



European Union
Global Diaspora Facility

WHAT IS A DIASPORA ORGANISATION?

A STARTING GUIDE

Funded by
the European Union



Implemented by ICMPD



ICMPD

International Centre for
Migration Policy Development

CONTENTS

■ Key takeaways	04
■ Diaspora organisations at a glance	05
■ Introduction	06
■ Evolution of diaspora organisations	08
■ Main characteristics	09
■ Main types	09
■ Primary functions	11
■ Conclusion	13
■ Resources	14

The European Union Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF) is the first European Union-funded project to take a global approach to diaspora engagement. Implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the project seeks to build an informed, inclusive, and impactful diaspora-development ecosystem through research, dialogue, and capacity development. The first phase of EUDiF runs from June 2019 to December 2023.

This publication was written by Dr F. Tittel-Mosser EUDiF's Knowledge Management and Research Officer, with editorial support from Dr A. Sgro and C. Griffiths, and document layout and design by Marc Rechdane.

This publication includes links to sources and references that are accessible online. Readers are encouraged to use the digital version in order to access all related links.

The views presented in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of EUDiF, ICMPD or the European Union.

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not for commercial use. EUDiF requests acknowledgement and a copy of any publication containing reproduced material. If publishing online, we ask that a link to the original publication on the EUDiF website be included.

Citation recommendation: Tittel-Mosser, F. (2024) *What is a diaspora organisation? A starting guide.* EUDiF, Brussels: ICMPD.



Funded by
the European Union



Implemented by



KEY TAKEAWAYS

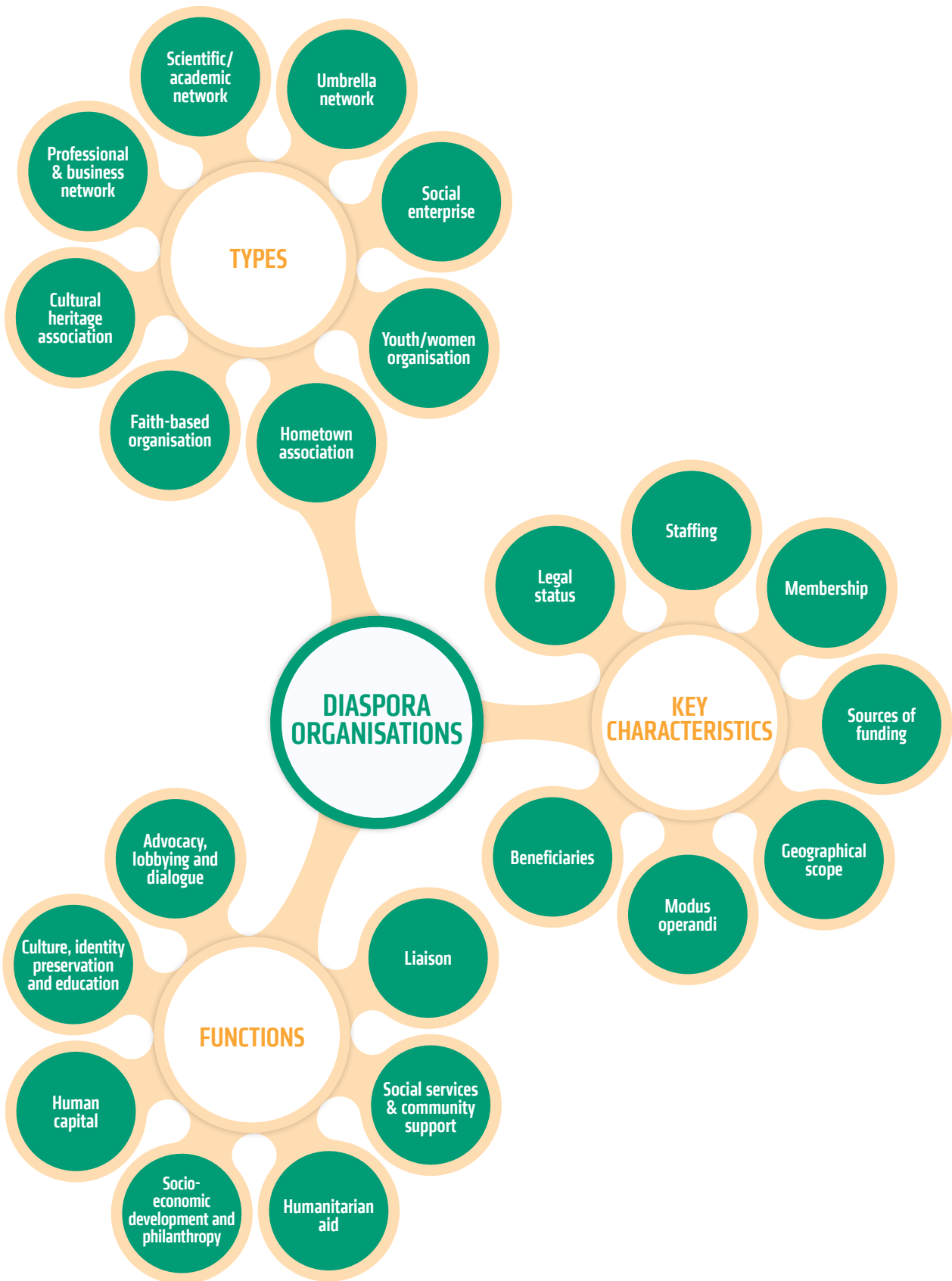
1. Diaspora organisations are complex to define and there is no one widely accepted definition.
2. The main characteristics of diaspora organisations are varied beneficiaries, geographical scope, legal status, membership, modus operandi, staffing, and sources of funding.
3. Diaspora organisations include a wide range of organisations including cultural heritage associations, hometown associations, professional and business networks, scientific/academic networks, social enterprises, youth organisations, umbrella networks and many more.
4. Diaspora organisations are fluid and can evolve over time, shifting focus from integration to development, changing target beneficiaries, and/or growing into diaspora networks.
5. The primary functions of diaspora organisations are advocacy and dialogue, culture and education, human capital, humanitarian, liaison, social services and community support, and socio-economic development.

