their parents do. Approaching diaspora development engagements through the prism of Islamic charity is revealing of the possibility of lasting transnational ties of a religious kind in post-migration generations. This has implications for the ways in which youth religiosity among post-migration generations is approached, with a need for particular sensitivity to religious and national identity constructions which are multiple, rather than singular, and may be transnational.

Third, in societies like the Norwegian, the notion of belonging as a zero-sum game is persistent, either ‘here’ or ‘there’. Despite increasing levels of international mobility in many sections of society, attitudes of suspicion to migrant transnationalism remain. For diaspora development engagements which intersect with practices of Islamic charity there is not only the suspicion with which ordinary transnational ties are met, but also the challenge of broader stereotypes about Muslims.

Whilst many Muslims engage in Islamic charity, often beyond the family sphere, engaging in development efforts, these are largely invisible and unrecognized activities in mainstream society. An implication here is the need for more attention and recognition of the engagements of more or less practicing Muslims in development. More specifically, this could include an acknowledgment that for some of these efforts, the principles and practices of Islamic charity are a motivating, structuring and organizing factor.

Fourth, diaspora development engagements that converge with Islamic charity are not necessarily similar to typical development projects funded by government development agencies, or those carried out by major players in the development sector. A key question is whether or not this means that such initiatives cannot be labelled ‘development’. On the one hand, this can be seen as a question of semantics. On the other hand, the power of definition over what is or should be seen as development, should not without scrutiny be assumed to lie solely in the hands of a Global North dominated development sector.

When we started out, not from an analysis of ‘the development project’ but rather examining everyday practices of Islamic charity, other forms of activities and engagements – for the good of others, for the improvement of education, health or infrastructure, among other things – came to the fore. These efforts were inter-changeably discussed by the actors themselves in terms of development, in the long run, or relief, in the short term.

This underlines the continued relevance of critical approaches to what constitutes development, and who defines it. In turn, this has implications for all stakeholders and actors, including diaspora development actors themselves, with regard to their own role as donors, partners, and for the ways in which they select their geographic and thematic areas of work. It

Further Reading


Notes


Religion and migrants’ development engagements

While migrant remittances have received increasing attention in both policy and academic circles in the past decades, interest in Islamic charity as a source of development funding coming from diasporas has been limited. This is an intriguing paradox, as remittances and Islamic charity are both substantial, private flows of funds, which can flow internally or internationally, and can both be individual or collective. Remittances, monetary transfers from migrants to relatives in countries of origin, feature centrally in discussions about the relationships between migration and development. Individuals’ private transfers amount to substantial flows, which for many countries globally constitute double or triple the amounts received Over seas Development Assistance (ODA). Motivations for remittance-sending, and their individual and as collective articulations, have received increasing attention from policy makers, development practitioners, and academics alike. Discussions have centred on whether remittances are motivated by altruism, self-interest, or something in between; on the role of remittances as an insurance mechanism and for securing continued membership in extended families, kinship groups or local communities; on the potential for dependency on remittances among recipients and the inherent asymmetry in sender-receiver relations; and on the responsibility, obligation or duty which rests on many migrants globally to remit, which is sometimes described as ‘the burden of remittances’.

Diaspora development engagements refer to organized, collective efforts to contribute to development in countries of origin or heritage. Diaspora development efforts include collective remittances sent informally, as well as organized development activities. Many states – both of emigration and of immigration – have an interest in facilitating or encouraging diaspora development engagements. This is often driven by an interest in tapping into, or seeking to influence, the substantial volumes of remittances which migrants send. Many immigration states in the Global North therefore have particular diaspora development programs, whereas emigration states in the Global South often focus efforts around diaspora strategies which seek to boost diaspora investments.

In this policy brief we explore some ways in which religion is relevant for understanding diaspora development engagements. We do this by exploring diaspora development engagements among Pakistani-origin Muslims in Oslo, through the prism of Islamic charity. Our analysis draws on interviews with 40 individuals in the Oslo-area, conducted as part of the Private Islamic Charity and Approaches to Poverty Reduction’s research project (2011–2015).

