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'TRANS-LOCAL' DIASPORA AND DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPT AND RESEARCH NOTE

ABSTRACT

This note clarifies how the concept of diaspora is employed in this project and suggests four areas of concentration in our approach to understanding their 'trans-local' development activities. First is the nature of diaspora as communities; second is their trans-locality built of horizontal, vertical and lateral links; third is their constant networking and embeddedness; and fourth is the 'looping effect' of their activities in the country of origin back to Canada, and vice versa. All of this makes our subject a perfect illustration of fluid dynamics. As time passes, Canada is the country of origin for new 'diasporic' generations and the looping effect is found moving back to another faraway place; consequently at least two countries are being developed by these activities.

‘Trans-local’ Diaspora and Development: A Concept and Research Note

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I.   Preliminary Observations on the Diaspora Concept

Concepts are tools for organizing information about phenomena to be investigated, understood and explained. Concepts are abstractions that structure perceptions of the world and allow judgements to be made about the relevance and significance of information (Dingwerth & Pattberg 2006). Concepts work by grouping phenomena with similar properties together (and keeping others apart) even though the similarities might not readily be apparent. For example, although "we might separately learn about tables, chairs, sofas … the process of learning will be facilitated if we arrive at the concept of furniture." (Bélanger 2000:1)

The definition of a specific concept does not need to be fixed or achieve universal agreement in order for meaningful research and communication to take place. Concepts in the social sciences and humanities are almost always subject to different interpretations and to contestation (Wahlbeck 2002). The diaspora concept, which is used in several different academic disciplines, is plagued by ambiguity, and some approaches to the study of diaspora in the literature are very problematic for our project.

For example, at one extreme we have very narrow and rigid definitions that commonly cite three notions as central to the definition of diaspora (e.g., Safran 1991). First is the notion of a 'shared identity' or 'consciousness' which, combined with a sense of deterritorialised 'belonging', enables common economic, socio-cultural, political and other endeavours. Second is the notion of 'exile' (usually involuntary or coerced) with implications of 'return' to an original 'homeland'. Third is the idea of a stable perhaps timeless quality with respect to cultural relations of diasporic communities in their host society, as if they did not learn much from each other.

Because these notions are problematic a more flexible conception of diaspora is needed. Although some sense of identity is essential, some groups that may be considered diasporic may lack such commonality, or may experience divided identities. Many diasporic communities seek to balance the need to adapt to the host society with maintaining particular(istic) identities. Indeed a diasporic community could be so highly assimilated into a country of settlement that it retains only vestiges of identity or 'difference', which may be instrumentally mobilized in support of the country of origin or some other collective cause (Werbner 2004, Tseng 2002).

Thus, rather than being fixed and coherent, diasporic identities are "socially and historically constituted, reconstituted, and reproduced" (Patterson & Kelly 2000:19). Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1990) use the metaphor of **hybridity** to capture the multiple, provisional, contingent and dynamic amalgams of diasporic identity. Furthermore, rather than viewing diaspora as comprising only two sites ('home' and 'exile'), it is more useful to think of diaspora occupying multiple sites/localities and to examine the connections between them (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa- Ganga, 2000). These **trans-local** connections – i.e., built around multiple localities connected by ever-changing **networked**

relationships – should be the focus of research. Philosopher Ian Hacking talks about *'looping effects'*. These are not just simple feedback effects, but are flows of information and influence that modify both the subject and object of the network or relationship. So that the 'community' which acts for development outside Canada (in its 'place of origin'), is altered in Canada by both the experience and consequences of the action -- whether or not that distant activity is considered by them to be a success and failure.

At the other extreme, the notion of a diaspora has been broadened to describe any expatriate minority community that has a history of migration (Wahlbeck 2002; Cohen 1997; Marienstras 1989; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). This broadened definition is also problematic. Although diaspora are formed through historical and contemporary migratory processes separating an 'original' and 'current' home, diaspora should be distinguished from other patterns of migration across time and space (Bilge & Denis, 2010). This is because migration (be it through voluntary immigration and resettlement, temporary migration, or involuntary displacement and asylum) is potentially an *individual* action. Diaspora, however, implies the existence of some kind of meaningful *community* based on a *continuing* (albeit fluid and dynamic not fixed and static) shared identity.