This piece is inspired by EUDiF's research, dialogue, and capacity development activities with diaspora organisations. It aims to help practitioners to differentiate diaspora organisations from other types of civil society organisations and to provide a better understanding of their activities, structure types and ways of operating in Europe. As diaspora engagement is often informal and fragmented, this exercise seeks to bring a bit of structure to the scattered diaspora world and to the work done with diaspora in general.



– Dr Fanny Tittel-Mosser, Knowledge Management & Research Officer, EUDiF

DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS AT A GLANCE



INTRODUCTION

Diaspora communities are increasingly recognised as central partners in supporting development activities in their home countries. The development potential of diasporas has been captured in the plethora of policy and academic discussions around diaspora human capital, social and financial remittances, entrepreneurship and advocacy among other areas (Cohen and Fisher 2020; Levitt 1998; Newland 2010). At the European Union (EU) policy level, the 2005 Communication “[Migration and Development: Some concrete orientations](#)” was the EU’s first comprehensive approach to migration and development appreciating diaspora groups as agents of development. Strategic policy frameworks, including the 2011 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, the 2015 [European Agenda on Migration](#), the 2017 [New European Consensus on Development](#), the 2020 [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) and, more recently, the [Samoa Agreement](#) have consolidated principles of diaspora for development and placed particular emphasis on enhancing dialogue with diasporas, migrant groups and strengthening cooperation with countries of origin.

In 2019, ICMPD was entrusted with the implementation of the EU Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF): the first EU-funded project to take a global approach to promoting collaboration between diaspora organisations and governments of countries of origin, as well as with the European Union. For EUDiF, diaspora organisations are both a key target group and direct beneficiaries of the action.

Why do we need to better understand diaspora organisations?

