

**In- or Outsiders? The Return of Qualified Diaspora Members and Their Role in  
Rebuilding Post-Conflict Governance**

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# **In- or Outsiders? The Return of Qualified Diaspora Members and Their Role in Rebuilding Post-Conflict Governance**

By: Sylvia Sánchez Villa

## **I. Introduction**

In responding to conflict and civil wars, development, reconstruction agencies and governments have increasingly looked to migrants—specifically migrant diasporas—as agents for change and development.<sup>1</sup> The focus has largely been on the more highly-skilled, Western-educated members of diasporas, who are seen as the greatest potential sources of human capital for post-conflict peacebuilding. International organisations and donors have begun to staff their reconstruction and development projects with experts from the migrants diasporas. However, the value of these individuals in bringing a combination of local knowledge with ‘Western’ know-how is sometimes disputed. This paper will consider the role of these individuals in the context of post-conflict governance and reconstruction. It will consider the reasons why returnees have often been less effective than expected in influencing local structures. The findings will be explored within the context of prevailing notions of ‘capacity’ and ‘local ownership’ on the part of international donors. It will be argued that aid-dependent ‘capacity’-building is a political, rather than a technical, project and as a consequence, its outcomes often differ from those anticipated by the intervening parties. In this sense, involving diaspora members in international reconstruction efforts in post-conflict states can be less about local ownership of

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, M, ‘Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding’, Paper for WISC 2008, Ljubljana, 23-26 July 2008, p.11.

the reconstruction and more about an attempt to impose international ownership in a 'culturally appropriate' way.

## **II. The role of skilled diasporas in governance reconstruction**

The role of diasporas in influencing policy and promoting regime change has long been recognised. However, often these actors and their activities have been viewed as having a negative role, by prolonging or exacerbating conflicts in their home countries.<sup>2</sup> One alternative view is that these groups, and individual members, make various positive contributions to their homelands, including by sending remittances, contributing to economic development and investment<sup>3</sup> and conflict resolution,<sup>4</sup> promoting good governance and advocating for human rights<sup>5</sup>, and through philanthropy<sup>6</sup> and post-conflict development and reconstruction.<sup>7</sup> This positive potential is increasingly being recognised, with the diaspora seen as a source of funds and expertise for capacity-building and political leadership. As expressed by one contributor to a study by the United Nations (UN) University in 2007: 'Diasporas in democratic countries can inform members of their group in the homeland of the norms, values and institutions

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<sup>2</sup> Collier, P. and A. Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievances in Civil War' (2004) 56:4 *Oxford Economic Papers*, pp.563-595.

<sup>3</sup> Esman, M., 'Factors Conducive to Diaspora Investment: Comparing China, Armenia, and Ireland', in J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential* (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, C., 'The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy' (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, p.1498.

<sup>5</sup> Brainard, L.A. and J.M. Brinkerhoff, 'Sovereignty Under Siege or a Circuitous Path to Strengthening the State?: Digital Diasporas and Human Rights'. For the Special Issue on State Hollowing and State Sovereignty, P.A. Mameli, ed. (2006) 9:8 *International Journal of Public Administration*, pp.595-618.

<sup>6</sup> Brinkerhoff, J.M., 'Diaspora Philanthropy in an At-Risk Society: The Case of Coptic Orphans in Egypt' (2008) 37:2 *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, pp.411-433.

<sup>7</sup> Brinkerhoff, J.M., 'Digital Diasporas and International Development: Afghan-Americans and the Reconstruction of Afghanistan' (2004) 24:5 *Public Administration and Development*, pp.397-413.

which define a democratic policy and which provide equal rights to all.’<sup>8</sup> At the same time, ‘Members of the diaspora can offer expertise, knowledge and understanding of cultural norms and a deeper appreciation of the situation in their homeland.’<sup>9</sup>

International perceptions of the causes of intra-state conflict developed and some came to argue that conflicts are often based on ethnic divisions. This was followed by a parallel shift in peace theory, with the view that lasting stability could be achieved by creating state institutions that guarantee ethnic balances, along with capacity-building to create ‘good governance’ within these institutions, which would enable the state to manage ethnic relations.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, within the context of peace-building in general, and capacity-building in particular, the issue of ‘local ownership’ has increasingly gained the attention of international interveners. The term generally refers to the extent to which domestic actors control both the design and implementation of political processes.’<sup>11</sup> Local ownership is now considered vital for the legitimacy and sustainability of peacebuilding. At the same time, the liberal notion of peacebuilding, prevalent among international donors and agencies, dictates that global norms and standards of ‘good governance’ exist and must carry weight when rebuilding state structures.<sup>12</sup> Employing skilled members of diasporas for post-conflict governance reconstruction is often seen as a way to address both priorities. It enables donors to bring war-affected state institutions into

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob Bercovitch, ‘Diasporas and Conflict Resolution’, in Hazel Smith and Paul Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peacemakers or Peace-wreckers?* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2007), p.34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, C., ‘The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy’ (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, p.1947.

<sup>11</sup> Donais, T., ‘Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes’ (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.6.

compliance with Western governance standards, while preserving local ownership and thereby avoiding friction with local stakeholders.

