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Advantages and Challenges to Diaspora Transnational Civil Society Activism in the Homeland: Examples from Iraqi Kurdistan, Somaliland and South Sudan

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About the Conflict Research Programme

The Conflict Research Programme is a four-year research programme managed by the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the LSE and funded by the UK Department for International Development.

Our goal is to understand and analyse the nature of contemporary conflict and to identify international interventions that 'work' in the sense of reducing violence or contributing more broadly to the security of individuals and communities who experience conflict.

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Introduction

Investment in overseas developmental projects is a multifaceted effort which involves a variety of actors. These include donor governments and their departments for international aid, international organisations, recipient governments and the societies in the recipient countries. With relation to the latter, the existence of an active civil society has been identified as crucial for the advancement of socio-political reforms (Putnam 1995; Kaldor 2003; Neumayer 2005). Certainly, aid providers have become more aware of the need to take civil society into account when supporting initiatives aiming to promote democratisation, human rights, and human security in general. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), two of the largest government-supported aid agencies, have invested resources in exploring the importance of civil society in recipient countries and the avenues for encouraging its further development (DFID 2012; Giffen and Judge 2010; USAID 2014).

More recent works on civil society have recognised, though, the fact that such actors are not confined to particular territorial boundaries. Civil society campaigns are often global, involving elements that operate at the international and transnational levels. One element, nevertheless, has been overall neglected by both policymakers and scholars examining transnational civil society, and that is diaspora communities. The refugees of previous decades, which have evolved into well-established communities in the West, have traditionally played pivotal roles in the reconstruction of their homelands. But as time has gone by, they have become involved in other aspects of state- and society-building in the homeland.

As the paper concludes, while there is undoubtedly eagerness among highly motivated and talented diasporans to contribute to social and political changes in the homeland, on the ground, there are difficulties and challenges. These challenges may limit the contribution and hinder diasporan integration in, and contribution to, activism in the homeland. Aid providers and donors should develop clear strategies to incorporate diaspora communities in development programmes. Such integration would help not only to utilise the advantages that diaspora returnees possess when participating in civil society campaigns in the homeland, but could also help these returnees to overcome potential challenges that they face.

The research for the report has relied on 75 interviews with diaspora returnees to three homelands: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Somaliland; and South Sudan. After elaborating on the rationale for this study, the report explains in more detail the methodology and case-study selection. In the following part, the report analyses the findings based on these interviews. It concludes with policy recommendations.

Rationale for the study

While the majority of these refugees settled in camps in neighbouring states, a substantial number of them ended up seeking asylum in Western Europe, North America and Australia. Gradually, these refugees have consolidated into diaspora communities in their 'host countries'.¹ While engaging with their new societies, they have also sought to retain their connections with their homeland. Initially, this connection between the diaspora and the homeland revolved mainly around the diaspora's contribution to the economy of their homeland. By sending remittances to their relatives that have stayed behind, diaspora communities had become not only an essential source of support for their families but also the backbone for their homelands' economies (Tabar 2014; Newland and Patrick 2004). As the diasporans have settled in their new homes, they found other ways to contribute to their homelands while also benefiting from such interaction. Hence, diaspora communities began to directly invest in business ventures in their homelands, sometimes becoming influential businesspeople in these countries (Brinkerhoff 2008).

Beyond financially investing in their homelands, diasporans have been pointed out to play a crucial role in the politics of their homelands. Recently escaping violence inflicted upon their communities by external actors, members of the diaspora began lobbying the cause of their homelands in their host countries. Especially after acquiring citizenship and the right to vote, members of diaspora communities have sought to pressure their governments in the West to support their homelands' plight, intervene to protect their compatriots from further violence, or even accept demands for independence, when relevant (Geukjian 2014; Probst 2016; Shain

2002; Baser 2015; Toivanen 2013). But such activism has taken place not only within the boundaries of the host country. Diaspora communities have also functioned as pools of manpower for their compatriots in the homeland in cases of protracted conflicts. Due to their distance from the conflict, diaspora communities have often disrupted peace efforts, pushing the government in the homeland to take more hawkish stands. Hence, they have been pointed out as potential spoilers of peace agreements (Shain and Aryasinha 2006; Van Hear and Cohen 2017; Hoffman et al. 2007). Other works, nevertheless, have stressed the role of diasporas as potential peace-brokers and bridges between warring parties (Baser and Swain 2008; Cohen 2008; Pande 2017).

In more recent years, as the conflicts that gave birth to the diaspora communities began to give way to post-conflict reconstruction, diaspora communities have come to play other parts in their homelands' affairs. As the governments in the homelands have started diverting their efforts and resources to capacity-building and governance, members of the diaspora became potential contributors to such state-building efforts. Their education in the host countries, their material resources, and their access to the governments in the homelands have turned diaspora activists into important contributors to these state-building projects. Consequently, diasporans have sought, and been asked by their governments, to join such efforts through their professional experiences. Diaspora returnees are now integrated into politics, public administration, the health and education sectors, infrastructure but also the private sector (Mohamoud 2006; Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Walls 2009; Stokke 2006; Emanuelsson et al.

¹ The term host country, frequently used to describe the country in which diaspora community reside, is not free of problems. Many of the interviewees for this project

expressed strong affiliation with the so-called host countries, seeing them as another homeland. The term host country is used mainly for the sake of brevity.

2015). And while diaspora communities have continued to support the homeland financially, this contribution has shifted to an extent from sending remittances to philanthropy, focusing on particular fields or areas, but also to foreign direct investment and tourism (Newland and Patrick 2004).

All of these aspects of diasporas communities' participation in the homeland have gained attention by scholars and policymakers. However, one aspect of diaspora communities' participation in their homelands' social and political life has been somewhat neglected. And this aspect is diaspora communities' active participation in the construction of civil society in the homeland. Diaspora communities' experiences in their host countries, their access to education and employment, and their participation in the politics of the host countries have exposed them to ideas about and practices and standards of governance, society and economy that are different than the ones prevailing in their homeland. Closely engaged with their homelands and their societies, diasporans came to realise the lack of such institutions in the homeland. This understanding has been especially the case among the younger generations, who have spent a substantial part, if not all of their lives, in the host country (Alinejad 2011; Ben-David 2012; Helland 2007). And so, diaspora activists have sought to join ongoing efforts in the homeland to bring about social and political reforms. And they have sought to do so in various ways, as part of the budding civil society in the homeland, by working for international organisations, or through joining the civil service and administration.

Thus, we may argue that diaspora communities in some cases have transformed not only to extensions of their homelands abroad but also into transnational civil society. Here, the term civil society is being used in its broadest sense. It refers to a wide range of civil organisations to advocate changes, including advocacy groups, labour unions, charitable organisations, community groups, and religious organisations.² Nonetheless, as the methodology section elaborates, this research has also taken into account unorganised activists, including journalists; individuals who have joined government offices and public administration at all levels; and workers and volunteers for international aid organisations. The purpose of this inclusive definition of transnational civil society is to demonstrate to the greatest possible extent the function of diaspora communities as transnational conveyers of ideas, from the host country to the homeland.

The study builds upon a growing understanding of civil society as being transnational. Mary Kaldor (2003), for instance, had noted that the growing connection between like-minded individuals and groups in different countries, even before the advent of the internet, along with the emergence of international human rights legislation, created the foundations for a global civil society essentially.³ And indeed, various works have emphasised the growing significance of transnational civil society activism in producing change across borders, either at the state or at the global levels (Chandler 2004; Florini 2012; Price 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). And though the emergence of such transnational activism has not been

² The term civil society has been discussed in numerous works and reports. Nevertheless, a more recent discussion by the World Economic Forum provides a more recent, and expansive definition of civil society (Jeizard 2018).

³ For Kaldor, nevertheless, the term global society relates to interaction exclusive to the global level. As she summarises the definition, 'global civil society is a platform

inhabited by activists (or post-Marxists), NGOs and neoliberals, as well as national and religious groups, where they argue about, campaign for (or against), negotiate about, or lobby for the arrangements that shape global developments' (Kaldor 2003, 590).

free of criticism,⁴ it has still been accepted as an engine of change. These studies too, nevertheless, fall short of giving sufficient attention to the diaspora component of transnational civil society activism.

To be sure, some works and reports have identified this function of diaspora communities in transnational civil society activism. In what one of my interviewees described as a pilot scheme, the multinational professional services network, Deloitte, implementing a project designed and funded by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), sought to hire members of the South Sudanese diaspora to work on capacity-building projects in the homeland.⁵ This project, nonetheless, did not fully materialise. Several studies and reports commissioned by donor organisations suggest a realisation of the potential part diaspora activists can have in developmental and civil society campaigns (e.g. Boyle and Kitchin 2014; Kuschminder 2011; Terrazas 2010). However, these works have generally avoided conceptualising diaspora activism in broad terms. As such, they have left room for further exploring the study of diaspora activism and its implications. Diaspora should gain special attention as part of the study of transnational civil society because diaspora activism represents the essence of transnational activism. Diaspora activists, whether they operate mainly in the homeland or the host country, are immersed in both societies. Their activism is the outcome of their experiences in the host country, shaped by their desire to develop the homeland. Their status as diasporans has privileges. They have access to education in a way in which many of their compatriots in the homeland have never had;

they have passports that grant them greater freedom of movement, and they have access to policymakers in the host country. All of these factors turn diaspora activists into potentially crucial cohorts in civil society campaigns. The successes and failures of diasporans to play the role of a transnational civil society, therefore, can teach us much about the prospects of transnational advocacy.

