

The African Union's diplomacy of the diaspora: Context, challenges and prospects

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Abstract

This article examines the venture of the African Union (AU) into diasporic diplomacy. It inspects the context in which this was done, and the thrust of its diplomacy in the diaspora. It identifies four crucial diasporic communities with which states and organisations like the AU must interact if they wish to have proper and functional diasporic diplomacy. These are the African diaspora abroad (i.e. outside Africa), which consists of the historical and the contemporary diaspora, intra-African diasporas in the continent, and the diasporas of other regions in Africa. It is argued that the African diaspora abroad consists of the historical diaspora, and the contemporary diaspora. The article makes the case that the AU should concentrate its diaspora diplomacy on the historical diaspora, since concentrating on the contemporary African diaspora abroad pits it against member states which are also practicing diasporic diplomacy. Instead, it is suggested that the AU should play a facilitative role and also engage these other diasporas in the service of African diplomacy.

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Introduction

The AU has for the last seven years or so engaged in the diplomacy of the diaspora. This engagement reflects a universal re-awakening to diasporas which has emerged as an important part of a state's strategies for enhanced growth and development. This incursion into diasporic diplomacy by the AU has several strands: it is an expression of the increasing awareness that the continent must seek out new partnerships for its development; but it is also an area where the AU pits itself against member states which are also trying to tap their diasporas in the quest for faster development. There is, therefore, clearly a conflict of interest that could derail the mutual pursuit of the diaspora by both the organisation and its member states.

This article argues that while the entry of the AU into diasporic diplomacy is timely, it must be properly defined and understood. The entry of the AU into this area of diplomacy should not be designed in a way that creates conflicts between the organisation and its member states. In order to avoid this possibility, the borders of the AU's diasporic diplomacy must be more clearly drawn. This article examines the concept of diaspora and diaspora diplomacy, analyses the AU's venture into diasporic diplomacy (and the problems associated with it), offers a critique of AU diaspora diplomacy, and suggests other diasporas that ought to be a part of AU diplomacy of the diaspora. These other diasporas have been ignored in AU diplomacy of the diaspora, even though they could be harnessed into the service of African diplomacy. Finally, it considers the prospects for AU diaspora diplomacy.

Diaspora and diplomacy of the diaspora

The term 'diaspora' has sometimes run the risk of becoming meaningless. This was – and still is – because of a tendency to apply the term to a wide category of people who have been dispersed from their homeland. When used in this way, it is applied regardless of the reason for their dispersal. This – what Brubaker calls universalisation of the term – means that almost everyone is diasporic. And if everyone is diasporic, then the term diaspora is no longer able to delineate between categories. And if it is no longer able to do this, it will have a very

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short conceptual life (Brubaker 2005:3). This tendency to describe almost every dispersed population as diasporic led to calls for a clearer and more stringent definition of the term (Tololyan 1996).

This definitional problem of all-inclusiveness has been addressed by an emergent consensus on three criteria for the constitution of a diaspora. These are dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance. The first refers to any form of dispersion as long as territorial borders are crossed. It has been argued on this reasoning that ethnic communities divided by territorial borders also constitute a diaspora (Brubaker 2005:5). Homeland orientation requires some loyalty to, or recognition of, a real or imagined homeland from which flow value, identity and loyalty. Boundary maintenance involves maintaining an identity distinct from that of the host society, which can be done by resisting assimilation into the host society through self-segregation, or can be an unintended consequence of social exclusion (Brubaker 2005:6).

Into this frame, there developed – or was constituted – an African diaspora. 'African diaspora' is a political term originally used to emphasise the experience of African people dispersed by the slave trade. It is also an analytical term permitting discourse about black communities across territorial borders (Patterson and Kelley 2000:14). This diaspora, however, is not a nation. As Patterson and Kelley (2000:15) note,

... the diaspora is not a sovereign territory with established boundaries, though it is seen as 'inherently inherited' to people of African descent ... while there is no official language, there seems to be a consistent effort to locate a single culture with singular historical roots, no matter how mythical ... many members of this diaspora see themselves as an oppressed 'nation' without a homeland, or they imagine Africa as their (future?) home.