The governance structures and institutions in post-conflict states often lack technical and managerial know-how. To try to overcome this issue, a range of diaspora recruitment projects have been put in place with varying objectives: permanent return and skills and knowledge development for the public sector,<sup>13</sup> medium/long-term recruitment for government ministries,<sup>14</sup> or smaller scale, targeted recruitment for senior-level advisory positions.<sup>15</sup> Overall, the programmes aim to enhance the managerial and institutional capacity and effectiveness of government departments and agencies. The Afghan Expatriate Programme (AEP), by way of example, has as its objective the placement of 'Afghan expatriate professionals in advisory positions in line ministries to enhance the capacity for policy and institutional reform, as well as for implementation of public investment programs.'<sup>16</sup> Capacity here is articulated as 'technical' knowledge transfer. This terminology, however, masks the highly political notion of governance re-/construction. Furthermore, the interveners' concept of capacity-building does not pay due attention to what some scholars increasingly see as the main cause for institutional change: the transformation of societal perceptions and forces.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> IOM, 'Return of Qualified Nationals' programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Afghanistan, and across Africa. See IOM, Return of Qualified Nationals. n.d. 'Return of Qualified Nationals'.

<sup>14</sup> Legal Expatriat Program (LEP), Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Afghanistan Expatriat Program (AEP), Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Embassy of Afghanistan, Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide (Washington: Embassy of Afghanistan, 2006), p.11.

<sup>17</sup> Chesterman, F., Ignatieff, M. and R. Thakur, 'Making States Work – from state failure to state-building', International Peace Academy, United Nations University (2004), pp.10ff.

### **III. The limits of ‘capacity’-building**

It is debatable whether skilled members of the diaspora are indeed as effective in affecting the institutional changes envisaged by the recruitment programmes.<sup>18</sup> Evaluations of such programmes show that the alleged ‘transformative powers’ of expat agents is limited. Overall, programmes often fail to achieve the foreseen increase in capacity of local civil services, and capacity strengthening remains sporadic.<sup>19</sup> Diaspora experts frequently report that their attempts to promote organisational change and influence governmental and administrative processes are hampered by various factors.<sup>20</sup> Analyses of the achievements of skilled diasporas in rebuilding governance capacity raise questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of the global reconstruction concepts outlined above. Several factors obstruct the agents’ success and are often overlooked by international aid agencies.

#### ***The fallacies of ‘ethnic bonds’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’***

The belief of international interveners in the ability of diaspora returnees to assist reconstruction in an ‘ethnically correct’ manner is based on the notion of ‘ethnic bonds’ and ‘solidarity’. However, as similar problems encountered across various programmes show, the cohesion of ‘ethnicity’, ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ cannot be taken for granted. Different experiences of individuals during war and in exile forge distinct developments and create distances between home

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<sup>18</sup> See Lazarova, M. B., and J.-L. Cerdin, ‘Revisiting repatriation concerns: organisational support versus career and contextual influences’ (2007) 38 *Journal of International Business Studies*, pp.404–429; International Crisis Group, 2009. ‘Afghanistan: What now for refugees?’, Asia Report no. 175.

<sup>19</sup> Worldbank, ‘What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza’ (July 2006) Social Development Notes, No.25, p.1

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

populations and diasporas. The first to leave during conflicts are often the ones who have the financial means, and have higher levels of education and professional skills. Such people also integrate easier into host societies, which increases the need for stronger incentives for them to return to the home country, even for short-term assignments.<sup>21</sup> Those who do return are often met with resentment or outright hostility for having left while their fellow citizens endured, or actively participated in, the conflict.<sup>22</sup> For example, such tensions arose between experts from the Afghan diaspora who returned from Western countries and Afghans who had remained in the country during the Taliban regime, or had been in exile in neighbouring countries.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, different individual experiences during the conflict may have eroded former bonds and can even lead to situations where the ethnic identity of expatriates is itself questioned. In fact, this distance often meant that returnees felt, and were identified, as belonging to the interveners rather than the local population.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the natural assumption by international donors that diaspora returnees act as a bridge between the international capacity and the local legitimacy overlooks a crucial point: the fact that from a local perspective, legitimacy does not automatically follow from ethnic bonds, but rather—in a

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<sup>21</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'World Migration 2005: Costs and Benefits of International Migration', Geneva: IOM (2005), pp.290/1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.289ff.

<sup>23</sup> Government of the Kingdom of Belgium, the International Organization for Migration, the European Commission and the World Bank. Migration and Development Conference: Final Report. Brussels: International Organization for Migration Regional Liaison and Coordination Office to the European Union (March 2006), p.224.

<sup>24</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries' (2010), pp.29-30; Worldbank, 'What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza' (July 2006) Social Development Notes, No.25, p.2.

post-conflict setting—it is based on one's participation in the struggle and sacrifices.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, it is wrong to assume that existing ethnic bonds are by nature conducive to achieving capacity-building. In fact, diaspora members often mirror the ethnic and societal divisions of the home society. These features might impact negatively on the programme's implementation and output, as in the case of the Local Governance Program in Iraq (LGP).<sup>26</sup> In this case, the majority of experts wanted to be assigned to areas where they had ethnic ties and their families had a strong standing. Returnees showed resentment if they did not get their location requests granted. Moreover, those experts put in leading positions and who were placed in or near their home communities tended to use their situation to hire and mentor individuals from the same ethnic group. In this way, some experts effectively established mini-'fiefdoms' and surrounded themselves with bodyguards and drivers to demonstrate personal power. Ethnic division was also seen to create tension between the returnees and local hires<sup>27</sup> as well as between the experts. In the preparatory phase of the project, the diaspora professional who had been assigned to screen candidates and approve applications had reportedly given preference to candidates who were part of her network. Moreover, some experts apparently refused to work with others on ethnic grounds. At the same time, the fact that experts work in social

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<sup>25</sup> Hughes, C., 'The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy' (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, p.1514.

