

# Social Accountability in Diaspora Organizations Aiding Syrian Migrants

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents data from a study of Syrian diaspora organizations providing assistance to conflict-affected Syrians in Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Using interview data from leaders in four Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations, this article examines the social mechanisms used to ensure accountability within the challenging environments where the organizations operate. We find that Syrian diaspora organizations benefit from informal social accountability mechanisms that derive from individuals' social network ties. Personal, social forms of accountability are particularly valuable to these organizations because these mechanisms help circumvent uncertainty and challenges in the operational environment. These findings reflect an important theme in the extant literature on diaspora philanthropy: diaspora members may have an advantage over other actors because of dense personal networks that make them adept at identifying dependable partners and enforcing agreements even in places where banking and legal systems are fragile.

## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict has led to more than 4.8 million people departing Syria and 7.6 million more being internally displaced (UNHCR, 2015, 2016). As large-scale government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) struggle to respond, what strategies and comparative advantages might Syrian diaspora non-profits have when navigating this complex operational environment? To address this broad question, this article presents data from an inductive, exploratory study of Syrian diaspora organizations providing assistance to conflict-affected Syrians. Using interview data from leaders in four Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations, our grounded theory approach generated findings on ways that social mechanisms are used to ensure performance accountability when the organizations provide aid in the Middle East, specifically in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. Within these challenging environments, we find that diaspora organizations use informal social accountability mechanisms such as reputation, trust, social networks and shaming to ensure that employees and organizational partners are held accountable to organizational leadership when delivering services. The origins and use of these accountability mechanisms differ from their use in many other non-profit organizations because they derive specifically from individuals' social network ties within the Syrian diaspora. Intricate family, friendship and reputational networks that are unavailable to non-Syrians help these diaspora non-profit organizations mitigate uncertainty and challenging conditions in the operational environment.

Research on diaspora non-profit organizations, and on the use of informal social accountability in non-profit organizations, has been limited. This article contributes to both fields of inquiry by

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offering new insights into the specific ways diaspora organizations make use of informal social accountability mechanisms. Research on accountability mechanisms has typically focused on more formal aspects of accountability (for example, financial audits and reports), while informal social accountability has largely been ignored (Romzek et al., 2012). Romzek et al. (2012) examine what they term informal accountability (for example, the use of trust, reputation, social ties and informal meetings) in organizational networks in the United States. Other studies of informal social mechanisms, such as repeated interaction, norms of reciprocity, facilitative behaviours, informal rewards and sanctions and informal monitoring, have also been conducted in politically stable, economically developed countries such as Australia and the United States (Mandell & Keast, 2007; Amirkhanyan, 2009, 2010; Romzek et al., 2014). Tsai (2007) and Hossain (2010) observe what they term social accountability in the context of developing nations, examining mechanisms such as reputation, shaming, social prestige and even beatings.

In this article, we use the term social accountability to refer to the mechanisms identified above. We contribute to the current state of knowledge on accountability by adding to the limited literature on informal social mechanisms of accountability and examining the utility of these mechanisms in less stable, less economically developed contexts. We find that social accountability mechanisms become valuable tools when organizations are operating in a region with violent conflict, where legal and financial obstacles are ubiquitous. Organizations may use social accountability as an alternative tool to monitor and control service delivery, and to address information asymmetry.

These findings reflect an important theme in the extant literature on diaspora philanthropy: diaspora members may have an advantage over other actors because of dense personal networks that make them adept at identifying dependable partners and enforcing agreements, even in places where banking and legal systems are fragile (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2011). For the purposes of this article, we define diaspora non-profit organizations as organizations that are founded, led and predominantly operated by members of a diaspora community, and that are engaged in diaspora philanthropy. We define diaspora philanthropy as diaspora members providing assistance in various forms (money, goods, volunteer labour, knowledge and skills and other assets) for the social benefit of members of an ancestral community beyond the individuals' immediate family members, in a country or region where there is a population with whom the donor has ancestral ties.

Johnson (2007) calls diaspora philanthropy one of the least understood subfields of philanthropy, with Brinkerhoff (2014: 1) describing research on diaspora philanthropy as "in its infancy." Scholars agree that diaspora philanthropy seems to be a not strategic tool but an ad hoc practice (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Sidel, 2008). While some research speaks to potential comparative advantages offered by diaspora organizations (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2008, 2011), little if any research addresses internal organizational or management strategies of diaspora organizations. Our article contributes to the literature on potential advantages of diaspora organizations, and begins a discussion of distinctive accountability strategies used by these organizations.