Research Design and Methodology

i. Research questions

The exploration of diaspora as a transnational civil society entails the following research questions. First, what are the motivations for members of diaspora communities to try and integrate into civil society movements and campaigns for reforms in the homeland? Understanding these motivations is essential for designing strategies for encouraging more members of diaspora communities to join such networks. The second set of questions relates to the way diaspora activists themselves perceive and utilise their experience in the host country. This experience is the basis for the ideas that diaspora activists and returnees convey to the homeland. But how does this experience come to play in the diaspora campaigns? The third set of questions is: What advantages does the 'diasporan' status have for participants in transnational advocacy efforts and civil society? Does it open more doors? Does it enhance diasporans' participation and ability to attract more audiences? The fourth major question is: Does seeking to operate as diaspora advocates and members of civil society have disadvantages? What kind of

⁴ David Chandler (2004), for example, warns that the emergence of global civil society is primarily neoliberal and puts to risk the idea of collective action in favour of elite advocacy.

⁵ According to the interviewee's account, 'Deloitte at one time advertised to the diaspora opportunities. The people who were recruited and brought to the country as

experts in the area of civil affairs, administration and governance. They succeeded in bringing the people. But unfortunately, they didn't win the projects' (Juba, 20 February 2019). Two other interviewees in South Sudan testified to working for Deloitte in South Sudan, though they didn't link it to this specific project.

difficulties do diasporans face when trying to advocate a change, that are different from local activists? And what kind of strategies do diaspora activists and returnees develop to cope with these challenges?

The research has been carried out in three cases: The Kurdistan Region in Iraq, Somaliland, and South Sudan. These three cases are different in many respects. Still, the purpose of this investigation is to highlight the commonalities between the cases and point out the potential for at least broad generalisations about diaspora activism. And indeed, the research has found notable similarities between experiences of diaspora participants in civil society in the three cases, which are presented later in the report.

ii. Case selection

The case study selection was based on several criteria. The three cases share many similarities, which make them crucial cases for the analysis. First, the bulk of the diaspora communities in the three cases emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The emergence of the diaspora communities was the outcome of a mass forced displacement due to conflict. This experience of forced dislocation has affected the perception and bond of these communities with their homeland (King 2005; 2008; Lewis 2008). It has also increased the importance of the refugees' lobbying efforts (Van Bruinessen 1998; Jhazbhay 2009; Hertzke 2004; Rolandsen 2005). Similarly, in the three cases, the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the decline of conflict, which gave place to state- and capacity-building projects. In the case of Somaliland and Kurdistan in Iraq, state-building has not translated to international sovereignty,

as both governments remain unrecognised, due to the international community's refusal to acknowledge their *de facto* independence (Voller 2014; Bradbury 2008). Nonetheless, this lack of recognition has had only limited impact on state-building in these countries. Third, with the end of the protracted conflicts, members of the diaspora became visible elements in state-building projects (Emanuelsson et al. 2015; Voller 2014; Bradbury 2008; Johnson 2016). This was true mainly in the cases of the democratic transitions that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Somaliland have experienced (Voller 2015; Abokor et al. 2006). Fourth, the three countries in question have been the recipients of donations and aid for projects relating to civil society development.⁶ These have come from DFID, USAID, international NGOs and various United Nations (UN) agencies, including the UN Assistant Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

iii. Methodology

The analysis for the research has relied on data gathered through six-month-long fieldwork in the three sites, from November 2018 and until May 2019. The fieldwork involved interviews with diasporans based in the homelands, or, in a few cases (5 interviews out of 75), have been involved extensively with the homeland but are still based in the host country. The governments in question do not hold detailed statistical data on diaspora returnees. This policy may have to do with the fact that the term 'returnees' itself is not free of problems.⁷ The

⁶ There are notable parities between the three different governments in terms of economic development. The Kurdistan Region in Iraq has enjoyed a far higher level of economic development than Somalia and South Sudan. This level of development has had to do primarily with oil income, but also the KRG's stability, which has enabled foreign direct investment.

⁷ As many of the interviewees themselves admitted, they do not necessarily see their lives in the homeland as permanent. These interviewees have considered the possibility of returning to the host country. Interestingly, in Kurdistan, returnees are often termed 'ex-pats'. In British and American contexts, the term ex-pats (derived from expatriates) refers to skilled workers migrating overseas (Castree et al. 2013, 144).

research involved 25 interviewees in each case. The idea behind focusing solely on diaspora returnees, and exclude so-called stayees at this stage stemmed from the desire to get a coherent understanding of how diasporans perceive their experiences. A more comprehensive picture could be achieved in the future by interviewing stayees working with returnees, against the statements by the returnees (Rock 2017). But to do that, there is still a need to theorise about the experiences of diaspora returnees.

The initial criterion for choosing interviewees was that they must possess citizenship of the host country. The setting of the criterion was based on several assumptions. First, since the term diaspora can be somewhat lucid, being a citizen of the host country indicates that the interviewee spent a substantial period in the host country to become a citizen. Second, being a citizen of the host country also gives the person a potential influence in the host country, through voting rights. A third assumption has been that foreign citizenship creates certain dynamics between the returnees and homeland. It may provide the returnees with a sense of protection by the host country's government; the ability to leave the homeland freely; but it also shapes the so-called stayees' view the returnees, for better or for worst (Rock 2017).⁸ Of the 75 interviewees, one exception was made, concerning an individual who has recently renounced his American citizenship for personal reasons.

The second criterion for choosing interviewees was their participation in the social and political life in the homeland. The list of participants includes NGO workers and volunteers, employees of international organisations and aid providers, organised and independent advocates for specific causes, educators at the higher

education and university levels, journalists, artists, civil servants and politicians. Concerning the latter categories, while those are usually excluded from the definition of civil society, diaspora returnees have often made the transition from one form of civil society activism into government and civil service. Moreover, if the purpose of the report is to examine the potential role of diaspora activists as conveyor belts of ideas, then governance and the civil service are certainly avenues for achieving this goal. The research generally avoided interviewing business entrepreneurs, under the assumption that such individuals prioritise other factors at the expense of norm integration. However, in both Somaliland and Kurdistan, two exceptions were made, when entrepreneurs maintained to have been searching actively to introduce new norms of employment and work ethics into society through their work.

Interviewers have endeavoured to create a body of interviewees of diverse backgrounds in terms of gender and age. As for gender, whereas in Somaliland and Kurdistan, there was a significant representation to both male and female interviewees, this proved to be a significant challenge in South Sudan. The ongoing civil war at the time of the research involved multiple cases of sexual violence that targeted girls and women primarily. This violence has driven many female returnees to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia. Hence, the number of female interviewees in South Sudan is significantly lower than in other cases. And while the research did not seek to discriminate based on educational background, all interviewees except for one, in Somaliland, have academic degrees, ranging from bachelor degrees to doctorates. And

⁸ This has also been identified by Anna Ida Rock (2017) in her study of the diaspora in Somaliland.

while the study sought to avoid ageism, the majority of interviewees were 45 and younger. Four interviewees, nonetheless, were in the seventh decade of their lives.

The access to most interviewees was through chain-referral (Babbie 1995) or snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). Through initial connections and interviews, the interviewers have been introduced to other interviewees that fit the criteria I presented. The interviews were based on a structured interview questionnaire.⁹ The questions were open-ended and gave the interviewees space to present their thoughts and experiences. For considerations relating to the ethics of the research, certain questions were avoided. For example, I refrained from asking direct questions on political opposition or criticism of incumbent governments. Some interviewees, though, initiated such discussions. In fact, generally speaking, in the three countries, interviewees seemed open to discussing social and political challenges, which indicates at least a certain degree of openness.

With the data gathered in the interviews, the research has aimed to trace the process through which diaspora communities have evolved as a transnational civil society. In his study, Oisín Tansey (2007) stresses the immense potential that elite interviews have for process tracing.¹⁰ Tansey (2007, 765), counts several advantages that such interviews have for case study analysis: They can 'establish what a set of people think'; 'Make inferences about a larger population's characteristics/ decisions'; and 'Reconstruct an event or set of events'. Indeed, interviews have been in many previous studies of diaspora communities and their link with the homeland (Baser 2015; Baser and Swain 2008;

Toivanen 2013; Rock 2017). The forthcoming analysis of the data gathered through the interviews presents a detailed picture of the experiences, achievements and challenges of diaspora returnees.