<sup>26</sup> Brinkerhoff, D.W. and S. Taddesse. 2008, 'Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq'. In J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential*, pp.83-84.

<sup>27</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries' (2010), p.28.



environments they are familiar with can also be problematic and impede their assignments. One expert did not want to associate with other experts from the programme since she feared disclosing the identity of, and endangering, her family.<sup>28</sup>

Diasporas are typically viewed as ideal interlocutors since they combine the Western and the local in terms of communication, culture and work dynamics. However, during their often extended absence, diaspora members may have lost touch with their home country to a significant extent. If diaspora returnees are not aware of the current needs, realities and dynamics in the country, then they may not be able to operate in the new political and cultural setting and make effective use of their presumed identity bonds.<sup>29</sup> Returnees have often reported great difficulties in dealing with the local administrative culture and felt that they could not utilise their skills or work effectively in their assigned positions.<sup>30</sup> This supports the argument that knowledge and skills obtained abroad are not easily transferable in a different cultural environment, but rather must be 'reinterpreted' in a way that makes sense in the local context.<sup>31</sup> In conclusion, capacity-building interventions follow the logic that experts are selected less on

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<sup>28</sup> Brinkerhoff, D.W. and S. Taddesse. 2008, 'Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq'. In J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential*, p.83.

<sup>29</sup> Brinkerhoff, J. M. 2008. 'Role of Diasporas in Rebuilding Governance in Post-Conflict Societies' pp. 239-264 in Bardouille, Raj, Muna Ndulo and Margaret Grieco (eds) *Africa's Finances: The Contribution of Remittances*, p.249.

<sup>30</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, pp.26-27

<sup>31</sup> Iles, P., A. Ramgutty-Wong and M. Yolles, 'HRM and knowledge migration across cultures: issues, limitations, and Mauritian specificities' (2004) 26:6 *Employee Relations*, p.652.

the basis of their up-to-date local knowledge than their grasp of Western norms of governance, society and social change.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, dynamics of mutual resentment and/or lack of respect between locals and expatriates are common challenges to technical knowledge transfer. While locals may refuse to be 'directed' by expatriates, the latter may show less respect for local counterparts based on a perceived lack of professionalism or inefficiency. Such an ambience can make the exchange of ideas and training very difficult.<sup>33</sup> If the outside experts are members of the diaspora, identity bonds to the locals can indeed help smoothen these divisions.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, diaspora identity can also exacerbate the situation due to the additional tension and alienation discussed above. In contrast to international staff, diaspora returnees are sometimes suspected of hidden agendas and political motives. In the context of a capacity-building programme in Liberia, local colleagues and superiors perceived returnee experts as a 'threat' while international staff were perceived as 'neutral' and therefore permitted to be closely involvement in the project.<sup>35</sup>

This leads us to one final aspect, which also tends to be overlooked and/or underestimated by donor states and agencies when staffing post-conflict governance institutions. Diaspora members' political convictions and strong

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<sup>32</sup> Krause, K. and O. Jutersonke, 'Peace, Security and Development in Post-Conflict Environments' (2005) 36:4 *Security Dialogue*, p.459.

<sup>33</sup> Mkandawire, T., 'Incentives, Governance, and Capacity Development in Africa' (2002) 30:1 *African Issues*, p.18.

<sup>34</sup> Brinkerhoff, D.W. and S. Taddesse. 2008, 'Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq'. In J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential*, p.85.

<sup>35</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 *Security and Practice* (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.20.

emotional involvement in the conflict in their home countries often survive distance and time. This is illustrated by numerous examples of the ways in which organised diasporas mobilise to influence politics in their home country, often by providing support to one side of the conflict,<sup>36</sup> or through lobbying.<sup>37</sup> Hence, returnees may have agendas other than, or beyond, simply helping to rebuild their country (e.g. gaining political power). In fact, repatriating diaspora members can cause the emergence of new political elites.<sup>38</sup> This can become even more likely when diasporas are employed in key political or governmental posts<sup>39</sup> as has happened on a grand scale in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### ***The issue of 'discrimination'***

To the extent that conducive ethnic bonds exist, it is questionable whether they can balance out what is perceived by locals as 'discrimination' between themselves and returnees in the context of aid-dependent reconstruction programmes. This 'discrimination' is apparent at two different levels:

First, international and/or diaspora experts receive considerably higher wages than local colleagues in similar posts. The Afghan governments resource guide provides an example of this distinction: '(...) depending on educational level and work experience, one may be recruited as either an "international" or "local"

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<sup>36</sup> Collier, P. and A. Hoeffler, 'Greed and Grievances in Civil War' (2004) 56:4 *Oxford Economic Papers*, p.591.

<sup>37</sup> Østergaard-Nielsen, E., 'The democratic deficit of diaspora politics: Turkish Cypriots in Britain and the Cyprus issue' (2003) 29:4 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, p.692.

