

Migration & (Im)mobility Magazine



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# Empowering Global Diasporas in the Digital Era

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## Foreword



**Marina Manke**  
**Head of Labour Mobility and Human Development Division**  
**International Organization for Migration**

Diasporas are agents with the capacity to create transnational connections and initiatives to support their communities both in their countries of origin and in their countries of residence. Technology provides an invaluable tool to galvanize these diasporic efforts to tap into the unlimited potential of the digital space and collaboration. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019, diasporas have become powerful actors in supporting communities both in their countries of origin and residence – for instance, by conducting information and advocacy campaigns using digital platforms to stop the spread of the virus and protect the most vulnerable people within their communities. Digital platforms have also been very useful as a tool to collect funds to distribute goods, personal protective equipment, and sanitary equipment. In addition, technology has allowed diasporas to communicate efficiently, reinforce existing networks, and engage with other stakeholders involved in the response to the pandemic such as international organisations, governments, and experts.

I am happy to present this publication as a collaborative effort between IOM's supported iDiaspora platform and the Routed Magazine which collates commentaries and articles from a wide variety of young scholars and professionals, under an overarching topic “Diaspora and Digitalization”. The publication showcases important initiatives undertaken by diasporas to contribute to their societies and to sustainable development digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The reader will learn how diasporas have been at the forefront in developing **life-saving initiatives** to alleviate the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, working transnationally to transmit crucial medical knowledge, from Nigeria to Syria to Afghanistan and across Africa, and helping medical teams in their fight against the pandemic.

As well, diasporas have deepened innovative uses of technology to **communicate across borders** during the sanitary crisis, when global mobility has been constrained, using social media to learn about repatriation opportunities, joining online conversations about their homelands, or strengthening transnational connections.

Technology has also been vital in the development of new initiatives to **engage diasporas within borders**, with the pandemic providing a catalyst for change for the Albanian diaspora and for the Egyptian diaspora's campaign to expand electronic consular services.

Beyond the pandemic, technology can empower diasporas to drive development, through using blockchain to **fund sustainable development** in Tunisia and bridging the **gap in digital literacy** for asylum seekers in Mexico, and systematically mapping Greek diaspora organizations.

When harnessed to their full potential, diasporas are a powerful source of knowledge, and can be a means to **transfer ideas, skills, and social remittances**. The knowledge gap can be overcome through effective media engagement and communications, breaking down barriers, and counteracting mainstream media narratives.

Diasporas use online social networks to create safe spaces, **constructing collective identity and fighting racism** or forming new and reclaiming old identities through art and photography. **Digital diaspora maps** and platforms can help locate diaspora organisations and facilitate the connections between them and with the homeland. As well, technology allows women to **access vital information** whilst migrating from India to the Gulf, or to construct collective memories and virtual remedies through art.

I wish the reader joy when reading this publication as another testament that diasporas are actors with the will and capacity to create partnerships for development at the international, regional, national, and local levels. Technology and digital platforms can accelerate diasporas' empowerment by enabling them to connect, to transfer knowledge and resources, and to reaffirm their identity as transnational actors.



**Marina Manke**

Head of Labour Mobility and Human Development Division  
International Organization for Migration.





# Diaspora organisations and technology: The role of the Afghan-Dutch diaspora in fighting COVID-19

**Ali Ahmad Safi**

Transnationalism has evolved with the advancement of new technologies, which has facilitated cross-border activities of diasporas in general, but particularly in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Diaspora organisations play a vital role in connecting countries of settlement and origin and in understanding the dynamics of migration. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, virtual internet platforms have created enormous opportunities for diaspora to extensively engage with countries of origin by sharing the latest knowledge on COVID-19 and starting dialogues. Migration scholars, policymakers, researchers and media have mainly focused on the financial contribution of diaspora and diasporic organisations. But like any other social infrastructure, Afghan diaspora organisations also extend social, cultural, political and developmental support to Afghanistan.

The first case of COVID-19 in Afghanistan was officially announced on 24 February 2020 in western Herat province and soon spread throughout the country. According to John Hopkins University, which tracks confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally, as of 13 June 2021, the virus had infected 88,090 Afghans of which 3,449 have lost their lives. As a low-resource country, the pandemic has affected Afghanistan's healthcare system, which has the lowest number of medical workers in the world, with 1.9 physicians per 10,000 people. In a survey of healthcare workers in Afghanistan during the pandemic, 85% of healthcare workers had tested positive in the first five months of the infection. Since the start of the pandemic, armed violence across Afghanistan has also killed thousands of civilian Afghans on top of what the pandemic has caused.

The pandemic has encouraged Medical Committee Afghanistan-Netherlands (MCAN), an Afghan diaspora organisation based in the Netherlands, to transfer their most up-to-date medical knowledge on diagnosing and treating patients with COVID-19 to doctors and healthcare providers in Afghanistan, using the organisation's social media and other virtual platforms, such as Zoom.

*'The pandemic opened our eyes to use various opportunities that internet provides. Before the pandemic, we thought of travelling to Afghanistan to transfer our skills through lectures and training programs, but the spread of corona forced us to think out of the box,' recalled Razma Paykardjoe, the chairwoman of MCAN.*



Founded in 2014 in Utrecht by a group of medical professionals from the Afghan diaspora in the Netherlands, MCAN has pursued three main objectives since its establishment: sharing knowledge, building networks, and collaborating to become stronger. Through its transnational activities, MCAN attempts to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan's healthcare system. Since its founding, MCAN has implemented two transnational medical projects using online platforms including UpToDate and eSurgery. The pandemic has also inspired MCAN to create another project with an objective to connect Afghan doctors in Afghanistan with the Afghan diaspora across Europe.

During the first wave of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, MCAN managed to develop a guideline in partnership with Afghan-Dutch clinicians who were engaged in Dutch hospitals. The guideline, titled 'COVID-19: A practical guideline for healthcare professionals in Afghanistan', was drafted in an attempt to strengthen clinical management of COVID-19 patients and to provide up-to-date instructions on how to diagnose and treat patients, taking Afghanistan's limited resources in the medical sector into consideration. *'We wanted to transfer our newest approaches of practices when dealing with COVID-19 in the Netherlands to Afghan doctors and hospitals in Afghanistan'*, said Paykardjoe.

This Afghan-Dutch diaspora organisation arranged a series of webinars on topics related to COVID-19 diagnoses and treatment. The 'new normality', with the support of various technological platforms, made it easy to reach out to more doctors and healthcare professionals not only in the capital Kabul but also in western Herat and Farah, and healthcare workers in Northern Mazar-e Sharif provinces. Paykardjoe said that while the virus had a negative global impact since its outbreak, the organisation has had many achievements during the rapid spread of the virus. According to Paykardjoe, access to the internet by medical professionals in Afghanistan made it possible to achieve what seemed difficult in the pre-pandemic era. She reiterated that the various technological platforms made it easy to connect to a larger audience from Afghanistan due to the widespread internet uptake amongst healthcare workers, especially doctors.



*Picture: The Medical Committee Afghanistan-Netherlands team. Source: MCAN*

According to Paykardjoe, between 40 and 50 doctors from various private and state hospitals in Afghanistan participated in MCAN's weekly webinars on COVID-19. The diaspora organisation then shared the recorded webinars on their Facebook page, YouTube channel and website, and those interested in the topic watched the webinars at a later stage. Another positive element of such transnational training was the fact that MCAN removed the language barrier and conducted all its webinars in Afghanistan's two main languages, Dari and Pashtu, which increased the utility and reach of the programme to different hospitals across Afghanistan. The challenge, Paykardjoe said, is the ability to know how many participants really benefit from the online lectures because the organisation has not yet been able to evaluate its services.

As one of the participants of MCAN's transnational knowledge transfer, Dr Farid Rafiee, who works in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan hospital, benefited from the webinars greatly. During his conversation with the author, Rafiee said that the healthcare professionals in Afghanistan did not know what measures were needed when admitting COVID-19 patients in hospitals, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic when knowledge on the virus was limited in low-resourced Afghanistan. *'In those early days of COVID-19, the webinars by MCAN helped us with diagnosing (testing kits were limited), treating, using the best knowledge available in European hospitals', said Rafiee. 'We learned the radiological changes that the virus brings to affected patients and the best approach on oxygen-therapy when people with COVID-19 were admitted in our hospital', Rafiee recalled.*

During the pandemic, MCAN and its team have played a significant role in using technology to support their fellow Afghan healthcare workers across Afghanistan. It represents a successful example of the power of diaspora organisations in harnessing technology to transfer medical expertise, playing a vital role in linking countries of settlement and origin.



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# The role of technology in the enhancement of diasporic networks

**Foteini Kalantzi**

In the current era, the scrutinising of the interrelationship between homeland and diaspora needs to include three important aspects. The first is that diasporas can only be seen through a transnational prism, affected by a multitude of goals, actors and agendas, with a capacity to affect economic and political developments in the homeland. The second is that the rapidly expanding technological innovations and the wide use of a variety of platforms, especially in the pandemic era, have upended the patterns of human communication and societal synergies. The third is that the networks between diasporas, as well as the networks between homeland and diaspora, follow different interactive patterns in comparison to previous eras, and this can be associated, to a great extent, with the digitisation of human interaction.

According to academic literature, diasporas have the capacity to influence the homeland negatively through, for example, conflictual claims and radicalisation of certain groups, or positively through partaking in fundraising activities, humanitarian causes, and business investments. Certainly, information technology has reshaped the ways that these interactions take place. The flexible character of the internet contributes to the formation, configuration and dissemination of agendas, goals, ideas, and networks. Through the employment of information technology, diasporas have the capacity to influence policy changes easily and quickly, to show their solidarity through lobbying, and to strengthen social bonds, professional networks and relationships. For example, several initiatives by Greek diasporic entrepreneurs demanded the facilitation of the right of Greek citizens to vote from their place of residence. Campaigns were launched through the internet, in forums, and through social media initiatives. After the 2019 law that was passed by an overwhelming majority of parliamentarians to allow Greek diasporans to vote from abroad, the government set up a registration platform. Through this particular platform, Greek voters abroad can now register on the special electoral lists by submitting all the required documents online.

These new and altered modes of homeland-diaspora communication set a different framework for scrutiny for migration and diaspora researchers. Using the Greek Diaspora Project at South East European Studies at the University of Oxford (SEESOX) as a case study, there is a firm realisation that there is a necessity to develop technological tools responding to the demands of the current era, such as the Greek Diaspora Digital Map. The goal of this tool is to promote the interaction between Greece and its diaspora, and also among the Greek diaspora itself.





*Picture: Picture by NASA on Unsplash*

The map constitutes a user-friendly tool, through which people can access the rich information on different diasporic organisations and filter them according to the country they are located in, their activity profile, and also their connection to a specific geographical origin in Greece. The essential benefits of technology in facilitating and analysing diasporic networks are twofold: firstly, this tool can serve not only as a record of the Greek presence around the world, but can also provide a platform of communication for global Hellenism; secondly, it can contain not only organisations that traditionally exist physically, but also newly created organisations with only a digital presence – a growing trend. There can be multiple benefits from the usage of the digital map that can be placed in the wider framework of much-needed diasporic engagement with the homeland, particularly due to the economic crisis and the changing requests/wishes of the diaspora towards Greece.

Greek diasporans of older generations participate in diaspora communities, for example cultural or professional associations, in those connected with the Greek Orthodox church, or in associations based on regional origins (i.e. people from the Peloponnese, Crete, etc.). These have been the traditional ways of staying in touch with their national and cultural identity and traditions.

Newer generations (either those that are second-, third-, fourth-generation Greeks or those that emigrated in the recent large wave caused by the 2008 economic crisis, also choose to connect through online communities. Technology can be an indispensable medium for interaction between communities of scattered Hellenism. It can bring diasporans with a specific cause together (i.e. funding Greek schools abroad) in an online forum, or help them mobilise for economic, philanthropic, or political purposes in the homeland. Especially during the pandemic, there have been numerous examples that demonstrate diasporic engagement facilitated through information technology. For example, technical and psychological support was offered online, as well as fundraising campaigns which were enabled through platforms (for example, one of the Greek diaspora's campaigns was launched through 'The Hellenic Initiative COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund').

Technology has been progressively nurturing diasporic networks. Especially during this unparalleled pandemic crisis, it has assisted recent emigrants and diasporans to remain in touch with their loved ones, to retain social bonds to their homeland and psychological links to their identity. In fact, the impact of technology since the outbreak of the pandemic has further eradicated boundaries and helped in the creation of new diaspora groups, which offered support, connectivity and valuable information to communities in need.



**Dr Foteini Kalantzi** is the A.G. Leventis Researcher at South East European Studies (SEESOX), St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Her work focuses on migration, diaspora politics, European borders, and Greek political affairs.



# French Asian youth online: constructing collective identity and fighting against racism

Hélène Le Bail and Ya-Han Chuang

As in many other countries recently, renewed racism targeting ‘Asians’ has fed new discourses and collective actions to fight against racist aggressions in France. Compared to the first generation of Asian (mainly Chinese) immigrants, who mobilised exclusively against violence and insecurity, the one-and-a-half or second-generation Asian youth put a much greater emphasis on the issue of racism. What led the descendants of Asian immigrants to voice this particular concern in the public space and to transform the framing of their mobilisation from ‘public safety’ to ‘racism’?

To answer this question, we propose an analysis emphasising the importance of the use of online social networks, or virtual activities. We summarise results from an online ethnography with regards to public discussion groups and artistic productions: Facebook groups organised around the issue of discrimination experienced by Asians, as well as blogs, YouTube channels and websites dedicated (or partly dedicated) to projects linked to the issue. Based on the ethnography and interviews with the opinion leaders we demonstrate how the descendants of Asian immigrants have made use of online social networks during the last decade to construct their collective identity and to advocate for a new cause – that of combating anti-Asian racism in France.

*‘When Facebook started to be popular, many mainland Chinese subscribed to different groups; there were different groups discussing identity. New groups would diffuse messages such as “If you are Wenzhou...” or other keywords that led you to identify with and connect with the group. It was easy to manage a Facebook forum like a discussion forum. For instance, someone would create a group called “What do you think about the tontine?” or “Don’t you think that French people insult us too often?”, etc. It started to develop in 2006. There were many such groups; personally I participated in a group called “Wen [Wenzhou] in France”. I did not know anyone but after a certain time of discussion we finally met and organised a first meeting... At one point I also got in contact with another group called “Nouvelle Génération de Chinois en France” [New Generation of Chinese in France], and we merged our resources [...] Then, there came a catalyst moment: the Beijing Olympic Games. It was a time when China and the Chinese endured suspicion, attacks; we were asked to take a position. Such bad experiences feed a need to belong to a group because we endure the same attacks. [...] Because of such experiences we started to think about doing something together.’ (interview with a founding member of a Chinese second-generation civil society organisation, 2018).*

This excerpt from an interview illustrates the role of online social networks in linking together descendants of migrants who share the same questioning about their identity and the same experience of discrimination. Throughout the 2010s, as Asian immigrants engaged in public mobilisation, their descendants started to create forums and discussion groups – especially on Facebook, and later on WeChat and Twitter – where they could share accounts of their experiences. Such online social networks are places for transforming individual experiences into a collective experience. In particular, much is exchanged about the experience of common microaggressions or covert forms of racist insults.

