Transnational Talent in Science: Diaspora Engagement and Global Health

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The role of diaspora communities in science, particularly in global health innovation, is increasingly recognised as a vital resource for improving healthcare delivery, policy development, and emergency response. This article explores the critical involvement of diasporas in enhancing global health outcomes through partnerships, expertise transfer, and advocacy. It focuses on three key areas: the contributions of diaspora health professionals, the implementation of transnational and national initiatives, and their role in fostering health equity and innovation within the broader global context.

By leveraging their talents, networks, and cross-border collaborations, diaspora communities have become invaluable in addressing healthcare challenges worldwide. Their active engagement highlights the need for sustained partnerships to advance global health outcomes.

IOM's Strategic Approach to Diaspora and Health

The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Strategic Plan for 2024-2028 underscores the multifaceted role of diaspora communities in advancing global health outcomes. This strategy focuses on integrating diaspora engagement into key objectives, particularly in saving lives, protecting people on the move, and facilitating pathways for regular migration.

Diaspora communities, comprising first, second, and third-generation migrants, contribute significantly to healthcare by utilising their expertise, resources, and networks to support vulnerable populations. Diaspora members act as essential actors in humanitarian efforts, providing practical health solutions, enhancing access to care, and supporting marginalised groups. Their roles as healthcare professionals, community leaders, and engaged citizens allow them to offer psychological support, protection services, and recovery assistance, making them vital to global health initiatives. Additionally, diasporas facilitate migration by supporting healthcare solutions throughout the migration cycle, advocating for protection, recognition, and opportunities for newcomers, and ensuring smoother migration pathways.

Diaspora healthcare professionals play a vital role in enhancing development in both their countries of origin and host communities through initiatives like Finland-supported MIDA FINNSOM, which, over 16 years,

has deployed 230 Somali diaspora experts to strengthen 50 health and education institutions, benefiting over 8,000 professionals, and IOM's partnership with the Rwandan government (2019-2022), engaging diaspora health professionals from Europe to provide services, transfer knowledge, and build capacity in ten Rwandan hospitals. Diasporas engage in philanthropy, knowledge transfer, and telemedicine initiatives, which help build local healthcare capacity and address brain drain from developing nations. These efforts also promote the integration of migrant healthcare workers into host country systems, fostering professional ties and cultural exchange.

Diasporas further drive innovation and research by partnering with academics and leveraging their networks, advancing healthcare solutions and improving practices, especially during emergencies. Their ability to create cross-sector partnerships enables coordinated responses to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where diasporas mobilised resources and expertise. For example, the National Federation of Chinese Migrants in Spain donated 270,000 masks and 5,000 protective suits, the Global Albanians Foundation conducted targeted donation campaigns for vulnerable groups, and the KEIHAN Foundation distributed 500 PPE packages to health staff in Afghanistan's most vulnerable provinces.

Philanthropic efforts by diasporas include financial investment in health infrastructure and advocacy for healthcare equity, focusing on underserved populations. Their advocacy helps shape health policies that prioritise dignity and humane treatment. Overall, diasporas are instrumental in building inclusive, resilient, and responsive global health systems, advancing health equity and improving outcomes across borders.

Global context: Health Equity and Resource Disparity

The global health sector still faces unequal distribution of health resources, including essential medicines, trained healthcare professionals, and healthcare facilities, among others. This disparity in healthcare infrastructure and resources exacerbates health inequities and disproportionately affects marginalised communities. Meanwhile, the global health workforce is strained by critical shortages of skilled healthcare professionals. This shortage is particularly acute in low- and middle-income countries, where the demand for healthcare services often outstrips the available workforce capacity. With this, retaining highly skilled healthcare professionals remains challenging for many developing countries, further exacerbating healthcare disparities.

In response to these global needs, engaging diaspora communities has emerged as a promising strategy to strengthen health systems, enhance healthcare delivery, and address the unmet health needs of populations in their countries of origin. Diaspora members possess valuable skills, expertise, and cultural insights that can be leveraged to fill critical gaps in the global health workforce, improve access to healthcare services, and drive innovation in health programming and policy. This approach not only supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: Good Health and Well-being but also aligns with Objective 19 of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). This objective advocates for enhancing the connection of transnational communities with their communities and countries of origin, aiming to foster sustainable development for all.

