

Evaluation of DRC's "Diaspora Project Support" (DiPS) Program

Synthesis Brief

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Overview of Brief

Background and Intended Use

This Synthesis Brief summarizes the main findings of two independent evaluations of the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC's) "Diaspora Project Support" (DiPS) activities in Somalia and Afghanistan. It is intended to provide a comparison of key similarities and differences across the two portfolios, as well as inform ongoing efforts to revise and strengthen the program's overarching strategy.

The primary intended users are DiPS, DRC, and DANIDA staff involved in the management and oversight of the program; however, secondary users, such as other donors and development partners supporting diaspora-led programming might also find the brief of interest.

Summary of Evaluations

The **purpose** of the evaluations was to provide an objective assessment of key assumptions underlying the program and provide recommendations for how the program could be strengthened. Specifically, the evaluations had the **objectives** of testing program assumptions related to (1) relevance and local ownership; (2) cost-effectiveness; and (3) sustainability, as well as (4) providing a comparison of the "diaspora-led model" to more traditional DRC models of programming.

The **scope** of the evaluations covered a combined portfolio of 41 grants (14 in Somalia and 27 in Afghanistan) implemented by 23 different Diaspora Organizations (DOs) and their local partners between 2013 and 2019. Interviews were conducted in Denmark, Somaliland (Hargeisa and Burao), and Afghanistan (Kabul, Ghazni, and Jaghori), as well as remotely by phone and Skype. In total, 93 individuals (72 males, 21 females) were interviewed across both evaluations.

Evaluation Design and Methodology

The evaluations followed a non-experimental, mixed-methods design that utilized a **theory-based evaluation approach** to data collection and analysis. They employed a range of qualitatively-dominant rapid appraisal methods, including in-depth document review and semi-structured key informant and small group interviews. Qualitative data was supplemented by quantitative data mined from DiPS program documents, as well as publicly available secondary studies.

Limitations

The evaluations faced considerable challenges threatening both their internal and external validity. These are detailed in-depth in the main evaluation reports but included: (1) difficulties of attribution given a wide range of intervening variables; (2) a gender imbalance among respondents given prevailing social norms in Somalia and Afghanistan; and (3) considerable limitations in access to project sites given safety and security considerations. To mitigate these limitations, the team focused on assessing DiPS's contribution (not attribution) to results where relevant; hired a local data collection firm to conduct fieldwork in Afghanistan and used phone-based interviews for respondents outside Hargeisa and Burao in Somaliland; and mainstreamed gender-related questions across all data collection instruments, as well as consulted relevant secondary studies to identify potential gender issues that might have influenced results.

Summary of Main Conclusions

Relevance and Local Ownership

Strength of Evidence Supporting Assumptions				Som.	Afg.
DOs are aware of the unique needs and challenges of humanitarian and development programming in the communities they claim to represent.				1	2
DOs can utilize their knowledge and local networks to identify capable local partners.				1	1
DOs understand local contexts and cultural nuances and can work effectively with local partners.				3	3
DOs and their local partners are familiar with ongoing development efforts and strategies, local and national, and identify ways to support these initiatives.				4	3
Shared experience implementing DiPS activities will strengthen the relationships between DOs and their local partners to continue to support the development of their communities.				3	3
1 = Strong evidence from 2+ sources.	2 = Some confirming evidence from at least 1 source.	3 = Mixed evidence both confirming/ disconfirming assum's.	4 = Some disconfirming evidence from at least 1 source.	5 = Strong disconfirming evidence from 2+ sources.	

There were strong similarities between the portfolios on the extent to which DiPS's assumptions on relevance and local ownership have materialized. Both demonstrated that DOs have a unique ability to engage their personal and professional networks to not only identify priority community needs but also to identify capable and trusted local partners to work with. The ability to identify new and often "non-traditional" partners is an important comparative advantage over more traditional DRC operations such as programming through a field office with more established partners.