<sup>38</sup> Chesterman, F., Ignatieff, M. and R. Thakur, 'Making States Work – from state failure to state-building', International Peace Academy, United Nations University (2004), p.8; Brinkerhoff, J. M. 2008. 'Role of Diasporas in Rebuilding Governance in Post-Conflict Societies', in Bardouille, Raj, Muna Ndulo and Margaret Grieco (eds) *Africa's Finances: The Contribution of Remittances*, p.248

<sup>39</sup> Worldbank, 'What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza' (July 2006) Social Development Notes, No.25, p.3.

staff which of course would impact salaries.<sup>40</sup> International fees can be many times higher than monthly wages for local civil servants which can be seen as a material discrimination. Return programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, provided subsidies through salaries and housing assistance for returnees. Local residents who had stayed during the war could not access the same benefits, which created substantial resentment.<sup>41</sup> A local NGO interviewee in Sierra Leone, talking about his experience of working with a 'technical' expert who had been hired and sent over by an international partner organisation to develop agricultural programs with local communities, described local perceptions of the situation: 'In spite of the fact that I did most of the practical work and was in a real sense the expert, my counterpart was paid three times my salary and a lot of fringe benefits.'<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, higher wage levels are often necessary to give highly-skilled expatriate professionals incentives to make their expertise available for such deployments, while taking leave from well-paid jobs in their countries of residence. Yet, as experience has shown, these salary distances can create impediments to the returnees' effective work in indigenous administrations. The resulting resentment of expatriates by local staff has been identified as one clear reason for setbacks and political resistance to implementing capacity-building programmes.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the successful

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<sup>40</sup> Embassy of Afghanistan, Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide (Washington: Embassy of Afghanistan, 2006), p.16.

<sup>41</sup> Black, R. 2001. 'Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?' (2001) 21:2 *SAIS Review*, p.187.

<sup>42</sup> Ian Smillie, International Development Research Centre, 'Chapter 7. ,Sierra Leone: Peacebuilding in Purgatory'.

<sup>43</sup> Massing, S. and A. Bari, 'PAR and Institutional reform processes in periods of transition Case study Afghanistan', PowerPoint presentation, presented at the Seminar on Capacity Development, Bratislava (21–23 November 2005); OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, p.27.

transfer of skills and capacity were hampered since positive working relationships could not be cultivated.

Another type of discrimination refers again to the selection of returnees instead of local hires. The issue of experts who bring Western 'solutions' to local 'problems' and the perceived lack of local 'capacity' is very much present in international reconstruction efforts and has created tension in many programmes.<sup>44</sup> On one hand, the 'return of qualified professionals' programmes provide disincentives for employers to invest in skills and train their lower qualified local staffs who had filled the gaps when the educated nationals left during the conflict.<sup>45</sup> More fundamentally, however, the expertise of internationals and diaspora returnees is clearly preferred over the knowledge of locals. An OECD study on the outcome of professional exchange programmes in several countries has identified a mismatch between supply and demand. Whilst the required expertise is available at local level, governments have relied heavily on diasporas to fill posts.<sup>46</sup> A US-educated Liberian expert described the rules for staffing high-level advisory and assistance posts in Liberian ministries: 'While many Liberians would be qualified for various posts (...), they are seldom considered.'<sup>47</sup> This is consistent with the impressions of reconstruction and development actors in other countries, who pointed out that expatriates were

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<sup>44</sup> Worldbank, 'What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza', Social Development Notes, No.25, July 2006, pp.3-4.

<sup>45</sup> Black, R. 2001. 'Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?' (2001) 21:2 *SAIS Review*, p.188.

<sup>46</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, p.14

<sup>47</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 *Security and Practice* (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.13.

often hired even though local—and better qualified—staff were available.<sup>48</sup> The discrimination against local expertise creates suspicion of nepotism and favouritism and also generates resentment within the wider population, as has been reported in Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

One argument frequently put forward in favour of hiring returnees is their command of local languages in addition to English.<sup>50</sup> However, knowledge of local languages is not always necessary for being hired, as illustrated by the expatriate programme for Afghanistan. The *'Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide'* of the Afghan government reads: 'Within the Afghan government itself, English is a highly sought-after language skill. However, *at times*, proficient spoken and even written, Dari & Pashto are also necessary.'<sup>51</sup> In the context of rebuilding governance in East Timor, members of the diaspora elite who were fluent in Portuguese and had built up a recognised professional record (according to Western standards) were appointed to key positions in politics based on these qualifications, without considering their competencies in local language and knowledge. This created great resentment and resistance on the part of local professionals and the population.<sup>52</sup>

While the skills and Western knowledge of diaspora returnees and other expatriates provide significant resources to governance reconstruction, it is important to recognise that giving greater value to Western 'knowledge' over

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<sup>48</sup> Ian Smillie, International Development Research Centre, 'Chapter 7. Sierra Leone: Peacebuilding in Purgatory'.

<sup>49</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, p.14

<sup>50</sup> Brinkerhoff, D.W. and S. Taddesse. 2008, 'Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq'. In J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential*, p.84.