This understanding of the diaspora, as people who have been dispersed beyond the territorial borders of their country, but who retain some loyalties for the country that they came from, and who, in their new habitat retain also some social exclusiveness, frames the emergence of the notion of a diplomacy of the diaspora. The diplomacy of the diaspora is not the normal state-centric diplomacy. It is more in the nature of sustainable diplomacy (Constantinou

and Der Derian 2010), to the extent that it tries to bring concerned non-state actors into an arena where diplomatic strategies of state are formulated and implemented. In this diplomacy, the diaspora is brought into the diplomatic mainstream both as addressees of diplomatic policy, and as participants in the diplomatic – and foreign – policy-making processes. In diaspora diplomacy the role and the social, economic and political welfare of the diaspora as citizens take centre stage. In the context of the AU, but also in that of an individual state, diplomacy of the diaspora will constitute, to paraphrase Cross (2010:205),

[a] dialogue among citizens that transcends national borders, [leading] to stronger societal interdependence, and eventually some sense of common [African] identity. Citizens in the [African Union] can serve as cultural ambassadors.

The essence of the diplomacy of the diaspora is to enhance and maintain the linkages between members of the diaspora and citizens in the home state, and especially to encourage the diaspora to participate in economic and political processes in the home country. This happens through creating policy incentives for the diaspora, and loosening bureaucratic hurdles to their participation, both politically and economically. It is also done through establishing structures specifically meant to address diaspora issues, such as diaspora departments in ministries of foreign affairs (such as in Kenya) and organs like a ministry of the diaspora relations (as exists in Ghana). The opening up of the diplomatic space for the diaspora leads to the realisation of another political role for the diaspora. The numbers of the diaspora of some countries like Kenya are significant enough to decide an election, especially a presidential election, if they were allowed to vote. Opening the diplomatic space entails loosening the impediments to their political participation, especially in voting during general elections. While there exist forceful arguments against the diaspora voting unless they first pay taxes (Kapur 2003), the important thing is about the agreement in principle upon the diaspora's right to vote.

AU diplomacy of the diaspora

The rationale of AU diplomacy of the diaspora is to provide leverage to the African diaspora and make it a cornerstone of African integration and development. So important is the diaspora to the AU that its constitutive act has been amended to bring in a new article – allowing the organisation to invite and encourage full participation of the African diaspora as an important part of the continent. It is also thought that the African diaspora contains a huge talent bank which, if nurtured by the AU, can enable African development to shift to the next level (Ogom 2009:166). The AU and its organs like the Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) are restructuring their laws and procedures to allow the formal participation of the diaspora in official programmes and processes. While AU diplomacy of the diaspora is at once a diplomacy with and about an outside actor, it is also a diplomacy with an inside actor in the sense that the AU considers the diaspora to be the sixth economic region of the continent.

It is estimated that the African diaspora targeted by AU diaspora diplomacy has a spending power of about US\$ 500 billion per year. This might explain the thrust of the AU's definition of the African diaspora as being 'peoples 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'. This definition has been criticised for being so utilitarian that it excludes people who are in the diaspora, but have no means to contribute financially to the union (Omeje 2007:96–7). In any event, the spending power of the African diaspora is gross spending power of individuals and institutions. It does not take into account that the net spending power is less and is also constrained by other needs of the individuals and institutions.

The African diaspora is very wide. It includes not only those of African origin living outside the continent, but also those who may not even hold the nationality of an African country, but who consider themselves to have an African ancestry (Omeje 2007:95). This diaspora consists of two quite different components. The first is what may be termed the 'historical' diaspora. This consists of those black people who were taken into slavery, ending up in the Americas, Caribbean and other places (Black 2011). This diaspora's Africanness is fictive, although

there are those who maintain that the African-American community did not sever its ties with Africa, and that these links can be strengthened further (Veney 2002). The second component of the African diaspora are those contemporary Africans who have dispersed outside their home countries in the last sixty or so years. By and large, this group left voluntarily for education, and later in search of greener pastures. This group is now in the third generation of diasporahood, and still largely retains roots and ties to the home country.