This study examines the use of social accountability in diaspora non-profit organizations operating in complex and dangerous political, legal and financial contexts, thus adding to the literature on both diaspora philanthropy and social accountability in organizations. We begin by reviewing the literatures on diaspora philanthropy and social accountability, then provide a short overview of the current migration crisis generated by the ongoing conflict in Syria. We follow with the methodology for the study, and conclude by offering findings on how social accountability mechanisms are used in the complex operational environment of the Syrian conflict.

## LITERATURE ON DIASPORA PHILANTHROPY

Sheffer (1986) defines diasporas as "ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of

origin—their homelands.” Diaspora members have an emotional connection to a shared language, culture and/or ancestral homeland that manifest as a feeling of membership in a unified community, despite members being physically spread across great distances (Werbner, 2002). These emotional ties often generate an interest in the hardships endured by other diaspora members in the homeland and beyond (Brinkerhoff, 2008, 2011; Best et al., 2013; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2016). Assistance to other members of the diaspora can serve as one means of expressing identity and demonstrating belonging to the community (Nielsen and Riddle, 2009; Brinkerhoff, 2011). A sense of responsibility generated by a comparatively high quality of life and cultural norms of mutual aid can serve as other motivations for aiding members of the diaspora (Brinkerhoff, 2008, 2011; Tchouassi and Sikod, 2010; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2016). Most studies of diaspora donors focus on business aspects, such as remittances and private investing, but fewer studies have been conducted on philanthropic practices among diaspora groups, making diaspora philanthropy one of the most poorly understood subfields of philanthropic practice (Johnson, 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2014).

### **Social Networks and Diaspora Philanthropy**

Most scholars agree that diaspora is largely informal and improvised (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Sidel, 2008). Diaspora philanthropy is a critical portion of remittances, which makes studies of remittances highly relevant to diaspora philanthropy. Research on remittances gives us important insights into the mechanisms through which diaspora philanthropy can occur. Family channels are critical to remittances (Sidel, 2008), as are the social networks provided through clan associations (Sidel, 2008; Tchouassi and Sikod, 2010). Limited time, resources and expertise mean that most migrants work through an intermediary to target aid to projects assisting the diaspora. Intermediary organizations can include ethnic and professional groups, neighbourhood and regional groups, home-town associations, online giving platforms, faith-based organizations, diaspora foundations, and foreign-based ethnic NGOs, among others (Sidel, 2008; Newland et al., 2010).

### **Advantages of Diaspora Philanthropy**

In international development policy, there is a focus on the potential impact of diaspora philanthropy on peace-building, economic development and stability. Diaspora members are assumed to be peace-builders and stability generators, and economically helpful through remittances and direct investment in their countries (Smith and Stares, 2007; Brinkerhoff, 2009). Diaspora members are thought to have advantages over larger multinational aid agencies and smaller non-local NGOs. One advantage is diaspora members’ emotional commitment: their strong social and emotional connections may cause them to become involved in projects or communities not prioritized by other donors, and diaspora members may be less deterred by complications in the field (Brinkerhoff, 2011, 2014). In fact, challenging conditions may serve as a motivator for some donors, particularly since diaspora members are aware that their social networks in the country of origin may increasingly rely on diaspora aid during challenging times (Lubkemann, 2008; Brinkerhoff, 2011; Flanigan and Abdel-Samad, 2016).

Diaspora members may have a better understanding of context-specific needs and strategies than non-diaspora philanthropists or development professionals (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Johnson, 2007). Diaspora members may have better knowledge of and entrée to local organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2008, 2011). Diaspora members may be skilled at ascertaining partners’ reliability, and may be seen by those partners as more credible than other external actors (Newland and Patrick, 2004). Additionally, diaspora members may have means of executing agreements using social norms and social networks in places where the legal and banking systems are fragile (Newland and Patrick, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2011).

## Challenges of Diaspora Philanthropy

For all the excitement around diaspora philanthropy, challenges abound. Concerns about equity and targeting aid to those most in need are paramount. Since diaspora philanthropy often relies on personal networks, those not tied to relevant networks may not have access to assistance (Brinkerhoff, 2008; Bains, 2014). Diaspora members often are interested in aiding individuals from their own group or region, which can worsen socio-economic disparities (Van Hear et al., 2010). Because diaspora aid is often amateur, ad hoc, and voluntary in nature, the priorities of diaspora donors may not align with the needs or priorities of beneficiaries, and effectiveness can be reduced (Salamon, 1995; Newland et al., 2010). Davies (2010) cautions that diaspora philanthropy is very context-specific, and can be only one component of policy efforts to address poverty or alleviate conflict.

