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Diaspora and development policies in the Economic Community of West African States
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Abstract: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its Member States are increasingly adopting policies and measures aiming at maximizing possible benefits of migration for development. This chapter analyses how ECOWAS Member States engage with their diasporas. It draws on an analysis of United Nations, African Union, ECOWAS and national policies, strategies and regulations on migration, diaspora and development. It finds that in ECOWAS Member States, policy attention to migration and the diaspora is recent, but rapidly increasing. Diaspora-related measures are integrated in the migration policies and strategies that have been/are being developed since 2014 in 14 out of 15 countries. In some cases, diaspora policies were adopted before wider migration policies. Whereas 13 out of 15 States mention diasporans as development actors, they define their possible contributions to development differently. They all mention financial transfers, whereas fewer States mention migrants’ skills and knowledge transfers, political influence transfers and benefits of diaspora political engagement. Diaspora institutions have been created in 13 countries, in 8 cases with a ministerial status. However, a scarcity of data on diasporas hinders effective policymaking.

33.1. Introduction

Migration can be an opportunity for development. In West Africa and worldwide, migration is growing together with technological and infrastructural changes that could allow an easier transfer of financial and non-financial remittances, and an easier circulation of knowledge and skills between countries of origin, transit and destination. However, obstacles such as scarce support to emigrants’ contributions and high remittance transaction costs still hinder effective harnessing of such opportunities.

In this context, States of origin of emigrants are increasingly adopting policies and measures aiming at maximizing possible benefits. State efforts to engage with the diaspora are on the rise in West Africa and worldwide. These have led to a rapid diffusion of diaspora policies and institutions. Whereas they have existed for a longer time in some important countries of origin, such as Mexico and Italy, worldwide their adoption has been accelerating since the mid-2000s, when the United Nations started recommending them as a good practice for development cooperation. This international model has spread rapidly and has been adopted by States with varying needs, identities and migration situations (Gamlen, 2019). In parallel, States have increasingly coordinated their formerly partially dispersed diaspora engagement initiatives. In this context, they have tended to define diasporans as non-resident citizens (see Box 33.1).
Despite their increasing importance, diaspora policies still receive less consideration than immigration policies. Whereas policymakers and researchers have dedicated more attention to States of origin recently, they have mostly focused on their role for the immigration policies of States of destination. The transnational engagement of States of origin with their citizens abroad for domestic purposes has received less attention. Moreover, so far, research on diaspora policies has mostly focused on national rather than multi-country case studies. An analysis of diaspora policies in the whole West Africa region is still missing.

This chapter analyses diaspora policies and institutions in ECOWAS and its 15 Member States. It first provides some explanations of recent trends towards State engagement with the diaspora and the emergence of diaspora institutions, and illustrates recent policy attention to diasporas at the global, African and West African levels. It then analyses the state of diaspora policies in ECOWAS Member States. Finally, it draws some conclusions and recommendations.

Box 33.1. Defining diaspora groups

Diaspora groups have been defined in different ways. State approaches often tend to focus on non-resident citizens, including emigrants and their descendants (Collyer, 2013). With a similar approach, the International Monetary Fund defines a diaspora as a “group of persons who have migrated and their descendants who maintain a connection to their homeland” (Ratha and Plaza, 2011). Instead, the African Union defines the African diaspora as “consisting of people of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union”.

Researchers have underlined that citizens can have different feelings of belonging and willingness to engage with their countries of origin. Therefore, an alternative suggestion of diasporas has been suggested, based also on an “ongoing orientation towards a ‘homeland’ and maintenance of a group identity over time” (Gamlen, 2019:8). In other words, a diaspora has been defined as “an imagined community living away from a professed place of origin” (Vertovec, 2009:5). Such a definition implies that diasporas are not equivalent to broader emigrant communities, but rather “constructed from some broader potential pool of engagement” (Collyer, 2013:7), based on a “sense of common purpose” and willingness to engage with countries of origin. Therefore, the composition of diasporas can change over time, based on changing situations in countries of origin and destination of emigrants, but also on personal life situations and social networks.

Researchers have also suggested that diasporans can invest expecting to gain different types of returns. These include financial returns, emotional returns, social status or political returns. Often, motivations for engagement and expected returns are multidimensional (Riddle, 2017).