The AU should concentrate its diplomacy on the first of these diaspora groups, namely, the historic diaspora. It should do so because as an institution, it is better placed to deal with this group of the diaspora directly. As an organisation, it is less encumbered in bringing this diaspora into the frame of its development and other operations, which its individual member states might be unable to do. Because it has a certain competitive advantage over its member states in dealing with this sort of group, it should concentrate its diplomatic energies there.

The main question about dealing with this historical diaspora is whether it still retains a sense of connection with the continent. It has been argued, with merit, that a necessary requirement for engagement with the diaspora is whether at all times it has 'the sense of connection to a homeland...strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilating or distancing' (Shuval 2000:43). The historical diaspora was not itself ever in Africa, let alone having been born there. It is a diaspora in support and remembrance of ancestors who were removed from the continent. Its diasporic relationship is also with the continent, rather than with a particular African country. This raises issues about its commitment to the continent – for how long it will last, and whether it will be strong enough to convince that diaspora to engage in the enterprises that the AU has planned for them.

The situation is different for the contemporary members of the African diaspora. This group left voluntarily, and still maintains close ties with the home country and with family members. Also, this group of diasporians supports family members through remittances to pay for school fees, development projects and the like. The group has members who are not only regular visitors back home, but who have also decided to invest back home. This is the group that individual governments target in their diplomacy of the diaspora. Since governments have

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discovered the potential of their own diasporas, some – like Kenya – have begun to harness them in their foreign policy and diplomacy (Mwagiru 2011). Because this is a matter that is being done in the national interests of the different member states, it is not an area that the AU should get into. The organisation is in any case a servant of the member states and should therefore not be seen to be competing with them, especially in areas that member states consider crucial for their own development. If the AU involved itself in the diplomacy of the diaspora targeting the contemporary African diaspora, it would also create conflict of interest problems with the member states, and this would not augur well for their mutual relations.

The content of the AU's diplomacy of the diaspora involves establishing and consolidating regional diaspora networks, holding regional consultative conferences, fostering a closer relationship between the AU and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), concluding economic partnership agreements with different elements of the diaspora, creating information hubs about diaspora issues throughout the region, and the like. This quite extensive load for this diplomacy however also involves some more non-diplomatic themes and issues (AU 2011).

Although it is not stated directly, it would seem that the AU indeed has in mind the historic diaspora as the platform for its diplomacy of the diaspora. In terms of political cooperation, it intends to appoint diaspora experts (meaning experts from the diaspora) and to give preferential treatment to diaspora populations (AU 2011:4). This kind of positioning can only be contemplated for the historic diaspora. Such positioning cannot work for the contemporary African diaspora because it would raise too many issues and create too many conflicts with which even governments have found it difficult to deal. Were preferential treatment to be offered to the contemporary diaspora, the thorny issue would be raised about whether individuals must first leave their country for them to be offered incentives.

The economic strategy of the AU's diplomacy of the diaspora, to the extent that it focuses on economic partnerships, creating incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship, research and development, and knowledge transfer

(AU 2011:10–11), is a useful platform for diaspora diplomacy, the major tool of which is persuasion. The economic partnerships envisaged require capital, and it is therefore in order to develop facilities to mobilise such capital. However, the issue of financial remittances should be left to the individual governments that deal with their own diasporas. Financial remittances in this context mean payments by members of a diaspora either directly to their families or for individual projects. The historic diaspora cannot send similar remittances since they have no families in the continent. It would also be unwise for the AU to compete with governments over the collection of such remittances. However, there also exist social remittances, which involve the transfer of ideas, values, and norms (Levitt 1998). Given the configuration of the AU's diaspora diplomacy, these are the types of remittance that should be sought in pursuit of AU diaspora diplomacy.

