

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: AFGHAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE

MAPPING ENGAGEMENT IN DENMARK, GERMANY,  
SWEDEN, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM



# STUDY

This study was commissioned by Danish Refugee Council, as part of a larger project to support Afghan diaspora engagement in Europe and was carried out by Maastricht Graduate School of Governance/ UNU-MERIT. The report has been written by Dr. Biljana Meshkovska, Nasrat Sayed, Katharina Koch, Iman Rajabzadeh, Carole Wenger, and Prof. Dr. Melissa Siegel. Editing was conducted by Emily Savage, from Meraki Labs. We would like to thank Maximilian Eckel, Nina Gustafsson, Rufus Horne, Helle Huisman, Chiara Janssen, Bailey Kirkland, Charlotte Mueller, Kevin O'Dell, Wesal Ah. Zaman, and Gustaf Renman for their invaluable support in this research. Moreover, we thank all respondents for sharing their insights with us.

## **DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL'S DIASPORA PROGRAMME**

The Diaspora programme is part of DRC's Civil Society Engagement Unit, and focuses on facilitating, supporting, and enhancing the role of diasporas as effective agents of humanitarian assistance, recovery and development.

DRC is a private, independent, humanitarian organization working in more than 35 countries to protect refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) against persecution and to promote durable solutions to the problems of forced displacement based on humanitarian principles and human rights.

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## **ASIA DISPLACEMENT SOLUTIONS PLATFORM**

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative launched by the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council and Relief International, which aims to contribute to the development of solutions for populations affected by displacement in the region. Drawing upon its members' operational presence throughout Asia, and its extensive advocacy networks in Europe and North America, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities. As implementing agencies, ADSP members work closely with displaced populations and the communities that host them and are therefore able to contribute a distinctive, field-led, perspective to policy and advocacy processes which can sometimes be removed from the realities on the ground and concerns of those living with, and in, displacement.

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## **THE MAASTRICHT GRADUATE SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE/UNU-MERIT**

The Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG) of Maastricht University is integrated within the United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT). UNU-MERIT is a research and training institute of the United Nations University and Maastricht University, based in the Netherlands. MGSoG/UNU-MERIT is leading the way in operational, policy-relevant studies and evaluations with ample experience conducting data collection and analysis around the world.

Website: <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/research/maastricht-graduate-school-governance>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STUDY BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Afghans are currently amongst the top nationalities for asylum applications globally (UNHCR, 2019a). Driven by decades-long ongoing conflict and insecurity, **large-scale migratory trends are not new**; Afghanistan has traditionally been considered an 'emigration country' (Weinar, 2014). Given the scale of the Afghan diaspora, migration stakeholders are increasingly interested in engaging the diaspora due to the importance of diaspora networks in providing information and support to new arrivals, the importance of remittances in economic development, and the two-way transfer of knowledge and skills between destination and country of origin. In this context, the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme (DRC-DP) has commissioned the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG) /United Nations University-MERIT in the Netherlands to conduct a study of Afghan diaspora and diaspora organizations **in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom**. This study has the specific objectives of **mapping Afghan Disapora Organizations (ADOs), providing a capacity and needs assessment of the ADOs, and developing recommendations for further ADOs engagement**. This report is based on 4 ADO consultation meetings and 103 interviews conducted with members of ADOs and other relevant stakeholders, in addition to a desk-based literature review and mapping exercise.

## THE AFGHAN DIASPORA

- The Afghan diaspora has consistently been found to be a **heterogeneous group** due to factors such as ethnicity, political affiliations or views, time of arrival, generation, and religious beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Lengthy asylum processes, family reunification, and lack of certainty around their residence status were highlighted as stressors on the diaspora community. Afghan diaspora did not show willingness to return permanently to Afghanistan due to the deteriorating security situation. Political participation was found to be important to Afghan diaspora and ADOs in order to have a stronger voice. However, **the instances of political participation were rare across the focus countries**. The demographics of the Afghan diaspora in the focus countries show that the majority of them are young (between the ages 15 - 34) and males.
- **In Denmark** the divisiveness of the Afghan diaspora along lines of ethnicity, political views, and generation was raised repeatedly. Specifically, Afghans that arrived in the 1970s and 1980s have maintained Afghan culture, while later waves see themselves as broadly belonging to the Afghan community, but are more concerned with work, education, and being active in the larger Danish society. Some younger Afghans in Denmark are perceived to be well-connected with the Afghan diaspora outside of Denmark.
- **Germany** hosts the largest Afghan diaspora population in Europe, with significant influx occurring in the last five years. There are **significant socio-economic distinctions** between arrivals in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and recent arrivals. In general, the diaspora is focused on prioritizing integration with German society rather than within the diaspora. Connections between the diaspora in Germany are highly dependent on familial ties, without a broader sense of community.
- **Sweden** experiences more interaction between diverse diaspora sub-groups due to the relatively small size of the community; however, there are clear **distinctions between earlier arrivals and recent arrivals**, with the latter being primarily Hazaras who migrated from Iran and who have less direct