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33.2. State efforts to engage with diasporas are on the rise

States engage with their diasporas with different objectives and particularly with the aim of supporting national development, extending their political and administrative functions abroad and increasing emigrants’ political participation (see, for example, Collyer, 2013). The first objective refers to emigrants’ potential contribution to development in countries of origin. Over the years, policymakers and researchers have interpreted this influence differently. Development “pessimists” have tended to put greater focus on negative externalities of migration, such as “brain drain” or dependency from remittances; and development “optimists” have tended to underline more positive effects, such as increasing remittance transfers. In the 1950s and 1960s, a greater emphasis was put on development-optimist arguments, whereas development-pessimist arguments received increased attention in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, a renewed optimism has been observed (de Haas, 2010). A stronger focus on the possible support of migrants to development in countries of origin and destination has also represented a point on which the interests of these States and of non-State actors could converge. International organizations have played a critical role in supporting their diffusion and in increasing promotion of diaspora engagement initiatives. The second objective refers to the extension of the State’s political and administrative functions beyond national borders. It has been suggested that by allowing the strengthening of State engagement with citizens living abroad, diaspora policies and institutions have contributed to a “redefinition of the State” (Levitt and Dehesa, 2003), in particular through measures aiming at increasing the extension of the financial resources and of the political influence of the State beyond its national borders. The third objective, lastly, refers to an increase of emigrants’ political participation, through a progressive extension of the citizenship and political rights of citizens abroad (Bauböck, 2007), for instance by allowing them to vote from abroad or to hold multiple citizenships. Box 33.2 illustrates challenges related to diaspora policy effectiveness.

**Box 33.2. Diaspora policy effectiveness: Challenges and potential for improvement**

Evaluating the effectiveness of diaspora policies in West Africa is challenging. To begin with, most of them have been introduced only recently. In addition, there are broader challenges with regard to the evaluation of the impact of diaspora policies more broadly. In fact, their objectives and impact are often not clear, in particular regarding the intended form of development, and due to the variety of stakeholders involved (Vezzoli and Lacroix, 2010). However, researchers have highlighted that the effectiveness of diaspora policies can be augmented through cohesive and coordinated policies, including measures strengthening migrants’ political representation and protection, as well as their links with their countries of origin (Gamlen, 2006). Research has also highlighted the need to harmonize both migration and development, as well as national and local policies (Mensa-Bonsu and Adjei, 2007). Furthermore, it has underlined that development outcomes of diaspora policies also depend on migrants’ legal and political rights; broader social, economic and political contexts in origin and destination countries; and investment conditions and remittance-transfer structures. All these need to be addressed – for instance, through comprehensive development policies – if migrants’ contributions to development are to be supported (de Haas, 2010). Finally, broader challenges related to migrants’ contributions to development need to be addressed (see Quartey, Addoquaye Tagoe and Boatemaa Setrana, Chapter 21 of this volume). These include migration selectivity, differences between consumptive remittances expenditures and productive investments, and scarce policy attention to internal and South–South migration.
States have engaged with their diasporas by establishing diaspora institutions. This chapter looks at diaspora institutions as “formal State offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants” (Gamlen, 2014:182). This definition includes formal offices attached to executive and legislative institutions at the national level. Diaspora institutions can be units, directorates or agencies, which are mostly integrated in ministries of foreign affairs. However, in some West African countries, diaspora institutions have reached ministerial status. Some States also have governmental diaspora councils, which in this chapter are considered as diaspora institutions. In other cases, diaspora councils are independent from the State and can therefore not be considered as diaspora institutions. Non-State diaspora councils are mentioned here, but not included in the analysis. In addition, several actors have an influence on diaspora policymaking and programming. These include international organizations such as IOM, the United Nations Development Programme, the African Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development; private banks and investment institutions, such as the African Institute for Remittances; development cooperation agencies; local governments; and civil society organizations. As this chapter focuses on State-led diaspora policies and institutions, international organization-led diaspora engagement measures are not included in the analysis.

Diaspora institutions can fulfill different functions (Gamlen, 2014). To begin with, they can fulfill “tapping” functions and aim at supporting development and foreign policies with possible financial and political contributions of the diaspora. Diaspora engagement strategies often aim at facilitating remittance transfers, trade and investment. Less often, they also aim at facilitating the transfer of skills and knowledge, and at increasing political participation, including on development cooperation planning. Diaspora organizations have called for strengthening engagement strategies targeting these non-financial contributions (Madichie, 2016). Diaspora institutions can furthermore fulfill “embracing” functions with a view to strengthening emigrants’ links with their home countries – for instance, through an extension of political, welfare and social rights, or through symbolic events such as diaspora conferences and “diaspora days”. Finally, they can also have “governing” functions and aim at adapting national migration governance to evolving broader policy developments, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

33.3. Global, African and West African policies pay increasing attention to diasporas

Migrants’ contributions to development have received growing recognition in recent times. At the global level, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development introduced a first explicit recognition of migrants’ contributions to inclusive growth and sustainable development, and called for reducing remittance transaction costs. Objective 19 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration later called for improving conditions for migrants to contribute to sustainable development in countries of origin, transit and destination. In particular, it called for adopting migration policies; integrating migration into development planning and sectoral policies at different levels; facilitating migrants’ contributions, including investments and entrepreneurship; investing in research on migrants’ non-financial contributions; and enabling their political participation. In addition, it recalled the need for participatory approaches, including State and non-State actors.