Our work adds to this literature by illuminating the internal organizational practices of Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations as intermediary organizations. The study contributes knowledge of how diaspora organizations ensure accountability through the same family and social network channels that are critical to transfer of remittances. In addition, our study adds to the literature on advantages and drawbacks of diaspora philanthropy by further elucidating the role that social networks and social norms play in the operation of diaspora organizations.

## LITERATURE ON INFORMAL OR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability mechanisms are used by organizations to ensure better performance, the legal and rightful use of resources and equity (Behn, 2001). Formal principal-agent accountability mechanisms such as audits, receipts, official communication, annual reports and financial records are used to “hold people responsible,” but they face limitations in that they often do not take into account multiple principals or accountability to mission and values (Ebrahim, 2003). Accountability is inherently relational (Ebrahim, 2003), and formal accountability mechanisms often have limited application when considering networks of organizations operating collectively (Romzek et al., 2014), as are often found in humanitarian aid contexts. The limitations of formal accountability mechanisms are exacerbated when non-profit organizations operate in contexts of violent conflict, or where laws limit the work of humanitarian organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2011). These limitations raise a need to better understand alternative forms of accountability, and accountability outside economically developed, politically stable countries.

Alternative forms of accountability, such as informal social accountability, are less prominent in the literature on organizational accountability, but studies exist. Most research on informal accountability has focused on the United States and on networks of organizations (Romzek et al., 2012, 2014), and information relevant to international contexts is limited. The few researchers focusing on informal accountability in developing countries (Bangladesh and China) have examined this concept within the context of the public sector, approaching it from the perspective of how citizens can use social strategies (such as shaming or beating) to affect accountability (Tsai, 2007; Hossain, 2010).

Repeated interactions, trust, norms of reciprocity, facilitative behaviours, informal rewards and sanctions and informal monitoring (Mandell & Keast, 2007; Amirkhanyan, 2009, 2010; Romzek et al., 2014) are all key elements of a general theory about informal social accountability. Informal accountability mechanisms such as face-to-face meetings (Ostrom & Walker, 1997; Ostrom, 2000), or having as off-the-record phone calls or informal meetings rather than reporting a problem (Van Slyke, 2007), have proved to increase cooperation in some settings. Organizations or individuals in networks that use informal accountability mechanisms, abide by shared norms, and engage in

facilitative behaviours then are rewarded with favours, future collaboration, public recognition, enhanced reputation and advance notice of changes. However, if individuals and organizations violate shared norms and practices, they are sanctioned in the form of diminished reputation, loss of opportunities and exclusion from the information network (Romzek et al., 2012).

A key shared norm that contributes to social accountability is trust. While it can be difficult to achieve (Ansell and Gash, 2007), trust is crucial for successful collaboration (Brown et al., 2007; Emerson et al., 2012; Romzek et al., 2012), and results in numerous benefits (Klijn et al., 2010). Trust can play an important role in growth in countries with weak financial systems (Knack & Keefer, 1997). Trust can improve information sharing, reduce transaction costs, improve cooperation, reduce uncertainty and facilitate innovation (Klijn et al., 2010; Romzek et al., 2014).

In tandem with trust, informal accountability is continuously reinforced by facilitative behaviours (Romzek et al., 2014). Facilitative behaviours are repetitive, and relationship- and information-based. Some examples of facilitative behaviours found in the United States include frequent and continued communication, sharing information, taking responsibility for and correcting mistakes, providing favours and following through on commitments (Romzek et al., 2012). The relationship between trust and shared norms is mutually reinforcing, with facilitative behaviours reinforcing shared norms such as trust, and shared norms increasing one's willingness to engage in facilitative behaviours (Romzek et al., 2012).

Finally, reputation is a key tool in the reward- and sanction-toolkit of informal social accountability. To ensure that accountability takes place, organizations and individuals in organizations can enhance the reputation of their partners professionally (Romzek et al., 2012) or socially (Tsai, 2007). They can also tarnish that reputation. Social reputation is an end objective. Social reputation motivates people, since it provides a certain prestige in their community (Tsai, 2007; Hossain, 2010). In the case of professional reputation, the objective is more transactional in nature: to ensure future collaboration (Romzek et al., 2014). On the professional level, the reputation of employees and the organization might be based on strong performance, while on the social level employees' or partners' reputation is based on securing and distributing resources in a fair manner (Hossain, 2010). If individuals or organizations lose some of their reputation, then their ability to collaborate with new and existing organizations decreases. This will automatically reflect on their social reputation, since they will not be able to capture and distribute resources to those in need.