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1 Religious beliefs or affiliations were not found to be a major factor in the Afghan community divisions.

connection with Afghanistan. **Unaccompanied minors (UAMs) comprise nearly 50 percent of recent arrivals** and may resist integration as a means to reduce their loneliness and isolation.

- **The UK** hosts a major Afghan diaspora population in Europe. The Afghan diaspora in the UK is **significant and diverse**, though Pashtuns are overrepresented proportionately. The older generation has not been as willing to integrate as younger diaspora members and that **cultural clashes are common within Afghan** diaspora in regard to social norms.

## OVERVIEW OF AFGHAN DIASPORA ORGANIZATIONS (ADOS)

- A total of **462 organizations** have been established by the Afghan diaspora: Denmark (96), Germany (129), Sweden (133), and the UK (104), with the **majority founded between 2010 and 2016** following large influxes of Afghan migrants after the withdrawal of most NATO troops from Afghanistan.
- **The number of ADOs per country does not correlate with the size of the Afghan diaspora**; Germany has a diaspora population approximately five times that of Sweden, but fewer ADOs.
- The membership composition of ADOs is generally mixed in terms of age, gender, education level, size, and ethnicity – though all tend to have open membership policies, many experience ethnic and generational divisions.
- **Supporting integration of Afghans into host communities is more prominent in Sweden (74%) and the UK (42%)** as opposed to Germany (22%) and Denmark (17%). Diaspora members remain connected to events in Afghanistan, though there is mixed engagement with humanitarian and development activities. **German and British ADOs are significantly more engaged in Afghanistan** (63% and 40%, respectively) when compared to Swedish (7%) and Danish (19%) organizations.
- The areas and the level of engagement by ADOs vary among the focus countries due to needs, opportunities, and the characteristics of the diaspora population.
- ADOs have **diverse but unstable sources of funding** that are often insufficient to meet needs. Based on information, sources of funding include: donations (17%), grants (7%), membership fees (5%), sales (1.7%), personal funds (0.8%), and loans (0.6%).
- ADOs mostly form transnational ties based on ethnicity rather than thematic areas or objectives. The fractured landscape has limited the formation of national umbrella organizations. **None of the countries studied have an inclusive coordinating body organization.**

## OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

- **Diaspora division.** Ethnic, political affiliations or views, time of arrival, generational, and religious beliefs factors have limited membership, collaboration, cooperation, and coordination amongst ADOs.
- **Capacity and access to funding.** Proposal writing and project cycle management skills are limited, which have further limited funding opportunities. The voluntary nature of the work means organizations struggle to have adequate time dedicated to operational issues and are unable to attract technical staff.
- **Engagement in Afghanistan.** The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the reluctance to work with the Afghan government, and a lack of proper knowledge and awareness about the development policies in Afghanistan have reduced ADOs engagement. ADOs without sufficient local connections are prevented from implementing projects, particularly in the rural areas.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Support activities to improve social cohesion within the diaspora.** Activities that could facilitate social cohesion are cultural, religious and thematic events which would offer opportunities for diaspora members to meet in person and overcome existing divisions. Workshops for members of diaspora organizations presenting conflict situations in other communities and how they were dealt with are presented may serve as case stories to learn from them,<sup>2</sup> this could include exchange meetings with other diaspora network leaders who have overcome obstacles.

**Focus on encouraging youth and second-generation participation.** Individuals that settled in the country in question very young or are part of the second generation have been repeatedly identified as being willing to work across typical social divisions. They also have a unique position between culturally and linguistically, feeling tied to both countries. Young people who have benefited from educational opportunities and professional experience can play a pivotal role in redefining diaspora organizations and ensuring they remain relevant and may be ideally positioned to form and lead umbrella organizations.

**Build on gains from social cohesion activities with the ultimate goal of creating umbrella organizations and/or thematic networks for improved coordination, collaboration, information sharing, and advocacy.** Supporting agencies should provide financial and logistical support and coordination of activities related to the formation of umbrella organizations and may also choose to act as a convener and facilitator to mediate differences. Given the distrust that exists in some parts of the diaspora community, it is important that the chosen facilitator is regarded as neutral by all organizations. However, the process of forming an umbrella organization should result from the initiative and participation of the diaspora organizations themselves – without buy-in, organizations will not be sustainable.