Analysis

i. Perception of challenges in the homeland

A good starting point for understanding the role of diaspora as a transnational civil society is to observe how diaspora returnees view their society and the socio-political and economic challenges it faces. Education was the most recurring issue in the interviews, as interviewees pointed out problems in the education system as one of the greatest challenges to society. Many of the complaints have been about the infrastructure and facilities. One interviewee in Somaliland, a banker who has also volunteered to work with government organisations in introducing computation, has pointed out the fact that in education, as in other sectors, 'the system still relies on paper and blackboards' (Hargeisa, 10 December 2018). In fact, one interviewee in Somaliland, who has volunteered as a teacher in IDP camps, explained that often, these are the communities, rather than the government, that build schools: 'Schools are built by the civil society,¹¹ by people who keep schools open for kids... The government is not even involved' (Hargeisa, 24 January 2019). In South Sudan, a county official has stated that 'Illiteracy is so high, because the educational level is so low, so that when you explain something to someone that could benefit them in the future, they won't understand it' (Juba, 6 March 2019). As in Somaliland, the

⁹ The questionnaire is available [here](#).

¹⁰ While Tansey (2007) refers to the term elite interviews chiefly to policymakers and government officials, the study views diaspora returnees as broadly fitting into this definition. This is due to their educational background, experiences, and aims.

¹¹ Here the interviewee used the term 'civil society' in the meaning of local community.

South Sudanese official pointed out that many efforts to establish education systems are the outcomes of local initiatives (Juba, 26 February 2019).¹² In Kurdistan, a university professor maintained that 'we are lagging behind. We still follow the old system, from the Ba'ath days. And this applies to all levels of the education system' (Erbil, 17 April 2019).

Not only in education, but also the state of general social infrastructure has been brought up by interviewees. Interviewees in particular mentioned the situation of public health, or the lack of it. In Kurdistan, where a thriving private health industry is the main provider of health services, one interviewee bemoaned that 'there's no health infrastructure. You cannot rely on public hospitals. You have to pay. It's not like in the UK. Even if I come with terminal illness, they won't treat me if I don't pay upfront' (Erbil, 16 April 2019). Another interviewee reiterated that 'The sector has been completely privatised, and the facilities that are available to the public are terrible. Only those who can't afford to attend private facilities go to public hospitals, because they don't have a choice' (Erbil, 24 April 2019).

Nevertheless, beyond infrastructure and education, which are considered as under the governments' direct responsibility, many of the returnees have identified social and cultural issues as the greatest hinderances to national development. Tribalism has been one recurring issue, brought up by many interviewees in Somaliland, where clan affiliation is a main source of support and access to services and resources; and in South Sudan, where tribalism/ethnicity (the terms have been used interchangeably with references to the same groups), has served as a mobilising factor in the ongoing civil war. In South Sudan, a researcher at one of the very few independent research

institutes in Juba explained that the state has been 'unable to create incentives to bring societies together... The state cannot fulfil its most basic commitment to the population, namely providing them security. So the people go back to their zone of safety, to their tribal enclaves' (Juba, 24 May 2019). Another returnee, who is working for the South Sudanese Ministry of Defence, has lamented that the country's greatest problem is that 'there is no unity because of tribalism. Everyone believes in their own culture. I never encountered such things in America (Juba, 20 April 2019). In Somaliland, an interviewee proclaimed that 'Asking which clan people are from is not normal and I think this is what makes us separated in a way and why we are divided. I think a lot of diaspora want to overcome the tribalism thing'. In fact, she went on, 'the clan leaders want to leave this behind, but it is impossible because you benefit from it at the same time' (Hargeisa, 6 December 2018). Interviewees in Kurdistan, on the other hand, made no mentions of tribal divides. One interviewee, though, did mention ethno-religious divides, stating that 'Muslims... don't like Yezidis. They won't maybe say it but it's the fact. They don't like Christians and Christians don't like Muslims. Yezidis don't like Muslims. They don't like each other' (Duhok, 24 April 2019).

Another persisting theme in the reflections of diaspora returnees about the challenges the homeland faces, in the three cases, was that of 'mentality'. Many returnees complained about 'laziness', lack of commitment and apathy on the side of stayees, whether government officials, service providers, employees, students and the public in general. One returnee, who operates a manpower and training centres across Kurdistan, maintained

¹² One testimony for a successful educational endeavour was by a high-ranking Episcopal cleric, who was successful in establishing a local university. This,

nonetheless, was with the aid of the church, rather than the local community (Juba, 12 May 2019).

that 'working standards, ethics, things like that, the quality of work, dedication to work, they are still stuck in the past. This is because of lack of education, the absence of international corporations. The level of work is poor across all kinds of jobs' (Erbil, 11 April 2019). Another Erbil-based returnee, a journalist and environmentalist, complained that in his host country, 'when you go to a bank, they won't necessarily be nice to you. But they provide you with a useful service'. In Kurdistan, in contrast, when 'you get to a government building, they welcome you, they offer you tea, they are nice to you. But they don't do the work they should be doing' (Erbil, 14 April 2019). In South Sudan, a returnee working for a UN agency stated that 'If I bring a cleaner from the US, he could teach cleaners here about work ethics and dedication to work. I've seen people who work in office. They come to the office and do nothing at all. A person from the diaspora will not accept this' (Juba, 21 February 2019).

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the word 'democracy' has been hardly mentioned explicitly by the interviewees. However, this does not mean that interviewees did not reflect on governance. Rather than democracy, references have been made to such terms as transparency and accountability. One South Sudanese demographer noted that 'some of our policymaker can barely read. Our environment is politically charged. And there is no much accountability. If there's no accountability, if you are not held for certain standards, even if you are capable, you can slack' (Juba, 29 April 2019). Another youth worker in Juba noted that 'South Sudanese in the West... need assistance on similar issues as people in South Sudan. The only difference is that in these cases, there are already institutions in place. In South Sudan, unlike the US, Canada or Australia, if something happens, nobody is held accountable' (Juba, 29 April 2019).

Concerns for gender equality and gendered violence were brought up frequently, though somewhat dispiritingly mostly by women interviewees. A South Sudanese activist, working for an NGO working to advance women's education, stressed that:

Because of our patriarchal system, women are not viewed as equals. They are not given opportunities in all aspects. From childhood, girls are viewed as property... Because of the lack of education, they cannot make decisions about their own future. Without access to education, and often without access to health, women don't know their rights (Juba, 19 March 2019).

Another Juba-based analyst pointed out that 'women are not equal to men. There's tokenism, and women in politics are mostly tokens. At home, the division of labour is unequal, and women face great burden for women' (Juba, 21 March 2019). In Somaliland, an activist promoting women's participation in politics and the economy told of her experience since her return from Western Europe: 'When I came here, I realized we have equality. It was shocking to see women absent at management levels. If I go to high level meetings, I am the only woman in there. How come? I'm sure we have qualified women' (Hargeisa, 31 December 2018).

Another surprising finding from the interviews was that most interviewees, even in South Sudan and Somaliland, where such issues exist, did not mention food and water insecurity. In Somaliland, only three interviewees mentioned food and water deprivation as an issue. One of the interviewees stated that 'water is one of the biggest challenges because our country

depends on livestock and livestock needs it so it is important for our society' (Hargeisa, 31 January 2019). In South Sudan, only three interviewees mentioned food insecurity and water. One, a food insecurity officer at a Western European embassy in Juba, specified that '60 percent of the population is food insecure' (Juba, 4 May 2019). This discrepancy may reflect the fact that many diaspora returnees, at least those involved with advocacy and activism, tend to concentrate in urban centres, rather than the rural areas.

ii. **Diaspora returnees' and socio-political changes**

Diaspora returnees have been involved in various ways in networks seeking to improve the welfare and lives of their homeland. Interestingly enough, however, diaspora activists and agents have often focused on two dimensions: Aid and capacity-building. Few of the interviewees were involved in politics, policymaking, or even direct campaigning and advocacy, or what can be described as naming-and-shaming advocacy (Hafner-Burton 2008; Murdie and Peksen 2015). In South Sudan, one interviewee has been a leading member of an opposition party. Another worked for a short-time as a state minister. And another has served as an appointed commissioner in one of the states comprising the former Western Equatoria region. Three others have worked as civil servants. In Somaliland and Kurdistan too, only two interviewees have worked as government officials. To be clear, a number interviewees did participate in direct advocacy campaigns. In Somaliland, one interviewed informed that 'I participated in some campaigns to pressure the government or change policies or implement new ones. My recent participation was with the Somaliland Women's Movement event, and it was about women are not represented in politics and felt their wishes are ignored or their voice

was not heard' (Hargeisa, 12 January 2019). Another told of being able to set up a body for citizens to submit complaints to about civil affairs (Hargeisa, 20 January 2019). In Kurdistan, one interviewee had been directly involved in drafting legislation against human trafficking, which was passed by the parliament (Erbil, 24 April 2019). But these represented a minority of the interviewees. As one South Sudanese interviewee described this reality: 'We are not really doing direct activism. We are trying to feed into activists the information. People have been able to utilise the information that we have used' (Juba, 24 May 2019).