More detailed provisions have been adopted at the African level. The African Union has recognized the importance of the diaspora in different ways, including by declaring that it is the Union’s “sixth region”, and that encouraging its full participation is one of its key objectives. To this aim, Agenda 2063 called on African Union Member States to enable diaspora participation and facilitate free movement of people, as later concretized in the 2018 African Union Free Movement of Persons Protocol. In 2012, the first Global African Diaspora Summit led to the adoption of five projects, including the development of a Skills Database of African Professionals in the Diaspora to facilitate their involvement in Africa’s development agenda, the African Diaspora Investment Fund and the African Institute for Remittances. The Revised Migration Policy Framework for Africa (African Union, 2018) identified diaspora engagement as one of its eight key pillars for engagement. It highlighted existing challenges regarding trust-building among diaspora institutions, scarcity of quality data on diasporas and remittances, and the need to develop national...
diaspora engagement strategies, in line with international frameworks. It also called for engaging with second- and third-generation diasporans. The Migration Policy Framework for Africa recommended multiple strategies to address these challenges. To begin with, it recommended establishing diaspora focal points and agencies; adopting whole-of-government approaches; and developing diaspora engagement strategies, together with international donors and organizations. It further recommended facilitating diaspora investment and circulation of knowledge and skills, as well as broader political, social and economic reforms that could help attract diaspora engagement. Finally, it recommended improving research and data collection, including through diaspora mapping.

In West Africa, diasporas’ contributions to development are also recognized. While the regional migration policy being developed will likely contain more detailed provisions, the issue is currently addressed in the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration. Adopted in 2008, this Approach is, however, less detailed than documents adopted later at the African and global level. It claims to harmonize migration and development policies, including through migration and development action plans. It does so mainly based on a recognition that “legal migration towards other regions of the world contribute to ECOWAS Member States’ development”, whereas less attention is paid to internal and interregional migration. At the same time, the Approach reiterates that free movement of persons in the region – as established by the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment – is a priority for the region (see Schöfberger, Chapter 30 of this volume). Even if not specifically focused on the diaspora, in fact, free movement policies facilitate the circulation of persons and the transfer of diaspora contributions. Diaspora engagement measures proposed in the Approach are mostly focused on the potential of financial transfers and investments for development and the involvement of the diaspora in development projects. Improving migrants’ education and skills and reducing the potential negative impact of “brain drain” are also mentioned. The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA, created in 2001) also includes diaspora issues as one of its areas of discussion. European Union–ECOWAS policy negotiations have also had an impact on diaspora engagement strategies in the region, as discussed in Box 33.3.

Box 33.3. Diaspora engagement strategies in the context of wider European Union–ECOWAS policy negotiations on migration

Since the 2000s, the policy relevance of migration between West Africa and Europe has risen both for ECOWAS and its Member States, and for the European Union and its member States, in parallel with increasing migration from West Africa to Europe (see Fedorova and Shupert, Chapter 4 of this volume) and intensifying European Union efforts to engage with West African countries on migration following the establishment of the Schengen Area of Free Movement (see Schöfberger, Chapter 30 of this volume). Related interregional policy negotiations have contributed to framing evolving migration and diaspora policies at the regional and national levels. Diaspora-related aspects have been present in policy negotiations since the beginning, even though to a changing extent over the years. In 2006, the Joint Africa–European Union Declaration on Migration and Development recognized migrants’ contributions to development in countries of origin, transit and destination, and affirmed the need to support diaspora efforts. This recognition was also present in the 2006 Rabat Declaration, launching a political Dialogue on Migration and Development between European, West African and Central African States. Migration and development-related aspects have also remained present in interregional policies developed in the following years. However, their balance with further migration-related issues, such as immigration control, has changed in line with shifting international migration priorities (Schöfberger, 2019). There has been an increasing focus on how migration could be due to development challenges, rather than how it could contribute to addressing them. Meanwhile, growing policy attention to migration in countries of origin and transit, and increased availability of funds, have supported the development of national migration policies and strategies. As analysed below, this has in some cases allowed national Governments to further develop diaspora engagement strategies and institutions. The recent launch of the European Union-funded European Union Global Diaspora Facility further suggests greater attention to diaspora contributions at the European Union level.
33.4. What is the state of diaspora policies in West African States?\(^5\)

In the 15 ECOWAS Member States, policy attention to migration and the diaspora is relatively recent but increasing. Where present, relevant policies have incorporated diaspora engagement elements, as suggested at the levels of ECOWAS, the African Union and the United Nations (see Figure 33.1), while simultaneously selecting and adapting them to national migration and development trends and needs, and to different social, economic and political contexts. This section provides an overview of diaspora engagement measures and structures included in relevant national policies in ECOWAS Member States.