Islamic Charity in Norway

One of the five pillars of Islam is charitable donation, which includes among other things zakat, the 2.5% annual tax on assets, which all Sunni Muslims are obliged to pay. Islamic charity is provided first to those in need who are the closest to you, moving outward to others in need, in concentric circles. It includes time-specific activities, such as during Eid, ritual slaughter qurban, as well as more general principles of doing good.

Like Muslims elsewhere, Norwegian Muslims commonly give zakat. Their alms are given privately, or through mosques, or through organizations that may or may not have explicit religious links. For many Muslims living in Norway, the obvious course of action is to help people living in the countries from which they – or their parents – emigrated, when offering their zakat. Accordingly, Norwegian Muslims’ almsgiving merges with other transfers of funds from migrants to their countries of origin, such as remittances and transfers in relation to more organized forms of diaspora development engagements. Thus there is often an overlap between what might be defined as migrant remittances, organized diaspora development engagements, and Islamic charity.

Many people prefer to be discreet about their almsgiving, and recipients may not be aware that the money they receive is religious alms. This is due to the desire for discretion around almsgiving for religious reasons to show of wealth is discouraged, and due to migrants’ concerns that recipients might feel uncomfortable being defined as ‘needy’. It is an obligation to give, and a right to receive. The dignity of the receiver is emphasized in Islamic teachings.

These financial contributions may help deprived relatives in their everyday lives, allowing them to put better food on the table. The money may also be put towards school fees and medical expenses, or towards other types of development engagement, such as health or education projects. It is not unusual for religious alms to be used to fund the building of schools and hospitals in Pakistan, Turkey or Somalia. Money is collected at mosques, women’s groups and social gatherings, but also through appeals that run on television or the internet.

Many Norwegian Muslims also give money in the wake of natural disasters, for example the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, or in connection with the war in Syria. Like many other people living in Norway, they wish to help people in need.

While it is difficult to estimate how much money Muslims in Norway donate to charitable causes each year, we do know that many donate in different ways, both as obligatory and voluntary almsgiving. They give for a common purpose: to help the poor and needy. With particular reference to zakat then, it is a ‘religious tax’ which is paid in addition to ordinary Nor weigan state taxes, and the money is earmarked for helping those who need it most.

Religion and motivations for diaspora development engagements

Faith-based motivations may converge with other motivations, as in the above discussion about migrant remittances. This may entail a relative strengthening or weakening of faith vis-a-vis other motivations, or faith may motivate in new ways altogether, among other in relation to diaspora development engagements.

Starting with individual Muslims’ everyday life and activities, rather than with particular development projects, we examined which roles religion might play in motivating diaspora development engagements. We found that the Islamic calendar was a significant factor in the structuring of engagements. Religious motivations were of key importance, in particular at the time of Eid, during Ramadan, and at the time for ritual slaughter, qurbani.

Among our research participants, giving voluntary alms, sadqa, was an integral part of their personal, individual level of involved in a particular organization. Some diaspora development projects are conducted through organizations which self-define as faith-based. Yet among these, the role of religion for organizing diaspora development engagements, both for organizations in relation to migration than questions about faith-based, at the individual as well as at the organizational, collective level.

We find that religion takes on a variety of roles within different types of organizations. Religion can be employed explicitly or implicitly, both at the organizational, collective level and the personal, individual level of those involved in a particular organization. Some diaspora development projects are conducted through organizations which self-define as faith-based. Yet among these, the role of religion for organizing diaspora development engagements, both for organizations in relation to migration than questions about faith-based, at the individual as well as at the collective level.

Perceptions of diaspora development engagements and religious links

Migrants’ development engagements are part of migrants’ broader involvement with countries of origin, or in the case of migrants’ descendants, with their country of heritage. As long as an idea of a zero-sum game about attachments persists, where you either belong here, or there, migrants’ development engagements also fall prey to the suspicious attitudes with which transna tional ties more generally are met.

Diaspora development engagements in European contexts are a topic far less discussed in relation to migration than questions about immigrant integration and social cohesion. When diaspora development engagements are discussed, there are often questions about how money is collected, how it is sent, and for what purposes. Directly or indirectly, questions about foreign financing are brought to the fore, both in the Norwegian context and internationally. Muslim organizations collecting money for relief efforts in Syria, or for those fleeing the conflict, or those living in refugee camps in neighboring countries, encounter suspicions about the nature of their humanitarian engagements.