In 2016, after the murder of a Chinese migrant worker in the suburbs of Paris, the city witnessed several large street demonstrations. The major demonstration on the Nation square in the centre of Paris stood as an opportunity to be more visible and a pivotal point for many younger participants already active on the web or in the very few formal organisations of descendants of Asian migrants, such as the Young Chinese French Organisation (Association des Jeunes Chinois de France, or AJCF). While the discussions and the constructing and sharing of a collective ‘Asian’ experience started earlier, this demonstration was a turning point after which forums and artistic productions developed online with the aim of deconstructing stereotypes and proposing alternative representations of Asians in France. One could mention different projects visible online such as the webseries [Ca reste entre nous](#) (‘That stays between us’) by Grace Ly, the photo project [Yellow is beautiful](#), or the society magazine [Koi](#).



*Picture: Facebook page of the video project Asiatiques de France (‘Asian French’)*

We will focus here on the project *Asiatiques de France* ('Asian French') which is a short video shot a few months after the murder of the Chinese migrant worker in Paris, a murder that was considered racist, since the man was targeted for being Chinese. Inspired by members of the very active Teochew community in Paris (mainly Chinese Cambodians), the video was directed by a Vietnamese French journalist and aimed at gathering well-known French individuals of Asian origin, athletes, artists, researchers, chefs, etc. The participants first depict one of the many stereotypes and aggressions they have heard and experienced as Asians and, in the second part of the video, each appears again, saying 'I'm French' as their professional activity is displayed at the bottom of the image. As described in her own words, the director was surprised by the positive responses she received even from very well-known people:

*'All the VIPs I solicited were very enthusiastic and made themselves available to participate. I was expecting difficulties to convince them, I thought I would have to explain why it was important that they participated. But it seems that the request was coming from them [...]. There was a need to exist as French of Asian origin and I was really surprised [...]. I did not anticipate how much it would make such a hell of a noise! I had to answer a hundred interviews [after the video was published] even from abroad. I answered to Chinese media, American, British media because it was new.... On social networks, it reached 1 million views in 24 hours. I am myself a journalist, but I did not anticipate that. It does mean that there is a cause.'* (interview with H  l  ne Lam Trong, video director, 2018).

Like other initiatives, this online video was launched after 2016, embracing the opportunity created by a moment of collective anger and a united desire for change. Such initiatives create spaces for collective reflection as well as opportunities to deconstruct stereotypes and develop new models of self-representation by Asian French people.



**Hélène Le Bail** is a CNRS researcher at CERI-Sciences Po Paris. Her research focuses on Chinese migrations (to Japan and France) and on migration policies in a comparative approach. Special focus is made on female routes of migration (marriage, reproductive labour, sex work) and on mobilisation, collective actions and political participation of migrants and their descendants. She coordinates the research group *The Chinese population in Paris: identities and identifications under transformation*, funded by the City of Paris.

**Ya-Han Chuang** is a researcher at INED, Paris. She has conducted research on Chinese immigrant collective action for more than 10 years and just published *Une minorité modèle ? Chinois de France et racisme anti-Asiatiques* (La Découverte).

They together directed the special issue for the Journal of Chinese Overseas, 'Chinese Xin Yimin and Their Descendants in France: Claiming Belonging and Challenging the Host Country's Integration Model', 2020.



# INTIMAL: Relational listening that unknowingly prepared us for the COVID-19 pandemic

## INTIMAL collective

\*This article has been written by Dr Ximena Alarcón-Díaz, Dr Ana-María Alarcón-Jiménez, and Dr Liliana Rodriguez, from the INTIMAL collective. The article will include the input of all members of the INTIMAL collective.



*INTIMAL collective in Grån, Norway. Deep Listening® Intensive. Photo by Sharon Stewart*

## Background

INTIMAL is a sound art-research project developed by Ximena Alarcón to listen to our migratory journeys. It uses Deep Listening® and telematic performance as key creative practices to expand our sense of place and presence, bringing together fragments of our migratory experience to be perceived, and played with, as a whole. Nine Colombian migrant women living in Oslo, Barcelona and London were invited to listen to both their experiences of migration to Europe and an oral archive of testimonies of other Colombian women in the diaspora so as to open creative paths for healing experiences of longing and loss. The project was funded by the Marie Skłodowska Curie Individual Fellowship (2017-2019) and hosted at the University of Oslo.

The INTIMAL (Interfaces for Relational Listening: Body, Memory, Migration, Telematics) project explored how the body becomes an interface that keeps memories of place, and it prototyped the INTIMAL system to improvise and transmit the experience of relational listening to our migrations using non-screen based interfaces. Using two main movements such as walking and breathing, and the oral archive, we tested the system in a final Telematic Sonic Performance between the three cities.

In this article we will explain how this project gave birth to the INTIMAL collective and how we feel that this process prepared us for the COVID-19 pandemic. We start by explaining how the space of the collective was produced and constructed through listening practices and networking technologies. Next, we explore drawings and medicinal recipes as key moments of embodiments, and finally we show how these embodiments were essential for us to forge a new virtual territory that supports and resignifies collective memories.

### **The social production and construction of space**

According to anthropologist Setha Low, the social production of space refers to the historical, political, and economic processes through which a space or a place comes into existence. In contrast, the social construction of space includes the changes and *resistencias* that take place as people walk by, play, work, or inhabit social spaces which are ‘made into places, scenes, and actions that convey particular meanings’.

In this logic, the social production of the INTIMAL collective space emerged from Ximena Alarcón's INTIMAL project. Being a Colombian and migrant herself, Ximena chose as a case study the experience of Colombian migrant women in Europe. This included an oral archive of Colombian women in exile collected by the organisation Diaspora Women in London and Barcelona. Thus women from these cities, as well as women based in Oslo, were invited to be part of this research. For the selection of nine participants, the project made emphasis on our interest in listening to our migrations and to the oral archive. The Google Hangouts networking platform as well as a WhatsApp group consolidated as the inner structure of the embodied space of our collective.

The set of practices of Deep Listening® – including sonic meditations, improvisation, dreams and body awareness – invited us to listen to ourselves and others without judgment, and became our focal point of social interaction. This was foundational to 1) construct our social space, 2) communicate collective and individual meaning, and 3) implement a mode of plural and horizontal governance. In our view, this social construction of space opened up an unexpected possibility for branching out from the INTIMAL original project into the INTIMAL collective. Central to the development of this collective were issues such as our shared longing for a war-less Colombia, our common interest in the arts and our multilingualism.



Our biweekly online, and in-person (once in Norway) Deep Listening practice resulted in: collective sound and body movement improvisations; a stone that was tele-transported hand by hand, holding feelings and giving space to be heard; and making drawings that we used and evoked as meaningful symbols. In fact, far from using state flags or national anthems, our imagery consisted of shared dreams recounted by one and drawn by another member of the collective.

We have called these ‘key moments of embodiment’, and, as we explain in the next section, we will highlight drawings, as a special embodied practice which started pre-pandemic, and the medicines that were created to cope with the pandemic.



*Drawing by Silvia Esperanza Villalba Martínez*

## Key moments of embodiment

### Drawings

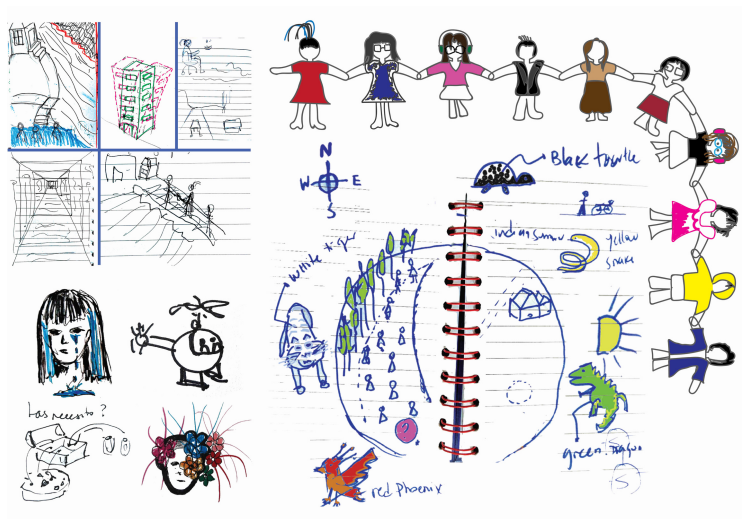
During our sessions, some of us created drawings while listening to each others' stories and dreams with the purpose of recording them (Table 1). These drawings were actions of graphic recording, which helped us learn from one another and reflect and make sense of our stories and their meanings. As a consequence of these actions, common knowledge emerged, thus materialising dreams and stories.

INTIMAL collective members self-theorized their process of drawings as:	Name/aka
‘All of a sudden, each of us has several versions of the same dream, somewhere in the world. Is that the ubiquity of sound? A vibration, an amplification, a healing, a distraction ... in many parts of the globe, in many bodies?’	Violeta Ospina
‘It [drawing] makes it easier for me to focus on details and let my body trace as I listen (and keep focusing)’	Calu
‘[By drawing] I can give a shape to all of their [INTIMAL collective member’s] words, I can put colour or not, their ideas create spaces with my drawing. I could define those spaces clearly and not just as shadows.’	Liliana Rodriguez
‘The drawing is the texture and weft of that sensory threshold between the bodies.’	Anita Ramirez

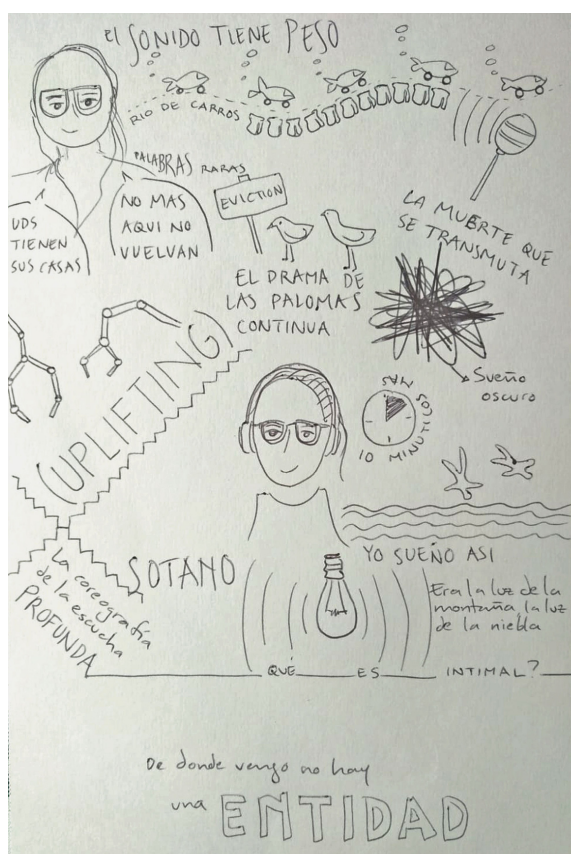
*Table 1. Self-theorizations of the INTIMAL collective process of drawing*

As the drawings were produced simultaneously by participants from different points of the world, several versions of the same dream appeared. These drawings were a Lab By-product, and some of them were published on the first edition of our collectively created Fanzine.

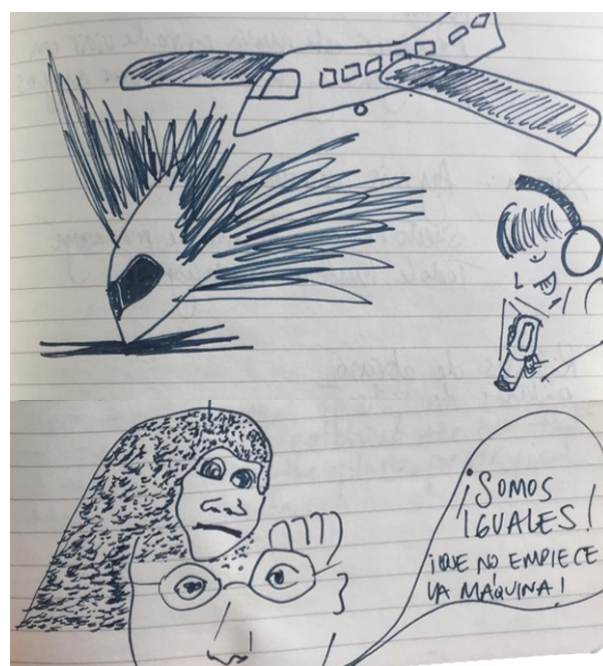
Like octopuses with hands having a mind of their own, we created images of each other which acted as holograms, made by fragments of dreams. We defined those spaces and actions clearly with our drawings, and there were no more shadows.



*Drawing by Liliana Rodríguez. Included in INTIMAL Fanzine*



*Drawing by Calu*



*Drawing by Anita Ramírez*

## Medicinal recipes

Since September 2019, our online meetings have continued under the name of 'INTIMAL Veins and Arteries', including the INTIMAL collective but inviting more Latin American migrant women to partake in our migratory listening dynamics. Intuitively we knew that our rich sonic/movement/visual production was preparing us for something. And so in fact, in March 2020 when the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed social distancing and remote encounters, the INTIMAL embodied system stood out with/in us and for us. Given our previous years of experience both meeting telematically, and producing/constructing our own virtual and meaning-full territory, our collective felt knit up together with a special strength. Thus, reflecting on the already experienced embodiments, and their vibrational healing properties, we called for a session in which we prepared our own medicinal recipes to heal us, protect us, and support us: Meditalín, Ajixsh, and Amansa Corona. These three recipes mixed dream fragments, body awareness, textures, herbal components, landscapes, and a sense of humour that depicted memories from traditional Latin American curandería (Table 2).

Name	Creators	How to use/Description
Meditalín	Dayana Anita Ramírez Nadia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lie on your back.</li> <li>- Surrender all the weight of the body to the force of gravity.</li> <li>- Allow everything to find its place. No part of your body is more important than the other, and neither part exercises power over the other.</li> <li>- Feel the flow of circulation and of the energy.</li> <li>- Perceive the harmony between the individual flow and the flow of the great collective body.</li> <li>- Inhale deeply, suspending the breath, tense the whole body to the maximum, exhale with force through the mouth releasing the tension (3 times).</li> </ul> <p>I think that day I understood that the pangolin had to be freed from its guilt and set free from all human conspiracies. Free the Pangolin!</p>
Ajixsh	Silvia Villalba Violeta Ospina Marivi	<p>It [Ajixsh] is a rosemary-laughter-healing herbs-lemon cream made by Silvia, with three voices and gestures from Violeta's pangolin dream and an addition of Marivi's turbulence (a mixer and a moving device). Secondary effect: Tranquility.</p>
Amansa Corona	Calu Yamile Calderón Myriam Ojeda	<p>Listen to Amansa Corona</p> <p>Ingredients :</p> <p>Pure and crystalline cold water with its waterfall sounds energizing the pangolin</p> <p>Laughter, china, pillina</p> <p>Deep yellow</p> <p>Rattle</p>

Table 2. COVID-19 recipes





*Drawing by Violeta Ospina*

### **A new virtual territory**

In the midst of the lockdown, Ximena offered an INTIMAL Lab with a free agenda, which ran for seven consecutive weeks. This improvisation space served to question, listen, reflect, and create actions to support and vent feelings brought by the new experiences in the collective, and the pandemic's uncertainty. In a reconfiguration of the collective space, from our migratory perspective, we currently reflect on the meaning of a more established INTIMAL collective by Latin American migrant women in Europe.