Enhancing knowledge of diaspora organisations in the EU will help policymakers and practitioners to:

- Understand the diversity of diaspora organisations and their rich potential.
- Increase synergies among development partners including more marginal players.
- Develop targeted messages to reach specific segments of the diaspora.
- Create appropriate and modular funding opportunities and criteria for allocation.
- Tailor programmes and capacity development services, for example aiming at the professionalisation of diaspora organisations.
- Identify services provided to and by the diaspora.
- Gather ideas for replication and scale-up.
- Amplify the role played by diaspora organisations in sustainable development.

This piece does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview of the diaspora organisation landscape. However, it can be used as a building block to the development of more comprehensive typologies.

A question of identity

Diaspora organisations fit within the civil society organisations (CSO) framework. The European Economic and Social Committee defines civil society as a “collective term for all types of social action, by individuals or groups, that do not emanate from the state and are not run by it”. Similarly, the UNDP states that CSOs are “an arena of voluntary collective actions around shared interests, purposes and values distinct from families, state and profit seeking institutions”. Diaspora organisations are a sub-group of CSOs.



The diasporic experience is the key factor distinguishing diaspora organisations from other types of civil society organisations.

Just like the concept of “diaspora” itself,¹ there is no widely accepted definition of a diaspora organisation. The work of diaspora organisations is often representative of their transnational nature. Diaspora organisations provide a platform for constructive engagement with countries of settlement and countries of origin (Ong’ayo 2014). Diaspora organisations are pivotal in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue between countries of settlement and migrant communities, promoting good integration practices and identifying needs to better support migrant communities. However, while diaspora organisations usually start out by supporting the integration of their beneficiaries, they are also increasingly important – and usually better recognised – for their development work.

Working definition²

EUDiF defines diaspora organisations as organisations managed by diaspora members and/or having a majority of diaspora membership. Diaspora organisations should be based outside the country of origin and their activities can be implemented in regions, countries or communities of origin and/or host countries. Diaspora organisations can carry out a wide range of activities, depending on their purpose, including with a strong focus on integration activities, development activities or both simultaneously.

- 1 The EUDiF definition of the term refers to emigrants and descendants of emigrants who actively maintain links with their country of origin/heritage and are willing to contribute to its development.
- 2 In the context of our activities, this definition may vary according to programming requirements.

EVOLUTION OF DIASPORA ORGANISATIONS

There is no one path for a diaspora organisation to take. This hyper-diversity means no assumptions should be made about the past, present or future of any diaspora organisation. Nevertheless, looking at factors such as history, government-activity, region, mission and membership, patterns emerge.

Diaspora organisations are spaces for the diaspora to get together and stay involved in the country of origin as well as in host countries, whether or not they align with the national authorities. Diaspora organisations can be useful to countries of origin as they can provide complementary services to diplomatic and consular bodies as well as acting a “trusted” interlocutor for governments trying to engage the diaspora’s financial, human or social capital. Finally, they are also useful to host countries as they are a point of contact both to facilitate the provision of integration services to the diaspora and of development initiatives in the country of origin. Overall, diaspora organisations are entities that connect all main stakeholders of the diaspora engagement ecosystem, the diaspora itself, countries of origin and destination and secondary actors depending on the focus of a particular organisation (i.e.: private sector for business organisations).

Regional trends³ in terms of diaspora engagement have influenced the development of diaspora organisations. Diaspora organisations related to Africa or Asia are usually the oldest organisations as these regions were the first to engage their diaspora. The need to identify reliable interlocutors for diaspora-government exchanges has encouraged the development of organisations in parallel to the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement at government level. Eastern European diaspora organisations, on the other hand, have mainly been created in the second half of the 2000s as diaspora engagement only started picking up in the region after the independence from the former Soviet Union and the recognition of countries of origin of the importance of migration and development issues.