On the other hand, capacity-building and training have concerned a variety of causes and fields. These have ranged from political and economic reforms, women's rights (again, mostly by women interviewees), food and water security, and social welfare. Of the three cases, Kurdistan was the only case in which a number of interviewees, four to be precise have worked on issues relating to environmentalism. Social welfare has also related to capacity-building among the security forces, especially in their treatment of more vulnerable groups in society. In Somaliland, one interviewee has worked for a UN agency along with the local Ministry of Justice to improve the conditions for inmates. Her work, according to her description, has involved supervising the implementation of regulation by the warden and prison guards, but also communicating directly with prisoners and check on their educational and health needs, and generally 'Making sure that human rights aren't violated in the prisons'. Having her educational background in legal studies, she moved to deal with prisoners' rights after advocating the abolition of female genital mutilation (FGM) (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018).

In South Sudan as well, one interviewee worked in training and capacity-building of law enforcement agents and judges, before moving to an administrative position at the UN agency that employs him. He has landed in this position after having gained experience in the US army in Iraq, where he trained Iraqi policemen and law enforcement agents about civil rights and due processes, followed by employment as a parole officer in US. His task involved:

Overseeing the capacity building of law enforcement agents and judges, monitor human rights in South Sudan by advising the relevant authorities against arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention among others. As part of my work, I mostly interacted with the government officials by giving them advices and trainings of the law enforcement agents and judges. My typical work was trying to build the capacity of police, so that they can avoid certain interrogation techniques.

He also tried to advance the building of juvenile centres and halfway houses in South Sudan, though without success (Juba, 21 February 2019).

In Kurdistan too, one interviewee has been responsible for carrying capacity-building workshops for policy officers on how to deal with gendered violence, as part of her work for an NGO dedicated to improving women's rights. One topic she advanced in particular has been that of human trafficking into Kurdistan, especially of young women to work as maids and nannies for the growing middle class, and who have been subjected to abuse and violation

of employee and civil rights. Her work on this topic, she noted, was motivated by her own experiences in the US, where she has lived since her childhood: 'Coming from the US, I found it unacceptable the way women are treated, for example in the family. Or the fact that male employees will refuse to accept the authority of a female boss' (Erbil, 24 April 2019). At the time of the interviews, the Kurdistan region was still recovering from the episode of the Islamic State. Many Yezidi victims of the IS's genocidal campaign were still residing in IDP camps across the region. Several of the interviewees who have dealt with issues relating to gender rights focused their efforts on Yezidi women who had been freed from IS captivity. One interviewee was volunteering at the time of the interview with an NGO that aided Yezidi women at the camps. Working for the organisation's gender department, she was meeting on a weekly basis with Yezidi IDPs, asking them about their conditions, problems and addressing the feeling of neglect that they were experiencing in the camps. Returning to Kurdistan from a Scandinavian country, where she spent all of the life, the interviewee linked this work with her experience as a woman in Kurdistan, in comparison to the host country: 'It's so different, I feel more imprisoned here. I feel I don't have the same freedoms. I see unfairness going on a daily basis. You just become more aware of it. It is good to see the experiences of both societies' (Sulaymaniyah, 23 April 2019).¹³ These are of course only a few anecdotal examples. But they tell of returnees' participation and contribution to fields that rarely get any attention in societies whose members are often preoccupied with daily survival.¹⁴

¹³ This statement was echoed by an interviewee in the city of Sulaymaniyah (the cited interview took place in Dohuk), who noted that 'The freedom I used to have in UK I still have it here. It's a very liberal city, I mean Sulaymaniyah. Yes, you have it but it's limited' (Sulaymaniyah, 2 May 2019).

¹⁴ Of course, capacity-building is not completely devoid of direct advocacy. As one South Sudanese employed in a senior position by a major international NGOs described his work: 'Capacity-building refers to formulating documents to be used by council of minister handbook for the Jonglei state, the executive council

Direct advocacy was mostly done not among policymakers, but the public, in the form of awareness raising in relation to socio-political and economic issues. One activist in Somaliland, working for an NGO dedicated to countering violence against women, and especially FGM, described her work as

[encouraging] people to becoming educated and aware of the things that affect them negatively. So we do a lot of work in advocating these issues. We tackle very sensitive issues and we found that working in partnership with other organisations and governments, and engaging in communities in open ways, people are open to education, and many of them have changed their positions on the things we are working on (Hargeisa, 20 December 2018).

And in other cases, advocacy that was initially aimed at the local population, also attracted policymakers. As one environmental activist in Kurdistan described it:

As the Kurdistan coordinator [of the global network of environmentalists he has been affiliated with], I'm trying to bring everybody together, all these environmentalists from Suli, Erbil, Duhok, Halabja, Dukan, Germiyan, all doing different activities in different locations to raise awareness and to put pressure on the government. We do a lot of advocacy training, we do a lot of training on solidarity, on how we actually come together and share experiences. We made these guys to listen to us to put more pressure on them [politicians] (Sulaymaniyah,

30 April 2019).

Following his work on the topic, the activist had the opportunity to meet with the KRG's Minister of Environment. In this meeting, he lobbied for the drafting of an environmental protection law, which would later be passed by the parliament.

There are several possible explanations to this preference of many returnees to focus on the backstage of advocacy networks. One explanation may relate to the fact that in the societies under investigation, civil society activism in general does not focus much on advocacy. One South Sudanese interviewee commented that, with the exception of NGOs affiliated with the church,

The rest of the civil society tend to be service-oriented. Because of the limited space for civil society, they tend to shy away from advocacy. They prefer to provide services such as health, education. Many civil society organisations provide humanitarian aid. But very few engage in advocacy, pushing for peace, being voice for the people – apart from the church' (Juba, 2 May 2019).

In contrast to these NGOs, the large Christian international NGOs he has worked for, has striven to 'work with the government and remind them their international obligation in terms of the treaties that they have signed... to create space and to ensure that there is active participation of civil society coupled with the investment that have gone into developing of local civil organisations' (ibid).

handbook that would guide the functionalities of the counties, and provision of workshops on human resources, training, concept notes, committee to review the

Jonglei workforce, and concepts that were to be implemented before the crisis [2013 civil war] started' (Juba, 6 March 2019).

Another explanation is that often diaspora returnees, though seeing themselves as internal part of the society in the homeland, still lack access to, or understanding of, the local networks and actors in play, which can give them direct access to policymakers. In other cases, it could be the inability, or reluctance, of returnees to comply with the local practices. Although considering themselves as locals, 'Sometimes this exposure [to Western political culture and practices] makes you speak louder than the rest. And then people within the system may be offended', as one South Sudanese interviewee put it (Juba, 6 March 2019). An interviewee in Somaliland observed that there are 'local people [i.e. stayees] who understand the local context in a way that is better than diasporas' (Hargeisa, 20 December 2018). And another interviewee in Somaliland suggested that 'people here have the advantage, because they know each other and know better how to make the change; I think we should involve the locals and you have to make them want the change and make them realize that change is good' (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018).

Another explanation for this tendency among diaspora returnees to focus on capacity-building is the expectation on the side of stayees, due to their enthusiasm to learn from the experience of returnees. One returnee in Somaliland, working for a government department, told that she is constantly asked to provide training to her co-workers: 'they do that all the time especially the young generation. They are excited about the diaspora and they are like, show us this and teach us, so they do that most of the time'. Elaborating on that, she informed that:

I do trainings for my co-worker and it's not my job, but I do it because I like it and they like it too. What I do is capacity building. I teach them teamwork skills... When we went to university

[in Europe], we had projects we worked on as team, so you learn that in the university. But here it is different... So I started giving trainings on teamwork and communication and having the same goals (Hargeisa, 5 December 2018).

In Kurdistan, a student and a volunteer with youth noted that 'other students show respect to me because I've lived in Germany. You could see that in discussions we have in class. When I shared my ideas based on what I've seen in Germany, they listened to what I had to say' (Erbil, 26 April 2019).

Nonetheless, in a few cases at least, the tendency among diaspora returnees to avoid direct engagement with policymakers stemmed from what is one of the major disadvantages of returning to the homeland, which I discuss in more detail below: The suspicion and hostility on the side of the stayees. One interviewee in Somaliland told that 'I don't think people respect me because they would call me "Arab," which means "you are clueless." So I would only speak about my opinion with my colleagues and I avoid any discussion about politics because I feel I don't know much about it' (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018). Another bemoaned that 'when I talk about FGM with people, some of them challenge me and say to me that I'm too western and that I have different views and that people here share their opinion [on FGM]' (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). In South Sudan, an interviewee working for a UN agency that deals with food insecurity admitted that 'Because I feel that I will be judged, I sometimes hesitate to express my thoughts. And I do, people sometimes tell me "oh, you are so Westernised." I get shot off so many topics, and that makes me hesitant about raising concerns' (Juba, 18 May 2019).

Another South Sudanese interviewee angrily commented that ‘Diasporas are not given chance to participate in the government that would bring about a change. So the activism becomes useless since it is not taken into implementation’ (Juba, 20 February 2019). A professor at one of the leading universities in Erbil has mentioned incident, in which ‘At the beginning I had some issues. I may have said things that upset people here. I had students who were more religious and objected to what I had to say about science. I tried to tell them “we are talking about science” and have a debate’ (Erbil, 17 April 2019).

iii. Reasons for returning

In light of the nature of activism, it is interesting to explore the reasons for returnees to join civil society networks in their different ways. When initiating the exploration of diaspora participation in such networks, and the reason for return in general, interlocutors familiar with the economies in the countries under investigation commented that working for NGOs and international organisations is usually a lucrative employment opportunity.¹⁵ Two interviewees bolstered this notion. One interviewee in Kurdistan stated that ‘We barely have any opportunities to work. With all those refugees and IDPs coming into Kurdistan, more organisations came to Kurdistan. These are the only job we can get. Other than these organisations... we have to wait until the government gets you a job’ (Duhok, 22 April 2019).