However, there were also notable areas where DiPS's underlying assumptions appear not to hold. The most apparent area, significant for supporting the sustainability of DiPS projects, related to the lack of adequate identification and linkages with other development programs or strategies addressing similar needs. While the remoteness of several of the projects supported under the Afghanistan portfolio further limited opportunities to link with relevant external initiatives, the lack of careful exploration of what others are doing resulted in some "missed opportunities" to coordinate and collaborate across both portfolios. The evaluation noted there is a clear opening for DRC to embrace more of a convening role and facilitate increased interaction among development partners interested in supporting diaspora-led initiatives. This could include facilitating lesson sharing among donors on "good practices" and/or practical examples on innovative ways that they have supported diaspora organizations without holding them to the same financial and reporting standards of traditional development organizations. It could also include opportunities to present successful DiPS projects that other donors could then look to further support or scale-up.

Relatedly, there was also evidence that DiPS-supported diaspora-led projects could improve the assessment and design of their activities. There was a clear tendency across both portfolios for projects to be based on informal consultation rather than more structured assessment. While the evaluation did not identify any particular instances of duplicated activities, a more structured and uniform approach to the assessment and design of projects could help facilitate DiPS partners to more carefully consider issues that could affect potential delays in implementation, as well as the inclusivity and sustainability of their projects from the outset. Considering the already sizeable workload of the DOs, more stringent proposal requirements could reduce the number of grants applicants; therefore the tendency reinforces the need for DRC field officers to validate and substantiate DiPS partner assessments presented in proposals.

Finally, there was less clear evidence that DOs are able to work more effectively with their local partners once identified. With DOs being based in Denmark and their local partners in-country, DiPS partners face consistent challenges related to working remotely and across time zones. While these issues can be minimized with the use of cheap and readily available communication platforms (Skype, WhatsApp, etc.), the evaluation also noted challenges related to asymmetrical capacity levels, as well as at times unexpectedly pronounced cultural differences between the DOs and LPs.

Cost-Effectiveness

Strength of Evidence Supporting Assumptions		Som.	Afg.	
DOs constitute important “alternative development actors” that provide unique and added value to humanitarian and development efforts.		2	1	
DOs will utilize new knowledge, skills, and expertise learned in their host-country to develop new project ideas not previously supported by local partners.		2	3	
DOs and their local partners can utilize their specific contextual knowledge to more efficiently procure needed inputs, mitigate potential delays, and monitor ongoing progress.		3	1	
DOs will transfer skills and knowledge gained from DRC-supported trainings to local partners during the design and implementation of DiPS projects.		4	4	
The current DiPS mechanism effectively captures the comparative advantages of DOs.		4	3	
1 = Strong evidence from 2+ sources.	2 = Some confirming evidence from at least 1 source.	3 = Mixed evidence both confirming/ disconfirming assum’s.	4 = Some disconfirming evidence from at least 1 source.	5 = Strong disconfirming evidence from 2+ sources.

The experiences of DiPS partners in Somalia and Afghanistan were more mixed when it came to the program’s cost-effectiveness assumptions. In terms of similarities, experiences from both portfolios demonstrate that the DiPS model offers several comparative advantages including increased access to local partners and geographies, augmented monitoring capacity, and the ability to raise additional in-kind and financial contributions. On a less positive note, there were also similarities on the extent to which knowledge and skill transfer took place and the extent to which the current DiPS model effectively allows DOs to utilize their comparative advantages. There was little evidence of knowledge transfer on the topics covered during DRC trainings from DOs to LPs during the projects, and interviewees consistently referenced a need to build the capacity of local partners. DRC has taken notable steps to improve program flexibility and reduce administrative requirements to near minimal levels, while still maintaining both Danida’s and DRC’s internal accountability requirements. That said, the program continues to be perceived as overly burdensome and restrictive, particularly during the application and reporting phases. While part of this perception can be explained by some DiPS partners being unaware of the extensive management time that such projects entail, some outside experts have also commented on the dilemma of trying to “professionalize voluntary associations” and the evaluations provide further evidence that this dilemma persists.