Syrian social networks have traditionally been dense and strong (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Leenders & Heydemann, 2012; Stevens, 2016). Social networks can be based on regional affiliation, religion, ethnicity and socio-economic status. They resemble informal institutions that assist members on both the material and social levels (El-Said & Harrigan, 2009). Social networks in the Middle Eastern countries are based on trust and reciprocity (El-Said & Harrigan, 2009). Diaspora organizations build on the embedded trust available in social networks to select people and organizations with whom they can collaborate. These individuals in turn provide diaspora members with information on what is happening in local organizations.

## BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SYRIAN MIGRATION CRISIS

Emigration from Syria has a long history, but at the time of writing, attention is focused on the refugee crisis spurred by the Syrian civil war, an ever-evolving multiparty conflict that initially began with the Arab Spring protests in early 2011. As of July 2016, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees estimated that more than one million displaced Syrians reside in Lebanon and more than 2.7 million reside in Turkey (UNHCR, 2016).

With a population estimated at only 4.6 million in 2012 (UN, 2015), Lebanon is one of the smallest host countries in the Middle East. "No country in recent memory has taken on more

refugees proportional to its size,” states UNHCR Representative to Lebanon Ninette Kelley (UNHCR, 2014a: 3). Many towns and villages are home to more Syrian refugees than Lebanese, with refugees living in more than 1,700 communities and more than 1,400 informal refugee settlements (UNHCR, 2015). Plagued by many years of civil war, subsequent sectarian conflict, and political impasses that disrupt government services, infrastructure in Lebanon was already weak prior to the Syrian conflict. The arrival of a large and vulnerable refugee population has created even greater strain on existing service systems (UNHCR, 2014a).

Although Turkey is a larger and wealthier country than Lebanon, Syrian refugees face many challenges there as well. The Turkish government assumed the Syrian conflict would resolve quickly when it first initiated its “open-door” policy towards Syrian refugees, but is less able to handle the large and long-term challenges of aiding 2.7 million people. Initially most refugees resided in camps which were regarded as high quality, managed by the Turkish state and NGOs. However, as the conflict continues many refugees have become urban dwellers, taking shelter at their own expense in cities, yet unable to work in the formal economy due to a lack of work permits (İçduygu, 2015). In both Lebanon and Turkey, local community relations are strained by growing grievances against Syrians, who are viewed as taking jobs from locals, increasing housing costs and shortages, and contributing to political instability (İçduygu, 2015).

The conflict between the Syrian regime and various rebel groups, as well as amongst rebel groups including Isis, has pushed millions of Syrians away from war-infested areas to safer areas, often only to be forced to move again as the conflict shifts. Both the violent conflict and large influxes of internally displaced individuals put tremendous pressure on often-destroyed infrastructure, as well as on service delivery organizations. The absence of civilian protection, and attacks on civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, parks, water networks, places of worship and economic assets (UNICEF, 2015: 7; Al-Jazeera, 2016), have increased the need for services, but also increased the risk to international organizations that attempt to deliver services. Amongst the organizations working to serve individuals inside Syria and Syrian refugees are Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations funded and operated by individuals of Syrian ancestry in Europe, the Middle East, and North America.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected using semi-structured interviews with individuals in leadership roles in four Syrian diaspora non-profit organizations that provide social services to Syrians inside and outside Syria. In some cases services are provided in formal settings (e.g. a school constructed by a diaspora organization or shared with another organization), but much more frequently services are provided in community settings such as refugee tent encampments or urban areas with refugee concentrations, without formal offices for the organizations. All four organizations provide services in more than one country, most commonly in Syria and one or more additional countries that host a large refugee population. For all four organizations, service provision began in an informal, ad hoc, small-scale manner. The organizations later formalized and applied for non-profit or NGO legal status once the scope of their activities became large enough to make such formalization desirable for purposes of fundraising and banking. The organizations have non-profit/NGO legal status in Canada, France or the United States (and in some cases in more than one of these countries), but do not maintain formal offices in the countries where they are legally registered. The organizations operate with unpaid volunteers, or a very small number of paid staff. The organizations provide humanitarian aid such as clothing, food, fuel, medical treatment and reconstruction services; some also support or operate schools for displaced children. These services are provided by raising funds to pay local professionals or procure goods, or by bringing



professionals (often other diaspora members) from outside the region to volunteer in the region for short periods.

The interview protocol is partially based on a survey by Riddle and Brinkerhoff (2011) and an interview protocol by Soss (2000). The protocol examines personal motivations for becoming involved in philanthropic activity, what mechanisms diaspora members use to engage with individuals inside Syria and within the region, what mechanisms are used to send funds and resources to the region and expectations of accountability for funds, mechanisms for assessing the success of an intervention, and links between philanthropy and individuals' perceptions of the broad political goals of the Syrian diaspora.