In the first four years of EUDiF’s implementation, we learned that **diaspora organisations are very fluid**. When looking at the evolution of services and structures, some common trends can be observed. First, diaspora organisations tend to first focus on integration issues before shifting towards development issues. However, this is not always the case. Some organisations created over 20 years ago are still mainly focused on integration issues. Without being able to generalise, we see that often diaspora organisations that focus on integration issues over a longer period of time are supporting communities from countries with long lasting crises such as Afghanistan or Somalia, or those with continuous migration flows such as CPLP country nationals (Community of Portuguese Language Countries) in Portugal, or Moroccans in Spain.

Diaspora organisations often **start with a specific focus before diversifying once they become established**. This is evident in membership expanding from a single diaspora community to cover those from multiple countries or a region. It is also true of subject focus and activities, which often diversify over time. For example starting with crisis response and diversifying to development; beginning with cultural activities and later adding advocacy work

Finally, **we witness more and more diversity in the type of diaspora organisations**, beyond the traditional hometown associations. We also observe evolution from individual diaspora organisations towards diaspora networks. This process usually takes time as an organisation needs to grow and create the necessary partnerships to develop a network. Moreover, sustaining a network can be challenging and so networks, like organisations, come in different forms and can be transient.

3 See EUDiF’s Regional Overviews on diaspora engagement.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Legal status

DOs may be legally registered or not. The exact status depends on the legal options available in the country of residence.

Staffing

DOs can be exclusively volunteer-led or led by paid staff with or without additional voluntary support.

Membership

Many DOs are exclusive to the members of the same diaspora community, though some are open to everyone wishing to be active in the organisation.

Geographical scope of action

DOs can operate at regional, national, and local level in country of origin, destination or both.

Main sources of funding

DO work may be funded through project-based interventions dependent on diaspora/member contributions, interventions supported by institutional donors, a combination of both etc.

Beneficiaries

Depending on the activities, beneficiaries may be exclusive to the same diaspora community, diaspora from a specific region, residents in a specific country/region, or a mixed audience of diaspora and non-diaspora.

Modus operandi

DO typically operate through a multifaceted modus operandi, leveraging networks, cultural ties, technology (allowing for online presence), and partnerships among other

MAIN TYPES

Diaspora organisations include a wide range of organisations including cultural heritage associations, hometown associations, professional and business networks, scientific/academic networks, social enterprise, umbrella networks, youth organisations and many more. This list is organised alphabetically.



Cultural heritage associations

The culture of every ethnic community remains as strong as its cultural associations. Cultural heritage associations bind communities together by promoting and preserving their identities, traditions, and values. Building and sustaining a sense of community is their primary objective. This can happen when an ethnic group gathers to observe an important holiday, or when migrants organise to teach their history, language and values to young people.



Faith-based organisations

Faith-based diaspora organisations often play an important intermediary role for diaspora philanthropic activities, such as providing money, goods, knowledge and skills for the social benefit of the community. This type of organisations is driven by certain religious beliefs, often including a social or moral component and serve some of the most vulnerable populations.



Hometown associations

Hometown associations allow diaspora members from the same village to maintain ties with and materially support their places of origin. At home, the focus is on development activities and abroad, the focus is dual – maintaining connections with home but also providing a supportive environment for people in their country of destination.



Professional and business networks

Professional and business networks aim at bringing together professionals and entrepreneurs of a particular heritage and based in another part the world so they can access information that supports them in their entrepreneurial activities. They play a critical role in identifying diaspora mentors and experts to provide support in pre-departure skills development, knowledge transfer, and professional development.



Scientific/academic networks

Scientific/academic networks mobilise highly skilled diaspora members to help counter brain drain and increase the capacity of research and education delivery of universities in the country or region of origin. Their main objective is to facilitate the involvement of academic diaspora in teaching and research collaboration. They also facilitate professional mobility.



Social enterprises

Social enterprises are for-profit organisations that use their financial resources to support the implementation of their own social initiatives. It differs from a traditional business in that it reinvests its profits to pursue its social “mission” while ensuring its financial viability. Many social enterprises are organised in the form of cooperatives, associations or foundations.