However, the two portfolios differed considerably on the extent to which DiPS partners were able to procure goods and services more cheaply than either the DRC field office or other international partners. In Somalia, the evaluation found that partners could not achieve the same economies-of-scale or acquired institutional knowledge and technical expertise as the country office. In Afghanistan, on the contrary, partners demonstrated an ability to utilize their local knowledge, as well as an ability to appeal to local sentiments, to enable them to procure goods and services at significantly lower rates than offered to either the DRC field office or other international organizations. Likewise, there was a difference in the extent to which DOs were able to capitalize

on their new knowledge, skills, and cultural values learned in Denmark and apply it to their projects. There were limited examples of DOs proposing unique or innovative projects across the Afghanistan portfolio with the majority of projects being basic infrastructure, such as the building of schools. However, the Somalia portfolio demonstrates some innovative solutions to local development needs, such as utilizing knowledge gained in Denmark to innovate and improve on the quality of mental health service delivery, or the idea to implement a plastic-recycling project to address a growing plastic refuse problem, while creating employment for low-skilled women and youth.

Sustainability

Strength of Evidence Supporting Assumptions					Som.	Afg.
DOs have an implicit interest and sense of responsibility to remain engaged in their activities to ensure they continue to benefit their communities.					2	1
Given their unique understanding of local contexts, DOs and their partners can better design projects based on local needs and interests, which are therefore more likely to be sustained by the community.					3	3
Local communities are more likely to sustain activities out of a sense of respect for their diasporas.					3	3
DOs have the capability to mobilize additional funding to sustain activities.					3	2
Linkages to other ongoing development efforts and strategies help support the sustainability of DiPS activities.					4	3
1 = Strong evidence from 2+ sources.	2 = Some confirming evidence from at least 1 source.	3 = Mixed evidence both confirming/ disconfirming assum's.	4 = Some disconfirming evidence from at least 1 source.	5 = Strong disconfirming evidence from 2+ sources.		

The results were consistent across both portfolios regarding DiPS's assumptions on sustainability. This is a key issue for the program and DiPS has undertaken considerable efforts in recent years to help its partners improve their sustainability. Both portfolios demonstrated that DOs feel an obligation and interest in supporting activities in their communities; however, Somali partners were more likely to express that this support should be timebound, noting the importance of encouraging communities to become self-sufficient and less reliant on their diasporas. DOs across both portfolios demonstrated an impressive ability to raise additional funds to support their activities, either through their members in Denmark, by reaching out to diasporas in other countries, or by exploring other Danida-backed funding modalities such as CISU or DUF. The willingness of other diaspora members to support activities that they themselves might not have been involved in starting directly is perhaps an indication that DiPS projects become regarded as a shared community resource and less as the responsibility of an individual donor.

There was less evidence across both portfolios supporting the assumptions that DiPS projects are more sustainable because they are based on more accurate local knowledge or that local communities are more inclined to continue to support projects coming from their diaspora. Rather, the evidence suggests that it is the perceived utility of meeting community needs that determines the community's willingness to provide time, labor, and money to support the sustainability of these projects. Finally, apart from receiving "Letters of Approval" from local authorities as part of the application criteria, there was little evidence of DiPS projects successfully linking with other ongoing or planned government and donor activities. Both portfolios demonstrated a need for DRC to increase its capacity-building efforts for local partners directly as the program's assumed knowledge and skill transfer between DOs and their local partners is not happening as expected.

Key Considerations for Upcoming Strategy Review

Program Focus

DiPS has undergone an impressive evolution since it began as a pilot initiative in 2010. It has carefully nurtured relationships with Somali and Afghan diasporas in Denmark to become a trusted partner and has witnessed a steady growth in the number and quality of applications the program receives over the years. Three different rounds of independent evaluations have assessed the program favorably, each finding that it is making a real difference both at individual and community level.

However, if the program hopes to achieve higher-order outcomes, it will need to decide if its primary focus is to increase the capacity and civic engagement of DOs in Denmark or if it is to achieve tangible “results on the ground.” Another key reflection for the future of the program is whether the aim is to provide seed funding for DO development projects or whether applicants with successful projects can expand current projects through the DiPS grant mechanism. Each focus requires different strategies and programming approaches and continuing to try and do both simultaneously will limit the program’s ability to influence more meaningful change in either.

Reducing/Incentivizing Administrative Burden

The clearest and most consistent finding across both portfolios is that the program, despite best efforts to reduce the administrative burden placed on partners, requires substantial time and effort from those involved. Given that DiPS works primarily through volunteer organizations whose members participate outside their regular full-time jobs, the program should explore options to further reduce the administrative burden of the program, or at the very least, better incentivize the effort needed to participate in the program.