While Ximena's original project continues evolving the INTIMAL system in the form of an INTIMAL App© to listen to migratory journeys, the social space of the INTIMAL collective has been consolidating as an internet-networked but embodied heterotopic Colombia: A virtual territory without borders that listens and resonates vital rhythms and sounds of our migrations, with technologies that surround the body as a sensitive interface to balance the memory of native places, and the present place that hosts; from a multiplicity of corporeities, transatlantic and feminine identities.



**Dr Ximena Alarcón-Díaz** is a sound artist and Deep Listening® certified tutor, with a PhD in Music Technology and Innovation, and 13 years of postdoctoral creative research experience listening to hers and others' migrations: through voice, language, body movement, underground transport systems, dreams and networking technologies. She creates telematic improvisations using Deep Listening, and interfaces for relational listening. She has received prestigious research awards such as The Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship (2007-2009) and the Marie Skłodowska Curie Individual Fellowship (2017-2019), and Honorary artistic mentions such as IAWM New Genre Prize for 'Sounding Underground', and Pamela Z innovation award at NIME Conference 2019, for 'INTIMAL'. She trusts the healing that improvising and sounding with others between distant locations can bring to feelings of geographical and cultural loss, as we interconnect sensing place and feeling presence.

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**Dr Ana-María Alarcón-Jiménez** completed a PhD in Ethnomusicology at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Her dissertation dealt with the social construction and social production of the International Festival of the Celtic World of Ortigueira. She co-founded the Group of Ethnomusicology at the Catalan Institute of Anthropology (ICA). She is the treasurer and webmaster of the Society for Ethnomusicology Section on the Status of Women. On the creative side, she is interested in sound art, electroacoustic music, new and experimental music. She plays the bassoon and enjoys finding new techniques to play it and diversify its sound palette.

[anamaria.aj@protonmail.com](mailto:anamaria.aj@protonmail.com)



**Dr Liliana Rodriguez** is a BMJ (British Medical Journal) Innovation award-winner Service Designer with a BA in Product Design, an MA in Interaction Design, and a PhD in digital services. She is currently working as a contractor for DHSC (Department of Health and Social Care) Test & Trace services for Equity & Inclusion. Liliana has worked on commercial, non-profit, and higher education environments, on design projects in health funded by Public Health of England (PHE), GOV.UK Digital Services (GDS), and innovation for SMEs. She is also an Associate Lecturer at the Open University for the modules of UX & Interaction Design and Design Thinking.

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## INTIMAL collective

We are a co-creation collective of Latin American migrant women in Europe listening to our migrations that emerged from the research-art project *INTIMAL: Interfaces for Relational Listening. Body, Memory, Migration, Telematics*. We develop creative actions for individual agency and collective transformation in our host lands and native places. We regularly meet in the virtual space to listen to and perform dreams and migratory journeys, expanding notions of femininity, territory and care.

[intimalcommunity@gmail.com](mailto:intimalcommunity@gmail.com)



# **The experience of the Manzoul organisation in using digital technology to support the Syrian diaspora**

**Jihad Alabdullah**

After more than a year of coronavirus, we discovered that there are a huge amount of changes that we can make in our lives. These most likely are simply awaiting an event to accelerate their occurrence.

The changes that took place affected all aspects of life: at work, at school, and at home. In many countries, children remained at home, homeschooled; and the work of many employees switched to 'home office', with many facing dismissals or suspensions from their jobs.

With the acceleration of events, many new digital methods developed to suit the new situation. They are likely to outlast COVID-19 social-distancing policies.

Charitable and civil organisations working in public affairs have also met this transformation, laboriously seeking new ways of working and adapting to the new situation.

## **The initiatives and activities of the Manzoul organisation**

Manzoul was established shortly before the coronavirus outbreak and struggled to carry out activities throughout the spread of the pandemic and associated closures. First, Manzoul organised interactive lectures through digital platforms (such as Zoom) related to concerns about coronavirus, dealing with COVID-19, and nutrition and a healthy diet.

With time, especially with the signs of a second wave, Manzoul developed the idea and launched small cultural and service projects in line with its policies, interests, and goals.

These projects were aimed at:

- Providing services to migrants and refugees in their Arabic mother tongue, especially for Syrians in different parts of the world. This harnessed the power of technology as a solution to social distance imposed in their countries, such as remote consultations and teaching Arabic to children from a distance.
- Reducing the burden and consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and its social and psychological effects, with cultural, artistic, and literary activities.



We review here two examples of the projects that the association undertakes.

## **1) Medical and psychological counselling project**

With the onset of the coronavirus crisis, we noticed an increase in medical questions submitted to us and the doctors around us relating to COVID-19 and other diseases, as patients were often unable to visit or obtain direct services from doctors and hospitals. This resulted from strict COVID-related policies, an overburdening of the health sector, and patients' fear of in-person visits.

### **Project organisation:**

An advertisement for the project in Arabic, including the objectives, the method for obtaining advice and the target group, was posted on the Manzoul website, social media sites, WhatsApp and Telegram groups.

A WhatsApp number for consultations was allocated, containing an announcement about the quality of service, advice, method of communication, and the nature of the service as consultation rather than therapy.

After receiving the written or audio consultations, the counsellor sends a small brief of the case, usually anonymously. The person receives an answer within 48 hours to determine the date of the consultation, conducted within the week on the basis of need.

There is one doctor who supervises the reception of WhatsApp consultations and then distributes them to the group's doctors. The team consists of three doctors from different specialities: a psychiatrist, a family doctor, and a gynaecologist. We have also cooperated with other doctors from other specialities when issues cannot be addressed by the team, especially with regard to children's diseases or subspecialties.

The consultation proceeds by listening to the consultant and then providing advice, possible solutions, and/or an explanation about a particular disease or course of treatment. In many cases, those seeking advice are directed to obtain healthcare services tailored to their country.

During the project period, in the last months of 2020, Manzoul provided nearly 50 consultations to people (especially Syrians) in different countries, from Germany to Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other countries of asylum. In the beginning, the main share of the consultations was psychological. With the start of 2021, the number of consultations increased, and during the first third of the year we provided about 50 consultations.

Difficulties encountered in consulting:

- We experienced some minor difficulties such as network disruptions, during which voice or written messages were used.
- The limited time and the frequency of requests were often difficult to reconcile with our objective of conducting complete – not quick or superficial – consultations. To address this, appointments are usually scheduled during the weekend, with up to 30 minutes of consultation time.
- We sometimes faced callers' urgency to obtain treatments such as psychotherapy, which could not be performed for legal and professional reasons, or to write prescriptions for medication or write reports related to the case.
- We also had to refuse requests to give out doctors' personal numbers.

We aim to expand this service with the use of means such as video calls, hopefully growing the team and communication networks involved.

## **2) Manzoul's Cultural Forum initiative**

The Cultural Forum is a periodic cultural activity that takes place on digital platforms, organised by Manzoul in cooperation with activists and others interested in cultural and public affairs.

The initiative, in its first phase, was devoted to a region of Syria, Al-Qaryatayn, which is a town in the centre of the country and at the outskirts of the Syrian steppe, the Badia, from which a number of the Manzoul members come from, who now reside in Germany and beyond. The activities of the Forum involved talking about the people of the city of Al-Qaryatayn, their folklore, heritage, and the role models therein, in the past and now.

The initiative aims to:

**Restore the communication between persons and families from the same country,** who are distributed around the world, through available technology.

**Introduce a generation raised abroad** over the past ten years to the heritage and environment of their country and the personalities active in it. This aims to show the youth inspiring experiences of success to help build their future.

In the executive steps of the initiative, an administration was formed consisting of five people, including three members of the association and two activists interested in cultural and literary affairs.

From March 2021 until now, the Forum has hosted three guests from Al-Qaryatayn, who are living in different regions of the world. In the first episode, we had a guest who had lived with his family in Jordan for years, who is a teacher of Philosophy and worked as a teacher and director of the cultural centre in Al-Qaryatayn before migrating. He is one of the people who continued working, writing books, teaching his students, and guiding them from a distance.

In the second episode, we hosted one of the figures interested in heritage. He is a teacher who has worked for many years in the teaching profession and continues to do so in his country of displacement, Lebanon, despite his advanced age (over seventy) and the difficult conditions there. The guest wrote a book on *Al-Qaryatayn and its Folklore*. He spoke for two hours about this book and its contents in the presence of about 60 people from different parts of the world, most of them from Al-Qaryatayn.

The third episode featured a likeable figure and role model, a teacher of Physical Education currently living in the Gulf. He has an important history, having laid the foundations for the most important popular game of football in Al-Qaryatayn. Otherwise, he practices the hobby of falconry for which he travels around the world. The meeting with him introduced many young people to the history of their country and the emergence of football while recovering beautiful and influential historical moments.

The Forum is preparing five additional meetings with figures from Al-Qaryatayn who are interested in the arts, heritage, education and humanitarian work, in addition to hosting young people who have done distinguished work in the countries of the diaspora.

The Cultural Forum is a new experience and constitutes a turning point for the people of Al-Qaryatayn, who have been introduced to role models from the region and learned about and debated their heritage. There was positive feedback from the people of Al-Qaryatayn and from Syrian people who asked to extend this experience to other regions, especially rural areas.

These are two of several projects undertaken by Manzoul, taking advantage of modern technology at the time of the coronavirus pandemic, as an important, useful and scalable experience.

We expect that these activities will continue even after the end of the pandemic, due to the positive impact they have left and the distinct opportunity they bring to communicate and alleviate the burdens of alienation amongst individuals of the diaspora.



**Jihad Alabdullah** is a Consultant Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist with the Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy Centre for Transcultural Psychiatry (ZtP) and the Vivantes Humboldt-Hospital. He is also a member of the German Society for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy (DGPPN) and the Sub-Section of Intercultural Psychiatry and Migration. He can be reached at [manzoul.ev@gmail.com](mailto:manzoul.ev@gmail.com).



**Manzoul** is a non-governmental charitable organisation, established in Berlin in 2019 by Syrians and Germans of Syrian origin. The organisation works to support Syrians in achieving effective integration in Germany and to provide relief and support for refugees and displaced persons in Syria and neighbouring countries.

- Website: <https://manzoul.org/de/>
- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbd79M-XmAbCqg8R-1ca5Cw>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ManzoulVerein>

# Creating global currencies for sustainable development

Karim Chabrak



*Picture: Coinsence logo. Courtesy of the author*

In line with a global brain-drain trend and in search of better opportunities, an increasing number of Tunisian young talents leave their home country every year to acquire new knowledge, start their professional journey and grow their impact in a new society. Even though most of them acquire a good living standard and land attractive positions, the longing for the homeland never ceases and the dream to see their land and loved ones in better conditions keeps growing.

While in the past remittances were the major contributions, today, with the rise of decentralised collaboration tools and digital platforms, there is huge untapped value-creation potential as well as unlimited opportunities for knowledge and resource-sharing that could bring diaspora and locals together, beyond all borders. Besides business opportunities that can be boosted and scaled through diverse contributions and cooperation, innovation projects and initiatives related to the Sustainable Development Goals in particular are highly attractive for impact-oriented diaspora members.

Despite the emotional connections and the great synergies that can arise from collaboration between diaspora and local ecosystems, structural challenges, bureaucratic hurdles, and a lack of visibility still limit opportunities when it comes to cross-border social and economic interactions.

The current traditional solutions for funding, governance and operations of multinational and multi-stakeholder projects generally do not offer the needed flexibility and effectiveness for most diaspora and international organisations, especially when it comes to the ability to support informal activities in a dynamic way and reward individual micro-contributions from different networks across the globe. For the diaspora to be intensively engaged in civil society, in education and in the economy, there needs to be new tools that involve them directly in decision-making and in governance, and that turn collective reflections and common visions into effective joint actions with tangible results.



In line with this, community currencies can offer the needed medium to stimulate activities and value exchange between diasporas and locals. With the use of blockchain technology in the creation of these types of currencies, diaspora expertise and resources can be mobilised, managed, and engaged in a more decentralised and flexible way. Contributions can be recognised and valorised globally.

Thanks to the support of the UNICEF Innovation Fund and the German Development Agency (GIZ), Coinseance was able to move from their first prototype toward offering a scalable digital platform, as well as a framework for new initiatives and networks across the globe, and is starting its first pilots with international communities and partners.

After the creation of an open-source decentralised collaboration platform that enables communities to create their currencies, perform transactions and share resources and expertise, Coinseance.org introduced the first community currency targeted to mobilise the Tunisian diaspora to collaborate and contribute to projects in cooperation with local initiatives and partners in their home country.

Tunisia Impact COIN is issued and allocated in a participative and transparent way to projects and initiatives that contribute to a cultural, environmental, and socio-economic impact in Tunisia. These COINS are used as a rewarding instrument for all kinds of contributions and can be further spent for peer-to-peer value exchange within the network.

Considering the fact that many contributions from the diaspora are financial in form, Coinseance further enhanced their platform with a tokenised solution for financial transactions. This solution has been selected by the Tunisian Central Bank within their regulatory sandbox framework. Donors and impact investors can buy, in real time, stable coins that can be transferred between members and can be cashed out by any beneficiary in Tunisia. Besides the new ability to perform fast, non-banked, micro-transactions at a low cost, the usage of blockchain is introducing a new layer of security and trust, where donors and investors can trace financial transactions and collectively manage funds and spending in a more flexible, effective, and transparent way.

Through a combination of the necessary digital tools for decentralised organisation as well as the community currencies and crypto assets that create liquidity and stimulate collective value creation and exchange, innovators, entrepreneurs, and social activists can now overcome financial constraints and bureaucratic hurdles. This opens a new sphere of emerging-use cases and opportunities. The members within the network can connect with projects and individuals to co-create solutions and share their created value. Any individual, organisation or company willing to support this is now getting more opportunities as a result. They can also offer services, resources, or discounts to support the impact projects and the involved communities in a direct or indirect way.

Through recognition and rewarding functionality, Tunisia Impact COINs create the perfect bridge and fill the gap between the non-profit philanthropic world and the economic investment world. The collected COINs, which show the quantified amount of contribution from each member, can further have an economic utility, can increase in value and can be spent on benefits offered within the networks.

