Leveraging the Potential of the Liberian Diaspora—Proposing a "Diaspora Commission: A policy note

By: Saah Charles N’Tow (ULAA Research and Development Committee) ¹

Introduction:

ARTICLE XXIV of the 2003 Comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) signed in Ghana provided for the establishment of a NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (NTLA), where said assembly would reflect a broad spectrum of the Liberian society. In sub sections 3 (a) and (b) of the same article, the framers of the CPA, recognized the significance of the Liberian Diaspora and provided for the formal institutionalization of a relationship between the Transitional government and the Liberian Diaspora. However, despite establishing a basis for it, the Transitional government did not develop any specific framework for incorporating or addressing the Diaspora throughout the course of its tenure.

This policy note reviews the rationale for a newly and democratically elected government in Liberia to take up this challenge, and proposes a process by which to develop an institutionalized relationship between Liberia and its many hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters who currently reside outside of the country’s borders—and yet whose concern, investment, and involvement back in their homeland is far from negligible or irrelevant to Liberia’s future.

The underlying premises that inform the recommendations in this policy note are:

- knowledge that in the wake of over a decade and a half of wartime dispersion the diaspora represents a significant portion of Liberia’s total population, who retain strong familial and community-level links with their homeland;

- emerging evidence that the diaspora constitutes an invaluable resource for Liberia’s economic reconstruction and post-conflict development and the belief that this resource should be systematically tapped and used rather than neglected or wasted;

- reluctant recognition that non-engagement with, and alienation of the diaspora, has proven to be a deadly mistake for Liberian government’s throughout the recent past. Most particularly the lack of systematic and institutionalized channels for constructive diasporic social, political, and economic engagement in their homeland has given credence within the diaspora to those disaffected elements who promote organized political violence as a means for redress and reform—and for the pursuit of personal ambition.

- a belief that many of the civic lessons learned by Liberians living in the diaspora may contribute positively to a much needed transformation of political culture and values, most notably with reference to accountability and transparency in governance.

- growing empirical evidence from other countries’ with large global diasporas of

  A) the importance of establishing institutionalized mechanisms for engaging with diasporas in order to ensure their positive economic, political, and social contributions to homelands.

  B) the need for homeland governments to play a leading role in developing such mechanisms in a rational, systematic, contextually-appropriate, and carefully considered manner.³

¹ Thanks to Dr. S. Lubkemann and Dr. J. Brinkerhoff (both at George Washington University) for comments.

² Among the countries that have been most notable in developing systematic diaspora policies are Cape Verde, the Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Portugal, and Mexico.

³ Castles, S. 2000. “The Myth of the Controllability of difference: labor Migration, Transnational communities, and state strategies in East Asia”. http://www.Unesco.org/most/apmrcaSt.htm#transnationalism) conducted to explore the impact of UK-based diasporas to development and poverty reduction found that, “National and particularly local governments in the homeland are crucial partners in directing Diaspora contributions toward developmental goals. However, national and local governments, and the state agencies within them, often have rather different and
Size and Location of the Liberian Diaspora:

There is a large and growing number of Liberians who live in diaspora—outside of their country of birth. While there is a need for a study that definitively establishes the actual size of the Liberian Diaspora, some estimates have been made by credible sources. For example, several publications quote the UN as reportedly projecting more than 1,000,000 Liberians living in the Diaspora today, with a significant concentration of somewhere between 100,000-450,000 residing in the United States of America alone.  

Liberians can be found scattered to the ends of the earth: from South Africa to Australia; from Russia to Argentina. Conservatively it is absolutely indisputable that the “near diaspora” (within neighboring countries in West Africa) includes several countries in which many tens of thousands of Liberians currently reside (Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea); meanwhile the “far diaspora” includes similarly large numbers in the USA, and significant concentrations of some thousands in the United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Along with countries like Cape Verde, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Portugal, Afghanistan, and Colombia, Liberia is one of a handful of truly “global nations.”

In the United States alone concentrations of several thousands are known to exist in Providence RI, Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN; Washington DC/Baltimore; Philadelphia, PA; and Staten Island, NYC. Other major concentrations are known to exist in Worcester, MA; Atlanta, GA; New Jersey, Detroit, MI; Chicago, IL; Boston, MA; and Cleveland and Cincinatti, OH. As Liberians have in the US have increasingly migrated from the East coast to the West, Mid-west, and South new concentrations have emerged in places as diverse as San Fransisco, CA; Lexington KY; Miami, FL; Durham, NC; and Houston, TX.

