

Over time, the idea of diaspora has proliferated to an extraordinary extent. The term is now frequently used in a generic sense to define communities of migrants living or settled permanently in foreign countries, conscious of their origins and identity, and maintaining various degree of contact with the mother country. Its meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas. In this global age, diaspora represents more than simply migration – it is a concept which helps to explain the world created by migration.

The large scale of contemporary international migration made some commentators to proclaim an Age of Diaspora. These days, along with the more established diaspora countries such as India, Israel, Ireland and China, we frequently hear about the Nigerian diaspora and the Australian diaspora. The last few years have been marked by an explosion of diaspora events, such as conferences, conventions and symposia, followed by scholarly publications, reports and strategies. Remarkable examples of the type of events are the Global Diaspora Forum in Washington, DC, which in 2011 and 2012 attracted more than 500 delegates representing 75 countries; the European Union Diaspora Conference in Brussels; the first Diaspora Conferences in Vietnam, Uganda and Indonesia; the establishment of a Global Diaspora Council in Portugal; the African first ever Diaspora Conference in South Africa, attended by 65 past and present African leaders.

Over the past 25 years, diasporas have become important players in the international political arena, for example the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian-American associations that represent the strongest lobbies in Washington, DC. Some countries, such as Israel and Armenia, consider their diasporas as strategically essential political assets. Others, such as India and the Philippines, and other migrant-sending countries, have been recognizing the large contributions their diasporas make through remittances.

In a globalized world, many countries began to look seriously at how to engage their diaspora communities. They came to the realization that “diaspora capital” should be “researched, cultivated, solicited and stewarded”. More than 100 countries develop diaspora strategies and policies, Ireland being the “thought leader” and part of the Big Four alongside Israel, India and China, the last two countries having special divisions and departments dealing with diaspora affairs. These countries are by no means alone in this move. The African Union recognizes the African diaspora as its sixth region.

Diasporas play a crucial role in supporting sustainable development by transferring resources, knowledge, and ideas back to their mother countries, thus boosting local entrepreneurship and integrating their countries of origin into the global economy. A growing body of evidence suggests that now it is about

“connecting to” and “collaborating with”, and this is where close relationships with key diasporas members is extremely useful and indispensable.

Technology and communications have not only rapidly transformed the massive diaspora sector, but have also influenced ways of looking at emigration. These days, people can keep in close contact with their mother countries, while being totally committed to their host countries. There is a growing movement between countries with people coming and going as never before. Now geography does not dictate identity. The countries who most suffered from emigration are now in a position to benefit the most.

Incontestably, there is a growing interest in diasporas around the world, as they make brain drain to become brain gain and brain exchange. The establishment of new networks of commerce and culture, and tapping into enormous financial and political resources only prove that governments around the world try to reach out their diasporas and that this “cooperation” is more than just economic remittances as there are also social remittances in the form of ideas, values and practices.

There is a growing realization that diasporas influence and shape what people think of home countries. National images are not manufactured but earned. David Parker reveals a model of interaction that he names the “diasporic habitus”, explained as “the embodied subjectivities poised between the legacies of the past, the imperatives of the present, and the possibilities of the future”. This habitus shapes ways of “being Chinese”, for example.

Overall, diasporas connect societies and create transnational communities of mutual development benefit to the host and origin countries; states can engage and empower diasporas for development purposes through communication, outreach and partnership policies; diaspora resources can influence family, community and national development efforts in host and origin countries.