While current activities are targeting to globally mobilise the non-for-profits, entrepreneurs, and diaspora for innovation and impact-driven projects in Tunisia, Coinsence offers an open and accessible platform, and supports initiatives and networks that consider introducing their own currencies to mobilise people and organisations for common purposes and for social impact.

*‘Coinsence demonstrates a new way where organizations, business partners, entrepreneurs, changemakers and innovators worldwide can join forces to address local problems and collectively work towards resolving global challenges’, says Oula Tarssim, GIZ Project Manager for the project ‘ProGreS Migration, mobilization of the diaspora’.*

Even though blockchain technology is still new for most people, organisations and regulators, the developers of Coinsence believe in a vision where democracy and governance go beyond borders, where sovereignty and transformation start with the ability of communities to create their own currencies, and where financial instruments are built to foster inclusive and sustainable growth. Now, it is up to the youth to liberate their potential from imposed hierarchy and old structures, and to step into the next evolutionary paths which enable connections anytime, everywhere.



**Dr Karim Chabrak** is the founder of coinsence.org, a decentralised collaboration, value creation and exchange platform that enables organisations and communities to create their own impact currencies to fund SDG-related projects and mobilize resources. Karim was born in Tunisia. After high school, he moved to Germany to study engineering where he completed his PhD in telecommunication in 2006. Besides his interests in social innovation, tokenised economy and fair finance, Karim’s main area of expertise is how to use technologies to re-invent organisations and create new decentralised and scalable economic and governance models which are better capable to tackle today’s global social and environmental challenges.

You can find him at:

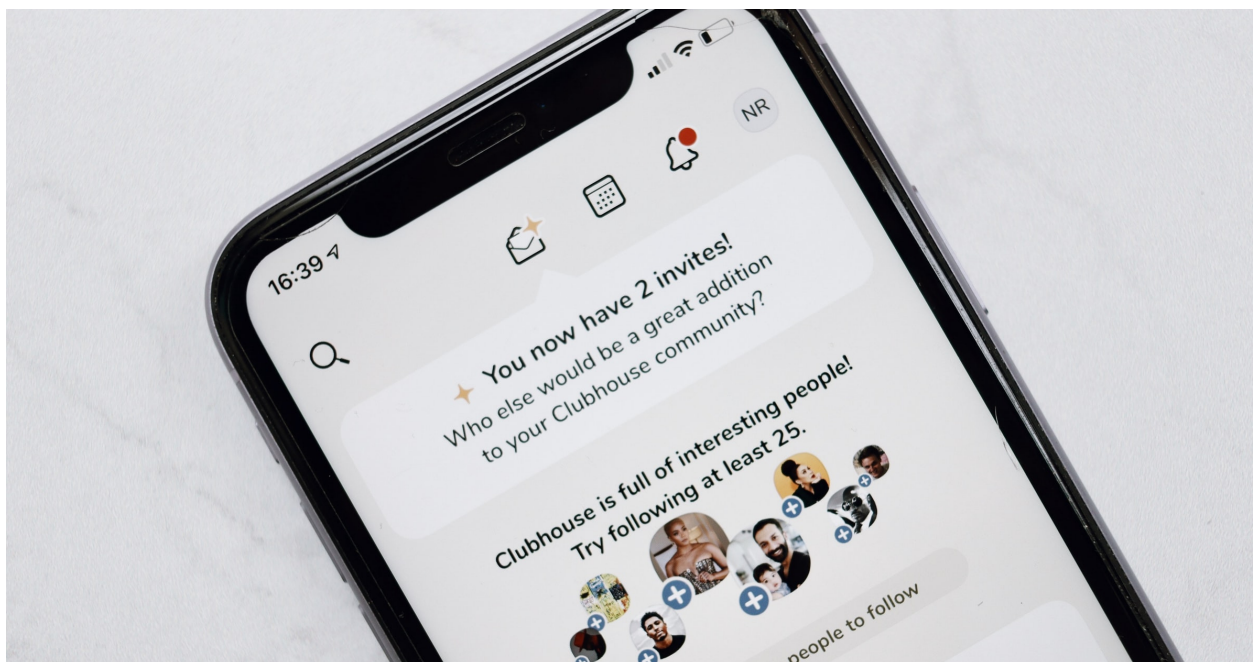
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<https://coinsence.org>

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# How Clubhouse connects the Ghanaian diaspora

Kirstie Kwarteng



*Picture by Nathana Rebouças on [Unsplash](#)*

The Ghanaian diaspora is large, with an estimated 3 million Ghanaians spread across Nigeria, the United States, the United Kingdom and many other nations around the world. Despite the global dispersion, individual Ghanaian diaspora communities, especially those in large cities, are close and tight-knit. They are held together by organisations and institutions created by Ghanaian immigrants.

In the early days of the formation of the Ghanaian diaspora, engagement within diaspora communities focused on creating hometown associations, ethnic group associations, religious institutions, and replicating Ghanaian cultural practices. Diaspora-homeland engagement was done through in-person visits, remittance-sending, and communicating through writing letters or phone calls. As digital media evolved, so did Ghanaian diaspora engagement. Ghanaians in the diaspora are now using fintech apps like WorldRemit to send remittances, while popular social media apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram now play an integral role in maintaining connections between people in Ghana and in the diaspora. The pandemic created a greater demand for digital connection in the diaspora, since opportunities to travel to Ghana and engage in-person in diaspora communities were limited. A new social media app, Clubhouse, has become popular with the younger segment of the Ghanaian diaspora and appears to be helping them meet their increased need to engage with each other digitally.



Launched in March 2020, Clubhouse is an audio-only app with over 10 million subscribers that allows users to listen to conversations on different topics in real time. Clubhouse allows users to join or follow clubs that are aligned with their interests, as well as to both listen to and participate in discussions between club moderators and guests on different topics, such as music, politics and current events. The app has become popular with the Ghanaian diaspora because it enables them to communicate in real time and to connect in ways that other social media apps do not allow. One Ghanaian diaspora Clubhouse user I spoke with said it felt ‘miraculous’ to meet and have conversations with members of the Ghanaian diaspora in different time zones about their shared diasporic experiences. Other Ghanaian diaspora users I spoke with said the app’s real-time connection feature made it easy to network and make connections with other users across the diaspora. By shrinking the distance between people in the global Ghanaian diaspora, Clubhouse has been able to help create and maintain connections in a time where in-person interactions were limited.

Searching ‘Ghana’ on Clubhouse will bring up over 50 clubs, which reflect a broad range of engagement needs and demographics within the diasporic community. For example, many clubs frequented by young diasporans tend to mirror real-world diaspora youth organisations by operating using a pan-Ghanaian identity, and include rooms focusing on learning Ghanaian languages, heritage, and culture, understanding what is needed to relocate to Ghana, networking with like-minded young Ghanaians, and learning how they can use their time and skills to support Ghana’s development. There are also clubs that serve as interest groups by connecting Ghanaians who share an interest in particular topics, such as the Ghanaian Music Lounge, clubs for Ghanaians who belong to the same age group or gender, such as Ghana Girls We Dey, and clubs for Ghanaians from the same ethnic community, such as Ewe Vibes or Ga Language University.

The largest and most notable Ghanaian club, Ghanaian Lounge, is a pan-Ghanaian club that has 16,900 members and 10,500 followers. As the most prominent Ghanaian club, the Ghanaian Lounge has become a microcosm of Ghanaian Clubhouse usage and shows how Ghanaians are using Clubhouse to meet their diasporic engagement needs digitally. The Ghanaian Lounge hosts several rooms on a weekly basis including speaking rooms for seven Ghanaian languages to help young Ghanaians learn their mother languages, rooms to discuss Ghanaian current events, rooms for networking, and matchmaking rooms for those looking for that special someone. In addition to their weekly events, the Ghanaian Lounge also hosts special event rooms which are held on a one-off basis. These rooms have hosted a wide variety of guests, from Ghanaian dancehall artist Shatta Wale to Ghana’s Minister for Information.

Some of the rooms in the Ghanaian Lounge have had a specific emphasis on diaspora-homeland relations, including conversations on diaspora privilege and whether citizenship is a birthright for Ghanaians in the diaspora.

In 2019, the Ghanaian government launched the Year of Return, a year-long tourism initiative targeted at the Ghanaian diaspora and wider African diaspora. The Year of Return received a significant amount of media attention which increased interest in Ghana and its relationship to the Ghanaian and African diasporas. Clubhouse has become a place to continue political conversations that the Year of Return created, especially around citizenship, belonging, and return.

The Ghanaian diaspora's use of Clubhouse shows how digital methods can be used to strengthen and maintain diaspora-homeland relations. The diversity of discussions that take place in the Ghanaian Clubhouse space illustrates the variety of interests the Ghanaian diaspora has and how they are using Clubhouse as a digital space to engage these interests. In addition, Ghanaian Clubhouse use reveals the importance of three key elements in digital diasporic engagement. Firstly, it clarifies the importance of paying attention to which social media platforms are popular in the diaspora community of interest, in order to best engage with them. Secondly, it shows the importance of social media in engaging younger generations of diasporans. Engaging younger diasporans can help them feel connected to their country of ancestry, which will give them more incentive to create their own unique connections to their homeland that are distinct from their parents' connection. Lastly, Clubhouse shows the importance of understanding diaspora needs in order to use social media as an effective tool for diaspora engagement. This will make it easier for diasporas to engage, as they know their concerns will be taken seriously.

Time will tell if Clubhouse remains an integral part of Ghanaian digital diaspora engagement after the pandemic, but in the meantime, the Ghanaian Clubhouse space will continue to serve as an example of diasporic engagement in the digital age.



**Kirstie Kwarteng** is a storyteller and curator of stories. She is currently a doctoral candidate at SOAS, University of London in the Department of Development Studies and is a recipient of the Royal Geographical Society Dudley Stamp Memorial Award. She is also the founder of The Nana Project, an online platform dedicated to preserving Ghana's history through firsthand accounts of Ghana's history.

# Bridging the gap in digital literacy for asylum seekers in Mexico

Melanie Stanek



*Picture: One Digital World Lab in Tijuana. Courtesy of the author*

Long before COVID-19 turned the world virtual, there had been a digital divide in education, especially in non-formal and emergency settings. My friend and colleague Casey Myers understood this. In 2017 Casey spent a year volunteering with Movement on the Ground, a Dutch NGO providing education and social services to some of the thousands of refugees residing in the Kara Tepe and Moria refugee camps in Greece, at the heart of the European refugee crisis. Refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Cameroon, and other places had been forced to uproot their lives. A simple survey revealed a common thread: every single person whom Casey met in the camps wanted to learn English so that they could get a job. But most of them had never even turned on a computer, let alone learned how to type, search the internet, or use digital language-learning platforms. Yet they were expected to file essential paperwork, seek jobs, and integrate into a digital society, all without ever having been taught how.



Sometimes the greatest solutions are the simplest. In Greece, Casey's solution was to build a computer lab inside the camp and then train participants on everything from building computers, to typing, to using the internet, to creating resumes and email accounts, and connecting on Zoom. In 2019, Casey returned to Greece to launch a pilot digital literacy course in Samos, Greece. Over 400 women graduated from that course and gained the skills to be able to connect in the digital sphere. While some are still in Greece, awaiting resettlement, they are able to use some of their time to continue taking courses online and communicate with friends and family around the world.

On average, it takes a refugee or asylee seven years to integrate into their new environment after resettlement. Yet this statistic doesn't take into account the time and effort it takes for an asylum seeker to become a refugee or an asylee – a legal status doled out by the UNHCR or government agencies. In the United States and Mexico, thousands of asylum seekers are currently fleeing deteriorating economic and political situations in Central and South America – particularly El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Venezuela. Most of them leave at a moment's notice, after being threatened or experiencing horrible violence. They make their way on foot or via bus to the US-Mexico border, where they intend to ask for asylum and be received into the United States. Many already have family or close friends living there.

Unfortunately, the reality is proving quite different. Last year, the United States invoked a decades-old public health measure known as Title 42 that gave the government emergency power to expel all new asylum seekers, despite condemnation from public health officials. After spending weeks – or months – at risk of kidnapping, dehydration, and other dangers on the way to the border, asylum seekers are being told to 'go away'. In response, thousands have erected makeshift tent camps in places from parking lots to parks along the US-Mexico border, determined to cross into the United States as soon as things 'open up'. But misinformation, exposure to inclement weather, and extortion or kidnapping by local gangs make this a very difficult and dangerous living situation.

Local communities are forming shelters to house migrants temporarily, but these have quickly filled to capacity. Many people have been waiting in Mexico for more than six months – some up to a year and a half. Yet while they wait for the border to open, they are unable to legally work or provide for their families. There are not a lot of options.

Casey founded One Digital World in response to this crisis happening on our doorstep. We are a group of educators and advocates passionate about refugee rights, and the only cross-border non-profit working in both California and Mexico providing digital education for asylum seekers.

So far, we have built three computer labs inside community shelters in northern Mexico and just completed our first five-week digital literacy course with residents. With computer and internet access, not only can asylum seekers learn digital literacy and English, but they can also gain access to essential services like public health, housing, and pro-bono legal counsel. Our position on the ground has enabled us to connect asylum seekers with service providers in the United States with the goal of reducing the time it takes to integrate once an asylum seeker becomes an ‘asylee’ (similar to the status of a ‘refugee’).

We envision a world where asylum seekers have all the information and skills necessary to win their cases and integrate successfully into a new country. Digital access is an essential piece of integration – one that is too often overlooked.

By bringing computers and the internet to asylum seekers, we are not only facilitating future integration; we are providing access to a wider support network of asylees and community members, which can change the course of their lives.



**Melanie Stanek** is a graduate student at the Kroc School of Peace Studies in San Diego, California and a contributor to One Digital World. She believes that having access to quality education is a human right and that no human being is illegal. You can follow her on Twitter at @mellymary and learn more about One Digital World at [onedigitalworld.net](http://onedigitalworld.net).

# Innovative approaches in diaspora engagement: i-platform/i-dijaspora connecting the Bosnian and Herzegovinian diaspora in Switzerland

Aida Ibričević



*In 2018, i-platform organised the (H)AJMO! event series in Bern and Zurich, Switzerland. Source: i-dijaspora/i-platform*

## 'i' is a connector

*'The Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian conjunction "i" (meaning "and" in English) in our name signifies connectivity, inclusiveness, togetherness. The "i/and" in our name refers to us in the diaspora "and" to us in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), to us here "and" to us there. With this connecting approach we bridge issues pertaining to the economy "and" culture, gender equality "and" scientific cooperation, environmental conservation "and" political representation. We simply oppose divisions, and instead, we want to create networks. We want to connect people,'* answers Nikola Burić, CEO of [i-platform/i-dijaspora](http://i-platform/i-dijaspora), when asked about the 'i/and' in their name. Nikola further explains: *'Above all, we are a network, guided by the principles of network weaving, where developing strong human bonds and building trust are prioritized.'*

## Bosnian and Herzegovinian diaspora in Switzerland

According to the 2014 [research study](#) carried out by the University of Neuchâtel's [Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies](#) (SFM), more than 60,000 emigrants originating from BiH live and work in Switzerland. People arrived in Switzerland from BiH in three separate waves of immigration, where the first and second waves (1960s and 1980s) were mainly labour migrants, while the third and most numerous refugee wave was caused by the 1992-95 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Nikola Burić discusses the role of the i-diaspora/i-platform in the life of the BiH diaspora in Switzerland: *‘The i-diaspora organization was founded in 2014 and is of a semi-open type, as there are many procedures for becoming a member. After two years of successful operation and countless bilateral and multilateral meetings with various institutions, it became apparent to us that we needed a larger platform, a network with broader membership. In 2016, we launched a broad-membership project for individuals, institutions, NGOs, and companies.’* Furthermore, the i-dijaspora/i-platform network teamed up with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to create a self-sustaining platform with the main goal of strengthening economic, educational, cultural and social cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the BiH diaspora in Switzerland.