Nonetheless, those interviewees who described their work or activism as an opportunity were a small minority. For most interviewees, their return to the homeland was motivated by the desire to bring to a change, contribute to their society, and give back to the homeland after they

have had the privilege of prospering and studying in the West. For some, it was their personal experiences during past visits to the homeland that made them take the decision to return. One South Sudanese returnee talked about his encounter with soldiers in his hometown, in which he was mistreated and harassed by them for simply taking a photo of the terrain, that made him decide to leave his job in the US and apply for a position with a UN agency in the country: ‘I was motivated by the poor justice system, human rights violations I witnessed in South Sudan mostly by government agents whenever I pay a visit and I decided to come and utilise my experience here’ (Juba, 21 February 2019). For others, studying at university issues relating to development and poverty alleviation served as their main drivers. Another interviewee in South Sudan told that, after graduation, he felt that ‘the need is so great, the need to bring about change, improve people’s lives, and to put my knowledge and skills to better use’. Considering his options, he concluded that ‘I could not find any country better than my country to do this, to me these are the main driving forces and also is one way to give back to my community the knowledge and skills that I have gained’ (Juba, 2 May 2019). Another interviewee, when telling of local volunteers at a youth centre that he had established, told that ‘they don’t know that what they are doing is volunteering because, they don’t have the concept of voluntary work. I do have, and this the result of living in Europe’ (Hargeisa, 16 December 2018).

For some, to be sure, the choice to integrate into political and social activism was intertwined with the desire to return to the homeland and explore their roots. An

¹⁵ This assertion echoes observations made by De Waal (2015) and Goodhand (2013).

interviewee in Somaliland told of her decision to return: 'I wanted to come back and get to know my roots. I left Somaliland when I was 4, so I wanted to see my people. I came with my kids for them to have a positive experience'. But what was supposed to be a short vacation turned into a long-term residence. She then joined a local NGO working on issues relating to reproductive health, and especially the issue of FGM (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). Similarly, another Somalilander interviewee explained that 'I felt overworked and I have three kids, so I took a year off and moved here. And my other main reason was that I wanted my kids to learn about the culture and learn the language so I ended up staying'. In Hargeisa, she became involved with charity organisations, before taking a full-time position working for a communication corporation (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018). However, even in these cases, the interviewees had a background of activism in their host countries. The former interviewee worked with Somali asylum-seekers, whilst the latter was a columnist for a liberal newspaper, where she dealt with socio-political issues, and especially immigrant communities.

And indeed, many of the interviewees, though by no means all, had a background of activism, volunteering or professional experience in advocacy in the homeland. One of the Kurdistan-based environmentalists interviewed for the project informed that before returning to Kurdistan, 'I was an environmentalist... [working on] different topics, such as climate change, global warming. I always worked with left-wing activists... For me it was a right opportunity to learn how I can find my track. Eventually I did. I was part of that movement' (Sulaymaniyah, 30 April 2019). Another Kurdish interviewee, working in one of the handful of organisations supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

individuals in the Kurdistan Region, had developed extensive experience in working with LGBT asylum-seekers in her host country, an experience that ended up serving her in her own work with LGBT under threat in Kurdistan (Sulaymaniyah, 2 May 2019).¹⁶

In several cases, the activism was not necessarily on socio-political issues. Some of the interviewees were involved in campaigning for the cause of the homeland. As another Kurdish activist put it, whereas now he has been travelling among universities and academic institutions in Kurdistan, telling them about the practices of other countries in fighting climate changes in his host country, 'one of my jobs was to go to universities and schools and tell them about Iraq, Kurdistan, and the Middle East. So I did the opposite thing, I educated them about the situation here' (Erbil, 14 April 2019).

These interviewees rebuffed the notion that they chose their path simply for making a living, when confronted with that question. A South Sudanese interviewee responded to such assertion that 'Obviously I need to maintain myself. But I am not motivated by any financial gains. I do what I do because I enjoy doing that. There are better ways to make more money. But it's a way to do something and contribute to my society'. Reflecting on her decision to return to South Sudan, she noted that 'It was a natural transition for me. It's a new country, and there's a lot that needs to be addressed, especially in terms of human rights. We have a long way to go, and being involved in civil society seemed to be a natural transition' (Juba, 21 March 2019). Another South Sudanese interviewee stressed that 'Financial considerations played a very little part in my

¹⁶ Such trainings, though, have been mainly conveyed under the title of gender-based violence, due to the sensitivity of the subject in Kurdistan.

decision. I wanted to come home to help my people. The pay that I get, it's peanuts. But the joy of serving other people at the end of the day, that's what I need' (Juba, 18 May 2019). In another example, an interviewee in Somaliland proclaimed that 'I do have a Dutch passport but I'm from here and my identity will be always Somali. So I wanted to do what I can for this country, because we are behind other countries. Also, to be honest, I came here looking for the sense of belonging' (Hargeisa, 13 December 2018).

This emphasis on the altruistic nature of their participation in the social and political life of the homeland has aimed to distinguish them from those members of the diaspora who have sought to exploit the homeland. Several interviewees, in all three cases, mentioned those migrants who had failed in the host country, but returned to the homeland and integrated in senior positions in the government and civil service. An interviewee in Somaliland, for instance, mentioned that 'the generation before us, maybe I shouldn't say this, but they are uneducated old people who became ministers'. In contrast, the new generation of returnees are 'much more educated people, who want to understand the culture, who want to understand the country. They are not enough yet, but when those people connect to the locals, they could improve things' (Hargeisa, 9 January 2019). And another added that 'I know of at least 10 diaspora [returnees] who were welfare takers in Norway but now they are either DG [director generals] or minister etc.' (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). A Kurdish interviewee echoed this notion:

A lot of returnees came back with the wrong intention. They came back with this idea of the milking cow. They were trying to milk it. And most of them, with all due respect, came back with huge failures in the Western world. They

came in and tried to cash in on the experiences they had in the outside world. They did end up doing very well for themselves, but they haven't done good for this place (Erbil, 14 April 2019).

In short, the desire to bring to changes in the homeland threads along many of the cases of those involved. But even if not disconnected from the need, or the desire, to make financial gains, the participation of diaspora returnees in the advocacy networks, in different capacities, still provided them with the opportunity to convey their ideas, which have been moulded by their long experiences in the West. The next question, then, is in what ways has the status of diaspora returnees affected their endeavours to have a say and shape politics and society.

iv. Diaspora returnees: advantages vs. disadvantages

At the basis of this investigation stood the idea that returning from the diaspora into the homeland can have a symbolic and real value for these returnees when they engage in their work and activism. And indeed, most of the interviewees concluded that coming from the diaspora had certain advantages for themselves and for their desire to secure change. However, and this notion was shared by the vast majority of interviewees, the greatest advantage in returning from the diaspora lied in their experiences and evolution as human beings. Most interviewees maintained that living in Western Europe, North America and Australia made them more proactive, open-minded, capable of adjusting to changes, and better equipped to embrace and apply available solutions to the problems that their societies face, in comparison to stayees. A South Sudanese

interviewee affirmed that 'Life in the UK has made me realise that it is possible to have views that are different, but still respect others' opinions. This might not have been the case had I stayed in South Sudan, because of the restrictive environment'. Because of that, she continued, 'I am much more equipped to be involved. Travelling and living in other cultures, having more experiences and even learning new languages opens your horizons and mind. It makes you a better person, a better judge of issues and characters'. Especially as a woman, 'I am freer than my female relatives who have never left the country. They are more constrained, not as outspoken as I am. They are more concerned about what people would think of them than I would' (Juba, 19 March 2019). An interviewee in Somaliland, who has worked as an aid worker for various international organisations, informed that

My experience in growing up and living abroad, and being a minority, my particular learning experience and access to broad educational opportunities, and being able to travel across the world, in a small capacity, these are advantageous to an aid worker. Those things inform my world view and who I am as a person (Hargeisa, 27 December 2018).

And another said that 'I think humans, in general, if they stay in the same place for so long, they become close-minded because they don't see new things or changes so this gives me the privilege of appreciation and seeing things differently... They see a lot more barriers than I can see' (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). And in Kurdistan, an interviewee working as policy advisor to the government explained that 'Living in the UK broadened my knowledge, guided me. It turned me into who I am now. I am a different person... I experienced different education, and

lived in different countries in Europe. I think wiser, I think broader, I am more knowledgeable' (Erbil, 15 April 2019). This mobility, thanks to the possession of Western passports, continues to serve the returnees in the homeland, which gives them further advantage over their local colleagues.