Interview participants were selected using a purposive sample based on individuals' leadership roles within Syrian philanthropic networks. This sample was supplemented by a snowball sample of individuals recommended by other interview participants, which served as a suitable sampling method given our explicit interest in the role of diaspora social networks in aid. The individuals in the sample share network connections with other Syrians primarily based on friendship and family connections, but in some cases also due to professional connections, such as being alumni of the same university. Twenty-six diasporic Syrians who held leadership roles in four Syrian diaspora organizations were interviewed. We considered organization founders, board members and individuals who directed key programmes and initiatives within the organization to be leaders, even if these roles were unpaid. We plan to increase our sample size in the future as we interview additional front-line staff and service recipients. However, because we interviewed individuals in leadership roles for this phase of the project, we found we reached saturation with 26 participants (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Creswell, 1998).

The individuals in the sample were engaged in activism, volunteering, donating money or resources and other philanthropic activity targeted towards Syrians inside Syria and those displaced to other countries including Canada, Germany, Lebanon, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. All interview participants were Syrian, or of Syrian descent, with ongoing familial and friendship ties within Syria and the region. Interviews were conducted between February 2015 and August 2016. Interviews were conducted in person in Germany, Lebanon and the United States at sites of the interview participants' choice. In Germany and Lebanon these often were sites of service provision to refugees, but other public locations such as parks or coffee shops were common. Due to the wide dispersion of our sample, interviews were also conducted by phone, Skype or Google Hangout with individuals based in the Gulf States, Europe, Lebanon and North America. Most interviews were conducted in English, with eight interviews conducted in Arabic by a native Arabic speaker.

Many of these individuals are involved in efforts by multiple diaspora networks, and talked about their work with various initiatives in several countries. Because of our interest in the effectiveness of informal social accountability mechanisms in the complex operating environments geographically proximate to the Syrian conflict, in this article we focus specifically on interview data related to the organizations' efforts in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

This study does not engage in a comparative analysis of diaspora philanthropy in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, largely due to the inductive approach of the study and the nature of the interview participants' responses. All interview participants report engagement in philanthropic efforts with displaced Syrians in at least two countries. Nonetheless, interview participants focused on the similarities between their experiences in the countries where they operated, rather than describing differences. Undoubtedly there are important variations amongst the three countries' operating environments, and as such we do not suggest that the findings of this study are broadly generalizable. A future study with a larger sample and a comparative sampling frame may produce data on key differences in country contexts and their influence on philanthropic practice.

## INFORMAL SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN SYRIAN DIASPORA NON-PROFITS

Facing logistical and security barriers that would challenge any organization, diaspora organizations continue to deliver assistance in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey several years into the Syrian conflict. According to data from the study's interviews, these organizations depend on informal social tools of accountability to deliver their services. They work with trusted individuals to act as the organizations' agents, deliver services and move money to targeted recipients. Because trust is critical for service delivery in the context of war and disrupted financial systems, diaspora members choose to work with individuals from their trusted social networks, and use social accountability mechanisms to ensure services are delivered.

Diaspora organizations overcome financial and security barriers in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey through the connections they enjoy within their social networks. Social networks allow diaspora organizations' members to access resources that make them more productive, such as accessing people operating in conflict areas who have the trust and credibility of the different fighting groups and who can deliver services needed by Syrian citizens. As an example, one organization is able to operate refugee schools and pay its teachers in Lebanon because a trusted Syrian individual who was vetted through friendship and professional networks directly accesses the diaspora organization's US bank account by ATM, and provides those funds to staff members on the ground in Lebanon. Paying staff would be nearly impossible otherwise, since Syrian organizations are viewed with suspicion in Lebanon and have a very difficult time opening bank accounts or formally registering as NGOs. Even if the organization had a bank account, US banking regulations make it remarkably difficult to transfer money to the region. In the cases of Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, diaspora organizations' members build on their social networks to determine trusted individuals who can assist them in delivering services in less accessible areas, in evaluating local needs and in dealing with daily operations of the organization.

The dire security situation in Syria makes it nearly impossible for leaders of diaspora organizations to visit Syria on a regular basis. Diaspora organizations' collaboration with other entities becomes essential. However, choosing an appropriate partner is crucial for diaspora organizations' leaders. In the absence of formal tools such as the ability to take legal action against partners that do not deliver, diaspora organizations need to find individuals and/or organizations that they can trust to limit the impact of a failed partnership. In peaceful countries where the state is operating, it is easier to hold people and organizations accountable; in war-torn countries, however, or countries that institute legal and financial limitations on non-profits, diaspora organizations face major obstacles. Trusted individuals identified through diaspora social networks deliver the services themselves, or facilitate introductions between diaspora leaders and humanitarian efforts inside Syria. These trusted contacts provide diaspora organizations with an assessment of interpersonal behaviour, and confidence in organizational competence and expected performance.