### **The COVID-19 crisis as opportunity: Connecting the BiH diaspora online**

Increased transnational connectivity resulting from the COVID-19 crisis was seen as a real opportunity by the members of i-dijaspora/i-platform. From the first lockdowns onward, they started designing innovative approaches to connecting the BiH diaspora in Switzerland to the homeland, as well as the BiH diaspora worldwide. As Nikola Burić elaborates: *‘Before the COVID-19 crisis, we held many in-person business forums, cultural events, summer schools, student exchanges – we had events where people could meet and share experiences. We could then further support initiatives and ideas created within those interactions. Paradoxically, while we were all stuck at home both in Switzerland and in BiH, an excellent opportunity emerged: the opportunity to connect online with our diaspora scattered all over the world.’* Using the wonders of ICT, diaspora dialogues and meetups for BiH local communities and a series of online themed events were created.



*Courtesy of i-dijaspora/i-platform*

## Diaspora dialogues: Leaving, arriving and belonging

Diaspora dialogues build community using a set ‘dialogue format’ developed by Katalin Hausel, a Hungarian-Swiss artist, designer and educator, in cooperation with Collaboratio Helvetica. Diaspora dialogues discuss experiences of leaving the homeland, arriving in Switzerland and creating belonging in both countries. The dialogue format relies on introspective questions, such as: ‘Who am I?’, ‘What do I long for?’, ‘Where do I belong?’, ‘How did I become what I am today?’, ‘Where do I feel at home?’, ‘What is home?’, ‘Belonging, what kind of feeling is it?’, ‘Where do I feel it in my body?’ Dialogue participants give individual answers to these questions in pairs, and then exchange their observations with the larger group. The basic dialogue principles are to speak with intention and to listen with attention; to replace advice-giving with intellectual curiosity; and to create a safe and stimulating environment where all participants feel secure to reveal their vulnerabilities.

## Meetups for local communities

Instead of viewing the diaspora as a monolithic and somewhat abstract whole, a translocal approach suggests the existence of many diverse diasporas, focused on belonging to small, local communities. Recognising the reality of many different diasporas, i-dijaspora/i-platform launched internet meetups for worldwide diaspora from BiH towns: Zenica, Živinice, Bijeljina and Kladanj. In conversation with Dalida Karabdić, i-dijaspora/i-platform’s representative in Kladanj, we learn that the Kladanj model of local community engagement has proven to be successful. *‘From October last year until today, we have held nine online meetups with the basic guiding idea of rebuilding mutual trust with the Kladanj diaspora. As a small local community of some 13,000 inhabitants, we have a wonderful opportunity to cooperate with our diaspora, to build a great team. We want to work together – families in Kladanj and families abroad, individuals, educational, cultural and sports institutions, as well as the Municipality of Kladanj, with which a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed. Since we are a close-knit community, we mostly know each other well, while it is often the case that some members of one family live in Kladanj, while others could be in the USA, Sweden, Italy, France or Germany. This type of diaspora engagement is personal, close and, above all, based on trust,’* says Karabdić.

## Online diaspora check-ins, literary evenings and themed events

In order to harness opportunities for highly specific diaspora engagement, i-dijaspora/i-platform has organised online discussions on a variety of topics such as bilingualism, environmental conservation, as well as literary evenings and a conference on deliberative democracy.

*‘We are a network and we try to encourage people to offer their knowledge and experiences, so that we could all benefit. Our joint pool of resources is impressive, and our approach is based on self-organization and self-management, because if we do not act, then who will? If not now, then when?’* The concluding words of Nikola Burić point both to the urgency of diaspora engagement and the extraordinary opportunities offered by the increased digitalisation of such cooperation.



**Dr Ibričević** is an independent migration and diaspora studies researcher based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, affiliated as a Global Fellow with the Migration Center at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Norway, and a Research Fellow with the Center for Diaspora Studies at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology. Her most recent research focuses on return and reintegration, the nexus between citizenship, home and belonging, external voting, and on highly skilled emigration. Aida has performed consulting services for various international development agencies, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). She also provides review services for a number of peer-reviewed, international academic journals. Her BA and MA degrees are in Economics from Middlebury College, United States, and from the Central European University, Hungary. Her PhD is in Political Science from Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey. For further information and contact, go to: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/aidaibricevic/> and <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Aida-Ibricevic>

# Central American News: The diaspora's media that bridges Central America and abroad

Melissa Vida and Bree'ya Brown



Picture: Art by Xiomara Garay on Instagram. Courtesy of the artist

In late December 2020, Bree'ya Brown came across the *Central American News* account while scrolling on Instagram. Even though she grew up in a Panamanian household, finding news about Central America was always rare, especially in US mainstream media. For Bree'ya, *Central American News* became a digital tool to learn about current events in the region and engage in conversation with her grandmother about Central America, which strengthened their intergenerational bond. She saw the relevance of having a news outlet created by members of the diaspora to build a bridge between our countries of origin and abroad.

Too often, US media reports sensational news of 'migrant caravans', migrant 'surges', and cut-throat gangs. This approach lacks genuine interest in Central American societies, disregards cultural notions, reveals biases, and oversimplifies phenomena. Simultaneously, mainstream media dismisses the ways in which the US intervened in Central American regions throughout the 20th century and participated in bloodbaths during the Cold War, further destabilizing the social fabric for future generations. The echoes of history still impact our families.

More than 3.5 million Central Americans live in the United States and thousands more seek asylum in the UK and in Spain. Decades of civil wars, foreign intervention, economic weakness, and climate disasters have forced our parents, and now our contemporaries, to flee. Today, for example, a quarter of Salvadoran nationals live outside El Salvador. The large, and growing, Central American diaspora seeks consistent and diverse information about their lands of origin, but do not know where to begin or do not speak Spanish.

Bree'ya would read aloud the Central American News newsletter to her family, focusing particularly on Panama. It offered her a chance to form her own opinions about culture, society, economy, and politics in Central America without relying on US mainstream media.

Central American News provides a fresh perspective on the region by allowing Central Americans themselves, in the region and abroad, to report the news. It is liberating to decide what news to highlight, build news narratives and choose our words carefully. We would have never qualified the recent migratory movements as a 'surge', for example, as the word conjures fear of our peoples.

Every week, a volunteer team of 14 people invests a couple of hours in *Central American News*. We condense a week's worth of news from Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, as well as on migration. By linking a variety of news sources about each country within the region, the readership then has the freedom to navigate into local news media outlets for more information. Arts and culture often give a beautiful counterbalance to news of environmental disasters or corruption. For us, showing a more complete picture of Central America is imperative.

*Central American News* was born in summer 2018 amidst 'migrant caravans', violent state repression of protestors in Nicaragua, and the birth of a digital community of Central Americans in the diaspora, '#CentralAmericanTwitter'. Central Americans abroad would often feel isolated from others, so digital platforms played an important role in creating community.

Salvadoran and Belgian journalist Melissa Vida, the founder and now Editor-in-Chief of the newsletter, saw the need to provide regular news from the region to counterbalance the international press's biases and rapid news cycles in a digestible way: a newsletter. As more and more members of the Central American diaspora subscribed – along with other journalists, scholars, activists and government officials – the growing team created social media and Patreon accounts, and then, a podcast.



José Luis Martínez, a Texan of Salvadoran descent, founded the [Central American News Podcast](#) to offer the audience a concise recap of the newsletter, along with co-host Cecilia Rivas. The first episode was launched in February 2020 and continued, week after week, providing Central American news to a listenership rather than a readership. ‘My strengths are digital storytelling and I learn a lot from outside project ideas, which can then be transferred to Central American News’, José, who studies journalism, says. During the pandemic, José also created a Central American [COVID-19](#) interactive map using a data visualization tool along with statistics. Although inadequate public records made the task challenging at times, José dutifully recorded statistics of COVID-19 from governments and NGOs in Central America.

Often, we would receive responses from our audience, with messages such as *‘Gracias SO much for existing and sharing the real deal news in Central America <3 much love and positivity going your way!’*, or *‘I love the newsletter! You all do a great job. I’m an undergraduate student in New Jersey. I am originally from Honduras and this is the best way I stay informed.’*

Today, the newsletter has more than 1,000 subscribers, 50% of whom open the newsletter every week. Thousands more follow on social media and listen to the podcast. The number of those who donate to the newsletter through Patreon benefit from additional exclusive talks with experts on the region.

Deep-dive conversations on our podcast and a TikTok account are in the wings to reach an even more diverse audience.

In April 2021, Bree’ya joined the Central American News team to curate news from Panama. As an archivist, she wants to understand Central America’s past and present. For her, staying connected with her Panamanian culture and sharing it will help build a sense of belonging among the diaspora, as well as highlight the beauty of her grandmother’s country.

**Bree'ya Brown** works as a Project Archivist for the Texas Domestic Slave Trade Project and curates the Panama section for Central American News. She is second-generation Panamanian-American. She holds a Masters of Science in Information Studies from the University of Texas at Austin and a Masters of Arts in History from California State University, Long Beach.

**Melissa Vida** is a Salvadoran and Belgian multimedia freelance journalist with bylines in The New York Times, Foreign Policy and El Faro. She is also the Latin America editor at Global Voices and editor-in-chief of Central American News. In 2019, she made the documentary Resucitaré (‘Reborn’) on Oscar Romero's legacy in El Salvador.

# Emigrating e-Services: Diasporic insta-advocacy and the Egyptian ID card renewal process

Nadine Loza



*Photo by author*

In September 2020 the Egypt Diaspora Initiative (EDI) successfully campaigned to establish the Egyptian national identity (ID) card renewal as a permanent consular service worldwide amid the growing need for countries to expand, export or ‘emigrate’ remote and electronic public services (ePS) to their citizens abroad.

Housed on social media platform Instagram, the EDI is an independent and inclusive virtual gathering of over 50,000 Egyptian migrants globally. It has served as a source of news, forum for debate, network of support and catalyst for change since 2017, addressing both conceptual and practical issues affecting Egypt’s diaspora.

Of all the enquiries received by the EDI, those concerning ID cards are among the most recurrent. Necessary for passport issuance, electoral participation, property registration, banking transactions and just about every administrative scenario linked to Egypt, a valid ID card is the fundamental tool and token of citizenship.

Prior to the pandemic, renewing an Egyptian ID card overseas was challenging and time-consuming. It entailed contacting the nearest consulate to express interest in the service and then waiting for a minimum of 500 such requests to accumulate, at which point a committee from Egypt's Civil Status Department would visit to process applications with card delivery expected eight weeks later. Contrastingly, Egyptians in Egypt are able to submit a renewal request any time – either in person, via a hotline or the [official ePS portal](#) – and have their new ID card ready in as little as twenty-four hours.

When [COVID-19 mobility restrictions](#) led to a full and indefinite suspension of the ID missions sent abroad, demand for ID cards not only persisted but multiplied as emigrants who may have otherwise applied during trips back to Egypt postponed their travel plans. Noting this intensifying problem, in August 2020 the EDI proposed the idea of a consular hotline or portal to policy-makers and conducted an online poll wherein 90% of respondents agreed that non-resident nationals should be offered an alternative renewal method.

Our efforts to find a solution proved fruitful: Egyptians abroad were soon granted the right to renew their ID cards at Egyptian embassies and consulates directly, all year round. This promising stride has enabled those living further away from these sites to journey there when it suits them instead of being rushed and restricted by the brief window of access when a committee would be present. Eliminating the element of time pressure and streamlining the process so that it can now partially be completed by mail have helped in maintaining physical-distancing measures as the chance of queues or crowding is minimised.



Screenshot of EDI post





*Screenshot of EDI post*

The pandemic has revealed the urgency of boosting consular crisis preparedness through investments in digitisation and digitalisation approaches; but even extraneous to an emergency, the speed of the digital era itself requires faster consular reaction cycles. Introducing more flexible, remote and virtual options based on agile, scalable, human-centred technology will allow for service delivery that is responsive to changing situations and evolving demands.

Digitisation could further improve consular services by increasing efficiency and reducing costs. While in Egypt there are three price points for ID card renewal depending on processing speed and starting at the equivalent of USD 2, Egyptians abroad must pay a set fee of approximately USD 100.

The possibility of delivering consular services electronically is still being explored because there are a number of factors to consider, namely authentication and the development of a secure digital infrastructure. To mirror the innovative and convenient variety of Egypt's award-winning internal public service delivery system, any future ePS projects aimed at the diaspora will also need to be complemented by analogue options.

Article 36 of the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to which Egypt acceded in 1965, focuses on communication between sending states and their nationals with a view to facilitating the exercise of consular functions.



Carried into the contemporary context, this means strengthening feedback flows, co-designing policies and continually refining ePS systems based on reviews. A central concern is that consular services do not have an intuitive and evidence-based understanding of how citizens respond to different kinds of services so unquantifiable experiences and opinions should be taken into account along with statistics and data. Involving the main stakeholders early on will help ensure digitisation projects are viewed from the citizen's perspective and not merely as a modernisation scheme.

Launching ePS for emigrants is useful in terms of speed, cost and communication, but may not always be the best service delivery option. A transparent and ongoing multi-stakeholder, multi-channel, multilateral conversation and comparison of best practices will help all consulates adapt long-term.



**Nadine Loza** is Founding Director of the Egypt Diaspora Initiative, which aims to raise issues of interest to Egyptians living abroad and voice their concerns; establish a close link between Egyptian communities all over the world and in Egypt, cutting across political and religious affiliation, age and gender, and free of commercial interests; and strengthen solidarity with Egypt among Egyptians in the diaspora.

You can reach the EDI by email at [egyptdiasporainitiative@gmail.com](mailto:egyptdiasporainitiative@gmail.com) or on Instagram at [@egyptdiasporainitiative](https://www.instagram.com/egyptdiasporainitiative).

# Breaking diaspora engagement barriers through effective media communication

Theresa R. Fianko



*Picture by fauxels on Pexels*

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, countries implemented restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, affecting mobility around the world. [A United Nations Population report estimates](#) that, with an assumption of zero growth in the number of migrants between 1 March and 1 July 2020, the number of international migrants may have decreased by nearly 2 million against the initial expectations. As a result, foreign missions and other stakeholders have had to adopt a new approach to engaging members of their diaspora, in addition to dealing with humanitarian, political and socio-economic concerns.