The adoption of national migration policies and strategies is very recent in the region, the first national migration policy having been adopted in 2014, but has since then progressed rapidly (see Figure 33.2). In recent years, seven countries have adopted a national migration policy: the Gambia (2017), Ghana (2016), Liberia (2017), Mali (2014), Nigeria (2015), Senegal (2018) and Sierra Leone (2018). Five further countries are currently working on the elaboration of a national migration policy: Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and the Niger. In addition, Burkina Faso (2016) and Togo (2016) have adopted national migration strategies. Diaspora-related measures are included in all these documents.

Seven countries have developed or are developing specific diaspora or migration and development policies, strategies or regulations. In three cases, these documents were adopted before wider migration policies and strategies. Benin had already adopted a national policy for Beninese abroad in 2000, while it is still elaborating its national migration policy. Cabo Verde’s 2013 National Strategy on Emigration for Development remains the only relevant document at the national level. Moreover, Togo adopted a strategic plan on the mobilization of its diaspora in 2013, three years

\(^5\) This section is based on an analysis of national migration, diaspora and development policies, strategies and regulations, as detailed in the text. A direct analysis was conducted of documents available online, whereas the analysis of documents not available online was based on information available on the websites of relevant ministries, on consultations with IOM country offices and on secondary literature.
before adopting its National Strategy for Migration and Development. Liberia and Guinea are also finalizing a national diaspora engagement policy. In the Niger and Senegal, finally, relevant diaspora-related provisions are contained in the order for the creation of the Directorate for Nigeriens Abroad and in the Community Approach to Senegalese Abroad of the related Directorate General, respectively. In Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo, national labour migration policies and policies also include provisions on diaspora engagement.6

Figure 33.2. Adoption of relevant policies

Note: These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on these maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

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6 Ghana’s national labour policy is being finalized. The analysis of Ghana’s diaspora engagement policies and strategies is therefore based merely on its National Migration Policy for Ghana – Migrating out of Poverty (2016).
Efforts are also ongoing regarding a harmonization of migration and development policies, as recommended in policies of the United Nations, the African Union and the ECOWAS. The national development plans of 12 States mention migrants’ possible contributions to national development, and foresee diaspora engagement measures. Benin’s and Liberia’s development plans do not, and the Long-term National Development Plan for Ghana 2018–2057 is currently under review.

ECOWAS Member States define possible diaspora contributions to development and to political and administrative processes differently, and therefore adopt different diaspora engagement strategies. They all recognize that diasporans are important actors for development. The transfer of financial contributions receives particular attention: policy and strategy documents of 13 countries foresee measures addressing the potential of remittances for national economic growth, and in particular for the national budget, for investment, trade and employment creation. Moreover, most countries have adopted or foreseen the adoption of measures intended to lower costs of remittances, and three countries explicitly indicate the need to engage emigrants as actors for local economic growth and development. Instead, only five countries currently foresee measures aiming at supporting the transfer of skills and knowledge, whose extent and possible impact are perhaps still less immediately visible. The creation of a portfolio of skills of citizens abroad is also included in the draft national migration policy of the Niger.

The Gambia and Côte d’Ivoire refer to a transfer of political influence, by indicating that diaspora engagement can increase the countries’ political influence abroad. Supportive to a strengthened political engagement of the diaspora are further provisions adopted by these and other States aimed at improving the political representation of diaspora groups, including through improved coordination between the Government and diaspora institutions and associations, through councils of citizens abroad, through diaspora forums or through the extension of political rights, such as the allowance of multiple citizenships and of voting from abroad and/or for diaspora representatives in national parliaments (see Jaulin and Smith, Chapter 34 of this volume). In other cases, however, migrants’ participation in political processes remains difficult, in line with difficult Government–diaspora relations. This could lead to a misrepresentation of migrants’ interest in the definition of diaspora engagement strategies and eventually to ineffective policies.