### **The "good names": identifying trusted partners**

The ability to identify trusted individuals through diasporic social networks gives diaspora organizations the advantage of having "eyes on the ground" in places where conflict makes it harder for humanitarian organizations to act. The diaspora members trust key individuals, and respond to the needs of the community on the basis of the trusted individual's assessment. Trusted individuals also provide channels for moving money, goods and expertise into communities that might otherwise be difficult to access.

The trust embedded in social networks assists organizations in choosing potential partners and provides diaspora organizations with means to hold their partners accountable for delivering services. Trusted individuals act as a mechanism of social accountability that allows diaspora



organizations to detect any goal conflict; if the trusted person reports that a partner organization has political or financial motives that do not align with the diaspora organization's objective, then collaboration may end. As one young American of Syrian descent described it:

The organizations I work with, I know the people personally that work within the organization, so you really do know what's going on, what the motives are, is there an agenda, is there not. Versus the organization [mentions a Syrian diaspora organization], the reason why we were very sceptical was because, well, we didn't see any people that we know, it was just the idea that we've never seen this organization, what exactly is their agenda; you do feel sceptical when you're not familiar.

As another Syrian businessman residing in Lebanon explains:

The way we operate somehow reflects how Syrians are now living. Most of the founders are not in Syria. It's only me in Lebanon, and all the other founders are in the United Arab Emirates. So what we do is that we have operatives in each region... and they manage all seven schools, and we also partner with the local community for the renovation part. So basically we don't do anything operationally, the founders are not involved in the operation, what we do is we get the funds, and then we find the proper partner to do the renovation for us... we have our networks, we have our contacts, we have our friends and our families [who are still in Syria] who are part of what is going on. So this is how we started, then the good names are easy to figure out.

### **Trust and assessment of local needs**

Having an accurate assessment of local needs can be a major challenge for humanitarian NGOs, specially in contexts of conflict where service environments are challenging and dynamic. As one diaspora interviewee indicates:

They [larger humanitarian NGOs] basically shove down your throat what they think you need, and then that's also how you get very angry people. You also get a lot of unrest that way, you know if people are saying we don't want any more food baskets, we actually are looking for jobs, and an NGO just keeps sending us food baskets, then that's a problem. And what people end up doing is selling those food baskets, or it gets into the wrong hands, or it starts to become this mafia style, you know, selling and buying, you know it becomes a mess. That [accurate understanding of local needs] is a very huge point that we at our foundation make sure to do.

Having contacts who are currently living in the targeted community provides these partners with a comparative advantage when it comes to assessing local needs. One interviewee indicates:

These programmes came because we go and ask people what they need. ... We basically provided a big tanker, a big oil tanker that was giving out heating fuel, and people lined up in Aleppo, in the outskirts of Aleppo, for heating fuel. But since we have people we trust there, we can find out the greatest need in that moment. And because we are flexible we don't have to stick to a budget that says, "Well this money is for clothing." We can say, "Forget clothing, use that money to buy heating fuel, that's what people say they need."

### **Trust and financial accountability**

Moving funds into Lebanon and Syria can be very challenging due to strict banking regulations towards Lebanon by the United States government and some European governments, and the disrupted financial system in Syria. Reliance on trusted partners becomes crucial as diaspora

organizations move funds into countries where they provide aid and services. Repetitive interaction with partners tests trust and ensures that the right partner is chosen. Partners display competency and transparency, which continues to reinforce the diaspora organization's trust. Many of these partners mix aspects of their personal and professional lives in order to help the diaspora organization operate and achieve its goals. As one interviewee notes:

We know him [our contact in Lebanon] and we have a lot of trust in him. . . He is very, very meticulous about tracking every dollar that is spent, and he keeps it in a spreadsheet that he updates every month. And he sends me it, at the end of every month. It's really, really hard to open a bank account in Lebanon as a Syrian, which he is. And we're trying to get registered there [as an NGO] but as you can imagine everything takes forever, and so as of now we don't have a bank account in Lebanon, so he actually ends up withdrawing money every day from our US account, but he is withdrawing it from ATMs in Lebanon. So it is very clunky but there is no other way to make it work. . . I think for us, it really comes down to the fact that we have our own person on the ground. He is literally the one who is withdrawing the money and paying everyone and stuff, and so given that, and given the fact that we put some tracking mechanism in place. Literally, these schools, to run now it is hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. So it's not like, oh, here and there a couple hundred bucks, it's a real operation, and the current set-up is not ideal, because in Lebanon there is a limit to how much money can be withdrawn each day, and we're paying fees.