There are a variety of options the program could follow. From relatively simple changes such as protecting partners against currency fluctuations or making the initial application simpler, to larger changes such as using fixed-price contracts or even direct cash transfers, wherein predetermined tranches of funds are transferred to partners based on key deliverables and without detailed financial reporting and receipts, to help simplify accounting and reporting and also better capitalize on the comparative advantages of diasporas. Should these changes not be possible in the short-term, DiPS should explore ways to further incentivize and reward partners, such as revising its current policy to accept time spent by DOs on project management in Denmark in lieu of financial contribution, or allowing DOs to spend a small percentage of their grant on organizational strengthening activities in Denmark, such as trainings, awareness-raising, or social activities.

Types of Interventions

Another consistent finding across interviews, both with DiPS partners and partners in Forum Syd’s “Somalia Diaspora Program”, was that it is valuable for these programs to remain open in the sectors and types of projects they support. While knowledge- and skill-based interventions demonstrated advantages over infrastructure based projects in Somalia, the Afghanistan portfolio demonstrated that infrastructure projects can help address priority community needs and can even be delivered more cost-effectively by DOs compared to larger development partners. DiPS should therefore remain open to supporting a variety of sectors, projects, and partners at various levels of capacity.

Outreach and Engagement

DiPS has developed a wealth of experience and lessons learned on how to engage diasporas over recent years. It has learned that there are unique challenges in approaching different diaspora

groups and that strategies of engagement should vary based on the characteristics of each group. The evaluations of the Somalia and Afghanistan portfolios are not able to comment on the extent to which DiPS should engage other diasporas in Denmark. This decision should be undertaken by the program team and should align with the overarching decision on the primary focus of the program. If the aim is to focus more on building the capacity and engagement of DOs in Denmark, then the program should consider opening up to other diasporas. However, if the aim is to achieve outcome-level development results, then the program should consider prioritizing its resources to build on existing achievements and provide larger and longer grants in Somalia and Afghanistan.

However, DiPS should carefully consider ways in which it could strengthen its advocacy and awareness-raising with other donors, development partners, and host-government ministries. There is a wide-spread interest among all three groups to support diaspora-led initiatives, however, there is currently a lack of an adequate convener that can bring members together to discuss what has already been learned on how to support diaspora-led initiatives, and explore options for how to better link projects going forward. DiPS has already recommitted in its new work plan to strengthen its efforts to re-energize the DiaGram Network, which should be commended. However, there are still additional steps that both the home office and country offices can take in mobilizing awareness, ensuring coordination, and promoting collaboration and joint fundraising.

Capacity-Building Needs

There was a widespread appreciation for the capacity-building efforts provided by DiPS to DOs across both the Somalia and Afghanistan portfolios. While some suggested that the training be more modular and allow partners with demonstrated capacity and knowledge to skip more basic sessions, most reported that the trainings were useful and informative.

While the program is already working to provide trainings for local partners in-country, these efforts should be strengthened going forward with opportunities to both attend trainings in-person at DRC field offices or to complete the online curriculum. DiPS's local partners are the critical link to ensuring the local ownership, participation, and sustainability of their projects and the evaluation heard consistent requests for further capacity-building opportunities as the knowledge and skill transfer from DOs to their local partners is not happening to the extent originally expected.

Future Studies

DiPS staff have consistently demonstrated their openness to outside, critical reflection and to continually build their evidence-base on what works and what does not when it comes to supporting diaspora-led development and humanitarian support. All indications are that the program will continue that openness going forward. However, the program could benefit from strengthening its overarching monitoring and evaluation (M&E), not just relying on periodic outside review to capture its program-level results. DiPS should consider revising its indicators to better capture not just its reflects in the "countries of origin" where it works but also all the results currently going uncaptured in Denmark and its work with the DOS. The program should also consider undertaking more systematic baseline and endline measures in order to enable the program to better document potential outcome and impact level results. In terms of evaluations specifically, the program should consider either commissioning a midterm evaluation midway through its next Danida grant period to ensure that initial results are aligning to the new strategy, or commissioning more of a longitudinal study that re-examines some of its earlier projects in order to identify possible outcome or impact level effects.