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Recasting diaspora strategies through feminist care ethics

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ABSTRACT

The diaspora-centred development agenda holds that migrants lead transnational lives and contribute to the material well being of their homelands both from afar and via circular migration. Concomitant with the ascendance of this agenda there has arisen a new field of public policy bearing the title 'diaspora strategies'. Diaspora strategies refer to proactive efforts by migrant-sending states to incubate, fortify, and harness transfers of resources from diaspora populations to homelands. This paper argues that diaspora strategies are problematic where they construe the diaspora–homeland relationship as an essentially pragmatic, instrumental, and utilitarian one. We suggest that a new generation of more progressive diaspora strategies might be built if these strategies are recast through feminist care ethics and calibrated so that they fortify and nurture caring relationships that serve the public good. Our call is for an approach towards state–diaspora relationships that sees diaspora-centred development as an important but corollary outcome that arises from prioritising caring relationships. To this end we introduce the term 'diaspora economies of care' to capture the derivative flow of resources between diasporas and homelands that happens when their relationship is premised on feminist care ethics. We introduce three types of diaspora economies of care, focusing on the emotional, moral, and service aspects of the diaspora–homeland relationship, and reflect upon the characteristics of each and how they might be strengthened later by foregrounding care now.

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Introduction

Official discourses concerning emigration have oscillated, on the one hand between those bearing connotations of flight, disloyalty and exile, and on the other hand, those depicting emigration as a modern and even patriotic act (Lowell and Findlay, 2001; Nyiri, 2004; Yeoh, 2009). During the 1970s and 1980s, it was widely believed that emigration both signalled and amplified a failing development trajectory. Emigration constituted a 'brain drain' that starved the domestic labour market of talent, aggravated dependency ratios, and weakened domestic consumption. Accordingly, stemming brain drain and encouraging return migration were the preferred policy responses. From the 1990s onwards however a new discursive regime has emerged which has transformed

understandings of the migrant–development nexus. Today it is recognised that migrants lead transnational lives and they can contribute to their homelands¹ both from afar and via circular migration. Emigration it turns out might serve as a catalyst for, rather than putting a brake on the development of migrant-sending countries.

Reflecting this discursive revolution, global development agencies,² host countries, thought leaders, diaspora activists and migrant-sending states have begun to explore the ways in which they may engage emigrant populations more productively (see Yossi and Barth, 2003; Saxenian, 2006; Vertovec, 2007a,b; Solimano, 2008; Faist, 2008; Dewind and Holdaway, 2008; Bakewell, 2009; Piper, 2009; Leblang, 2010). In particular, migrant-sending countries, which might have previously adopted an organic approach towards diaspora homeland relationships, now deem it necessary to redefine the

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¹ We acknowledge the contestations associated with the idea of 'homeland' in critical diaspora studies (e.g. Brah, 1998; Anthias, 1998; Butler, 2001). Our purpose for using 'homeland' as a referent heuristically is to develop our arguments on how care may feature in the relationship between the diaspora and the countries that they left but continue to identify with as home, such as because of kinship ties or the desire for belonging.

² These include the World Bank through its 'Knowledge for Development Programme'; the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance (IdeA) established by Hilary Clinton via the Secretary of State's Office of the Global Partnership Initiative (GPI), in collaboration with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI); the joint European Union (EU) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Migrant for Development (M4D) programme; and the advocacy work undertaken by among others the MPI, Economist Magazine, MacArthur Foundation, the Inter-American Bank, and Diaspora Matters Consultancy.

state–diaspora relationship. Concomitantly, there has arisen a new field of public policy bearing the title ‘diaspora strategies’ (Kuznetsov, 2006; Aikins and White, 2011; Boyle and Kitchin, 2011, 2013, 2014; Agunias and Newland, 2012; Kitchin et al., 2013). Diaspora strategies can be thought of as proactive efforts by migrant-sending states to birth, incubate, fortify and better leverage the transfer of resources from diaspora communities to their homelands. Through joint ‘policy transfer’ workshops, seminars, publications, and conferences, there exists a vibrant global dialogue as to the optimum design of diaspora strategies (i.e. the most appropriate institutions, instruments, policies, programs, and initiatives).

The diaspora-for-development agenda has enjoyed a certain celebrity status, and like many ‘buzz ideas’, has been permitted a somewhat pampered ascent. But a number of critical commentaries are now emerging. This paper aligns itself with these commentaries but seeks to go further. We argue that diaspora strategies, in their current form, might undermine rather than augment the contributions made by diaspora populations to the development of homelands. Diaspora strategies are prone to construe the diaspora–homeland relationship instrumentally. An alternative approach, we suggest, is to reposition diaspora strategies within a framework of feminist care ethics that prioritises and undergirds diaspora–homeland relationships built on social relations of reciprocity, trust and mutuality (Lawson, 2007; Raghuram, 2009), and which sees care as a public good (Tronto, 1993, 2013). Our argument is that diaspora strategies go awry when they begin with the wrong motives, such as to capture the resources of the diaspora for instrumental gains. The point of entry for diaspora strategies should be to support caring relationships that serve the public good. Prioritising feminist care ethics means that where diaspora strategies nurture certain forms of development this development is seen as a derivative outcome of caring relationships; care generates ‘other centred’ transfers of resources which seek to meet the needs of those ‘cared for’ from a distance. In forwarding this argument, we do not deny the importance of economic benefits from diaspora-centred development; rather, we see the economy and care existing in a symbiotic manner captured in the concept of ‘diaspora economies of care’ that we introduce later.