History of the Diaspora’s Production

The major factor responsible for the rapid growth and global distribution of the Liberian Diaspora is the just ended Liberian civil war. The IOM offers “Out of a total population of three million persons, between 400,000 and 600,000 Liberians are internally displaced and another 200,000 to 300,000 remain as refugees in third-states. Potentially up to 30% of Liberian’s citizens are currently living in some form of conflict-forced displacement.”

The Liberian diaspora has not only grown astronomically but has also changed in its composition considerably over the last two decades. From a transient and socio-economically privileged population of mostly students, diplomats, business people, among other whose stay in the abroad was relatively short term up to 1980, the Liberian Diaspora is now an ethnically, economically, and socially heterogeneous
community, comprised of asylum seekers, resettled refugees, lottery visa winners, US TPS recipients, and a whole generation actually born abroad.

Liberians in the diaspora are no longer comprised primarily of those descendants of the American-born settlers, but include representation from every county and ethnic group within Liberia—such that a recent study has concluded that the ethnic composition of the US diaspora closely mirrors that in Liberia itself. Liberians in the US also represent a broad cross-section of professions and socio-economic classes. With the passage of time, the Diaspora now hosts a pool of experienced professionals with qualifications in every conceivable area of study. Among members of the Liberian Diaspora Community today are lawyers, doctors, nurses, social workers, bankers, University, professors, professional athletes, media professional, business men and women, corporate executives among others.

The Changing Liberian Diaspora—the impact of Transnationality:

Prior to the war, most Liberians living abroad had no real reasons for wanting to stay permanently in other countries. Often traveling on visitor’s, students’, business and other temporary visas, Liberians came and returned without bothering to stake significant claims in places like the US. This was largely due to the fact that there was relative peace at home and there was almost a certain job assurance for Liberians who studied abroad. It was easy for many Liberians to travel in and out and engage in flourishing business ventures. The institution of the family as we knew it was practically intact and many of our elders, women. However the dire economic and political conditions that characterized Liberia’s chaotic descent into a decade and a half of war led many Liberians who found refuge abroad to begin to consider other life-strategies. Although a majority of Liberians living abroad harbor a strong desire to re-establish homes in Liberia their long stays in countries such as the US have inadvertently generated new social realities that shape their aspirations. Many Liberians have started families and made significant investments in their adopted countries, raising their children with a dual love for both their homeland Liberia and their country of birth (the US). They are thus socially tied now to both countries. While many want to invest in their homelands and assist in the recovery of their communities they remain cautious about the political stability of Liberia, and wary of corruption, economic uncertainty. They are keenly aware of how their war-torn homeland’s precarious health and education environment could affect them and their families.

Increasingly those Liberians in diaspora choose to think of themselves in new terms: as transnationals. In the context of this paper, a transnational is a member of a diaspora that finds him/herself with long-term commitments and responsibilities to both a country of origin and a country of resettlement. Such commitments could include marriage, children, relatives, businesses, school, and work, among others. For transnationals a permanent return to Liberia that would involve simply abandoning their social options or rights to participate in US society is no longer a foregone decision. At the same time a transnational, unlike a permanent immigrant, is someone who, under the right circumstances, still seeks to invest and establish a home back in their homeland while also retaining a home in the country in which they found asylum. In short diasporic transnationals are individuals who plot life-strategies and see their social, political, and economic future as one that will involve investment and activity in two countries simultaneously. To Liberians in diaspora therefore what they seek is the opportunity to live the life of the “home with two rooms”: one in the US (or Europe) and one in Liberia.

Global Recognition of the Development Potential of Diasporas:

Over the last few years numerous governments, multi-lateral and bi-lateral aid and development organizations, and international donors have begun to recognize and respond to the fact that transnational diasporas are important political, economic, and social actors in, and resources for, their countries of origin. Diaspora remittances, human capital, and entrepreneurship are increasingly recognized as vital to many...
developing economies across the globe. Governments as diverse as Cape Verde, Portugal, and Mexico have recognized the central importance of their diasporas to economic development, pursuing major institutional initiatives to harness their diasporas to the task of economic development. Major multi-lateral institutions like the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and bi-lateral agencies such as USAID have recently developed innovative initiatives to support homelands in these efforts. Diasporas also represent a key source of human capital for their homelands—and the professional qualifications and talents of diasporic citizens are often particularly important to war-torn countries where educational and professional training has fallen by the wayside for long periods of time. The talent of diasporic professionals has been accordingly recognized and utilized in post-conflict reconstruction by countries such as Eritrea. Both UNDP and the International Organization of Migration have recognized and begun to develop experimental programs that explore a broad range of options through which diasporic citizens can contribute to migration—including options ranging from permanent return to temporary professional consultation and even “virtual migration.” Diasporas have also recently played a growing role in mobilizing assistance and sustaining reconstruction in the wake of both natural and man-made catastrophes. Some countries such as Cape Verde and the Dominican Republic have accorded their overseas citizenry rights to vote and otherwise participate in homeland political process.