<sup>51</sup> Embassy of Afghanistan, *Return of Qualified Expatriates Resource Guide* (Washington: Embassy of Afghanistan, 2006), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Hughes, C., 'The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy' (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, pp.1507-9.

domestic knowledge excludes locals from reconstructing their own country and creates 'hierarchies' of input.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the assumption that ethnic bonds will balance out the above tensions and will ensure returnees' advice is welcomed and adopted is not borne out by experience. In East Timor, local lawyers who had undergone Indonesian education did not appreciate the 'capacities' and skills of the Portuguese-educated elite, who had returned to staff the justice sector. The diasporas were seen as trying to re-establish colonial hierarchies of power and language. For the Indonesian lawyers, the preference for foreign-educated judges from abroad over local judges showed contempt for local knowledge as well as a denial of local professionalism and capacity.<sup>54</sup>

The next question is to consider what the above analysis reveals about the political nature of capacity-building and the concept of local ownership in aid-dependent post-conflict governance reconstruction.

#### **IV. Politics of capacity-building and the question of 'ownership'**

Capacity-building has emerged as a core element of contemporary peacebuilding.<sup>55</sup> 'Capacity-building' in the context of state-building and/or reconstruction—as opposed to community development—focuses on reforming state institutions to comply with a neoliberal institutional ideal and thereby international/Western standards.<sup>56</sup> In this way, capacity-building is not a mere measure of improving technical performance, but a political project 'with identifiable political and ideological underpinnings that attempts to establish a

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.1500.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.1509.

<sup>55</sup> Huang, R. and J. Harris, 'The Nuts and Bolts of Post-Conflict Capacity-Building: Practicable Lessons from East Timor' (2006) 2:3 *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, p.78.

<sup>56</sup> Turner, M, 'Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding', Paper for WISC 2008, Ljubljana, 23-26 July 2008, p.11.

certain relationship between rulers and ruled.’<sup>57</sup>

When reflecting on their lack of transformative influence on administrative structures and governmental processes in countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, Sudan, Gaza, West Bank and Liberia,<sup>58</sup> diaspora experts described the challenges they faced, including a lack of facilities, slow and unresponsive procedures, low capacity of local teams, bureaucratic centralisation and government resistance to change, corruption, ‘old-fashioned’ attitudes and practices, and local colleagues, who were ‘inertia-prone’ and displayed a ‘lack of interest’ in the projects and hostility towards the diaspora experts.<sup>59</sup> From a technical perspective, most of these obstacles seem proof that capacity-building is exactly what is needed. By looking more closely, however, it appears that many of these dynamics, which underlie the staffing and personnel structures, local employees’ access to resources and salaries, and resistance to and/or lack of interest in reform, represent political decisions at a local level. From this point of view, international ‘capacity’-builders do not seek only to transfer technical knowledge, but also to intervene politically.<sup>60</sup>

The Deputy Chief of Staff in the Office of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Barna Karimi, described the respective Afghan professional programmes and implied that diaspora returnees apply their expertise without building relationships or

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<sup>57</sup> Hameiri, S., ‘Capacity and its Fallacies: International State Building as State Transformation’ (2009) 38:1 *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> OECD, ‘The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries’, 2010, pp.26-27; Worldbank, ‘What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza’, Social Development Notes, No.25, July 2006, pp.2-4.

<sup>59</sup> OECD, ‘The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries’, 2010, pp.26-27.

<sup>60</sup> Hameiri, S., ‘Capacity and its Fallacies: International State Building as State Transformation’ (2009) 38:1 *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, p.55; Hughes, C., ‘The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy’ (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, p.1499.



using negotiation.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, political networks are viewed as decisive for successful capacity-building and governance reconstruction, a finding that is at odds with the assumption that these processes are purely about 'technical' knowledge transfer. Instead, diaspora experts' efforts are often hampered by the fact that their networks do not fit with those of local powerbrokers, which is particularly important in the context of governmental posts. Comparing the performances of returnees with those of local hires in Afghanistan, Haiti and Sudan, it became apparent that local staff appeared much more familiar with local bureaucratic, technical and political circumstances. Returnees confirmed the impression that they did not know how to navigate and function in the local system.<sup>62</sup> Returnees did not have a 'social status' in their respective working environments, which prevented them from generating change and transferring skills. The political nature of the capacity-building programmes is further illustrated by the fact that local actors sometimes saw returnees as a 'threat' because of their potentially *political* motives.<sup>63</sup> In conclusion, capacity-building in governance reconstruction is far more than a 'technical' exercise; rather, it is 'a process of outsider-led social engineering aimed at generating the institutional framework of liberal democracy.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Government of the Kingdom of Belgium, the International Organization for Migration, the European Commission and the World Bank. Migration and Development Conference: Final Report. Brussels: International Organization for Migration Regional Liaison and Coordination Office to the European Union. March 2006, p.224.

<sup>62</sup> OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, pp.27-28.

<sup>63</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 Security and Practice (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.19.

<sup>64</sup> Donais, T., 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes' (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.15.

### ***Whose 'ownership'?***

Donors often claim that local 'ownership' or 'empowerment' is an inherent part of their reconstruction and capacity-building efforts.<sup>65</sup> However, the use of these terms in the context of aid-dependent post-conflict reconstruction has been criticised as disguising the reality that the actual power lies with the donors, not the target state. In addition, a fundamental power imbalance between interveners and locals—or 'outsiders' and 'insiders'—underlies this peace-building practice.<sup>66</sup>

In an evaluation of the Return of Qualified African National (RQAN) programme, the IOM stated that despite the benefits to the government, its 'ownership' of the programme was almost non-existent.<sup>67</sup> In the context of capacity-building programmes for Liberian ministries, the staff explained that projects are developed and implemented by expats, whether internationals or returnees, and with very little transfer of knowledge.<sup>68</sup> Political and policy choices of domestic ministers were very much constrained by the views of donors.<sup>69</sup> While international and/or diaspora experts deliver 'technical 'support to rebuild governance structures, the underlying agendas are set out by donors.<sup>70</sup> Outside control of resources and decision-making over capacity needs is combined with

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<sup>65</sup> Hughes, C., 'The politics of knowledge: ethnicity, capacity and return in post-conflict reconstruction policy' (2011) 37 *Review of International Studies*, pp.1502.