II.   Operational Definition of Diaspora: A Minimal Approach

Gerring and Barressi (2003) offer a way to overcome these problems through what they term the 'minimal' approach to concept formation. A minimal definition offers a small set of attributes (to which others may be added at a later date). It has the advantage of combining a low number of attributes with the ability to encompass a wide(er) range of phenomena.[1]

Thus, rather than attempting to identify all the attributes of diaspora and develop a comprehensive typology, we offer a minimal definition embodying key attributes that we consider *necessary* for the existence of a diaspora. For the purposes of this project, a diaspora includes *members of a community dispersed to many diverse localities across and within state borders around the world, who retain more-or-less distinctive identities (fluid and contingent) vis-à-vis a host society, have an interest in a 'home', and are linked via networks of social organization* (adapted from Kearney 1995:559; Brubaker 2005:5-6).

Hence the three minimal attributes of diaspora include:
   a) *Community:* variations in shared identity and hybridity, boundary maintenance, and nature and degree of orientation to a 'home' (real or imagined) as a source of value, identity and loyalty;
   b) *Trans-locality:* patterns of dispersion and social relations across and within state borders;
   c) *Networks:* diaspora are also social organizations with networks of action, interaction and communication that vary by type, and degree of institutionalization and embeddedness.

Mapping variations in these attributes, diasporic groups could be placed along a continuum with

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[1] When the attributes of a concept are expanded its empirical scope or range of phenomena it can encompass is narrowed.

'emergent' or 'nascent' diaspora at the minimum end and 'established' diaspora at the maximum (and various combinations in-between).

II.   Research Concentrations

These preliminary observations and operational definition suggest four areas of concentration in the initial environment scan of diaspora and development in Metro Vancouver.

1. Community: *Shared Identity, Hybridity & Boundary Maintenance*
Produce a 'map' of diasporic communities in GVA identifying the bases of their commonality (ethno-national, cultural, racial, religious, linguistic, gender, class/status/occupation, etc).   Note the following:

a. *History & Social Structure:* There is an important temporal component in the formation of diasporic identity – i.e., although fluid, contingent and contextual, collective identities are forged over time, in particular historical contexts. It is useful to research these contexts (political, economic, etc). The popularity of the diaspora concept in public policy and academia is regarded as a positive move towards emphasizing *agency* and studying people in their own right. It is also seen as a way to move beyond the essentializing (and pejorative) discourses associated with 'ethnicity', 'tribe' and so on. However, in using the diaspora concept, it is also important to remember the *social structural* context – the unequal power relations, and structures of inequality, exclusion, and discrimination (based on race, gender, class, etc) in the societies of settlement. It is not only the structure of the society of settlement one needs to take into account, but also that of the diaspora communities that might themselves foster inequality and oppression.

b. *Boundary Maintenance & Scale:* – i.e., this addresses the 'boundary' of the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) delimiting the collective identity of a diasporic group and differentiating that group from others (i.e., 'us'/'them'). While some diasporic identities might have a wider (e.g., global/regional) scale, others (sometimes among members of the same group) may be narrower depending on the context/issue. It is useful to be sensitive to scale when producing the map of diasporic identities.

c. *Historic interactivity*: The diasporic group in Canada does not act in isolation, but in a climate where others are doing this (or have already done this). The newcomers see how other established 'groups' have been acting trans-locally (e.g., new Russians in Canada interested in Russia see that Ukrainians interested in the Ukraine, Jews interested in Israel or Scots interested in Scotland have for years successfully acted 'at a distance' and maintained their balance and position here – one might argue 'improved' their position here). This would work for large and older communities in BC like Punjabis or Cantonese, noticing what others have been doing, being used as models by others.

2. Trans-locality

Diasporic trans-locality and associated social networks are strongly influenced by contemporary **globalization** processes. Although diasporic groups have existed for centuries, contemporary globalization by facilitating communication, migration and mobility, economic and other forms of social interaction and relations, has spurred the growth of transnational communities not bound by the geographical borders of either the countries of origin or the countries of settlement. However, as many observers note, contemporary transnational networks influenced by globalization are not really deterritorialised; they are always connected to and rooted in specific localities (Faist 2000; Labelle and Midy 1999; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). Furthermore, globalization has not led to a situation in which localities have disappeared but rather to a 'glocalized' (Robertson 1995) social reality where both the local and the global exist side by side and in relation to each other. We employ the term *'trans-locality'* -- i.e., existing and operating via social networks in multiple localities within and across national boundaries -- to capture this important dimension of diasporic social organization.