Umbrella networks

A diaspora umbrella network typically refers to a coordinating organisation that brings together various individual diaspora groups or communities under a common structure. It serves as a central entity that facilitates communication, collaboration, and coordination among different diaspora organisations or individuals.



Youth/women organisations

These are youth-led or women-led diaspora organisations that aim and endeavour to serve the interests of diaspora young people or women in host countries, promoting their active participation in a constructive dialogue between their origin and host countries.

This list is non-exhaustive as the diaspora landscape is constantly evolving, with new organisation (sub)types materialising in reaction to national needs or diaspora identities and interests. For example, in addition to youth and women-led organisations, other historically marginalised groups are creating organisations which centre on intersecting elements of identity such as disability and LGBTQI+.

PRIMARY FUNCTIONS

The following section presents the seven main categories of function carried out by diaspora organisations identified through EUDiF activities. The mission of the organisation defines the main category and the main activities carried out. Each category encompasses a variety of activities. It is important to underline that most organisations engage in a vast array of activities that often overlap between these seven categories, which are presented in alphabetical order.



Advocacy, lobbying and dialogue

Advocacy and dialogue activities performed by diaspora organisations aim to affect change in host and home communities alike and to trigger positive actions by influencing policymakers. Activities target primarily governments of origin and settlement but can also engage international organisations, private sector businesses, NGOs and media outlets.

Activities: Awareness campaigns on identity related issues (e.g. racism, gender equality), political campaigns (e.g. on democracy, regional conflicts), information campaigns, organisation of thematic events etc.



Culture, identity preservation and education

This function focusses on the promotion and preservation of their cultural roots. Here, particular emphasis is placed upon the end goal of each cultural activity, which, in general, is to strengthen cultural identity and attachment to the country of origin. Usually, the diaspora organisations providing this type of service are smaller and operate at a more ad-hoc level. These organisations are also usually dedicated to a specific diaspora community, which is not surprising as culture is intrinsically linked to a particular community of origin.

Activities: Heritage language courses, traditional dance classes, cooking classes, celebration of cultural festivities and cultural performing arts etc.



Human capital

This function seeks to capitalise on the diaspora's knowledge, skills and education as well as on their soft skills, such as talents, creativity, capacity to innovate and digital literacy to support the development of the country of origin. This function is still growing, as the interest of countries of origin to tap into the human capital of its diaspora is more recent. The added value of involving diaspora members in skills transfer programmes, for example, lies in their knowledge of the context and cultural awareness, and their commitment to the country (for more see Learning by doing: Skills transfer schemes). Therefore, diaspora human capital tends to be primarily used in countries or regions of origin.

Activities: There are three main ways to “use” diaspora human capital: by nurturing talents (e.g. skills development for younger generations), deploying talents (e.g. short-term diaspora skills transfers), and attracting talents (e.g. brain gain/return).



Humanitarian aid

Activities supporting countries of origin in times of political, economic or environmental crisis. Diaspora organisations delivering this function can run short-term projects to support immediate needs of the population, or long-term activities in countries affected by ongoing conflicts.

Activities: Rebuilding of infrastructure, collection, and distribution of essential items, fundraising etc.



Liaison

This function seeks to provide a space to connect the diaspora and the country of origin. It usually takes time to build sufficient trust among the diaspora as well as with the country of origin to be entrusted officially with liaison work. Networks are often entrusted with this function as they represent a larger portion of the diaspora.

Activities: Provide visibility and representation to diaspora groups, bring together and coordinate organisations, organisation of events to maintain links between the country of origin and the diaspora (often targeting the youth), providing “professionalisation” services to diaspora organisations, identifying skilled or key people in the community to connect with the leaders or other interested parties in country of origin etc.



Social services and community support

Diaspora organisations can become important meeting points for newly arrived migrants and diaspora members provide a wide range of services in countries of residence within the function of social services and community support. This can facilitate the integration of the diaspora community within the host society, as well as foster social cohesion.