<sup>66</sup> Donais, T., 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes' (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.15.

<sup>67</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'Evaluation of Phase III of the Programme for the Return of Qualified African Nationals', Office of Programme Evaluation (January 2000), p.32.

<sup>68</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 *Security and Practice* (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.15.

<sup>69</sup> Hameiri, S., 'Capacity and its Fallacies: International State Building as State Transformation' (2009) 38:1 *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, p.73.

<sup>70</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 *Security and Practice* (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.15.

the selection of local implementing partners. While domestic ministries are 'officially' taking the lead in policies and political processes, interveners view the local mechanisms and actors as insufficiently skilled. Deploying diaspora returnees is considered very useful since these individuals knew better how to communicate Western know-how.<sup>71</sup> However, experts placed in key advisory positions close to ministers also exercise great political influence and can act as de facto decision-makers. According to some studies, local actors frequently did not 'own' their policies and were often bypassed. Donors frequently communicated directly with the diaspora and/or international experts without consulting local decision-makers, thereby avoiding domestic institutional structures and processes.<sup>72</sup> Despite this reality, the use of individuals from the diaspora allows donors to claim they have 'ticked the box' for local engagement and support.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, local actors often perceive that they will not be able to carry on with the new programmes and processes when funding runs out and international agency staff leave. In the context of African programmes, government representatives claimed that 'they would be absolutely unable to match the benefits offered under the programme'.<sup>74</sup> Referring to the issue of sustainability, international experts placed in Liberian ministries explained that in order for local governance structures to operate self-sufficiently in the future, diaspora returnees were needed.<sup>75</sup> In that sense, domestic capacity and ownership would always depend on the input of a 'foreign' element—in that

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.20.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp.19ff.

<sup>73</sup> Turner, M., 'Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding', Paper for WISC 2008, Ljubljana, 23-26 July 2008, p.14.

<sup>74</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'Evaluation of Phase III of the Programme for the Return of Qualified African Nationals', Office of Programme Evaluation (January 2000), p.32.

<sup>75</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., 'Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?' (2011) 3 Security and Practice (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.20.

case, the Western-educated returnees. Therefore, by imposing capacity top-down and excluding local knowledge,<sup>76</sup> interveners' concepts of local ownership have fundamentally disempowering effects on states and societies, rather than rebuilding autonomy of domestic structures.<sup>77</sup>

### ***The idea of 'Terra Nullius'***

One underlying assumption for the current approach to peace- and capacity-building is the erroneous belief that post-conflict states provide a 'blank sheet' or 'terra nullius', filled with 'traumatised' victims of war and bereft of any institutional capacity and sufficiently educated personnel.<sup>78</sup> This perception, which is often held by interveners, is the basis for many state-building projects and used to legitimise those projects. International programmes often fail to take into account realities on the ground and instead take the view that it is necessary to rebuild a post-conflict country 'from scratch' by employing Western expertise and delegitimising local efforts. This approach, however, fails to recognise existing structures, politics and capacity.<sup>79</sup> OECD and World Bank evaluations of skilled diaspora return programmes saw it as a failure that no ex-ante assessment of the capacity needs and political will of governments in the target countries had been carried out. Neither had programme drafters ensured that enabling structures for the experts' input were in place, which could also have reinforced the commitment and ownership of local staff. The evaluations found

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<sup>76</sup> Richmond, O., 'Whose war? Whose peace?', Committee for Conflict Transformation Support, (2008) Review No.38, pp.2, 9.

<sup>77</sup> Donais, T., 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes' (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.7

<sup>78</sup> Hughes, C. and Vanessa Pupavac, 'The Pathologization of Post-Conflict Societies: Cambodia and Kosovo Compared' (2005) 26:6 *Third World Quarterly*, pp. 873ff.

<sup>79</sup> Chesterman, S., 'Peacekeeping in Transition: Self-Determination, Statebuilding and the UN' (2002) 9:1 *International Peacekeeping*, pp.71ff; Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks, 'Liberal Hubris? Virtual Peace in Cambodia', *Security Dialogue*, 38:1 (2007), pp.32, 45ff.

that such ex-ante analyses of political economy and capacity on the ground—to be conducted in collaboration between interveners and the local government—are vital, but rarely undertaken<sup>80</sup>. Rather, it is assumed that capacity is completely lacking and that it requires international know-how, communicated in a ‘culturally sensitive’ way, to build efficient institutions.

Both returnee and international capacity builders regularly described local working structures as ‘inefficient’, ‘slow’, and ‘not responding’ and said they sensed a ‘striking’ lack of interest in learning new processes on the part of local staff.<sup>81</sup> The attitudes of domestic actors tend to be interpreted as dissatisfaction about their own lack of professional competence, rather than a reaction to externally imposed arrangements or a resistance to changing the status quo.<sup>82</sup> This denial of any local capacity also frees donors from the necessity of interpreting local reactions as checks on their policies.