Diaspora engagement relates to how external stakeholders such as governments and other organisations interact with members of its diaspora, in addition to how the diaspora community itself cooperates with its people and institutions as internal stakeholders. All work together to harness the development of both their homelands and countries of residence. An individual or organisation within a diaspora is not only a reflection of the country to which they have migrated, but also a reflection of their country of origin.

Generally speaking, when people think of harnessing diaspora power, it relates to remittances and how financial investments will be channelled to their homelands. This is indeed an integral part of diaspora development, considering studies have shown that in 2020, remittance flows surpassed the sum of Foreign Direct Investments (USD 259 billion) and overseas development assistance (USD 179 billion) in low- and middle-income countries. However, focusing overly on remittances means we can lose touch with broader perspectives about the power of diaspora.

Diaspora engagement aims to maximise and harness the power of the resources and capacity of multiple stakeholders. Dr Martin Russell, an advisor at the Networking Institute and well-known global diaspora engagement advocate, stated in a feature that three questions need to be asked from the start to ensure effective diaspora engagement: Who is your diaspora? Where are they? What do they do?

A lack of data is by far the biggest hindrance to diaspora engagement because it is the very tool that enables effective policymaking and development. Access to data is characterised by little or no diaspora mapping and low awareness about the existence of organisations and their initiatives. This often leads to selective engagement, which does not empower diaspora communities.

Digital communication is key to bridge the communication gap in effective diaspora engagement. Digitisation has been heightened by the impact of COVID-19, and more than ever traditional mass media communication channels such as television and radio have been complemented by modern omnichannel platforms. This begs the question: how can global diasporas take advantage of these digital platforms to bring about the desired awareness, provide data and lead to development?

It is critical that diaspora communities maintain a directory of their people, groups and organisations. Most diaspora organisations, however, are self-funded and so often do not provide a budget for developing and maintaining a website or diaspora mobile applications, for example. Support from governments and other development partners would help to harness the power of social media platforms to communicate their message.

Advocates are gradually becoming more active in diaspora media, and there are several examples of different organisations and individuals using their power to break the communication barrier. Diaspora Digital News, for example, is a social impact online broadcast platform mainly focused on shedding light on the works of diaspora organisations, their stakeholders and others who are making an impact transnationally without losing their identities. Through its platform, it showcases the work of new and existing diaspora organisations and personalities, so that communities can tap into their knowledge and expertise for inter-country development.

Meanwhile, [the Global Irish Diaspora Directory](#), supported by the Government of Ireland, includes 1,000 Irish welfare, culture, sports, business and social organisations around the world, providing data that its diaspora can connect with. This success story is a good case study for diaspora engagement. Advocates of diaspora engagement, such as Loksan Harley, are also using online media platforms to discuss and bring solutions to issues concerning migration and diaspora through [the Migration & Diaspora podcast](#).

Finally, in its [recent report](#), Shabaka, in association with the EU Global Diaspora Facility (EUDiF), recommends that in order to properly engage diasporas in times of crisis, we need to create targeted communication channels and content *for* and *by* the diaspora, in addition to developing communication targeted at diaspora resource and skills mobilisation. A good [example](#) of the use of media communication in times of crisis is a group of Chinese diaspora YouTube Vloggers, who are orienting their discourse to highlight critical health information during the pandemic.

Living in the digital era has provided us with the opportunity to seamlessly bring awareness about people, organisations and activities within the diaspora, whilst providing critical data to enable proper engagement. With enhanced media communications being developed with each passing day, the possibilities of what we can do when we harness this power for diaspora engagement are endless.

**Theresa R. Fianko** is an Integrated Marketing/Media Communications Professional and the Managing Editor of Diaspora Digital News. Based in Dubai and having lived in the diaspora for over thirteen years, she uses her experience, knowledge and expertise to advocate for diaspora engagement. She believes in the power of the media as a tool in shaping minds positively and so advocates for how its gains can be capitalised upon, especially within the diaspora.



# Nepali migrants' use of social media during the pandemic

Upasana Khadka



*Stranded Nepalis in the UAE go live on Facebook to tell their stories  
after not receiving adequate support from authorities  
Source: Kalim Miya*

With a remittance-to-GDP ratio of over 25%, international migration is crucial to Nepal's economy. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis emigrate, particularly to the Middle East and Malaysia for temporary, contract-based jobs. Given that the pandemic has evolved differently in Nepal and in destination countries, the use of social media by Nepali migrants can be viewed through two lenses. Firstly, when COVID-19 concurrently impacted the destination countries and Nepal in 2020, social media offered a way for stranded migrants to seek information and material help from formal and informal sources. Secondly, in 2021, with a second wave that has ravaged Nepal while the situation is relatively better in many destination countries, social media has enabled migrants abroad to extend critical, life-saving support to Nepal.

## **First wave: Destination countries and Nepal concurrently impacted**

Thousands of Nepalis abroad were stranded due to COVID-19-induced travel restrictions and lockdowns. Many were left in limbo because of job losses, expired contracts and cancelled flights due to sudden travel bans.

Social distancing was difficult in cramped rooms with shared sub-standard toilets and crowded canteen facilities. Combined with lower infection rates in Nepal during the earlier months, Nepal was viewed as relatively safer which amplified the pressure to return home.

Amid the chaos, social media was critical for migrants to connect not just with families back home, but also with informal and formal networks abroad. It provided a platform for migrants to voice their concerns and access up-to-date information on COVID-19 protocols on travel, quarantine and social distancing in Nepali, as well as to seek support for food and material help from formal and informal networks. The Facebook pages of the embassies and those run by Nepali migrant groups and community leaders became indispensable resources. In Facebook pages and social media groups (IMO, WhatsApp, Viber), calls for help were amplified and queries answered. Capital-centric embassies coordinated over social media groups to galvanize migrant groups and community leaders dispersed across the country to provide food and other material support. Destination country governments like Qatar and South Korea also put concerted efforts to convey public service announcements in Nepali via social media platforms and radio with support from Nepali community leaders.

A notable example is a weekly informational Facebook live programme run by the Nepali Embassy in Malaysia. Embassy officials update Nepalis on important information, while answering their queries. With short-staffed embassies unable to cater to the surge in calls received, this program facilitated two-way communication with a large scale of migrants. Social media also allowed Nepali medical professionals in the destination country to offer ‘telemedicine’ care in the local language even if there was no formal setup for remote consultation services.

Even then, support to migrants was inadequate and the sheer volume of problems were too great to overcome. Interestingly, stranded migrants relied on social media to hold authorities accountable. By resorting to Facebook live videos to share their stories in response to apathy from embassies, they raised the spectre of on-the-ground realities and the inadequate support system, which riled up the Nepali public and media to advocate for their protection and repatriation. Visuals that surfaced on social media spread like wildfire and became important markers of the pandemic. In Kuwait, repatriation flights of undocumented workers sponsored by the Kuwaiti Government got delayed because of the Nepal government’s mixed rules regarding incoming flights. In the UAE, a group of undocumented workers abandoned by their employer did not receive support from the Nepal embassy. In both cases, these last-resort attempts on Facebook live and the subsequent public pressure led authorities to respond.

Other migrants were stealthier about sharing information because they feared reprisal. Migrants shared pictures of their living and work conditions in anonymity with activists and media. Among them, Yubaraj Khadka, from Top Glove in Malaysia, got dismissed after he was identified as the whistleblower who had leaked pictures demonstrating the lack of social distancing at the workplace.

## **Second wave: Nepal is a hotspot, while several key destination countries apart from India are faring well**

Nepal is reeling from a second COVID-19 wave that has overwhelmed the health infrastructure. Migrants in destination countries who have resumed jobs have again resorted to social media to extend help to the country. Under a campaign called ‘Let us send oxygen to Nepal and save lives’, migrants in the Middle East managed to raise donations from hundreds of migrants across the region to send 560 oxygen cylinders since Nepal is in short supply. According to the coordinators of the campaign, social media enabled the planning and execution of this undertaking.

## **A long way to go**

Despite the enabling role of social media platforms, gaps remain.

Bans on voice over IP platforms like Facetime and Whatsapp in multiple Gulf countries are an obstacle. In many instances, phone use is restricted by employers, especially in the case of domestic workers, due to distrust and concerns about privacy or productivity. Furthermore, access to smartphones and the internet can be difficult, and even functional literacy is a challenge. There are ways around it: a few social media applications have audio recording options for those unable to read, and most migrants live in shared spaces. In the case of isolated sectors like domestic work, word of mouth through personal networks or migrants in the neighbourhood, such as from the shops they frequent, can be important resources to connect with migrant leaders or relevant authorities. But many migrants continue to fall through the cracks.

The spread of misinformation, including fear-mongering fake news, can be especially damaging during crisis situations. In addition, authorities like embassies have yet to realize the full potential of social media to engage migrants including via tangible initiatives on awareness or telemedicine programs. Finally, while social media enables migrants to share their realities, the fear of repercussions amid heightened surveillance and privacy concerns often prevents migrants from speaking up.

Despite these gaps in the inclusivity and accessibility of social media, the pandemic has shone the spotlight on its potential in transforming the way migrants communicate with families back home and with migrant communities where they are based.



**Upasana Khadka** consults for the World Bank on labour mobility issues in Asia, and previously served as a Policy Advisor/Migration Expert at the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security (MOLESS), Nepal. As a columnist for the Nepali Times ('Labour Mobility'), she analyses trends affecting Nepal's workers abroad and has reported from Nepal, Lebanon and Malaysia. She holds an MPA/ID from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and an interdisciplinary degree in Economics and Mathematics from Reed College.



# Mobile women without mobile phones: Indian domestic workers in the Gulf

Divya Balan



*Picture: Courtesy of the author*

Sheela (pseudonym) is a 38-year-old woman from Kerala, India who supports her family. She did not complete her bachelor's degree due to financial constraints. Four years ago, like many others in her situation, she went to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker to a large family of nine. Now back in Kerala, she recollected those two years in Saudi and the hardships she faced there.

A family friend, who was working in the Gulf, arranged her visa. Sheela's husband died in a road accident and she has two children in school to support, over and above the loans taken for the house construction and other debts. She recalled the relief on the faces of her elderly parents when the visa came, thinking that their life would be better once she started sending 'Gulf money' home. However, Sheela was worried about going to an unknown land all by herself. The visuals from the Malayalam film, Gaddama, kept playing in her head. She did not share her thoughts with anyone as the prospect of migrating to the Gulf and earning money was tempting. Moreover, this was a one-time opportunity for her to save the family and guarantee a better life for the children.

Throughout her time in Saudi, she felt misplaced and mistreated. She told me,

*'I did not know that I should have gotten a sim card from the airport as nobody told me to do so. That was a mistake. Because I was so anxious, I was only thinking about getting to my workplace. I was more worried about what awaited me there. So, I had to ask my employer several times to get me a phone connection. When that was finally done, they let me use my mobile only once a week to talk briefly to my family in Kerala. I did not know where to get the recharge cards as I was also not allowed to go out, even for personal shopping.'*

She worked around the house as instructed, often without a break and no proper meals. Interactions with co-workers were minimal as it is not taken well by the employer. She was forced to work even when sick, and her workload doubled when her employer hosted guests. She faced social deprivations, discriminations and prejudices based on her gender, language barrier, religion, class, and even region of origin.

*‘Luckily, I did not face any sexual abuse, but my employer used to beat me badly even when I worked properly. At one time, I thought I might die of thrashing, but I did not say anything to my parents as it will gravely worry them. They still do not know all that I have suffered. Eventually, all the physical torture and workload affected my mental health to the point that I could not sleep at night. I often felt like I was falling into a deep black hole, but I did not know who to reach out to and how. It got to the point that I decided to return to the dismay of my family.’*

My interview with Sheela is a glimpse into the lives of many Indian women domestic workers in the Gulf countries. India is one of the major origin countries of domestic workers to the Gulf, especially from the South Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, in addition to the Northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As Sheela’s case shows, migration to the Gulf is a livelihood strategy for either illiterate or less-educated women from India.

The widespread irregular practices of migrating on a tourist or family-visit visa and the dependence on fraudulent recruitment agents exclude them from the official databases and make them susceptible to exploitation and abuse by recruiters, sponsors and/or employers. The loopholes in the Emigration Check Required (ECR) passport clearance system in India also preclude them from pre-departure training and welfare policy mechanisms. Tied to the much-criticised kafala system, these migrant women workers are also excluded from the national labour and social protection regulations across the Gulf states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the already precarious working and living conditions of live-in domestic workers in the isolated ‘private spaces’ of sponsors’ houses, often deprived of using mobile phones or other digital communication technologies. Government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions curtailed their already limited mobility and occasional weekends, and restrained their access to services such as health, police, legal, and social support when in distress. The word ‘stranded’ that is frequently used in the context of lockdown takes on a new and literal meaning when looking at the plight of these women domestic workers. Inaccessibility of necessary information and redressal mechanisms are problems that domestic workers face in the Gulf countries at all times, but especially during COVID-19. This is where the mobile phone and digital know-how come in handy to reach out to their family, friends, formal and informal community networks or embassies for help.

Empowering them digitally will equip them with greater control over the pre-decision and pre-departure phases of migration. If trained, they can verify the credibility of the recruiter and the specificities of the visa and associated labour rights on various government portals before undertaking the journey. The information available on the websites of the Indian government and the state-level agencies like the NORKA ROOTS and its mobile application can, to an extent, help avoid the cheat pits and exploitation. In addition, digital skilling should be made mandatory as part of the pre-departure training, including coaching on how to install and use mobile and internet-based applications, like the eMigrate or MigCall apps, when in distress. Awareness about relevant labour rules, workers' rights and available complaint and redressal mechanisms needs to be disseminated through print and e-brochures in their mother tongue, with a dos-and-don'ts checklist, including getting a sim card and not depositing the passport and phones with the employer on insistence. They also need to include hotline numbers of embassies and consulates as well as of other stakeholders. Joining the social media groups of community organisations is also a practical strategy, as sometimes, sending an SOS message can lead to someone lending a helping hand. Most importantly, Indian embassies in the Gulf must reach out to this vulnerable migrant group online and offline.

Before leaving her half-finished home, I asked Sheela about her plans. With a deep sigh, she said,

*'I might go again as we have to finish the construction of this house, and my elder child will go to college next year. But this time, I will try Dubai, and I will be more cautious.'*



**Dr Divya Balan** is Assistant Professor of Migration and Diaspora Studies at FLAME University, Pune, India. She teaches courses on International and Internal Migration, Migration Governance, Indian Diaspora, and Refugees Studies in FLAME. Dr Divya has also served as a visiting fellow of the Institute for European Global Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland. She is an active writer and public speaker on themes related to migration and diaspora.

