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The rise of diaspora institutions

By Alan Gamlen

Why do governments form institutions devoted to emigrants and their descendants in the diaspora? Migration policy is often equated with immigration policy, but every immigrant is also an emigrant with ties to a place of origin, and origin states are now far from passive in managing these ties. Formal executive and legislative government offices tasked with diaspora populations – diaspora institutions – have rapidly become a regular feature of political life in many parts of the world: only a handful existed in 1980, but currently over half of United Nations Member States now have one (see Figure 1), and many are fully fledged government ministries.

Diaspora institutions have existed as far back as the nineteenth century, but their recent rise is unprecedented. These institutions matter because they connect recent developments in the global governance of migration, with current patterns of national and transnational sovereignty and citizenship, and new ways of constructing individual identity in relation to new collectivities. They have been overlooked partly because of this newness, but also partly because they operate in the grey zone between domestic politics and international relations – a zone that is growing more dynamic and significant in world politics.

Existing research on diaspora institutions is mainly in the form of single country case studies, without much comparative analysis and almost no quantitative work, to the detriment of theoretical developments. The ‘Diaspora Engagement Policies’ project aims to address this gap, developing a new theoretical approach to explain the rise of diaspora institutions, based on new mixed methods research

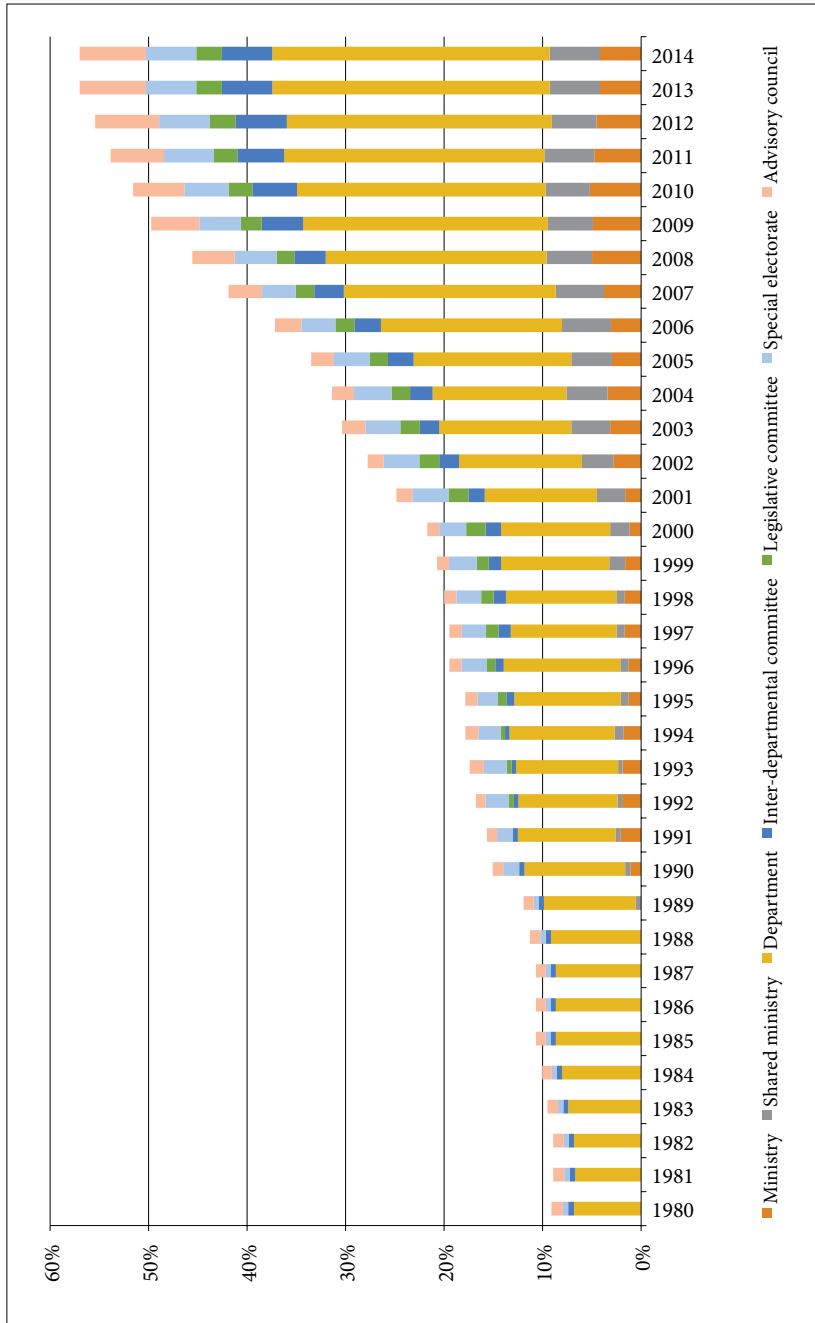


Figure 1. The rise of diaspora institutions: Percentage of United Nations Member States with formal offices for emigrants and their descendants, by institution type, 1980–2014. Data source: Alan Gamlen

covering all states in the United Nations system over a period of several decades.