### ***Repercussions***

Governance reform programmes, which unfold without domestic participation, risk facing resistance from local actors. The latter might turn against capacity-building projects, which do not respond to local needs or challenge existing power structures.<sup>83</sup> Diaspora experts identified political, structural, administrative and social barriers and an unwillingness of the general public as

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<sup>80</sup> Worldbank, ‘What Role for Diaspora Expertise in Post-Conflict Reconstruction? Lessons from Afghanistan, and West Bank and Gaza’, Social Development Notes, No.25, July 2006, p.2; OECD, ‘The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries’, 2010, p.32.

<sup>81</sup> OECD, ‘The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries’, 2010, pp.26-27.

<sup>82</sup> Donais, T., ‘Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes’ (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.10.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

limiting the effectiveness of their work.<sup>84</sup> In many country programmes, experts registered an 'unwillingness to learn' or 'resistance to change'.<sup>85</sup> In discussing the experience with Afghan diaspora staff, Barna Karimi describes clashes between Western thinking and the local, traditional ways of operating and interprets the latter as 'resistance to domination on debates and decisions'.<sup>86</sup>

The political nature of rebuilding governance and the risk of provoking domestic resistance is most evident when diaspora returnees assume key positions in governments, as has been the case in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>87</sup> The liberal notion of 'capacities' does not place weight on local expertise, but rather on Western concepts, which are often communicated and implemented to achieve preferred political outcomes. Furthermore, interveners see 'capacity' as central to ideas of 'legitimacy'. Contemporary international state-building agendas redefine sovereignty as state capacity rather than independence'.<sup>88</sup> This has led to situations where diaspora elites, who support Western political interests but have no real connection to existing constituencies on the ground, are 'parachuted' into high political positions.<sup>89</sup> In Iraq, the US identified a group of exile Iraqi politicians to assume power after the regime change. Ahmed Chalabi was selected as new leader since 'amongst a feckless crew of Iraqi exiles, he was

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<sup>84</sup> J. Wheeldon, 'Displaced Expertise: Diaspora Communities and Justice Reform in the Former Soviet Union (FSU)', Center for Justice Law and Development (2009), p.5; OECD, 'The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries', 2010, pp.26-27.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Government of the Kingdom of Belgium, the International Organization for Migration, the European Commission and the World Bank. Migration and Development Conference: Final Report. Brussels: International Organization for Migration Regional Liaison and Coordination Office to the European Union. March 2006, p.224.

<sup>87</sup> Jazayery, L., 'The Migration-Development Nexus: Afghanistan Case Study' (2002) 40:5 Special Issue 2 *International Migration*, p.244.

<sup>88</sup> Turner, M., 'Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding', Paper for WISC 2008, Ljubljana, 23-26 July 2008, p.14

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp.13-14.

the one who stood out for his intelligence and organisational abilities and his courage<sup>90</sup> as well as his political and security visions which were very much in line with those of American politicians.<sup>91</sup> However, no real thought was given to the question of whether Chalabi would also be able to mobilise large parts of the population. As a consequence, upon his arrival in Iraq he was 'shouted down' by the public and met by antagonism from other opposition groups.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, when interveners acknowledge the importance of local agency in governance building, it is vital to reflect not only on the meaning of 'ownership', but also on the identity and characteristics of the relevant 'locals'.<sup>93</sup> It is important for interveners to realise that 'local *elite* ownership does not equal local ownership'.<sup>94</sup>

In addition, post-conflict interveners tend to overlook how the process of engaging diasporas in governance reconstruction might also enter the political discourse through concerns around 'authenticity'. As already outlined, domestic actors and society have often responded with resentment and hostility towards diaspora members assigned by interveners to rebuild governance structures as they are considered as 'outsiders'.<sup>95</sup> In the course of the Local Governance Program in Iraq, for example, fellow Iraqis labelled diaspora experts as 'traitors'

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<sup>90</sup> 'Standing of Former Key US Ally in Iraq Falls to New Low', Washington Post, 21 May 2004, in Manning, C., 'Policial Elites and Democratic State-building Efforts in Bosnia and Iraq' (2006) 13:5 *Democratization*, p.727.

<sup>91</sup> Manning, C., 'Policial Elites and Democratic State-building Efforts in Bosnia and Iraq' (2006) 13:5 *Democratization*, pp.724–738, p.727

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.724–738, p.728

<sup>93</sup> Donais, T., 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes' (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, p.11.

