

Harnessing the role of African women in the Diaspora

The African Diaspora are increasingly recognised as significant development actors, providing remittances, Foreign Direct Investment, technology and knowledge transfers and positive political contributions to their countries of origin. African women in the Diaspora are coming to the fore. But as Stéphanie Mbanzendoré, Chairperson of Burundian Women for Peace and Development (BWPD) notes, better targeted policies are needed.

A member of the Diaspora herself and chairing the Diaspora-led BWPD in the Netherlands, Mbanzendoré is an empowering voice for her counterparts. There is no denying the role that women in the Diaspora have played in developing the continent, she says, “particularly in the fields of intellectual cooperation, technology transfer, education and healthcare and the fight for peace and development in Africa”.

In the EU and Africa, opportunities are opening up for women to establish contact with decision-makers and express their views through regular conferences and seminars. These include BWPD seminars on fostering unity, youth and development and AIDS prevention.

But with opportunities come challenges. “The same women who lobby are never taken seriously when it comes to implementing projects for their countries”, she says. Accessing EU funds for some Diaspora-led projects can be “very difficult” and “more complicated than in bilateral cooperation”, she adds.

> Global presence, local impact

Living abroad, the Diaspora run the risk of being disconnected from realities on the ground. This is where Diaspora organisations can play a major role, says Mbanzendoré, providing the missing link between stakeholders in African countries and the rest of the world.

Through “cooperative relationships with organisations on the ground”, African Diaspora organisations are constantly kept informed, she says. This is essential for

BWPD which is implementing various Diaspora-led projects in Burundi, including ‘Social Harmony’, which has established ‘peace committees’ for conflict resolution in local communities and has organised local visits for former refugees. In the Burundian province of Kirundo, they have organised and participated in advocacy campaigns encouraging women to vote and stand for elections, provided mills to groups of women and trained local teachers. The crown jewel of their efforts can now be found in a new multi-purpose centre in Kirundo city with conference, library and cinema facilities which serve as meeting points for people from the provinces in the north of Burundi.

BWDP is just one of various examples of female-led Diaspora organisations making a difference in their local communities. How can development cooperation ensure that there will be many more examples to come?

“We would like to see the expertise of emigrants taken seriously and made better use of”, says Mbanzendoré. “We would like funders and decision-makers to consult us for advice because a lot of donations are being used in the wrong places. This is why development aid has still not been able to improve living conditions in Africa, and has in fact had the opposite effect.”

Amidst the complex environment of international development aid, it is sometimes the small-scale Diaspora-led projects that have the greatest, most visible and most direct impact on the lives of the poor, says Mbanzendoré.

This is why existing funding systems

“urgently need to be reviewed and why such projects should be accommodated if the financial organisations really want to improve the lives of Africans”, she adds.

For more information, see: www.burundesevrouwenvoorvrede.nl (in Dutch)

Keywords

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