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# **The AEMRN diaspora: Bridging the digital divide and knowledge gap between southern and northern countries and between countries in the South through innovative digital technologies**

**Charles Edward Lahai Senessie**



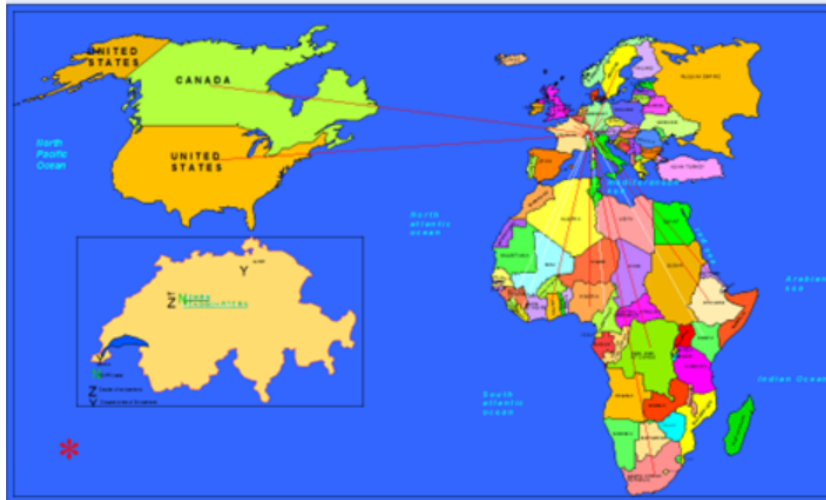
*AEMRN logo*

Diaspora communities, comprising people who live outside their countries or continents of origin, are an increasingly influential force in sending societies, to which they contribute through the transfer of various resources (human, material and financial). Such efforts and initiatives seek to complement the efforts of the local governance and service delivery sectors in improving the lives of their less fortunate compatriots.

Hence it was with this vision that the Afro-European Medical and Research Network (AEMRN) was founded in 2006 in Bern, Switzerland by a Sierra Leonean migrant, Dr Charles Senessie. This diaspora community network, accredited by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), aims to bridge the knowledge gap between southern and northern countries as well as between countries in the South.

Generating and sharing well-researched, evidence-based and locally accepted information is very inspiring, and when such information is converted into knowledge, it can be a powerful catalyst for enhancing and empowering behavioural and other changes. AEMRN members, including representatives from every continent around the world, strive to contribute their knowledge and experience to improve the quality of their work to benefit the people they interact with, irrespective of race, beliefs, and social affiliation.





*AEMRN around the world*

Our vision for AEMRN is to serve as a platform wherein active professionals from disciplines such as education, public health and clinical medicine, engineering, nursing, midwifery, as well as from faith-based and civil society groups, can interact through various initiatives. Among these are web conferences where participants share skills and expertise, enhancing cross-cultural exchange and promoting global peace as we give back to our continents and countries of origin.

We promote the exchange of information, knowledge, skills and expertise for the benefit of communities in their local settings through various information and communications technology (ICT), hence empowering AEMRN members and others to think locally and act globally. As advanced innovative ICT approaches are turning the world into a 'global village', the AEMRN diaspora runs regular virtual education sessions to enable our proactive communities to benefit from the knowledge and experience of experts around the world.

## **Methodology**

Alongside our colleagues in low- and middle-income countries, who keep expanding their knowledge to improve health, AEMRN members in the diaspora have been using simple low-resolution e-learning technologies such as Elluminate and advanced ones as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Skype, Webex, and the AEMRN/World Health Organisation (WHO) EZcollab Community of Practice to link individuals and institutions across countries. These colleagues are willing to learn from each other and share their knowledge so that together we address our challenges, especially in difficult times of pandemic outbreak such as Ebola and the currently raging COVID-19.

These tools have also been used for fundraising during the aforementioned and other humanitarian crises, including the mudslide that occurred in Sierra Leone in 2017, as well as the much needed psycho-social support after such disasters.



*Supporting the younger generation in sharing and exchanging knowledge. Courtesy of AEMRN.*

Hence, these tools greatly help improve the projects that we undertake in our communities, especially when we cannot easily go down to them, as we used to do through mobile clinics, nor physically interact with them. This way, we are still able to impart knowledge – one of the key social legacies we leave behind with them in complementing their efforts. We reach our diverse members in countries spreading over every continent in the world in synergising our efforts to maximise our outputs.

## **Monitoring and evaluation**

The AEMRN team, led by a special unit for monitoring and evaluation, regularly reviews our efforts and interventions so that we learn from our challenges and build upon our successes for the betterment of the hard-to-reach communities. We also focus on the youths who are the future leaders of tomorrow – bearing in mind that youth is a state of mind and not a physical condition.

## Conclusion

Our experiences continue to confirm that information sharing through innovative approaches, including North-South and South-South partnerships, can positively influence healthcare delivery and other humanitarian efforts, creating synergies to obtain the best results and ensure the sustainability of our initiatives. We encourage everyone to join and/or create similar initiatives as true to the motto of AEMRN, 'Together we can make it happen'.



**Dr Charles Senessie**, MD (USL), PgDip Epidemiology (University of London), MSc Dermatology (University of South Wales, UK), and PhD (Health Sciences) international Health Researcher and Education (California, USA) and concluding second PhD Public Health Epidemiology, (Walden University, USA). He is a physician working for the Swiss Federal Government as well as in private practice and lives with his family in Bern, the Federal Capital of Switzerland.

He has done multiple consultancies for the World Health Organisation (WHO) HQ, Geneva.

He is part of the diaspora originally from Sierra Leone, West Africa. Dr Senessie has been featured together with former President Obama, Rev Jesse Jackson, Oprah Winfrey and others in the book called *The Most Influential Contemporary African Diaspora Leaders*. In 2019 he was awarded the Top 100 Health Care Leaders Award by the USA International Forum on Advancements in Healthcare.

# Make home a better place through diaspora programmes: Engaging the Albanian diaspora during the pandemic

**Bardha Qokaj**



*Picture: Courtesy of IOM Albania*

Albania has one of the highest migration rates in the world. Nearly 1.7 million Albanians live outside the country, mostly in Europe, but also with a significant presence in North America as well as other regions. Migrant remittances have been a significant source of capital over the years, averaging 1.15 billion euros per year during the period 2008-2017, equal to approximately 12% of the country's GDP. Nowadays policy-makers in Albania and development agencies have realised that the diaspora is becoming increasingly important for the development of Albania.

The diaspora programme 'Engage the Albanian Diaspora to the Social and Economic Development of Albania' was implemented by IOM Albania in 2018, with funding from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, as well as operational involvement from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) in Albania.

Manoela Lussi joined the IOM in 2018 as Diaspora Programme Manager. She has extensive experience in working for the Italian Government and international organisations, mostly designing, managing and monitoring development programmes. Manoela holds a PhD in Transborder Policies from IUIES, a double Master's degree in Analysis and Management of Development Projects and European Project Design and Management, and a BA degree in International Political Science from the University of Padua, Italy. She also holds several postgraduate certificates in areas including European Union Law and Policy on Immigration and Asylum.



## The impact of COVID-19

As Diaspora Programme Manager, Manoela Lussi recalls, *‘We were in the middle of implementing and launching new mechanisms to engage the Albanian diaspora, when we were faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed our way of life in many unexpected ways. And considering that our Programme mainly targeted the Albanian diaspora in Italy, one of the most impacted countries early on, we can say that the pandemic also impacted the Programme’s “lifestyle”. Then, as many other actors, we were challenged on how to continue by utilizing non-traditional means. We worked with positive thinking and prompt creativity.’*

The first exercise for the Diaspora Programme to be adapted to the new normal was the training of trainers on the Project Cycle Management and Fundraising, which aims to support the newly created Albanian Diaspora Engagement institutions and strengthen their capacities to better engage the Albanian diaspora abroad. The training was planned to be delivered in person at the Albanian School of Public Administration (ASPA) to the relevant officials, but the lockdown and social distancing made this impossible.

Lussi adds, *‘In agreement with the Programme donor and institutional partners we were able to adapt all the offline training and activities to online. We are proud to consider ourselves a pioneer in using, for the first time, the technology utilized by ASPA to deliver training which has now become a common practice used by ASPA throughout this pandemic.’*

Establishing Connect Albania, a new foreign investment boosting mechanism, to support the engagement of the Albanian diaspora into homeland development was another exercise that the Programme went through during the pandemic. This was another initiative where technology was used.

Connect Albania engages the Albanian diaspora as development agents to boost direct and indirect investments into Albania. It rewards the diaspora in this capacity with a bonus for each employee hired by businesses established through their support. *Launching Connect Albania in the context of the global crisis was a tough activity for the IOM Diaspora Programme in Albania, but not impossible. After many discussions and preparation with the Albanian diaspora donors and partners, we launched Connect Albania on 18 December 2020. Connect Albania is now fully operational, facilitating the engagement of Albanian diaspora members as interested Development Agents. Through technological support, we were able to convert the offline events for Albanian diaspora and potential investors in Italy to online, followed by a digital campaign reaching over 300,000 diaspora members.*

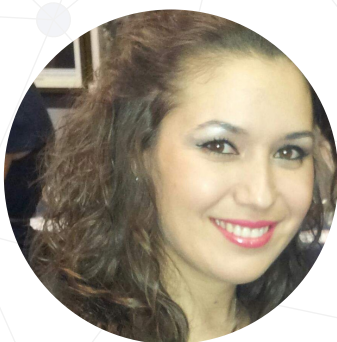
*We are very glad that the Albanian diaspora have shown interest in the new Connect Albania mechanism, applying to become Development Agents. The certificates have already been issued for several Development Agents from the diaspora,’ says Manoela.*

## **Engaging the diaspora remotely**

The pandemic proved to us that the Albanian diaspora is not only a resource in the host country, contributing to critical sectors such as healthcare, the food supply chain and other important services, but they can also be engaged in the development of their home country from wherever they are, through skills and knowledge transfer. For example, the most recent EU fellowship scheme of the Programme is designed and implemented with the purpose of engaging and mobilising 35 highly skilled diaspora professionals wherever they live. They will support and give their expertise in priority areas that Albania must adopt as part of the EU accession process.

In addition, there are fellows, Technical Advisory Board members and secondees supporting the engagement of Albanian diaspora institutions and diaspora communities – the majority of them remotely. *‘Engaging Albanian diaspora, staff and consultants in different countries would not be possible without the innovative tools that technology offers nowadays, enabling and facilitating daily work and communication. And this started to be particularly evident during the pandemic,’* highlights Lussi. The Programme also highlighted some of the contributions of the Albanian diaspora during COVID-19 in some regions of Italy.

Lussi concludes, *‘I am very glad to guide such a great initiative, aiming to set the roots and the best practices for diaspora engagement and apply innovative technological approaches such as with Connect Albania. And I am also proud to say that thanks to the IOM Diaspora Programme, for the first time, the EU Progress Report for Albania from June 2019 has highlighted the efforts of the Albanian Government on diaspora-related matters, emphasizing that the efforts to engage the diaspora should continue.’*



**Bardha Qokaj** is from Albania. She holds a University Degree in Albanian Language and Literature and an MSc in Media and Marketing from the University of Tirana. She is an experienced communication expert with a demonstrated history of working in the broadcast media industry with donors and communities. She is interested in a range of topics, including human rights, advocacy, communication for development and migration.

# Instagram: A new identity for the descendants of indentureship

Aratrika Ganguly



*'Coolies' in the depot in Paramaribo before 1885. Picture by Julius Eduard Muller, on [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

Indentured servitude started in the Indian subcontinent in 1834 after the abolition of slavery. Thousands of people, mainly from the central and eastern provinces of India, were sent to colonial plantations within the country and to places like British Guyana, South Africa, Fiji, Malaysia etc. These labourers were called by the derogatory term of 'coolie'. Indentured servitude exploited people in every sense. The descendants of the Indian indenture system, i.e. the descendants of the 'coolies' from India, are now settled in various parts of the world.

The word 'coolie' originally had different origins. In the British period, labourers were often termed 'coolies'. It was a negative racial term hinting at the people who used to do menial or low-wage jobs. Several dictionaries define 'coolie' as an unskilled labourer employed cheaply, especially one brought from Asia. Several also [flag it as pejorative](#).

Recently the descendants of this indentured labour system have begun to create a space for themselves by depicting their culture and that of their ancestors via social media.





Fig.1 The definition of indentured servitude



Fig.2 Depiction of a 'coolie' smoking ganja

Social media has been an integral part of our lives in contemporary times. It is not just a medium of entertainment, but an essential part of life. People can share content, pictures, and glimpses of their lives with others without the limitations of physical boundaries.

Instagram is an important platform for this collective social psyche where one has a sort of 'digital life' and shares it with others.

The descendants of indentureship are very active as content creators and as audiences. Accounts like @jahajee sisters (Fig.3.) and @thebgdiaries regularly hold events and post about social issues regarding the indenture diaspora. Conversely, accounts like @coolie tings (Fig. 4), and @coolieconnections post memes that help counteract their violent history with a tinge of humour.



Hashtags are another way by which we can easily and quickly find content on a topic we are interested in. At first, this style of grouping content under a category was used on Twitter. It then made its way to other social media networking sites, including Instagram. Some examples of popular hashtags for content on indentured history and present scenarios are: #coolie, #indenturelabour, #girmitya, and #indenturedservitude. Not all posts are about South Asian ‘coolies’, however, as many other communities were also forced to work as ‘coolies’. There are some users such as @breakingbrownsilence (Fig.5) and @tessaalexanderart that aim to decolonise history and give voice to their ancestors via their personal accounts. When the ‘coolies’ went to many countries from India, they took their cultural elements with them. Thus, some remained and assimilated with their new society. The Instagram account @cutlasspodcast informs us in one of their posts from 21 April 2021 (Fig.2) that a type of recreational marijuana, the Indian term being ganja, might have come to the Caribbean islands with the Indian ‘coolies’ among other things.