Missing links in the AU diaspora diplomacy

For many analysts in Africa and elsewhere, the diaspora of an African country consists only of those who have migrated *outside* Africa. Those who have gone to work or settled in other African countries are not considered to constitute a diaspora and are classified as migrants, refugees, asylumees, exiles, guest workers and the like. Even otherwise articulate analysts such as Omeje (2007) run into the same problem. He argues that there are three main categories of African diaspora: the descendants of the generations who were removed from Africa through slavery; late colonial and early post-independence emigrants to the west who left in search of education and green pastures; and those more recent ones who left, fleeing from socio-economic decline, wars, persecution and poverty in their countries, and who diversified diasporic destinations by going to destinations like Australia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and Russia (Omeje 2007:97–8). This categorisation does not include those who left their countries and settled in other African countries. These have been characterised, not as members of a diaspora but as intra-African migrants – including voluntary labour, refugees and asylumees in the continent.

It should however not be thought that an African can only be a part of a diaspora if he or she leaves Africa and moves to Europe or to America. The definition of

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diaspora emphasises dispersal and especially the crossing of territorial borders. Once people cross territorial borders, they meet an important criterion for membership of the diaspora. It is not necessary that a person must have crossed continental borders to qualify as a member of the diaspora. And yet this seems to be the dominant trend of thinking amongst those who have not recognised an intra-African diaspora. Besides this, the definition of diaspora does not take into account the financial or economic status of the members of the diaspora.

This same mistake underlies national discourses on the diaspora. In Kenya for example, there has been a lot of discussion and policy movement on the diaspora agenda. But this agenda is hedged by the fact that the diaspora being discussed is that which exists in the United States, Europe, Canada, and countries outside the continent. And yet there is a good number of the Kenyan diaspora in Africa itself, particularly in southern Africa, East Africa (Rwanda and Uganda) and South Sudan. It also seems to be assumed that the much talked about skills that the Kenyan diaspora possesses are skills apparently monopolised by the diaspora in America and Europe and not by the one in southern Africa or the Horn of Africa. This fallacious reasoning is reminiscent of the old colonial attitude that what was white was best.

The AU should not make the same mistake in its diplomacy of the diaspora. In its current practice of diasporic diplomacy, it is evident that it is assumed that the relevant diaspora can only be that which exists outside the borders of the continent. This is clear from the AU's definition of the diaspora as consisting of peoples of African origin living *outside the continent*. This is a fair enough self-limitation. Two things need to be said about it however. Firstly, this limitation of the diaspora that is the subject of AU diplomacy must accommodate to the understanding that the people of African descent living outside the continent are the historical African diaspora, and not the contemporary one. Apart from the reasons given earlier why the AU diaspora diplomacy should only deal with the historic diaspora, it would also be grossly unjust for the AU to choose favourites amongst contemporary African diasporas. It would also be inequitable for the organisation to be seen to be making the claim that it is solely interested in the African diaspora who have crossed the continental borders, and not those who have only crossed territorial but not continental borders.

The second point that needs to be made is that diplomacy of the diaspora such as the one that the AU is practising, should ideally be all-inclusive of the categories of the diaspora. Even if it does not wish for whatever reason to engage with the intra-African diaspora, it nevertheless needs to flag it, so that its diaspora policies can be seen to be inclusive. This is not very difficult to do. The AU deals with the issues of migration, and indeed has a policy on migration in Africa. The addressees of the policy are also the addressees of the content of AU diplomacy of the diaspora. For the sake of completion, this quite important diaspora of the African states requires inclusion – or mention – in the context of AU diasporic diplomacy.

AU diplomacy of the diaspora does not mention, or seem to intend to take account of, the diasporas of other countries that are living in Africa. At first glance, this would appear to be logical since the organisation is interested in the African diaspora. But on a closer examination, this is a big omission in the context of the content and reach of a diplomacy of the diaspora. The point of this contention is that while a country can use its own diaspora to harness relationships with other countries, especially the countries where its diaspora is living, it can also use other countries' diasporas living in its territory to enhance relations with those countries. This is an often forgotten dimension of diaspora relationships. And the AU, in crafting its own diaspora diplomacy also seems to have overlooked it.