Having a trusted partner allows diaspora organizations to overcome financial barriers in Lebanon and Syria. Funds are entrusted to individuals who deliver needed funds to partners inside Syria, thus dodging the financial and security barriers caused by the Syrian civil war. Another interviewee explains:

Getting money into Syria. . . is really a nightmare because as you know many restrictions are being put on money transfers, and especially when it comes to the military regime territory, where the extremists are around. . . because we are registered [as an NGO] in France we managed to get a bank account there, and when we send the funds to our bank account in France the journey starts. So we try to send some money to some trusted affiliate NGOs in Turkey, then get the money from Turkey to Syria. This is for the north part. For the south part we manage it through Lebanon, we transfer the money to some friends or some person we know well in Lebanon, then we pay it in Lebanon so they can get it to the south. It used to be that people carried money across the border. Now we have some good networks where you can get the money whenever you want and you can pay it directly inside. But this is not available all the time and it's not for free, it will cost us a percentage. It's really complicated. We try to do a lot of documentation to what we're doing just to avoid any problems, because sometimes you have to give the money to someone you know who lives in a neighbourhood where it's not very safe, or even handling cash in Syria is not really safe, so it is complicated.

In these sorts of extremely informal and variable environments, the value of highly trusted contacts to handle funds in-country cannot be overstated. It is worth noting that the two interview participants above are graduates of two of the world's most prestigious business schools, and are well aware of the amateur and ad hoc nature of their financial processes. As one commented, "to be honest, the whole thing makes me queasy. But when we realized the choice was to help with a very imperfect system, or not to help, we knew we still had to help."

### **Reputation as reward and sanction**

To ensure the success of the vetting process and the delivery of services, diaspora organizations depend on a key informal accountability tool: reputation. Reputation is a tool used to sanction or

reward partners professionally and socially. In the cases of Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, diaspora organizations are concerned about their own reputation, and also use reputation as a tool to ensure that their partners deliver services and assess local needs accurately. One interviewee described:

As an organization, humanitarian, your reputation is everything on the ground. Whether it's ours or someone else's, reputation is a big part of what we do. We make sure to maintain our reputation, but also pay attention to the reputation of our partner, because who we work with is extremely important to our reputation.

In this case, competent service delivery and accurate assessment of needs builds the reputation and trust of the partnering individual/organization, and rewards both the diaspora organization and the local partner with a better professional and social reputation.

Another important role that reputation plays within the diaspora network is with the person making the recommendation for a contact. There are high stakes when it comes to recommending an organization or individual, because the performance of that contact can affect the recommender's reputation as well.

One interview participant noted:

We feel like we can trust the recommendations of our friends and family because you know, in the Arab world, we're all very shame based (laughs). And I'm not saying we in [our NGO] would ever intentionally shame someone. But people know that if they give a bad recommendation, if that person performs poorly or does something corrupt, as the recommender they look bad too. It's their reputation too. And it's not just, like, their reputation at work. This is their reputation with their friends, their cousins, in their home village. And that's everything, that's really big.

Hence members of the diaspora network will make a great deal of effort to ensure that a trusted and well-respected person is recommended, and will avoid recommending any potential partner that they are not confident will be effective and trustworthy.

### **Reaching outside the network: the value of face-to-face meetings**

Of course, the complex environments in which diaspora organizations operate mean that the proper individuals to provide appropriate aid, logistical support and services do not always exist within the diaspora network. In these cases, diaspora organizations must reach outside the diaspora network to other individuals and organizations. In our interviews, we found that in these instances face-to-face meetings were the key. Interview participants indicated that face-to-face meetings allowed them to assess the trustworthiness of an individual or organization, and to determine whether to work with them. From a cultural perspective, the face-to-face meeting enhances a social contract based on trust. One interviewee explained:

"We definitely have an intermediary. We work with Syrian organizations and non-profits. And you know it's really hard, so we have to go through trusted avenues. A lot of our job when we go there on the ground is to have meetings with different orgs that come from inside Syria. I mean they drive, like, three hours to come and meet with us [in Turkey], or we're introduced by an already existing partnership that we work with, but we do give them money for specific, like I said, for heating fuels, for blankets, or for food distribution. I mean those things that we can't personally, as a foundation we can't go inside Syria and do. It's not possible."

The experience of meeting personally with organizational leaders who are willing to travel from Syria into Turkey gives diaspora members a feeling of reassurance that the individuals or organizations can be trusted. A screening process takes place in which diaspora members first engage in a social network assessment of the reputation of the potential partner, and if the reputation seems

strong, a face-to-face meeting is arranged. Once collaboration is established, repetitive interactions can reinforce diaspora members' trust that the partner is delivering on their promises.