**Support access to funding.** Donors should be more mindful of some of the limitations in terms of capacity of the ADOs, particularly in regard to proposal writing and reporting. This may begin with showing more flexibility in evaluating project proposals and ensuring that grants provide for the employment of a professional administrator or coordinator. Donor agencies could consider small grants for start-up agencies or opportunities for grants that support expansion and professionalization. Donors and supporting agencies should continue to hold capacity building sessions or individual coaching sessions to ensure specific administrative requirements are understood, but also offer opportunities for frank feedback on processes and support needed.

**Start small.** The umbrella organization in the early stage would have to be a small group of organizations. In the initial stages of an umbrella organization, information sharing, coordination and collaboration should be the focus. The development of an umbrella organization is a continuous process and requires consistent resources for basic activities such as basic coordination, event costs, amongst others. As part of supporting the initial phase of creating an umbrella organization, supporting agencies should provide those financial resources while at the same time facilitate the umbrella's efforts to raise more direct and sustainable funds. Donor agencies on the other hand should be ready to provide structural funding to the umbrella organization as soon as possible, either directly or through an established funding mechanism managed by an organization. Instead of trying to connect all diaspora organizations, regardless of the type of activity they perform, there should be an attempt to connect diaspora organizations that have similar focus, thus theme-specific coordination.<sup>3</sup>

**Support capacity development through direct outreach.** Project development, proposal writing, and project management capacity gaps have been identified consistently. While some diaspora organizations are aware and have knowledge of these sessions, it is clear direct outreach to organizations to confirm participation and understand barriers to attendance (funding, travel time, time commitment) is needed.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the feedback from two respondents.

<sup>3</sup> Respondent from Germany noted that this would also be beneficial for ADOs in Germany as well - in particular those working in medicine. They can learn from each other, and travel together to Afghanistan, in order to identify the main needs of people in Afghanistan.

Likewise, ADOs must promote capacity building activities among its members and take advantage of such opportunities. Should umbrella organizations form, these could offer an excellent forum for coaching and training.

**Support capacity development through mentorship partners with local-run community**

**organizations.** Respondents and ADO representatives expressed both a lack of capacity for project cycle management and also a desire to more closely connect with the local community outside the diaspora network. Supporting partnerships between diaspora and non-diaspora local organizations can facilitate information sharing, training, and create a platform for cross-cultural initiatives and collaboration – which is a priority for many ADOs.

**Increase opportunity and support for integration in country of residence to recently arrived**

**asylum seekers.** The local institutions such as the municipalities should strengthen social and economic integration programmes, such as language classes and access to labor market. ADOs should be properly linked as referral providers for these programmes to ensure reach. Where possible, small-scale funding provided by municipalities and local foundations should be provided to diaspora organizations to carry out their own integration projects that complement state and local institutions.

**Promote Afghanistan in the media.** Organizations should promote positive stories in the media related to Afghanistan and diaspora members, and work toward allowing for stronger Afghan voices in the public landscape to raise awareness amongst residence countries and promote cross-cultural understanding.

**Establishing local contacts to engage in Afghanistan and providing information and support:**

The Afghan government should facilitate and provide support for the ADOs in establishing local contacts with the Community District Councils (CDCs) and the District Development Assemblies (DDAs) as part of the increased interest in leveraging the skills and financial investment many diaspora organizations are willing to make in the country. Furthermore, the relief and development active actors such as ACBAR, DACCAR, SAK, and DRC/DEMAC are good entry points for partnership and engaging in Afghanistan. In addition, contacting the ADOs who are already engaged in Afghanistan such as DAMF and Doctors Association for Afghan Refugees from Germany, SAK from Sweden, ACA and FSTS from Denmark, and Farkhunda Trust and the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG)<sup>4</sup> from the UK can be good sources to learn how to engage in Afghanistan.

**Data consistency:** All countries included in the study conceptualize the diaspora differently in national statistics. While some countries only measure recent arrivals under temporary protection, residency, or work permit – others consider these categories as well as naturalized citizens. Other countries include naturalized citizens and the first descendants (though may not categorize these on a national origin-basis). In order to fully understand the diaspora, it is essential that similar data is collected and shared across the EU.

**The entire study can be found on DRC's website: [www.drc.ngo/diaspora](http://www.drc.ngo/diaspora)**



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