Of course, this knowledge and experience has more tangible meaning for these returnees, especially in terms of skills. As one interviewee in Kurdistan narrated, 'We were from the mountains, you know. I was 15 at high school when they came to arrest me and luckily, I managed to get to the UK. But I came to the UK with no skills, other than being able to dismantle and reassemble an AK-47 blindfolded' (Erbil, 14 April 2019). Having done his undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the UK, he was able to return to Kurdistan and integrate into local government. Another interviewee, an artist, city planner and teacher, who is advancing urban reforms in the city of Sulaymaniyah, reflected that his experience in Germany taught him 'Knowhow management. It's about how can I think. The structure of thinking was very wrong here. They give you a better discipline to think... One thing I learnt in Germany is to focus on small things, to think in small ways' (Sulaymaniyah, 27 April 2019). For an interviewee in Somaliland, it was her opportunity to work on such a controversial topic (certainly in the context of Somaliland) as FGM in the Netherlands that gave her the tools to continue working on the topic in her homeland: 'Having the background of FGM is something that gave me the access to participate in policy making and I wasn't intimidated to take part because I have the prior knowledge and experience. If I didn't know about FGM, I wouldn't want to tackle it I guess' (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018). In a similar fashion, a South Sudanese interviewee, working as a researcher for a UK-

funded research institute, confided that 'Coming from the UK has provided me with the necessary professional skills. I've worked with big and small organisations, and this has provided me with skills that maybe I wouldn't have had I remained in South Sudan' (Juba, 21 March 2019). Such experiences have also made returnees, at least according to their self-perception, more prone to volunteer and seek way to contribute to society, in comparison to stayees. As one interviewee complained, 'I need to contribute to society. We had a bit of patriotism in reality. But for people here, it's more about how can I fill my pockets, not what can I do for the country' (Hargeisa, 27 December 2018).

One advantage highlighted by a number of interviewees is the ability of diaspora returnees to serve as a bridge between the local community and governance and international actors, such as international organisations and other governments. For some interviewees, their experiences of living and studying in the West has given them access to foreign organisations and organisations that are present in the homeland. An interviewee in South Sudan, who has worked as a county official, described that 'NGOs like to interact with me. When they come to the office, I know exactly what they expect' (Juba, 22 February 2019). According to another South Sudanese interviewee, 'I have access to resources that people who live here don't have. I can address the American ambassador if I need; I can communicate with other Western scholars to consult with them about developing my ideas. I am privileged in this respect' (Juba, 29 April 2019). And a third interviewee noted that '[NGOs and Western expatriates in South Sudan] give me respect, because I come from their countries. So they look at you as someone who makes a difference. They won't dismiss what have you to say... People are more receptive to what I have to say and my ideas (Juba, 22 March 2019). But for others, this bridging has taken the

opposite direction, from NGOs and aid organisations to the local society. Several of the interviewees suggested that, being both local but also Western in their orientation and thinking, they could address the problems of the grassroots better than foreigners may. Several interviewees working for international organisations and NGOs told of private initiatives in which they, together with other locals and members of the diaspora, have delivered food and other aid to those in need. Their knowledge of the language and culture, but also family networks, have helped in identifying those in need and approach them directly. When detailing his engagement with the local population in South Sudan, one interviewee pointed out that 'We lived and experienced values like human rights. But we were also born here, and we understand South Sudanese values, which other people couldn't understand and may take at face value. When we debate with people here, we are well-informed especially when we debate with the government' (Juba, 24 May 2019). Another suggested that 'If you work in South Sudan, you need to really know the country and society. You need to be culturally sensitive' (Juba, 20 February 2019). A Somalilander interviewee discussed her experience of establishing a charitable network to support orphans and families in need, providing a fine example for how diaspora returnees can use their local networks:

We used our own mechanism like social network, where we spoke with our neighbours in different areas... A lot of areas have *Miskiin Kalkaal*, like social support for poor people through mosques, where they collect money or food and then give it away to people in need. Through that, we got a lot

of people and spoke to a lot of shopkeepers because we did not want to have big criteria. For example, [the international NGO she works for] uses the village counsels and leaders as gatekeepers, who are put in a position of power and sometimes exploit this [to benefit their family members]... We figured out that since we have the local network, we know Somali and we know these people, we know local mosques, why don't we just do it ourselves? (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018).

This point about the diaspora returnees' role as a potential bridge inside the homeland directly relates to their potential role, at least as they perceive it, as bridges between the homeland and their host country. The interviewees frequently stressed that returning to the homeland does not mean turning their backs to their new homes. Many of them stated that they visit their host countries at least on an annual basis, and keep in touch with family and friends there. As one Kurdish interviewee put it, 'I love Kurdistan. This is my home. It doesn't mean that I don't love Germany. I love Germany the same way. I have two nationalities and two homes. But even when I'm in Germany, there's something that makes me want to come back here' (Erbil, 26 April 2019). A Somalilander interviewee reiterated this notion, declaring that 'People tell me, you don't have a home. But it's not true, I have two homes. I'm comfortable here, and what you do here means something' (Hargeisa, 6 December 2018).

In one area, however, opinions among interviewees were more varied, and that related to the symbolic value of the returnee status, and whether returning from the diaspora has gained a person more credibility among listeners. For some interviewees, returning from the diaspora

has given them some advantages among listeners. One interviewee in Somaliland observed that 'There is an assumption that you know a lot more than the people here know... where I work, you can have somebody with a Master's degree or PhD, who works for the ministry and [who was] born and raised in here, but somehow my opinion is more convincing' (Hargeisa, 29 January 2019). In South Sudan, an interviewee emphasised that

People in South Sudan think whoever came from the US knows everything and your ideas in the community is highly needed.

Coming from abroad has been helpful to my activism because when I came people treated me differently so good as part of them and sometime when you come from the west the local people thinks you're highly educated and they are willing to listen to you' (Juba, 11 March 2019).

And in Kurdistan, a university professor and a columnist argued that 'I do feel that people listen to me more, because of my experiences. My students, my family, even my friends. Even my readers give me more credibility, because they say "she lived abroad, she brings in her experiences." Sometimes they ask me to talk about my experiences' (Erbil, 16 April 2019).

Others, nevertheless, have been more cautious about this position. One interviewee in Kurdistan warned that 'It used to be enough to come back with a European travel document to be appointed for a position, straight away. Not anymore'. Considering his own experiences, he asserted that 'If I say it's not been a factor, I won't be completely honest. But it hasn't given me too much

advantage. When someone introduces you to someone else, and they say “this guy is a graduate of a British university,” they will take note – until you open your mouth’ (Erbil, 14 April 2019). Especially with regard to approaching local policymakers and officials, some of the interviewees were more sceptic, even frustrated. A South Sudanese researcher bemoaned that ‘Honestly, only a few of our recommendations are getting implemented. But this is an issue of capacity, it’s not that they are not interested. But some of our policymaker can barely read’ (Juba, 29 April 2019). An interviewee in Kurdistan noted that ‘It’s too hard to change policymaking. That was my first goal when I came back, to be in a position of influence, in politics, even in the government, telling them these things are not right. But it’s too hard’ (Erbil, 24 April 2019). And another interviewee in Kurdistan, an academic who focuses on environmental issues explained: ‘If you really want to make a change in this part of the world, it is not through legislation and passing laws, you need to raise the awareness of people. If people are educated and informed, they will realise that there’s a problem that needs to be solved’ (Erbil, 17 April 2019).

Overall, then, coming from the diaspora has carried not insignificant advantages for the returnees in their efforts to integrate into existing civil society networks and convey their idea and share their experience. Yet, returning from the diaspora also has disadvantages, which are also relevant for understanding diaspora as a transnational civil society. One of these challenges has been the ability to adjust to the lives of the homeland after living outside for so many years. Many of the interviewees reported on other diaspora returnees, coming to the homeland with the aim of contributing to its development and economy, who left back to their host countries after they had been unable to adjust to life in the homeland. A South Sudanese interviewee acknowledged that ‘It’s

not an easy move... You have to adapt to the way things are going here. You don’t have stability that you have in Australia. There’s work, if you are sick you go to the hospital. You don’t have these things here. And it takes its toll on you (Juba, 4 May 2019)’. An interviewee in Somaliland remarked that ‘I have seen it with a lot of my friends. They come here, but they see the corruption, they see the negative things. And they think, “why should I stay here, when I can stay in the UK or Holland, make 4-5,000 dollars a month and live good lives’ (Hargeisa, 9 December 2018). And a Kurdish returnee, an academic and economist, summarised that ‘the local cultural setting is very different... It’s a militarised society. In Australia, it’s OK to admit that you don’t know something, it’s a courageous thing to do, a good even. But here, you should never admit that you don’t know something... It’s a challenge to adjust to things in here’ (Erbil, 16 April 2019). Even those who stay, often end up living in a ‘bubble’, surrounded by other returnees, where they can preserve their lifestyle. One of the interviewees in Kurdistan observed that her university, her workplace, has become this kind of bubble:

This university is open-minded and open internationally. But in a way this is a virtual society that I’ve built for myself. They say that it’s difficult to integrate into a new society. But I think that it’s much more difficult to reintegrate into a society that you have left. It’s more difficult because we try to integrate, but we cannot 100 percent. You have come back here, and you have changed. You adopted different principles, different things. So you also come to believe that you are different from the rest of

society. Returnees end up feeling isolated (Erbil, 16 April 2019).