Harnessing the Potential of the Liberian Diaspora

The experience of other countries suggests that the growing and changing Liberian diaspora represents perhaps one of the most important still under-utilized resources for their war-torn homeland’s economic, social, and political future. A recent study of remittances among Liberians in Minneapolis reveals that on average households are remitting over $3500 USD per year to relatives in Liberia, and that over 60% of the households that do remit provide support for 10 or more relatives back in Liberia, with almost one third of all households supporting 20 or more relatives through these remittances. Such pilot studies are indicative of the vital economic role that Liberians in the diaspora are—and can—play in their homeland’s future. Another indicator from this study of particular interest is the plans by almost 40% of all households to invest and start a business in Liberia. Unlike foreign investment or assistance that will inevitably be largely consumed in overheads and foreign technical assistance these remittance dollars and investments will have a


19 Lubkemann, Stephen –Draft White paper on TPS in the Liberian Community: An Empirically Based Analysis of the Policy Options-Return, Revocation, or Recognition? Unpublished draft paper-George Washington University-New Immigration Intersections Project (contact: Stephen.Lubkemann@gwu.edu)
broad impact in their entirety—and at the grassroots level—cultivating economic opportunity at the household level where it is most needed in Liberia.

The distinctive experience of Liberians in their host societies may also enable them to play a positive role in bringing about much needed change in Liberia’s political culture and civil society. Thus Dr. Stephen C. Lubkemann of Brown University’s Watson Institute and George Washington University’s Elliot School of International Affairs observes: “The international distribution of Liberian citizens, and in particular the presence of a significant number of Liberians in North America, offers an opportunity to explore new avenues and possibilities for positively transforming Liberian political, [social and economic] culture in ways that enhance the mass participation of the Liberian citizenry in establishing true democracy. Over the last decade the Liberian community in North America has confronted significant challenges as immigrants that have produced unifying grassroots efforts and important experiments with trans-ethnic community organization. Such experiences have included the struggle for permanent status and against economic and racial discrimination as an ethnic minority. A younger generation of Liberians has gained experience in community organization and tasted the possibility of participatory and democratic governance. As a result a growing interest in bringing that experience back to Liberia itself has emerged within the community.”

Policy Recommendations: The Diaspora Commission

It is on the strength of the aforementioned points that we are recommending that the Government of Liberia under the leadership of President Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf considers initiating a process that will ultimately aim to establish formal institutional mechanisms for linking the Liberian Diaspora to Liberia. The ultimate goal would be to create, by Presidential decree or an act of legislation, an institutional mechanism and policy framework that would:

1. tap and capitalize on the enormous development potential of the Liberian Diaspora;
2. bring to the attention of the government of Liberia diaspora-specific social, economic, and political concerns;
3. create and foster emigrant networks
4. enable the development and management of a comprehensive data-base of the growing pool of skills and talents in the Liberian Diaspora
5. ensure the development of policies on innovative and creative ways to encourage and retain active Diaspora interest and investment in Liberia

While these goals provide a general frame of reference for an institutional link between Liberia and its diaspora, a more specific policy framework should be developed through a careful and considered process that:

1. includes a process of comprehensive and systematic consultation with Liberian diasporic organizations worldwide;
2. draws upon existing international expertise and knowledge about how other governments have developed policies that incorporate their own diasporas; and
3. Where more knowledge of the Liberian diaspora is necessary for the development of sound policy, endeavors to collects this information in a rigorous and systematic manner.

We recommend that a Diaspora Commission (DC) be established to undertake a study that will present specific recommendations to the democratically elected GOL about the options for constituting institutionalized mechanisms that productively link Liberia with its global diaspora.

We recommend extensive consultation by the DC with officials of other countries who have developed diaspora policies and mechanisms of engagement.

---

We recommend that the DC be comprised of both Liberians—diasporic and non—whose commitment to non-factionalism is evident from past experience—and of non-partisan internationals who can bring appropriate technical expertise to bear on the process.

Finally we recommend that in light of war-torn Liberia’s many pressing reconstruction priorities that supplemental funds be sought for this effort from the countries of good will who currently host major Liberian diasporic population—particularly the US, the UK, Netherlands, and Sweden-amongst others.