<sup>94</sup> Kouvo, S., 'State-building and rule of law: lessons from Afghanistan', NDC Forum Paper (2009), p.12

<sup>95</sup> Turner, M., 'Three Discourses on Diasporas and Peacebuilding', Paper for WISC 2008, Ljubljana, 23-26 July 2008, p.13.; Manning, C., 'Policial Elites and Democratic State-building Efforts in Bosnia and Iraq' (2006) 13:5 *Democratization*, pp.724–738, p.728.

and accused them of collaboration with the ‘occupying Western powers.’<sup>96</sup> In Afghanistan, there was significant tension between the elites who had remained in the country and those who returned after long periods of exile to assume government posts. Some of these returnees had citizenships from developed countries. During public consultations on the constitution, a strong ‘nativism’ surfaced and people from across the country, crossing ethnic and partisan lines, called for persons with dual citizenship to be banned from holding public offices. Under the resulting compromise, the Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of the bicameral National Assembly of Afghanistan) must vote on nominations of ministers with dual citizenship.<sup>97</sup> Also in Haiti, only individuals with single (i.e. Haitian) citizenship are entitled to work in government positions.<sup>98</sup>

The statements of domestic politicians echo these popular sentiments. Afghanistan’s president Karzai has tapped into the feelings of less educated Afghans of being marginalised by the return of Western-educated fellow nationals to staff the new development and planning institutions. Since some members of the returning elites are influential and outspoken critics of the president, he himself has denounced them in strongest terms as “corrupt element[s]...strongly connected...with...some members of the international community,” who are unable to become “Afghans meaningfully.”<sup>99</sup> Naturally, these claims of ‘authenticity’, just like the contentions about ‘capacity’, are not about identifying realities on the ground or about the inherent legitimacy to

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<sup>96</sup> Brinkerhoff, D.W. and S. Taddesse. 2008, ‘Recruiting from the Diaspora: The Local Governance Program in Iraq’. In J.M. Brinkerhoff (ed.) *Diasporas and International Development: Exploring the Potential*, p.84.

<sup>97</sup> Rubin, B.R., ‘Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan’ (2004) 15:3 *Journal of Democracy*, p.13.

<sup>98</sup> OECD, ‘The Contribution of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict and Fragile Countries’, 2010, p.31.

<sup>99</sup> “I Wish I Had the Taliban as My Soldiers,” Spiegel Online International, June 2, 2008, in Tellis, A.J., ‘Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward an alternative grand strategy in Afghanistan’, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace (ed.) (2009), p.7.



govern, but instead about privilege and the perceived exclusion of Afghans. The key point is that while outsiders frequently view domestic actors as 'junior partners' in post-conflict governance building, local power structures maintain significant capacity to obstruct, avoid or undermine external policy reforms.<sup>100</sup> Liberal state-builders ignore or underestimate these potential repercussions when planning post-conflict reconstruction projects. By imposing the concepts of universal standards of governance without engaging with local knowledge and perceptions, they create 'virtual' state structures. As a result, new institutions and processes emerge that are alien to, and do not meet the needs of, the society they are supposed to serve. At the same time, their 'virtual' nature makes 'any notion of solidarity or resistance or community, welfare, or culture (...) legitimately overlookable',<sup>101</sup> and liberal peacebuilders believe a kind of 'institutional consensus' to be the foundation of their programmes.

## **V. Conclusion**

The main goal of international peacebuilding activities is 'to bring war-shattered states into conformity with the international system's prevailing forms of governance'.<sup>102</sup> Post-conflict capacity-building in the context of governance reconstruction is thus not a 'technical' process, assisting local societal and political structures to design and implement policies in accordance to their distinctive needs. Rather, it is an ambitious attempt to bring domestic governance structures into line with the international system's prevailing

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<sup>100</sup> Donais, T., 'Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes' (2009) 34:1 *Peace and Change*, pp.10-11.

<sup>101</sup> Richmond, O., 'Whose war? Whose peace?', Committee for Conflict Transformation Support, (2008) Review No.38, p.3.

<sup>102</sup> Paris, R., 'International Peacebuilding and the "Mission Civilisatrice"' (2002) 28:4 *Review of International Studies*, pp. 637-56., p.638.

standards. It is this complex political environment in which the role and actions of diaspora returnees must fit and be evaluated. According to a new discourse among development and peacebuilding donors, diasporas can be 'partners' and 'internal' promoters of change by increasing the presence of skilled personnel and kick-starting governance and development programmes. Still, the attempt to transfer Western knowledge and concepts by relying on ethnic bonds between diaspora returnees and local actors is not without its risks and ignores the importance of links of solidarity and loyalty, which go far beyond ethnic identity. These links are based on lived experiences on the ground as well as a deep understanding of local dynamics and needs, and they create local networks and alliances, which are necessary to obtain popular support. It is the lack of precisely this kind of local knowledge that prevents skilled returnees from affecting lasting changes and capacity for post-conflict governance structures.

Furthermore, utilising diasporas to implement donor-driven reconstruction and development policies does not determine 'local ownership'. Certainly, in a complex post-conflict setting, local ownership in the early phase may necessitate making use of capacity from the outside. The return of highly skilled and motivated exiles to rebuild governance structures may be perceived as more legitimate than hiring foreign personnel to staff the civil service.<sup>103</sup> Yet, if domestic political forces are expected to uncritically adopt and implement external blueprints for post-conflict reconstruction, then local ownership is neither preserved nor developed. Therefore, whether such externally designed policies are implemented with the assistance of returnees or international staff

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<sup>103</sup> Chesterman, S., Ignatieff, M. and R. Thakur (eds), 'Making States Work – from state failure to state-building', International Peace Academy, United Nations University (2004), p.i

will hardly make a difference for the outcome. The important question 'may be not who does the work, but whose perspectives underlie the policies that are adopted and implemented.'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> De Carvalho, B. and Nagelhus Schia, N., Local and National Ownership in Post-Conflict Liberia – Foreign and Domestic Inside Out?, Security and Practice 3 (2011) (NUPI Working Paper 787), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, p.3.

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