This sense of isolation has probably been bolstered by the returnees' own sense of mission and belief in their ability to bring to a change. An interviewee in Somaliland told that 'a lot of diaspora have what we call a diaspora saviour complex. They think that because they are [from] abroad they are better than the people, you think you can do things better. But it's not always the case' (Hargeisa, 10 December 2018). And a South Sudanese returnee reflected that 'I had to learn how to listen to them because what happens most of the time is we think we know everything. So to develop things you have to listen to people and understand how things work' (Juba, 6 March 2019). One Kurdish interview starkly analysed the situation:

You plant a seed in a soil, and it grows in a particular environment. Then you move it to another environment, which has many hostile species. It won't be able to grow, unless it adapts to conditions around it. And this is what diasporas need to do. They need to really understand the environment they are coming into. Otherwise they become preachers. And you know what happens to preachers (Erbil, 16 April 2019).

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing returnees, nonetheless, has been prejudices and hostility toward them by the local population. The vast majority of interviewees identified this as a serious issue affecting their lives in the homeland. A Kurdish returnee, an academic, told that 'We encountered internal racism, or perhaps not racism – but there are certain people who don't like us to come back. They don't want us back because we are taking their jobs. I've heard

the term "imported Kurds". Such perceptions, he recounted, cost him potential jobs in Kurdistan (Erbil, 17 April 2019). The theme of jealousy or envy of those holding dual citizenship has appeared in many of the interviews. But also that of fear, of competition over resources. One interviewee in Kurdistan recounted that 'When I come from the outside, the person who is less capable is scared for his position. And he will face me. That's a natural thing. I have heard the word transplant. It is painful' (Erbil, 16 April 2019). Others have been accused of disloyalty. A South Sudanese returnee bitterly recalled that 'some people look down at you. They try to cast doubt about your loyalty to the country... Some, out of envy, have said, during the fighting [the civil war] that "oh, the diaspora, now they are going to run away, use their passports and leave the country"' (Juba, 13 March 2019). And another reported that 'If there is dislike in the country about Americans, people blame you for being an American who tries to stabilise the country. It's not uncommon' (Juba, 10 April 2019). And a Kurdish interviewee narrated that 'People tell you "you have a passport, you can leave whenever you want..." In 2014 [when ISIS threatened Kurdistan], many of those with foreign passports left. My friends and even students, said "now you are going to leave." I didn't leave... But we have to prove that we are invested here' (Erbil, 24 April 2019).

This hostility has real implications for the work and activism of returnees. As noted above, several returnees admitted that this treatment, even if by a minority of the population, makes them hesitant to publicly express their political views or directly address policymakers. The above-mentioned South Sudanese interviewee warned that 'Those who come from the diaspora, they don't feel comfortable here, because they are

seen as a threat, and this is because of their superior knowledge. But this feeling has started to change' (Juba, 13 March 2019). One interviewee in Juba even described the situation in terms of fighting: 'some of the returnees are targeted. They are hated for coming from abroad... There's almost a sense of fighting between the locals, people who've come back from the diaspora, who have come from Khartoum, from Kenya, all of these groups of people' (Juba, 4 April 2019). And an interviewee in Somaliland, who shifted from working for an international NGO to the government specified that

I can't hide that I'm diaspora because they can tell by the way I speak Somali so they already have an opinion about me. This makes it difficult to do my job. I used to work for NGOs and it was easier because it's more international, but I jumped into the government to see that I'm here to stay and will get there one day! So working for government as diaspora is hard, because of your opinions and the way you speak Somali is weak, so they can tell you what to do because you are just like a child for them. What they will tell you is "You are diaspora and we run things in here differently than you do it normally" (Hargeisa, 6 December 2019).

Within this framework of prejudices, questions of gender have also appeared. Female returnees from the diaspora have been the subject of misconceptions and insults. According to one interviewee in Kurdistan, 'Many people think that I'm easy to get, because I lived in Germany – because they think German girls are also easy to get. Of course, this is not true. But this is one of the prejudices that people have about me' (Erbil,

26 April 2019). Another interviewee in Kurdistan reiterated this notion: 'they have this conception that girls coming from diaspora are not as descent as the ones here, which is completely wrong. They have this view that Kurdish girls in Europe are easy and that. They consider us as less descent' (Sulaymaniyah, 23 April 2019). And in Somaliland, a returnee reported on an anecdote of a similar spirit:

We have the office for Diaspora Affairs in Somaliland. I went there in the first week that I arrived. I filled in so many forms, and made a statement. I told them, "I want to be useful to the community. Put me in any place that you feel I can be useful for." It didn't happen. They didn't call me back. Well, they did call me back, but not for that reason. Some young guy who was there called me, trying to track me up. He felt "oh, there's a young lady from England, she is new and fresh and has no idea" (Hargeisa, 20 January 2019).

There were only a few statements on this issue, but they give another indication of what returnees may face in the homeland.

On the other hand, and this is perhaps a reason for optimism, returnees have developed strategies and ways to cope with such hostility. A South Sudanese interviewee pointed out that 'those who came back have learned the context where the country is, what are the issues and how things are done' (Juba, 23 May 2019). These ways of coping and strategies have mainly revolved around developing a thick skin toward such attitudes, a greater understanding of their new environment, and emphasis on excelling in their work. A Kurdish interviewee summarised

his effort in that 'I established connections and people know me, they know my ideas and goals. And now they are more willing to accept me. But if I had come from Sweden straight with Swedish mentality to try change things, this wouldn't work' (Erbil, 17 April 2019). Another interviewee confirmed that:

I have found different ways to cope with such challenges. I always prove that I was right, and by time they realise that the way I offered should have been implemented... But it's also about working with them, and whenever I work with them, even if it takes a lot of effort, I try to show them how to do things (Erbil, 24 April 2019).

For others, the strategy has involved a firm standing on their ground, without hesitating to confront their accusers. As one Somalilander returnee put it, when attacked on his background, 'I challenge them back, I put them in their place' (Hargeisa, 9 December 2018). Alternatively, others have chosen to invest more in learning about their homeland:

There are many people who come here [to Somaliland] with high expectations and then they get disappointed. So my advice to them is, when you come here, don't expect too much. You come here just as a normal Somali or Somalilander if you want. Learn more about yourself, because you learn more about yourself when you are in your homeland. Have a clear purpose, but do not overly think that purpose (Hargeisa, 27 December 2019).

Overall impact and contribution

Notwithstanding the challenges they have faced, many of the interviewees confidently pointed out the achievements their work, activism and participation in general have had over society and politics in the homeland. They have related this not to their independent work, but to their integration into existing advocacy networks, civil society movements and other positions that have enabled them to work with local actors, mainly through sharing their experiences. The article has already mentioned above successful campaigns in which returnees have participated, such as the anti-trafficking legislation and the introduction of environmental laws in Kurdistan. But examples are ample. An interviewee in Kurdistan played a key role in forming one of the first shelters to LGBT subjected to persecution and threat (Sulaymaniyah, 2 May 2019). In Somaliland, one interviewee was involved in drafting legislation to register all of the currency exchange companies operating in the country and set them with a daily rate (Hargeisa, 10 December 2018). Another founded a consortium for NGOs and international organisations tackling malnutrition (Hargeisa, 27 December 2018). Another interviewee in Hargeisa, advancing prisoners' rights, was successful in introducing vocational training programmes to prisoners, this is a country where such concept as prisoners' rights never really existed: some of the inmates have been able to find jobs because they got qualifications from the UN, that they are qualified, and they can work in these roles' (Hargeisa, 3 December 2018). In South Sudan, one interviewee working for a UN agency on the subject of IDPs insinuated a close collaboration with policymakers at different levels, testifying that 'We work closely with the

ministers of foreign affairs and the interior. We do a lot of things. I can't elaborate, but I've worked on drafting bylaws' (Juba, 14 May 2019). And another interviewee, working for an NGO advancing public health, participated as an advisor in parliamentary discussions that to the increase of maternity leave from 60 to 90 days (Juba, 20 February 2019). And another proclaimed that due to his training of judges and policemen in areas of Equatoria, as part of his work for a capacity-building programme set by a UN agency, 'the rate of arbitrary detention has been reduced dramatically' (Juba, 21 February 2019).

