

Chapter 1. Introduction



A. Diaspora Communities and Human Rights

The Migration Policy Institute defines the term “diaspora” as “emigrants and their descendants who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry . . . yet still maintain . . . ties to their countries of origin.”¹

Human rights advocacy takes many forms, and human rights activists can be found in every corner of the world. With advancements in technology and communication, activists have formed strong international networks and are often able to report many of the worst human rights violations as they occur. These advancements have changed the way human rights organizations work and provide access to information necessary for the broader community to engage in human rights advocacy.

¹ International Organization for Migration and Migration Policy Institute, *Developing a Roadmap for Engaging Diasporas in Development* (Washington DC and Geneva: IOM and MPI, 2012), 15. Also available online at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/thediasporahandbook.pdf>.

These advancements also allow diaspora communities to maintain a foot in two worlds. Diaspora community members influence the politics, economies, and often the human rights cultures in their country of origin as well as their new country. Diasporans influence development and the basic living conditions of millions of people by sending remittances to support relatives and friends. In this way diaspora groups directly influence the economic and social rights, such as the right to food, housing, health, and education, of people around the globe.

Many individuals in diaspora communities also influence human rights through communication technology, philanthropy, capacity-building and brain gain, and direct political advocacy. Some diaspora members make long-term commitments to building schools, improving access to healthcare, setting up legal aid programs, or offering other direct services to help people from their home countries recover from conflict or environmental disasters. Further, the political power of the diaspora is evident in the growing number of politicians who include visiting and speaking with diaspora communities as part of their campaigns.

Many migrants—refugees and asylum seekers in particular—leave their homes because of human rights concerns, and many were political and human rights activists in their home countries. Individuals bring these experiences to their new country; many become advocates for human rights in their country of origin from their new home base. Because they have regular contact with friends and family, members of diaspora communities are often the first to know about and report on human rights abuses on the ground in their country of origin. Diaspora civil society organizations are in a unique position to document human rights abuses, influence policy, and advocate on behalf of the people left behind who may be suffering human rights violations.

In the diaspora, many community groups or “mutual assistance associations” have been created to help other diaspora community members. These organizations work to meet a wide variety of needs in their community, from assisting with literacy or language learning to developing new skills through employment training. Some diaspora community groups have set up legal clinics to provide immigration or other kinds of legal assistance. Many diaspora community groups also regularly share and discuss information about issues in their home country through diaspora media outlets, email listserves, telephone trees, community meetings, and town hall forums.

Diaspora communities can also have a powerful impact on the human rights culture of their new country. As engaged participants in debates on immigration, language rights, discrimination, the right to work, freedom of movement, as well as the right to culture and free exercise of religion, diaspora communities challenge host countries to examine their own human rights practices. Diaspora communities also raise awareness of human rights problems in the broader community, creating new allies for protection of human rights.

Diaspora communities have an increasingly important global role to play as a bridge between individuals, governments, and international legal and political mechanisms. In particular, diaspora community members are in a unique position to raise awareness about, influence policy on, and advocate for individual survivors of human rights abuses. In order to bring about systems change and real human rights reforms, civil society needs to devote sustained attention to implementation—from within the country, as well from without. Diaspora communities are a critical link in changing social institutions and structures to hold governments accountable and promote the full realization of human rights.

B. The Advocates for Human Rights’ Work with Diaspora Communities

The Advocates for Human Rights works closely with diaspora populations. While The Advocates is an international human rights organization, it is based in Minnesota—a state that is home to numerous diaspora communities from around the globe, including Cambodia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Mexico, Russia, Somalia, Tibet, Vietnam, and Laos, as well as numerous other African, Asian, Latin American, and European countries.

As a provider of free legal services, The Advocates is often the first connection that asylum seekers have to their new community in the United States. The Advocates brings individuals and organizations together to help new arrivals become a unified force in addressing common issues, such as working at the state and federal levels to make the immigration process more humane and accessible.

Because of this special relationship, numerous diaspora communities have requested assistance from The Advocates in documenting human rights violations “back home.” The Advocates’ work with diaspora communities through the *Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project* and the *Oromo Project* proved the significance of involving these individuals in work to hold governments accountable and affect human rights in their home countries.

Similarly, The Advocates worked with diaspora groups in the United States to document their experiences after the 9/11/2001 attacks. The report *Voices from Silence* is an important example of how diaspora groups can have a powerful impact on the human rights culture in their adopted country.

Yet the role that diaspora communities can play in improving human rights around the world has been largely overlooked in the human rights field. With this project, The Advocates aims to create tools to help tap the underexplored resources of diaspora involvement in human rights.

C. What Is the Purpose of This Manual?

The purpose of this manual is to provide practical tools and step-by-step guidance for diaspora community groups and individuals who want to use human rights monitoring, documentation, and advocacy in their work to change policy and improve human rights conditions in their countries of origin. The contents of this manual have been shaped by the requests for assistance and guidance that The Advocates routinely receives from diaspora communities, as well as by input from surveys conducted with a wide variety of diaspora communities.

This manual is not just for lawyers or seasoned human rights activists; diaspora advocates of all backgrounds and experiences can use these tools and resources to promote human rights in their country of origin. From framing an issue in terms of internationally recognized human rights standards to submitting a detailed complaint to an international human rights body, diaspora advocates can use this manual to plan and implement this work. The manual is designed to aid advocates undertaking a variety of activities—from the relatively simple to the more complex. With background information, key questions to consider, case examples, and practitioner’s tips, this manual provides tools to combat human rights abuses and change social institutions and structures to promote the full realization of human rights.

The overarching goal of this manual is to facilitate the inclusion of diaspora voices in efforts to hold governments accountable for human rights. While the tools and resources presented in this manual were specifically created for use by diaspora communities to use in human rights work, they should not be seen as relevant only to



A member of the Liberian Women's Initiative of Minnesota testifying at the first ever public hearings of a truth commission held in a diaspora venue, the Diaspora Hearings of the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, in June 2008.

diaspora communities. This manual provides a full menu of useful tools that are grounded in the daily work of human rights defenders like The Advocates for Human Rights. We hope that this manual will also benefit and be used by human rights defenders and civil society organizations throughout the world.

D. How Is the Manual Structured?

The manual contains a background section on human rights and five practical sections focused in turn on monitoring, documentation, and advocacy. The background section is a brief primer on human rights and their application. The practice-oriented sections help advocates to do the following:

- *Monitor*: identify ongoing human rights abuses and collect the information advocates need about these issues;
- *Document*: analyze, present that information, and make recommendations within the framework of international human rights standards;
- *Advocate*: choose and implement a strategy to bring the lived reality of people in the home country closer to the ideals proclaimed by international human rights treaties, including through advocacy at international and regional human rights mechanisms;
- *Address Impunity and Accountability*: identify strategies and legal mechanisms in the country of origin, in the country of residence, and in international mechanisms for holding perpetrators and governments accountable for human rights violations; and
- *Build Capacity to Improve Human Rights*: develop a better understanding of the international human rights system, identify strategies for applying a human rights framework, and develop competence in setting up and effectively running an organization in safety and security.

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Chapter 1

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