The remainder of the paper builds this conceptual argument in three stages. Firstly, we provide a critical reading of the diaspora-centred development agenda and diaspora strategising. We argue that in their current form such strategies are driven by developmental goals and privilege certain emigrants, thus potentially undermining rather than enhancing the proclivity of diaspora populations to contribute to the development of their homelands. Secondly, in recasting diaspora strategies within feminist care ethics, we propose that migrant-sending states have a duty to formulate a more progressive generation of diaspora strategies. We propose four principles which frame the ways in which feminist care ethics might redefine the diaspora–homeland relationship so as to build more equitable and sustainable diaspora engagement outcomes. The final section develops the concept of ‘diaspora economies of care’ to capture an aggregate transfer of resources between diasporas and their homelands that is premised on feminist care ethics. We set forth three types of ‘diaspora economies of care’ which we argue usefully recasts the notion of diaspora-centred development. These focus on the emotional, moral, and service aspects of the diaspora–homeland relationship. Our conclusion reiterates the significance of feminist care ethics in the formulation of diaspora strategies and suggests future research agendas.

Critiquing the rise of the diaspora-centred development agenda

Countries that host sizeable migrant communities have long fretted over how they ought to relate to international migration.

Debate has centred on the extent to which it is ethical for countries in the global North to prospect for skilled labour (e.g. nurses, doctors, and engineers) and care workers (often mothers with children) from the global South. The recommendation has been for host countries to discourage (or at least better manage) further emigration from the global South while encouraging and enabling expatriate experts to return to their homelands, even for short periods, to promote development (Faist and Fauser, 2011). For example, at the supra-national scale the United Nations’ Volunteer Programme (UNVP), the International Labour Office’ TOKTEN (Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals) initiative, and the International Organisation of Migration’s (IOM) Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) Scheme have each attempted to motivate diaspora members to return as volunteers.

During the 1990s when transnational migration became recognized as a means of contributing to development in migrant-sending countries, their governments started to encourage and facilitate labour migration for national development. This contributed to the burgeoning of the low-paid migrant labour export industry in the global South (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Faist, 2008; Faist and Fauser, 2011). But as these migrant-sending countries realised the limitations and vulnerability of relying on remittances, they became interested in harnessing the potential of human capital and technology transfer as well (see Pellerin and Mullings, 2013). Alongside this, scholars such as Saxenian (2006) started to question the brain drain thesis by arguing that emigrant scientists and entrepreneurs can still contribute to the development of their countries of origin through brain circulation. Affluent countries in the global North like Scotland and Ireland started to pursue the resources represented by their diaspora populations; economically advanced countries in the southern hemisphere such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Singapore are following suit too (Kuznetsov, 2006; Aikins and White, 2011; Boyle and Kitchin, 2011, 2013, 2014; Ho, 2011; Agunias and Newland, 2012; Kitchin et al., 2013).

Over the past two decades a number of migrant-sending states have given considerable attention to supporting migrant communities so that these communities can better support them. Migrant-sending states that actively harness diaspora in the service of development often prepare and are guided by a diaspora strategy. Diaspora strategies refer to policy initiatives enacted by a sending state to fortify and develop relationships with diaspora populations who share an affinity with the homeland. Policy and academic literature suggests that migrant-sending states are pioneering a range of diaspora engagement programs and we frame these thematically in three ways: as consumers, donors and economic agents. This thematic organisation allows us to propose subsequently an alternative set of diaspora strategies premised on care values, known as ‘diaspora economies of care’.

First, at the heart of many diaspora strategies is a quest to build emotional bonds with diaspora populations by designing projects that recharge national pride and patriotism. Such diaspora strategies also recognise that instilling national culture promotes business opportunities, leading migrant-sending states to reach out to diaspora populations as potential consumers of products, activities or campaigns that promote national identity and belonging. Diaspora tourism³ represents one such diaspora strategy where homelands appeal to emigrants and diasporic descendants (e.g. Basu, 2007; Kuah-Pearce, 2011) by facilitating short term visits to the homeland through easing visa schemes; providing genealogy services; supporting research, training and policy development; nurturing diaspora marketing and branding; and identifying

³ Diaspora tourism spans a broad spectrum of return visits incorporating medical tourism, business-related tourism, heritage tourism, education tourism, VIP tours, and peak experience tours (Agunias and Newland, 2012).

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