Trans-locality, therefore, encompasses both *spatial* (geographic) and *social* (the networks) elements. In practice the two are intertwined but for analytical purposes it is useful to separate them.

With respect to the spatial elements, a number of scholars have proposed a three-fold classification of the linkages between diaspora and development (Mohan, 2002; Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002). We modify these to encompass three spatial vectors of trans-locality: *horizontal*, *lateral* and *vertical* linkages (or some combination of them, because these categories and the relationships among them are fluid and blurred).

a. *Horizontal* (i.e., within the host locality). Here, we have development *of* or *in* the diaspora where people within diasporic communities use their localized diasporic connections and networks within the 'host' (Global North) country ostensibly to secure economic and social well being and contribute to development of (or in) their specific locality.

b. *Lateral* (i.e., connecting different localities within one host country and/or across national boundaries to other host localities in the Global North). Here, development occurs *through* the diaspora whereby diasporic communities utilize their diffuse global connections and networks beyond the locality ostensibly to facilitate economic and social well being in the home and/or host country.

c. *Vertical*. Here, we have development *by* the diaspora in which diasporic flows and connections (both lateral and horizontal) ostensibly facilitate development back 'home' in the Global South.

3. Networks

While trans-locality refers to the spatial vectors within and through which diasporic development activities occur, the *networks* are the specific *social* vehicles or platforms (e.g., associations, NGOs, sports clubs, unions, churches, mosques, etc) through which these activities are carried out. Here, we are interested in the following:

a) ***Degree of Institutionalization & Embeddedness***: Diasporic networks vary in the degree of institutionalization (i.e, range from formal to informal associations) and they also vary by their degree of 'embeddedness' – i.e., the extent to which they reflect the community/identity characteristics identified in #1 (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Research should classify the major networks in each of the three trans-local vectors (# 2a, b, &c).

b) ***Type of network***: These can be economic, business/entrepreneurial, political, religious, aid/relief, kinship, and spatial etc. These networks are particularly sensitive to the looping effect, thus creating a lateral 'in Canada' effect of this 'action at a distance' in the global South. Looping means that actors are in continuous negotiation with others about the meaning and significance of these distant development activities. This may be a source (or one source) of the deepening interest of second or third generation individuals from diasporic communities in the human rights of people in their 'place of origin'.

4. Activities

These include the variety of development activities carried out by diasporic networks. The research should focus on activities that fall within the scope of the proposed public dialogues based on the UN Millennium Development Goals:

- Dialogue 1: Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth
- Dialogue 2: Improving Health
- Dialogue 3: Strategies for Education
- Dialogue 4: Human Security and Peacebuilding
- Dialogue 5: Diasporic Contributions to Development

5. Researchable questions

*A **researchable question** concerns a possible dissatisfaction in second or third generation actors with the other more classic development efforts initiated by their parents or aunts and uncles. Do they see those efforts as exhausted, and do they see no avenue for further action in that place (too dangerous, too confusing)? Do these new actors perhaps see a global and supportive environment for human rights pressure, originating on the outside? If this is occurring, is it because the action 'inside' in the place of origin proves very hard to sustain? Is this because the actors 'over there' are now embedded here in Canada in new ways? Cross-generational symbolic and monetary support is not uncommon, but joint action and definition of objectives turns out to be difficult.*

A note on 'Development'

This project does not privilege one definition of/approach to 'development'. We acknowledge there are many definitions/approaches and strong disagreements among analysts and practitioners. The dialogues and workshops should accommodate diverse views, including those who are uncomfortable with the term 'development'. The notion of 'development' employed in this project simply describes ***social processes of change***, some of it intended, some of it not. For this project the outcomes of development may be positive or negative, or positive to some and negative to others. That is precisely why *dialogue* is a better to approach to understanding these issues among these very different communities.

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