Whilst critical questions are necessary, these are questions that should be posed equally to all humanitarian actors working in post-crisis contexts, regardless of whether or not they have an Islamic foundation.

Conclusions

Our analysis of diaspora development engagements through the prism of Islamic charity points to four implications. First, the confu sion of remittances and diaspora development engagements, and the distinction between religious and secular, needs to be clarified. A clear division between motivations, organizations or activities which are religious, and motivations, organizations or activities which are social, cultural, economic, or political is untenable.

Whilst this may be common knowledge, the ways in which government agencies and the development sector approach religion in relation to migrants’ development engagements, indicates a need for a reappraisal. For instance, mosques may play a central role in hosting and facilitating key fundraising activities for diaspora development engagements, both for organizations and initiatives with – and without – an explicit Islamic foundation. There are implications for how organisations could be included and recognized, across different sectors and institutional boundaries.

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Religion and migrants’ development engagements

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Remittances, monetary transfers from migrants to relatives in countries of origin, feature centrally in discussions about the relationships between migration and development. Individuals’ private transfers amount to substantial flows, which for many countries globally constitute double or triple the amounts received of diasporic development assistance (ODA).

Motivations for remittance-sending, and their individual and as well as collective articulations, have received increasing attention from policy makers, development practitioners, and academics alike. Discussions have centered on whether remittances are motivated by altruism, self-interest, or something in between; on the role of remittances as an insurance mechanism and for securing continued membership in extended families, kinship groups or local communities; on the potential for dependency on remittances among recipients and the inherent asymmetry in sender-receiver relations; and on the responsibility, obligation or duty which rests on many migrants globally to remit, which is sometimes described as the burden of remittances. Diaspora development engagements refer to organized, collective efforts to contribute to development in countries of origin or heritage. Diaspora development efforts include collective remittances sent informally, as well as organized development activities.

Many states – both of emigration and of immigration – have an interest in tapping into, or seeking to influence, the substantial volumes of remittances which migrants send. Many immigration states in the Global North therefore have particular diaspora development programs, whereas emigration states in the Global South often focus efforts around diaspora strategies which seek to boost diaspora investments. In this policy brief we explore some ways in which religion is relevant for understanding diaspora development engagements. We do this by exploring diaspora development engagements among Pakistani-origin Muslims in Oslo, through the prism of Islamic charity. Our analysis draws on interviews with 40 individuals in the Oslo-area, conducted as part of the Private Islamic Charity and Approaches to Poverty Reduction research project (2011–2015).

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Religion and motivations for diaspora development

Faith-based motivations may converge with other motivations, as in the above discussion about migrant remittances. This may entail a relative strengthening or weakening of faith as a basis for other motivations, or faith may motivate in new ways altogether, among other in relation to diaspora development engagements. Starting with individuals’ everyday life and motivation, rather than with particular development projects, we examined which religions might play in motivating diaspora development engagements. We found that the Islamic calendar was a significant factor in the structuring of engagements. Religious motivations were of key importance, in particular at the time of Eid, during Ramadan, and at the time for ritual slaughter, qurbani.

Among our research participants, giving voluntary alms, was an integral part of their everyday life, and related to faith-based motivations. This could for instance manifest itself through a collection box within the home, where small donations were made throughout everyday life, and routinely passed on to those in need. Money would typically be spent to support family members in need, distant relatives, neighbours and servants of families in countries of origin or broader societal or development engagements, such as girls education, vocational training or community health projects.

By focusing on practices related of Islamic charity, the usual family emphasis in studies of migrant transnationalism is deemphasized. Instead, connections between the here and now – and the hereafter – are foregrounded, providing new angles to questions of motivations for diaspora development engagements.

Religion and organizing diaspora development engagements

Whilst the religious roots of organizations such as Christian Aid or Amnesty International are well-known, religion and development was for a long period a combination not commonly focused on. In the past decade this has changed, with emergent attention to ‘faith-based organizations’ (FBOs) in development and humanitarian efforts. The focus now is often on these types of organizations as a particular set of actors – the formal faith-based organizations (FBOs). However, less attention is paid to the role of religion in more informal arenas and organizations, and in organizations that do not explicitly define as faith-based.