In line with the Migration Policy Framework for Africa’s recommendation, 13 countries have established diaspora institutions. In eight countries, diaspora institutions have reached the ministerial level. Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Mali have established ministries for African integration and of their nationals living abroad. In Benin, the Gambia, Guinea, the Niger and Senegal, the term “diaspora” is explicitly included in the names of ministries of foreign affairs. In Cabo Verde, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo, the respective diaspora unit, agency and directorate are attached to the ministries of foreign affairs. In Nigeria, a House Committee on Diaspora Affairs is also present. In Sierra Leone, the Office of Diaspora Affairs is attached to the Presidency. Finally, in Liberia and Guinea-Bissau, the only two countries that have so far not established dedicated diaspora institutions, responsibility for diaspora issues is still attributed to ministries of foreign affairs. The eight councils of citizens abroad existing so far also play a relevant role regarding the diaspora’s political representation. In Burkina Faso, Guinea, the Niger, Senegal and Togo, they are attached to ministries. Côte d’Ivoire is also planning to establish a Council of Ivorians Abroad attached to the Ministry of African Integration and Ivorians Abroad. In Benin, Mali and Nigeria, relevant councils are private. In addition, in some countries, central banks also play a relevant role. National central banks in Ghana and Nigeria are responsible for implementing remittances-related policies. The Central Bank of the Gambia publishes quarterly data on remittances. In Benin, the establishment of a bank for investment for Beninese abroad is planned. In Senegal, similar functions are performed by the Investment Support Fund for Senegalese Abroad, attached to the Directorate General for Senegalese Abroad, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Senegalese Abroad. The creation of a diaspora investment fund is also foreseen in the draft national migration policy of the Niger.

Collecting data on the diaspora and developing diaspora databases or mappings are essential for evidence-based policymaking. However, so far, only three countries have adopted comprehensive diaspora mapping strategies. Senegal collects data on its diaspora through various channels, including voluntary online registers, consular registers and information from diaspora associations. The Global Database on Nigerians in Diaspora is currently based on voluntary registration, but the National Policy on Migration foresees the establishment of a comprehensive diaspora database. The Final Report of the Strategic Plan for the Mobilization of the Togolese Diaspora (2013) foresees a diaspora mapping. In the Niger, where an online registration system has been created, but was inactive at the time of writing, the establishment of a diaspora statistical bulletin and of a comprehensive database is foreseen in the draft
national migration policy. Five additional countries foresee the establishment of diaspora databases or of migration observatories tasked with collecting data also on the diaspora: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Mali.

33.5. Conclusion and recommendations

Diaspora policies are on the rise in West Africa. In some countries (such as Benin), diaspora engagement strategies were adopted even before their recommendation as best practice from the United Nations, and preceded the development of national migration policies. Diaspora-related issues are currently mainstreamed in the development plans of all ECOWAS Member States. The recent diffusion of diaspora policies and engagement measures has been accompanied by the creation of diaspora institutions at different levels. ECOWAS Member States strengthen their engagement with the diaspora, with the aim of supporting emigrants’ potential contributions to development, to extend the political and administrative functions of the State beyond national borders and to increase emigrants’ political participation. They dedicate particular attention to financial transfers at the micro and macro levels, whereas measures targeting non-financial contributions are still less frequent. Whereas at the ECOWAS level, diasporans targeted by the 2008 Common Approach to Migration are mostly skilled South–North migrants, the profile of targeted diasporans is not specified at the national level. Both at the regional and at the national level, the development of evidence-based diaspora policies is hindered by scarce data on the diaspora.

Based on the analysis presented in this chapter, the following recommendations can be made:

To national and regional institutions:

• Sustain efforts to harmonize migration and development policies, in order to support emigrants’ contributions to development and to improve investment conditions and remittances transfer structures. In particular, it would be important to ensure the inclusion of diaspora engagement strategies in the ongoing revision of the ECOWAS Common Approach on Migration.

To ECOWAS Member States and institutions:

• Develop more transnational diaspora-related strategies. These strategies, which could be developed at the bilateral, multilateral or regional level, should include interregional and internal migration, which still accounts for most migration from the region, and short-term and circular migration.

• Strengthen measures aiming at improving the participation of diasporans in the identification of migration- and development-related measures, as well as their political participation. This would help ensure their ownership and the sustainability of adopted measures.

• Strengthen diaspora engagement strategies targeting non-financial transfers, such as the transfer and circulation of knowledge and skills, in order to maximize possible benefits of emigration.

To national and regional institutions and research centres:

• Invest in enhancing capacities to collect data on diasporas. This is essential for evidence-based diaspora policies. Diaspora mappings and databases should include data on migration destinations and on socioeconomic characteristics of migrants.
African Union

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