Activities: Language courses (of the residence country), psychological counselling services, legal consultations, support to integrate in the labour market, activities for children such as reading courses, sports etc.



Socio-economic development and philanthropy

Though development is a broad spectrum, development-focused organisations primarily appear to engage in fields such as education, healthcare, sanitation and agriculture. Interventions are generally aimed at contributing to the socio-economic development of countries of heritage through entrepreneurship, capacity development of local actors and creation of job opportunities. Often, projects focus on vulnerable groups (e.g. women and youth). Usually, development projects are primarily targeted at a local community of origin before expanding to the national level and further.

Activities: Fundraising activities, mentoring, capacity development for individuals and organisations, implementation of projects, support to businesses, volunteering programmes etc.

CONCLUSION

This piece helps provide a first understanding of the types of diaspora organisations that exist as well as their main functions. It underlines the trends that were emphasised in our previous work, in particular during our diaspora consultations. A major trend shows that diaspora organisations can evolve through time either in terms of activities (including shifting from integration to development) or in term of target beneficiaries (moving from one specific diaspora group to various groups). It is important to factor this in for any diaspora engagement intervention as it demonstrates the adaptability and growth potential of organisations as development actors.

Understanding diaspora organisations helps to create appropriate funding opportunities, tailor programmes, determine services, and foster cooperation. Development practitioners can use EUDiF's observations to identify potential partners for projects. For example, the organisations focused on liaison or advocacy and dialogue might be the best suited to advance work on the creation of an enabling environment for diaspora engagement in the country of origin (and to some extent the host country) and the recognition of the diaspora's contributions. Organisations that focus on culture and education are important to keep second and subsequent generations involved. Organisations that focus on human capital can also be approached when implementing skills transfer schemes (such as our DP4D programme) to mutually learn from each other or join forces. Additionally, diaspora organisations focusing on liaison, as well as networks, can be entry points when supporting the "professionalisation" of diaspora organisation as they usually are the ones providing these type of services.

As stated, this publication does not seek to give an exhaustive depiction of what a diaspora organisation can or can not be/do; further research on a larger scale is welcome and could make a categorisation of diaspora organisations more operational. For example, in order to understand the actual level of "professionalisation" of diaspora organisations, further qualitative research would need to be conducted. Qualitative information such as the level of recognition or engagement of a particular organisation could also be useful in order to better understand the process of network creation or the notion of "representativity" of diaspora organisations that is often controversial.

The diaspora organisation landscape is dynamic and constantly evolving in response to a myriad of internal and external factors. All those active in supporting diaspora engagement must strive to observe, support and celebrate these changes so as to engage diaspora organisations as equal partners and maximise the potential of partnerships for sustainable development.

RESOURCES

Cohen, R., Fischer, C., (2019). *Routledge handbook of diaspora studies*. London: Routledge.

Levitt, P., (1998). Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion. *International migration review*, 32(4), pp.926-948.

Newland, K., Tanaka H., (2010). *Mobilizing Diaspora Entrepreneurship for Development*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Ong'ayo, A.O., (2016). Diaspora organisations and their development potential: An analysis of Ghanaian diaspora organisations in the UK, Germany and Netherlands (No. 200). *Discussion Paper*.

Ong'ayo, A.O., (2014). How can the EU and member states foster development through diaspora organisations? The case of Ghanaian diaspora organisations in the Netherlands.

Tarabay H., (2023). *Learning by doing: Professionalisation through governance, leadership and project management*. EUDiF, Learning by doing series.

Van Gorp, J., Smets, K., (2014). Diaspora organizations, imagined communities and the versatility of diaspora: the case of former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands.

© - 2024 - ICMPD. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of EUDiF and does not necessarily reflect the views of ICMPD nor the European Union.



European Union Global Diaspora Facility

ICMPD
Rue Belliard 159
1040 Brussels
Belgium



www.diasporaforddevelopment.eu



EU-diaspora@icmpd.org



[@diaspora4devEU](https://twitter.com/diaspora4devEU)