We find a great diversity in the types of organizations and organizational forms, which emerge when exploring the roles of religion in organizing diaspora development engagements. These include the large, highly professionalized, formal organizations, such as Muslim Aid or Islamic Relief (UK), but also women’s groups, village-based organizations, and many, many more in between.

We find that religion takes on a variety of roles within different types of organizations. Religion can be employed explicitly or implicitly, both at the individual level, collective level, and at the organizational level. We also find that religion plays a role even in those organizations that are not explicitly faith-based, at the individual as well as at the collective level.

Perceptions of diaspora development engagements and religious links

Religion and motivations for diaspora development engagements, both for organizations and the individuals involved, show a clear division between motivations, organizations or activities which are religious, and motivations, organizations or activities which are social, cultural, economic, or political in nature.

Whilst this may be common knowledge, the ways in which government agencies and the development sector approach relation in relation to migrants’ development engagements, indicates a need for a reappraisal. For instance, mosques may play a central role in hosting and facilitating key fundraising activities for diaspora development engagements, both for organizations and initiatives with – and without – an explicit Islamic foundation. There are implications in this for how organizations could be included and recognized, across different sectors and institutional boundaries.

Second, practices of Islamic charity are transna- tional ties which are also taken on by migrants’ descendants, who may no longer have as close familial ties to parents’ countries of origin, as
their parents do. Approaching diaspora development engagements through the prism of Islamic charity is revealing of the possibility of lasting transnational ties of a religious kind in post-migration generations. This has implications for the ways in which youth religiosity among post-migration generation is approached, with a need for particular sensitivity to religious and national identity constructions which are multiple, rather than singular, and may be transnational.

Third, in societies like the Norwegian, the notion of belonging as a zero-sum game is persistent, either ‘here’ or ‘there’. Despite increasing levels of international mobility in many sections of society, attitudes of suspicion to migrant transnationalism remain. For diaspora development engagements which intersect with practices of Islamic charity there is not only the suspicion with which ordinary transnational remittances are met, but also the challenge of broader stereotypes about Muslims.

Whilst many Muslims engage in Islamic charity, often beyond the family sphere, engaging in development efforts, these are largely invisible and unrecognized activities in mainstream society. An implication here is the need for more overt recognition and the recognition of the engagements of more or less practicing Muslims in development. More specifically, this could include an acknowledgment that for some of these efforts, the principles and practices of Islamic charity are a motivating, structuring or organizing factor.

Fourth, diaspora development engagements that converge with Islamic charity are not necessarily similar to typical development projects funded by government development agencies, or those carried out by major players in the development sector. A key question is whether or not this means that such initiatives cannot be labelled ‘development’. On the one hand, this can be seen as a question of semantics. On the other hand, the power of definition over what is or should be seen as development, should not without scrutiny be assumed to lie in the hands of a Global North dominated development sector.

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Further Reading


Notes


2 Abuel, S. (2006), Remittances as unseen-seen borders: Considering displacement, family and resettlement contexts in refugee livelihood and wellbeing. UNHCR.


In this Policy Brief, we approach diaspora development engagement from the angle of everyday practices of Islamic charity. We explore the implicit and explicit roles which religion may take in motivating, structuring and organizing development engagements. We argue that a perspective which foregrounds religion, in its diverse articulations, adds valuable insights to the ways in which we understand migrants’ contributions to development. It also adds to our understanding of the engagements of Muslims in societies like the Norwegian, and their transnational ties to countries of origin.

Brief Points

- Migrants development contributions in countries of origin include organized diaspora efforts and individual and familial remittances, constituting substantial monetary flows into many aid receiving countries.
- Islamic charity is an individual religious obligation, often collectively practiced, which may intersect with diaspora development engagements.
- Islamic charity can have motivating, structuring and organizational roles in relation to development engagements, where the role of religion may be explicit or implicit.
- The invisibility of practices of Islamic charity in mainstream Norwegian society leads to incomplete reconfiguration of ongoing diaspora development engagements.