. These presentations were valuable for the participants because they were able to identify the best practices on how members of multiple diasporas have been organising initiatives to inform and support the members of their own

communities. In addition, these virtual platforms were key to establish common strategies among the diasporic organisations to create synergies among the stakeholders involved in the crisis alleviation at the local, national, and even international level. The presentations were followed by a round of questions and answers through which the participants shared their experiences and ideas on how to better integrate migrant populations into the response to the pandemic.

Even if the virtual exchanges were organised at different stages of the crisis and the participants were facing different challenges related to their specific context, the discussions shed light on three main lines of action: the type of initiatives to be developed, how to do it at the local and practical level and finally on how to collaborate with international organisations to boost synergies at the international level.

The first series of recommendations included an analysis on the type of initiatives and programmes that the diasporas around the world have implemented. In the three sessions, experts discussed about the urgency to inform about the sanitary and security measures related to the Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, they emphasised the relevance of implementing different types of programme to provide a holistic response to the health crisis. In particular, this included the implementation of humanitarian aid initiatives, psychological assistance, and administrative support related to repatriation.

The second line of action identified the participants included specific strategies and advice on how to integrate local authorities into the mainstreaming of migrants into the alleviation of the pandemic. The stakeholders participating in the virtual exchanges emphasised the necessity to understand the local context and the profile of the different members of the diaspora in order to be able to implement efficient programmes. Key information about the members of the diaspora and technological tools can improve the design of the responses. For instance, some participants mentioned the relevance of conducting surveys to identify the most vulnerable migrants and better tailor the transnational initiatives. Finally, on various occasions, the participants highlighted the pertinence of implementing strategies using online platforms and mobile applications since in this specific crisis, mobility and social contact are restricted.

The third line of action depicted by the experts working on migration was the relevance of collaborating between all the stakeholders facing the Covid-crisis including international organisations, NGOs, academics, and other networks to boost international cooperation and identify the best practices on the field to prevent the spread of the virus and to face future challenges related to it.

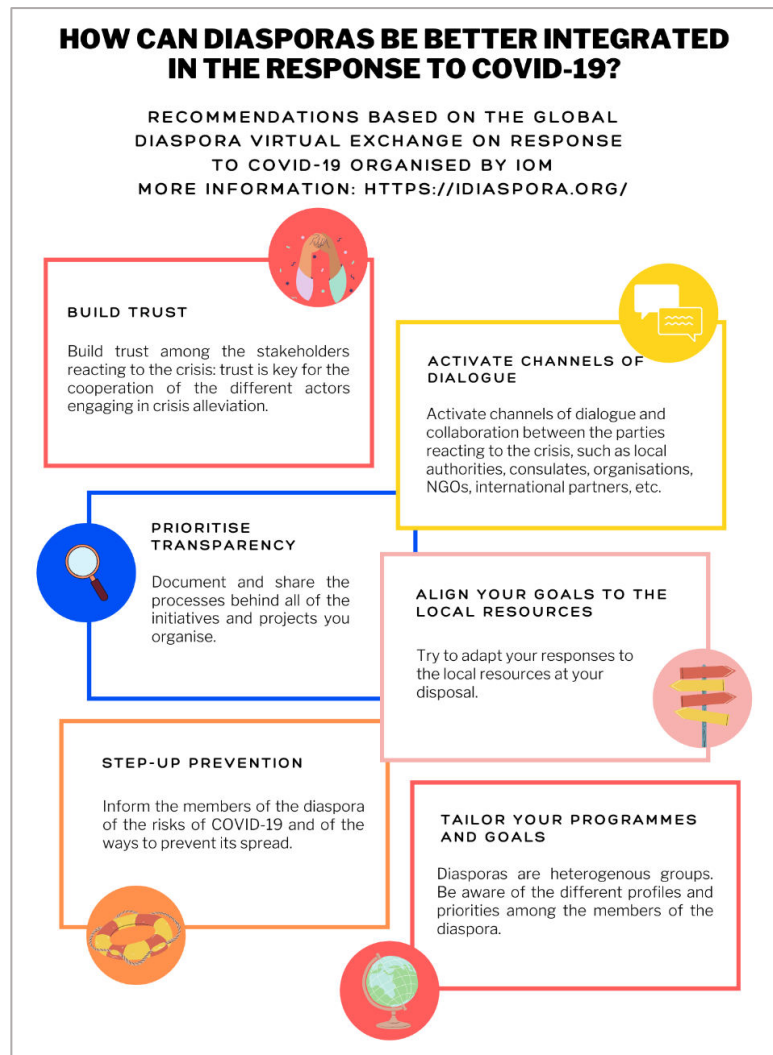
Conclusion

The effort made by the International Organisation of Migration and iDiaspora to coordinate three global exchanges with members of the diaspora from all the corners of the world to respond to a pandemic is unprecedented. Through these virtual meetings, different actors involved in the development of diasporic initiatives in America, Europe, Africa, and Asia were able to learn and share relevant information to better include the members of the diaspora responding to the global sanitary crisis.

The immediate response by the IOM and iDiaspora to organise these exchanges has proven to be effective for four main reasons. First, the IOM invited a different range of experts working and studying diasporic dynamics. By inviting policy-makers, academics, social workers, and other stakeholders,

the forums represented an opportunity to learn about diasporic transnational engagement in times of crisis from different perspectives. Second, besides the expertise of different actors, the IOM made three virtual meetings in three different languages. By inviting English, French, and Spanish speakers, the international organisation ensured to include people from different regions and gave them the opportunity to express their ideas openly in their own language.

Third, the virtual exchanges created a platform not only to learn and share the best practices but also to recognise the work of all the stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of transnational initiatives. The public and international recognition of the participants might incentivise the creation of more initiatives and inspire other actors to develop new synergies to respond to the crisis.



Graphic summary of the first Global Exchange in English produced by Larisa Lara-Guerrero and published in IOM (2020)

Finally, these virtual exchanges acted as an open arena where participants had the opportunity to express freely, learn from their different experiences, and share their personal stories on the field. In times of crisis, these platforms of free dialogue are particularly important to generate empathy among stakeholders facing similar challenges.

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