Every country – if not most – has what Leonard calls a global diaspora (Leonard 2002:55). That diaspora has a lot of potential for the countries in which it is found. It is a useful tool in the task of building up perceptions about (in this case) Africa, the relevance of the targets it has set for its diplomacy, and of the programmes it wishes its diaspora diplomacy to engage in. This global diaspora comes from different countries. Those different countries and their constituents will learn about projects that the AU is engaging in its diaspora diplomacy. It should also not be forgotten that part of this global diaspora will itself be from the countries where the African diaspora lives; it can thus be a good source of feedback to those countries, and hence to the very diaspora that the AU is trying to capture and do business with. At the same time, diasporas of other countries that have lived in African countries – and come to understand and empathise

with them – are an important resource for diaspora diplomacy. Such people can be used to 'connect' with the African diaspora, many of whose members have never been to Africa, and know little about it.

The relationship between the African diaspora and the AU should not be seen as a one-way street in which the diaspora is encouraged almost unilaterally to engage with the AU and Africa. Members of that diaspora can also be used to filter perceptions in their countries about Africa and the AU. For example, some of the diasporas of African countries are engaged in what Kapur labels 'long-distance nationalism' (Kapur 2003:445). In this, diasporas lobby for their countries, but also sometimes support extremist groups which can have negative effects on their countries of origin. The African diaspora can be used to temper the negative perceptions arising from this kind of reality; and that would be a substantially significant contribution of the African diaspora to the continent.

Conclusions

The entry of the AU into the world of diaspora diplomacy was a long time coming, but a good development. It will contribute to the creation of positive images for the organisation, and for Africa generally. The AU is, however, not the only actor practising diaspora diplomacy. There are other states in the continent like Kenya, Ghana, Eritrea and others that are deeply involved in the practice of this diplomacy. This dual practice of diaspora diplomacy can cause conflicts and misunderstandings, or it can enhance the practice and the benefits of diaspora diplomacy. In order to avoid such conflicts, it would be prudent for two of the three main actors in this type of diplomacy (the other actors are individuals: members of the diaspora, and citizens with whom they interact) to be clear about which aspects of the diplomacy of the diaspora they will conduct.

The diplomacy of the diaspora will be greatly enriched by this division of labour. In this division of labour, the individual states will concentrate on building and consolidating relations with the contemporary African diaspora, which includes their citizens who were dispersed abroad for various reasons. That diplomacy involves not only the collection of financial remittances, but also making room for the involvement of the diaspora in policy and in programme design and implementation of specific items of the agenda of diaspora diplomacy.

On the other hand, the AU will concentrate on building and consolidating relations with the historic African diaspora. Largely, this involves individuals who have not necessarily been to Africa, but who have historic and sentimental ties with the continent, and sometimes with specific countries in the continent. This engagement of the AU's diaspora diplomacy with the historic diaspora will provide the larger picture of diasporic relations and diplomacy, and will inspire and guide member states of the AU as they individually begin engaging in diaspora diplomacy.

If the AU engages with the historical African diaspora – as everything suggests that it intends to do – it will be engaging in a very challenging aspect of diplomacy. Because of the configuration of this diaspora, which is African not by birth but by emotion, it will need much more persuasion than would other diasporas, to contribute and be a part of the development process of the continent. But this diplomacy, with these interlocutors, is even more challenging because it is a diplomacy that will be played right at the frontline of Africa's interactions with international relations; it will also contribute to the discourse of how Africa can shape its international relations agenda. Because of the make-up of the historical African diaspora, it will need to be seriously convinced about the basic viability of this diplomacy. While that will not be easy, its successful completion will prepare the AU for the equally serious business of convincing other actors in the international system that Africa is now a serious interlocutor that, unlike in the past, sees beyond its nose.

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