Naturally, one should be cautious about taking testimonies at face value. But even if some of these testimonies are exaggerated for self-gratification, they still reflect the agendas of returnees, the way they may defer from stayees' and their strategies for achieving such changes. Moreover, for many of the interviewees, their achievements and changes they brought have not been at the government or other decision-making levels. Rather, they have been at the grassroots level, among their relatives and communities. Thus, the interviewee advancing LGBT rights told that 'My mom is a very religious person. She didn't believe in LGBT [rights]. But when I explain to her, she says "do your best to protect them from being killed." At least I changed my mom's mind. It is a good thing for me. It was not easy' (Sulaymaniyah, 2 May 2019). For another interviewee, a journalist and documentary moviemaker, introducing new techniques and practices of journalism to his colleagues has been a great achievement (Erbil, 14 April 2019). In Somaliland, one interview was able to tell that a subsidised football academy he founded has brought in together 1,300 kids, boys and girls, from all over Hargeisa, enabling members of different clans and parts of the city to integrate better than many other frameworks (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). For another,

describing clan politics as a source of instability in Somaliland, even avoiding asking job applicants at her organisation for details that could disclose their clan background has served as setting an example to her colleagues (Hargeisa, 6 December 2018). As one Southern Sudanese interviewee concluded,

In my interaction with my family, my voice has been valued. As you probably know, in South Sudanese society, the male family members are the ones who have the last word. But in my family, even my older brothers consult with me. They listen to my suggestions and come for my advice. People have also been more receptive to my ideas. If we talk about girls' education... I feel that my listeners can value my advice and my input. This is because I present the example of a female who is educated, but at the same time a female who respects and values her community (Juba, 19 March 2019).

In light of these achievements, many of the interviewees, though again not all, have concurred that the diaspora should play an active role in the socio-political development of the homeland. As a South Sudanese interviewee phrased it, 'diaspora have a special space that they need to occupy here, in order to bring about change. Their knowledge and their experience from wherever they are coming from can contribute in terms of bringing new technologies, civil society, trying to bring about change in the country' (Juba, 2 May 2019). A Kurdish interviewee remarked that 'It is good to transfer the experience, the knowledge you gained abroad back to your country. It is

[diaspora involvement] a great opportunity to build a great society here (Sulaymaniyah, 2 May 2019). And a Somalilander returnee suggested that 'We need doctors, nurses, and teachers so we need everyone here to work together; locals need to give the chance to those young professionals' (Hargeisa, 20 January 2019).

Others, though, had reservations about the influx of returnees. One interviewee in Somaliland maintained that 'I think a lot of diaspora either become part of the problem or part of the solution so I would say it is 50/50... For example, if something happens, diaspora can fly out immediately, but local people will stay here so this is when they become part of the problem' (Hargeisa, 4 December 2018). And a South Sudanese interviewee commented that 'Diaspora should be more active in South Sudan, but in a constructive way. If they start talking about issues they don't understand, they could only make things worst' (Juba, 19 March 2019). A Kurdish interviewee explained that 'We are lacking a structure. And therefore, if anyone is coming within this confusion, they would confuse people here as well. I wouldn't necessarily recommend them to return' (Erbil, 16 April 2019). This recommendation also had a practical consideration: 'Sometimes they are more useful there than in here. In the 1990s, when the situation was bad, their economic support was crucial. I would suggest instead keeping some links' (ibid). Another interviewee in Kurdistan reiterated this logic: 'I think we need the diaspora everywhere in the world to promote the Kurdish cause and show the world who the Kurdish people are... It's better if they work better where they are and contribute to the countries that they are in' (Duhok, 24 April 2019).

Those who have wished to see greater involvement of the diaspora in homeland affairs, nevertheless, admitted the need for governments and international organisations facilitation of

return to the homeland. A Kurdish interviewee elucidated that 'Women prefer to stay in the West; they don't want to come to this prison. Change in women rights is essential to attract diaspora people. More openness in society, more equality between men and women, equal pay, just being treated equally' (Duhok, 23 April 2019). And a Somalilander interviewee simply concluded that 'I would raise awareness for both locals and diaspora. Where diaspora needs to be patient and to make locals understand that they need to start benefiting from diaspora and that they are not coming back to get their jobs' (Hargeisa, 20 January 2019). And a South Sudanese interviewee urged his government to

have resources from outside of the country that they can tap into... There are many people who want to come and be part of the change, but they have no basis to come back to. They have never seen the country since the time they left. How do we make them move here? These are very important things and maybe one day, the government and donor community may decide to design a programme that would allow the diaspora to come back and be part of the nation-building (Juba, 6 March 2019).

Such concrete plans, nevertheless, have yet to be designed among governments and international organisations.

Findings and Conclusion

While the experiences of individuals may undoubtedly be different to an extent, one can identify recurring themes, experiences and perceptions. These perceptions cross sectors,

groups and countries. First, the motivations for members of diaspora communities to return to their homelands are multiple and intertwined. The vast majority of the interviewees noted that the desire to bring to develop the homeland was an essential part of their decision to return. In several cases, this was intertwined with the desire to reunite with their families. For others, it was the hope to expose their children to the lives and customs in the homeland, to instil them identity and a sense of belonging to the homeland. But in most cases, returnees stressed their desire to return and contribute to the homeland and its society. Even if this was an *ex post facto* justification, it still indicates the significance that returnees pay to their seeming obligation to contribute to the society that had sent them – and then received them back.

All of the interviewees, with no exception, cherished the experience that they gained through their lives in the host country. The vast majority of interviewees have expressed pride in their belonging to the host country. The experiences that they gained in the host countries, through their education and exposure to Western norms and practices, have been portrayed as key to their participation in public, social and political life in the homeland. When asked about the advantages of being diasporans for their activities, the only near-consensus answer has been that the life in the West has made returnees more involved citizens, with higher expectations of their governments and authorities.

Many of the returnees downplayed the idea that coming of the diaspora has opened doors for them. Most acknowledged that their access to education abroad, their knowledge of foreign languages, and professional experience had given them advantages of the locals in competition over jobs, including positions in government and the civil service. But they have

also stressed that without merit, such advantages mean little beyond the initial footstep. Most have stressed that the most considerable advantage of having a foreign passport is the mobility that it has allowed them, which most of the locals are denied. But for most, the passports did not seem to provide a sense of protection or greater freedom – again, at last, based on their statements.

Along with these advantages, most interviewees admitted the existence of disadvantages or challenges stemming from their status as returnees. The challenge mentioned most frequently is that of resentment because of jealousy. Interviewees noted that their advantages as diaspora returnees - many of the interviewees related this to competition over employment and the threat that they present to stayees. Being absent, and enjoying the 'streets paved of gold' in the West, at times when the stayees had suffered hardship during times of conflict and poverty, has also been used against returnees. However, perhaps the most critical challenge from this report's perspective, though not mentioned very frequently, is the fact that returnees often end living the 'ex-pat life'. That is, returnees end up somewhat isolated from the community, as they mostly engage with other returnees and essentially recreate their lives in the host country. One, of course, may argue that people of similar educational, economic and cultural background tend to coalesce everywhere and that this is not unique to the cases in question. But if there is a potential for diaspora returnees to serve as a transnational civil society, such isolation can be a hindrance. Overall, nonetheless, the vast majority of diaspora returnees have maintained that their status and situation has been far more advantageous than

disadvantageous. Most have developed strategies to overcome the challenges and advance in their fields.

These findings have important policy implications, for donor organisations and governments, the homelands, and the diaspora communities themselves. Donor organisations and governments should take further steps to institutionalise the involvement of the diaspora in overseas developmental campaigns. This is especially true in cases of homelands where the government does not have institutions in place to foster diaspora's involvement in the social and political affairs of the homeland. Donor organisations and agencies, such as DFID (e.g. 2014; 2013) have identified the importance of diaspora participation in various aspects of social, political and cultural development in the homeland. Nevertheless, not much has been done so far to institutionalise and organise such engagement.

This is not without risks; diaspora returnees to the homeland means a potential brain drain for the host countries. The emigration of well-education, socially and politically conscious individuals, who may eventually choose to stay in the homeland may not be desirable for governments in the host countries. Yet, the benefits in terms of international development may exceed the shortcoming mentioned above. Moreover, it is necessary to bear in mind, as much as returnees view the homeland as a significant part of their identity, they are also strongly connected to the so-called host country. Another potential hindrance to organising diaspora activism by donor states is the sensitivity involved in such action. Encouraging individuals to engage with, or travel to the homeland may signal to them that the donor agency or government view them as foreigners in their own country. Undoubtedly, helping diaspora organisations and institutions should

be done with high sensitivity. Agencies and organisations should not target individuals, but seek existing diaspora platforms and collaborate with them.

One way in which aid agencies and donor governments can support greater diaspora involvement in the homeland, and thus turn diasporans into a more influential transnational civil society, is through funding diaspora initiatives, in both the host country and homeland. Through such collaboration, donors may fund workshops and training programmes that would inform diaspora returnees and travellers. Such workshops could highlight to the returnees their advantages and how they can be utilised to the social, political and economic development in the homeland. But such workshops could also unveil to returnees the difficulties they may face upon returning to the homeland. If facing difficulties in the homeland bears the risk of returnees leaving the homeland back to the host country, knowledge about these potential challenges may reduce their costs for returnees.

Governments in the homeland may also contribute by finding ways to integrate diaspora returnees in society. If isolation and living in a 'bubble' is something that some diaspora returnees seek to avoid, governments could initiate a growing interaction between returnees and stayees. Being aware of the, often not unjustified, fear and resentment expressed by stayees toward returnees, governments may find ways to highlight the contribution of returnees to the homeland. In the long term, returnees could serve as a catalysator for a long-term change in education, health and policymaking in general.

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