One thing diaspora members assess in these meetings is whether the objectives of the potential partner align with those of the diaspora organization. An alignment of objectives can ensure mutual benefits for the organizations and service recipients. One interviewee indicated:

I met him two years ago. [Discloses the individual's company and position within the company.] In other words, he comes from a background of effectiveness. He's clean, he's not corrupt, he's effective. The government job for him is because of the feeling it is his duty to help as much as he can. He doesn't need that job. He doesn't need to be a minister. He just needs to use the function to produce good results. So in this case, I will go and I will help. Forgive this absolutely poor analogy but it is a little bit like marriage. You want to have a child. With whom? Who would I commit to, to be able to have a better future for our children? And that is the case also with partnerships.

## CONCLUSION

Data from this study of four Syrian diaspora organizations providing aid and services in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey indicate that social trust is critical for the functioning of these networked partnerships. Diaspora members have the ability to rely on their dense social networks for referrals of potential partners, and can draw upon reputational information present in that network to assess the potential trustworthiness and effectiveness of these partners. Diaspora members also can rely on the unique assets other diaspora members provide (use of personal bank accounts, willingness to deliver cash by hand, physical travel across international borders and the like) to navigate around specific logistical challenges common in contexts of conflict. In the absence of social network ties, diaspora members rely on reputation and face-to-face contact to assess the viability of partnerships.

The policy implication of the social accountability advantages that diaspora organizations bring come primarily in the form of various partnerships that might be fostered between diaspora organizations and more formalized organizations with larger capacity and resources. International aid organizations including larger formalized NGOs may benefit from greater information sharing with diaspora non-profits. Particularly in quickly evolving crisis situations, diaspora organizations may have more up-to-date information about needs and conditions on the ground, or access to information about locations where non-diaspora organizations have fewer contacts. Diaspora organizations may also have information about trustworthy but non-traditional partners that could increase the breadth or effectiveness of non-diaspora organizations' work.

If strong relationships of trust are built between diaspora organizations and other aid organizations, diaspora organizations may be willing to serve as a bridge between larger formal organizations and less traditional partners that may be effective in contexts of conflict. Framing the relationship in terms of social accountability, in the presence of a long-term trusting relationship, diaspora organizations may be willing to stake their own reputation on connecting non-diaspora organizations with untraditional partners. These new partners may be more nimble at navigating complex operating environments on the ground.

When not hindered by more formal organizations' own accountability regulations, diaspora organizations may be willing to serve as a conduit for resources to areas that non-diaspora organizations have difficulty accessing. An example would be informal social networks that allow money and other resources to be transferred to difficult-to-access areas. Acknowledging that many formal aid organizations would be hesitant to use such networks for financial transfers, or even forbidden from doing so, in emerging crisis situations where time is of the essence, these pathways may prove useful.

The partnerships described thus far primarily serve to aid larger, more formalized organizations, which can benefit from information sharing with diaspora organizations, and from diaspora organizations' vetting of potential partners. However, diaspora organizations and the communities they represent may also benefit from the increased resources and technical expertise that larger, more formalized organizations may provide. Diaspora organizations would need to consider any such partnership carefully to ensure that a partnership with a more formal, non-diaspora organization does not undermine the advantages informal social accountability brings to the table.

As diaspora organizations develop, they may also attract a new cohort of donors that historically have not been as involved in development aid and crisis intervention. In this particular case, the Syrian crisis presents a venue for Arab philanthropy because, as the United Nations notes, "The Syrian crisis has been a turning point in the history of humanitarian enterprise in terms of the increasing role assumed by Arab donors," with Gulf States taking the lead (UNHCR, 2014b). The United Arab Emirates and the other Gulf States were destinations for many economic migrants from Syria even prior to the current Syrian conflict, and are home to a large population of Syrian expatriates (De Bel-Air, 2015). Social networks with diaspora members in the Gulf States and an interest from the wealthy governments in this region may bring a new set of resources to the humanitarian landscape.

Finally, in addition to the advantages of social accountability discussed here, it is crucial to keep in mind that diaspora organizations' reliance upon social networks brings limitations as well. Since trust is a major factor for the delivery of aid, these diaspora organizations often tend to focus their service delivery in places where they have network contacts, rather than other locales where the need might be higher but the knowledge of local actors is less certain. As such, aid organizations must be mindful that diaspora organizations' advantages extend only as far as the reach of their social network, and can be only one factor of a comprehensive relief strategy.

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