Tapping diaspora resources and embracing lost members

Conventional explanations for the rise of this phenomena fall into two main categories which I will call *tapping* and *embracing*. Perhaps the most common approach in this field is to argue that origin states establish diaspora institutions as they seek to ‘tap’ the material resources of their diasporas in pursuit of national interests. One version of this approach is economic: it suggests that the primary function of origin-state diaspora institutions is to help organise and obligate diaspora groups to remit, invest, donate, or travel to the origin country, or share their development-friendly expertise from afar, off-setting ‘brain drain’. Although they shun the word itself, such initiatives may serve the function of a tax aimed at compensating origin states for human capital lost through emigration.

Another version of the tapping perspective focuses on diplomacy and security interests. Almost every state has or wants an ethnic lobby group in Washington DC, and some diaspora institutions cultivate such groups openly. Still more cloak their lobbying in educational and cultural co-operation initiatives or efforts to protect and promote the welfare and interests of emigrants and their descendants – conventional consular activities which are possible so long as a state maintains a sufficiently extensive network of formal diplomatic ties. Conflict-torn states may also form diaspora institutions to disrupt hostile networks of exile militants, or to cultivate diaspora allies who may bring resources and influence to bear in peace-building and reconstruction processes.

A second common theoretical approach – the *embracing* perspective – focuses on state identities rather than interests, arguing that diaspora institutions indicate the emergence of what Rainer Bauböck calls external citizenship: the idea that the state represents a political community comprising more than just the population within its borders (see Bauböck 2009). When this community is an ethnic nation dispersed across multiple state territories, diaspora institutions may express ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson 2002) or ‘trans-sovereign nationalism’ (Csergő and Goldgeier 2004) which can be

associated with right-wing politics in the origin state, or with the efforts of authoritarian rulers to shore up their strength at home and abroad.

On the other hand, diaspora institutions may aim to engage a multicultural diaspora rather than a mono-ethnic one, as studies have suggested to be the case in Germany and South Korea (see Brubacker and Kim 2011). They may be established to help states integrate into a supra-national polity, or convey the will of democratising governments to welcome back exiles of a past authoritarian regime. Indeed, diaspora institutions may demonstrate democracy in action, if they emerge where expatriate voting provisions and other opportunity structures permit emigrants and their descendants to gain an institutional foothold in the origin state. Here too the origin state embraces lost members of the nation, even if the nation is not imagined ethnically.

Diaspora institutions and diaspora governance

By focusing on state interests and the domestic identities underpinning them, *tapping* and *embracing* perspectives have worked well to explain the emergence of diaspora institutions in specific country case studies. However, explaining the convergence of so many countries on similar policy models requires more attention to processes at the international level, to show how state action is shaped by global norms. In particular, I advocate more focus on the role of international organisations promoting ‘diaspora engagement’ as a model of decentralised global governance in the area of international migration. I call this the *governing* perspective.

States and international organisations have long recognised the need for more international co-operation over migration, but been reluctant to form anything like a World Trade Organisation (WTO) for human mobility. Diaspora institutions have grown popular precisely because they facilitate co-operation but they do not require a centralised multilateral bureaucracy. Instead, they provide a focal point for direct collaboration between origin and destination states linked by specific migration flows. In this way diaspora institutions nominally allow origin states not only to recoup emigrant resources through financial and social remittances, but also to bear some responsibility for regulating international recruitment, combating

trafficking and money laundering, upholding migrants' rights, and ensuring smooth integration or return migration – all tasks that would otherwise fall solely to destination states.

This responsibility sharing supposedly turns migration from a zero-sum game into a 'win-win-win' where migrants and states of origin and destination all benefit. For these reasons, diaspora institutions have been enthusiastically promoted by, among others, the Global Forum on Migration and Development, the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, and leading think tanks like the Migration Policy Institute. Our project results reveal that, the worldwide proliferation of diaspora institutions partly results from their deliberate diffusion by international organisations in this way. From there, they have been adopted and adapted by an increasingly broad range of states.

Researching diaspora institutions

Diaspora institutions are the central focus of the 'Diaspora Engagement Policies' project, a five-year initiative within the ODP. The project uses mixed research methods, involving both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The quantitative component involves collecting and analysing a new dataset on diaspora institutions covering all United Nations Member States from 1980 to 2014, providing an overview of what kinds of states form what kinds of institutions. Meanwhile the qualitative element of the research directly asks a wide range of senior policy makers involved in diaspora institutions what they have done and why.

In this way, the research shows that the rush by migrants' origin states to establish diaspora institutions is less about domestically formed identities and interests, and more about a wider search for means of international co-operation in the area of global migration. For example it shows that, contrary to the common wisdom, diaspora institutions are not more likely to emerge in states that depend on remittances, suffer 'brain drain', or those that are governed by right-wing political parties or autocratic regimes. Instead it shows that diaspora intuitions have often been established by senior origin-state politicians and policy

makers acting on advice from international organisations.

In this way, the research suggests that states' diaspora initiatives are part of wider international efforts to govern global migration. Advised and urged by experts in think tanks and international organisations to seek 'migration for development', states are being steered towards an appreciation of how engaging diasporas furthers their own interests. What began as a good idea is gradually gathering the moral force of convention. Bound up with the reshaping of group identities and the re-framing of government interests, diaspora institutions are part and parcel of important shifts in the stuff of twenty-first century nation-states. □

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