Furthermore, as a significant milestone in diaspora engagement, the adoption of the Dublin Declaration outlined a comprehensive plan of action to institutionalise and operationalise diaspora cultural, economic, social and human capital. Experience from the pandemic has highlighted the diaspora's capacity to engage in transnational initiatives in response to global health needs. Stakeholders need to be ready to promote the mutual recognition of qualifications to maximise the mobility of diaspora talent, recognise the varied

and diverse skillsets of diaspora members and tailor programmes, digitalise knowledge transfer and skills exchange. The diaspora can support health professionals in integrating into the health systems of their home or host countries by facilitating the recognition of their qualifications and skills. It enables them to provide culturally appropriate care to migrant communities.

Transnational Health across Humanitarian, Development and Peace Efforts

Diaspora communities play a crucial role in enhancing healthcare access, particularly in underserved and remote areas, by leveraging their skills and expertise. They are increasingly recognised as vital sources of external aid, helping to fill gaps in health systems in their countries of origin. Innovative models like telemedicine and remote consultations allow diaspora healthcare professionals to deliver essential services to migrant populations and those with limited access to care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, diaspora communities demonstrated resilience by mobilising resources and expertise to support their communities. They provided critical assistance, such as sourcing personal protective equipment for healthcare workers in their home countries and combating misinformation. These efforts highlighted the vital role of diasporas in crisis response.

Beyond emergencies, diasporas contribute to strengthening healthcare systems through training programs, capacity-building initiatives, and direct healthcare services. Their deep cultural understanding and trusted relationships enable them to effectively engage in health promotion and education, addressing migration health challenges and promoting health equity. Moreover, diasporas foster innovation in healthcare by supporting research, developing new technologies, and implementing best practices from their host countries.

Diaspora organisations are also strong advocates for policies that promote health equity, ensuring migrants have access to comprehensive healthcare services and can navigate complex healthcare systems. They address unique health needs and barriers migrants face, such as language differences, legal status issues, and cultural gaps.

To fully capitalise on diaspora engagement in the health sector, long-term partnerships among governments, the private sector, academia, and diaspora organisations are essential. These partnerships should focus on mutual recognition of talent, developing governance frameworks, and integrating diaspora professionals into local health systems for sustainable impact. Strategies like knowledge exchange programs, diaspora support initiatives, and innovative funding models can further enhance the positive effects of diaspora contributions.

Diaspora engagement in health demonstrates the power of collective action and collaboration in advancing global health goals. By leveraging their diverse skills, networks, and resources, diaspora communities significantly improve healthcare access, promote health equity, and enhance health outcomes globally, especially when gender considerations are incorporated into these programs.

Moving Forward

The contributions of diaspora healthcare professionals extend beyond their immediate roles, as they foster synergies and partnerships that span various sectors and borders. Their involvement in developing sustainable and coordinated responses during emergencies, driving innovation and research, and engaging in philanthropy underscores their vital role in strengthening global health systems. By investing in health infrastructure, advocating for health rights, and promoting culturally appropriate care, diaspora communities contribute

significantly to health equity and access, particularly for underserved or vulnerable populations.

The establishment of long-term partnerships among governments, the private sector, academia, and diaspora organisations is crucial to fully harness the benefits of diaspora engagement in the health sector. These collaborations should prioritise mutual recognition of talent, the creation of governance frameworks, and the promotion of innovative models for transnational healthcare delivery. By embracing a collaborative and evidence-based approach, stakeholders can unlock the full potential of diaspora engagement, advancing global health outcomes and contributing to sustainable development. The Global Diaspora Policy Alliance (GDPA), with its focus on health and well-being, is set to play a pivotal role in driving these efforts, fostering long-term partnerships that will enhance health practices and policies worldwide.

In line with the Dublin Declaration, the establishment of the GDPA in 2024 is a key recommendation from stakeholders. Extensive multi-stakeholder consultations identified "Health and Wellbeing" as a critical focus within the GDPA's core structure, demonstrating a strong commitment to using a sectoral approach to diaspora engagement. This approach will enable better measurement of impact, talent matching, and fostering lasting partnerships. Historically, health has been a central focus for engaging diverse stakeholders, and the GDPA's Technical Working Group on Health, co-chaired by the Governments of the Philippines and Somalia, aims to provide a global platform to drive diaspora engagement, promoting innovative solutions across health policies and programs worldwide.

Resources

- IOM (2024) IOM Strategic Plan 2024 – 2028.
- IOM (2020) Global Diaspora reacting to COVID-19 crisis, Best practices from the field. International Organization for Migration, Geneva.
- Global Diaspora Summit 2022.
- IOM (2023) Regional Consultations: Towards the Global Diaspora Policy Alliance, International Organization for Migration, Geneva.