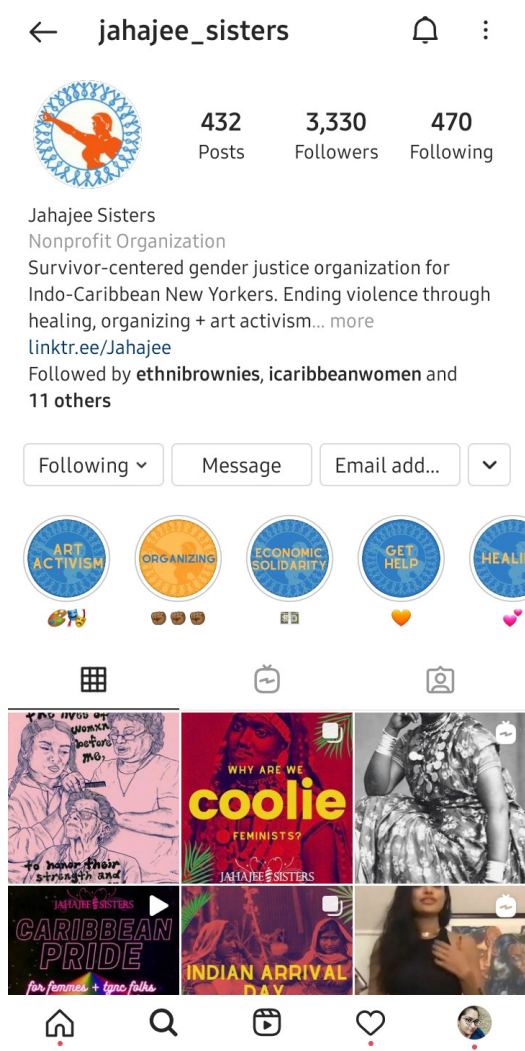


Fig.3. The account of @jahajee\_sisters



Fig.4. Meme becomes a medium to express oneself



Fig.5. Instagram becomes a way for decolonising one's mind and giving voice to the descendants of the indentured labour, the 'coolies'

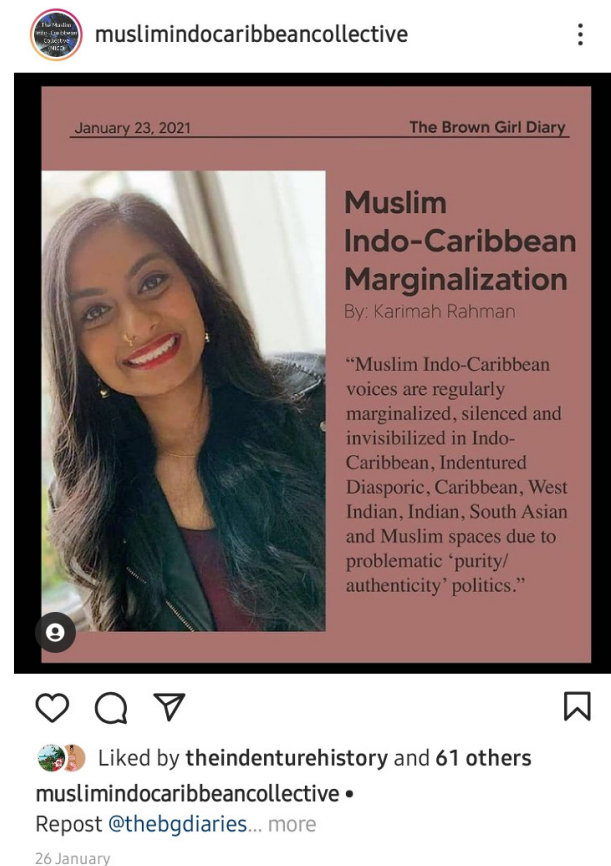


Fig.6. The marginalisation of Indo Caribbean Muslim women

In his book, *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism*, Prof. Himadri Lahiri has described diaspora: 'The concept of homeland alters with later generations of diasporic people. Diaspora is a phenomenon involving uprooting, forced or voluntary, of a mass of people from the "homeland" and their "re-rooting" in the hostland(s).' The remembrance of the homeland lingers; however, cultural assimilation of the host country simultaneously takes place, and their identity takes on a new shape. Diasporas are rooted in a specific spatio-temporal reality. The same can be said about the 'coolie' diaspora. Instagram accounts like [@theindenturehistory](#), [@cutlasspodcast](#), [@thebidesiaproject](#), [@coolie.women](#), [@jahajee sisters](#) (Fig.3) help in finding the spatio-temporal reality, a viewpoint from the descendants of indenture. In the contemporary period, the distance of the diaspora ceases with the visual culture of Instagram. Therefore, when viewers see posts of [@muslimindocaribbeancollective](#) (Fig.6.) about the marginalisation of Muslim women of Indo-Caribbean descent, it can be more engaging than reading about the same issue through traditional media channels. Viewers can finally get to understand the multilingual and pluricultural identity of these people. Many find their own ancestry by looking at these accounts or have stories running in their families that speak of indenture.

These accounts help them to create art, remember their history, forge their shared identity with other descendants of indentureship, and support transnational engagements with people all over the world. It has become sort of an archive of history, of 'coolitude', and a medium connecting both past and present generations of the diaspora.

The whole purpose of a digital world is to stay connected with each other. Instagram as a visual platform provides this medium to know a part of the 'other', framed within the four walls of a digital device. As Instagram is part of a very visual culture, it resonates more with its viewers and audiences. Even if somebody does not have a relationship with the indenture diaspora, they can still feel some connection as oppression still survives in some form or the other, as with the cyber 'coolies' who emigrate from India to various parts of the world. Even some Indian labourers migrate as bonded labourers (within India) to work as construction workers or house helpers or, if they are unfortunate, they may become a part of the flesh trade. Many women and men are regularly coaxed to migrate from the remote parts of India in the name of earning a big fortune and, in return, all they get is oppression. The Instagram accounts handled by the descendants of the 'coolies' show us a glimpse of the past by providing contents such as old pictures of documents, family photographs, artworks, pictures of 'coolie' depot and other historical buildings and places; and capture the life of the contemporary descendants by showing pictures, reels, slogans, quotes, memes, and artworks of various places across the world. The virtual media of Instagram dissolves the border between the homeland of their ancestors and their present homeland by showing them together in a single virtual space. Hence, the border is becoming more porous by the day.



**Aratrika Ganguly** is pursuing a PhD in the Department of Comparative Indian Language and Literature, University of Calcutta. She is currently delivering lectures as a guest lecturer in three colleges under the University of Calcutta. She is the Co-Founder and Coordinator of Calcutta Comparatists 1919, an independent forum for research scholars of Humanities and Social Sciences. Her research area for her PhD is Coolie and Migration and their literature. Her interest lies in the areas of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Coolie Literature, Migration, Women Narrative, Performance Studies, and African Literature. She completed her MPhil in Comparative Literature from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She also worked as a UGC-UPE-II Project Fellow at the Department of CILL, University of Calcutta.

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# Twitter orientation and digitalised medical outreach of transnational Nigerian doctors to the homeland during COVID-19

Abdul-lateef Awodele



*Picture by Tima Miroshnichenko on [Unsplash](#)*

The unexpected problems that came with COVID-19 pushed the world, especially Africa, to the brink of insolvency. These challenges forced many governments to provide coping mechanisms and alternative solutions to ease the lives of their citizens. One such alternative is the open virtual connection of many countries with their diaspora. While the effect of COVID-19 burdened the lives of many Nigerians, transnational Nigerians contributed overwhelmingly to the management of the global pandemic. Specifically, the transnational Nigerian medical practitioners using virtual methodology became a centre of attention as information givers, orientation agents and aid contributors. Between March and August 2020 various insightful clarifications were made by these diasporic Nigerian-born medical practitioners on Twitter and other social media.



## Virtual space and the arrival of digital doctors

The use of Twitter as the centre of engagement for transnational Nigerians and Nigerian locals has increased since the outbreak of the pandemic. Many transnational Nigerians created channels to contribute medical information on how to live during the global pandemic. The declaration of a nationwide lockdown created the need for Nigerians, especially for the working class and students, to explore various social media platforms. This avenue brought the transnational Nigerian medical doctors to the limelight, after seeing the challenges faced by local citizens. These doctors started posting COVID-19 specific matters on their accounts to complement their daily health-related content. Signalling a new dawn for transnational Nigerian medical doctors, they became the centre point for credible updates on COVID-19 and genuine practices to prevent its spread.

### Who are these transnational medical experts and how did they become relevant in Nigeria's health industry?

Nigerian transnational doctors live and practice outside Nigeria but maintain affiliations with the country through digital engagement with Nigerians at home. Prior to the global pandemic, these transnational Nigerian medical practitioners used social media to engage Nigerians on ways of proper health management, healthy eating, and other health-related information. These two Twitter handles, [@DrOlufunmilayo](#) and [@wakawaka\\_doctor](#), are transnational Nigerian medical practitioners, and they practice medicine in the United Kingdom and New Zealand respectively. Before the occurrence of COVID-19, they used Twitter to give Nigerians daily health updates. They started becoming popular on Nigeria's social media space in 2018 and by the end of 2019 they had become influential medical advisors on Twitter, with over 20,000 followers as of January 2020.

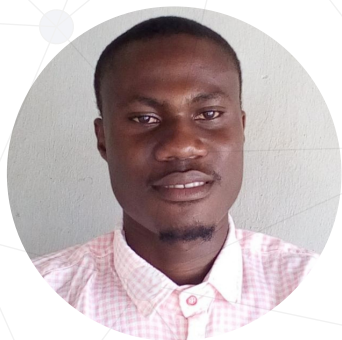
In the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown, following [President Buhari's March national broadcast](#) announcing the total closure of the country's economy, the majority of Nigerians were faced with unemployment, social instability, and depressing poverty. These, coupled with poor health infrastructure in the country, created multiple health problems for Nigerians. Similarly, the lack of government intervention, especially regarding the provision of efficient information, and the lack of access to medical doctors turned Nigerian doctors in the diaspora into health care guides. Using Twitter, Drs Olufunmilayo and Wakawaka used [social remittances](#) to contribute to the medical outreach to Nigerians in the country.

## The impact of transnational doctors on COVID-19 management among Nigerians

Although some portions of the country's population did not have access to their social media posts filled with daily information on worldwide research and COVID-19 management policies adopted in Global North countries, the information put up by these medical doctors helped many Nigerians who lacked prior knowledge on the symptoms of the deadly disease and how to effectively manage the health situation.

The followers of these medical experts on Twitter grew rapidly as Nigerians began sharing their information on other social media, which encouraged more people to follow them for their updates. Many Nigerians evaluated the quality of the content brought by these doctors as very impactful towards their engagement with people. Interviewees Odunola and Usmanoff revealed that the transnational doctors' messages on social media were very important to them. In her chat interview, Odunola explained that *'Olufunmilayo's tweets helped me debunk several controversial assertions being carried out by many Nigerians on the treatment of COVID-19'*. Usmanoff also said in a chat that *'Dr Olufunmilayo and Dr Wakawaka were the first people to explain comprehensively to us the signs and symbols of COVID-19 and how to minimise the spreading of the disease once one is discovered to have those symptoms ahead of testing'*. Comments under their tweets similarly acknowledged their roles in the management of COVID-19, especially when many of the isolation centres in the country were filled to capacity and the virus was spreading amongst Nigerians. Two striking comments from one of Olufunmilayo's tweets, posted by two Twitter users who tested positive for COVID-19 but treated themselves at home with his guidance having been referred by friends, further indicated the influence of the doctors' social media posts and the wide acceptance of their information amongst Nigerians.

While these transnational Nigerians could not solve holistically the health challenges that emanated from COVID-19, they have critically provided important information needed by many Nigerians during the pandemic. This alternative strategy for solving health issues prior to and during the pandemic truncated amongst the elite the supposed outcry on inadequacies of health personnel in Nigeria.



**Abdul-lateef Awodele** is a PhD Student at the Diaspora and Transnational Studies unit, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He is also a research fellow at the Institute of French research in Africa. His research is centred on ethnic migration, diaspora and ethno-diaspora communities, border crossing, diaspora return and cultural participation.

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# Technological tools to facilitate diasporas' transnational engagement through the use of mobile applications and online platforms to respond to the pandemic: impact of technology on the diasporas' cultural and political efforts

**Kazeem Ojoye**

Diaspora is a term used to refer to the expatriate population abroad and the new generation born abroad who may be citizens of their country of residence. They often form a community of individuals in foreign countries, dispersed across several nations, who maintain an affiliation to their country of origin. They have always been contributing to the development of their home countries, either through the private or the public sectors. They assist through remittances, direct investment, invention, and philanthropic contributions, amongst others.

According to the United Nations Population Division estimates, the number of people living outside their country of origin as of 2020 was 281 million, which represents 3.6% of the world population; while the remittances to low and medium-income countries (LMICs), as of 2019, was at \$554 billion. It has been estimated that remittances to LMICs will recover and raise to \$470 billion in 2021 after its drop-down in 2020 to \$445 billion.

Remittances have been a major lifeline and have an enormous impact on the economies at home as they are used to assist families to afford good food, access healthcare facilities, establish small and medium enterprises and cover their basic needs. Remittances have been particularly helpful to ease the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

Over time, technology and online platforms have been used to get information about the host country and connect with other immigrants. It also helps to transfer ideas (social remittances), where migrants are engaged in social or political activism to create awareness about their country of origin in their host country and raise funds to support communities in their country of origin.

Technology has facilitated globalisation. Immigrants connect with each other to decide how they can be of assistance to their home countries, especially when it comes to matters of urgency. This engagement would not be possible if there was no way to connect between migrants across the world. With the advent of technology, the level of diasporic engagement has improved. Technological tools such as mobile gadgets, blogs, teleconferencing apps, social media, help facilitate transnational engagement to maintain a sense of national identity and to foster relationships.

In Nigeria, blogs were used during the pandemic as a tool to post articles and share relevant information so as to keep people updated on what was happening globally and the progress made in curbing the spread of the pandemic. Teleconferencing apps such as Zoom, Google Meet, Skype and the likes were being used to organise seminars to enlighten people, and social media was used as a means of disseminating information and improving engagement.

Diasporas, as part of their philanthropic contribution, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing food, organising sensitisation seminars on basic hygiene to curb the spread of the virus, providing relief palliatives, paying for online courses for university students, and supporting educational programmes that aired on television, radio stations and also on some social platforms where students were taught core subjects so as to make sure they kept learning even while away from schools (see picture 2 below).

In a bid to step in and assist the Nigerian Diaspora Movement during the pandemic, the African Youth Enlightenment Empowerment and Self-Sustainability Initiative (AYEESSI), an international organisation that focuses particularly on youth enlightenment and empowerment, made contributions and responded to the pandemic by partnering with the Oyo State Government, Nigeria. They helped with public sensitisation and distribution of relief items and hand sanitisers to the residents of Oyo state so as to create more awareness about the virus and to provide materials to help curb its spread in the state and country as a whole (see picture 1 below.) Also, the organisation created a programme tagged 'Acknowledging Real Talent' (ART) which is a show that exposed the Nigerian youths to different trainings such as artificial intelligence, design thinking, amongst others to develop the youth's technological competences. The participants also got to sharpen their skills in interpersonal relationships and communication, amongst others.



*Picture 1: AYEESI Executive with Oyo State Hon. Commissioner for youth development during a COVID-19 sensitisation programme*





*Picture 2: Beneficiaries at the COVID-19 sensitisation programme organised by the Oyo State Government, in partnership with AYEESSI*



**Kazeem Ojoye**, the founder of the African Youth Enlightenment Empowerment and Self-Sustainability Initiative (AYEESSI), was born in Nigeria but moved in the early 90s to Germany, where he pursued his secondary and higher education. His passion for charity and for enlightening and empowering as many Nigerian youths as possible made him found AYEESSI. He is a 2-term ex-Financial Secretary of the Nigerian Diaspora Organization Germany (NIDOG) and the present Chairman in Bavaria, Germany, since 2020.



