



Centre for  
Humanitarian  
Dialogue

*Mediation for peace*

# oslo

F O R U M

*papers*

*N°005 - June 2016*

*Diasporas as catalysts  
for dialogue: the cases  
of Laos and Papua*

*Marc Probst*

**Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue**

114, Rue de Lausanne  
1202 Geneva | Switzerland  
t: +41 22 908 11 30  
f: +41 22 908 11 40  
info@hdcentre.org  
www.hdcentre.org

**Oslo Forum**

www.osloforum.org

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

© 2016 – Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Reproduction of all or part of this publication may be authorised only with written consent and acknowledgment of the source.

**Marc Probst**

Executive Director Swiss Academy for Development

I would like to express my gratitude to colleagues and friends who have made this article possible: Michael Vatikiotis who has given me the chance to work on Laos and Papua; Mike Edo Asif with whom I had the pleasure to work on Laos for many years; Shienny Angelita – without her the Papua work would have been impossible; Anagha Neelakantan and the HD Mediation Support and Policy Programme team who provided editorial comments and guidance. Heartfelt thanks also to those I cannot mention but who have contributed to this paper.

# Table of contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. CASE STUDY – LAOS: DIASPORA AS THE MAIN ENTRY POINT</b>	<b>4</b>
Brief background: the Hmong in Laos	4
Engaging the Lao Hmong diaspora and Lao government	4
The parties and their positions	6
The role of the third party	6
<b>2. CASE STUDY – PAPUA: DIASPORA AS NECESSARY FOR DIALOGUE</b>	<b>7</b>
Brief background: conflict in Papua	7
The Papuan diaspora	7
HD's engagement in Papua	7
<b>3. LESSONS LEARNED: REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE STUDIES</b>	<b>9</b>
When to engage a diaspora	9
Understanding the diaspora	9
Identifying relevant actors within a diaspora	9
Possible roles for the diaspora	10
Role of the third-party facilitator	11
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	<b>13</b>

# Introduction

Diasporas are stakeholders in almost all conflicts.<sup>1</sup> As they are often either excluded from processes of conflict resolution or perceived as spoilers, diasporas are rarely understood as actors who can advance peace through dialogue. Using insights from two case studies – Laos and Papua – this paper examines the role played by diasporas as catalysts for dialogue from the perspective of a practitioner. The goal of the paper is to extrapolate insights from these case studies that show how mediators can constructively engage diaspora communities.

---

The role of diasporas is not unconditionally positive or negative. They have a multifaceted role to play in conflict, and can prolong it, reframe it or assist in facilitating peace.

---

This paper begins by reviewing the current debate on the role of diasporas in conflict resolution. It then looks at the experiences of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) – a Swiss-based mediation organisation – in Laos and Papua, and outlines how diasporas can be essential in transforming conflict. The paper highlights learning from these case studies that could be applied elsewhere. This includes suggestions for governments and diasporas, as well as scholars and practitioners, on being more proactive in working with diasporas to resolve violent conflict. The following questions are addressed:

- What are the possible roles of diasporas in conflict resolution?
- What are the advantages of engaging diasporas?
- How can the diasporas' negative potential be transformed into positive roles?
- How to identify relevant actors within diasporas?
- What is the role of third-party mediators and facilitators when working with and through diasporas?

Finally, the paper takes a brief look at some of the challenges and limitations of engagements with diasporas.

## DIASPORAS IN PEACE PROCESSES: PEACEMAKERS OR PEACE BREAKERS?

Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen notes how diaspora and exiled groups tend to play an important, yet controversial, role in conflicts.<sup>2</sup> It is well documented that in some cases diasporas prolong or escalate conflict via economic or political support.<sup>3</sup> The Somali diaspora is often described as a spoiler for a range of reasons including remittances used by militias and warlords.<sup>4</sup> The Armenian diaspora propagated an Armenian identity based on victimhood and resisted Armenian rapprochement with Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Smith notes that: “The study of diasporas in conflict reflects an urgent international social problem.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the capacity of some diasporas to obtain resources that can be used to support armed conflicts is considerable. Fiona Adamson refers to examples of diaspora politics in the 19th and 20th centuries and acknowledges that:

*various aspects of advanced globalisation, including new communication technologies, increased travel and global economic integration, have combined to change the global political environment, making diaspora politics a growing force in the world.*<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Paul Collier notes that, if the size of a diaspora can be presumed to correspond to the volume of financial assistance, it can also be indicative of the intensity of a conflict.<sup>8</sup>

But monetary donations from diaspora members are not only used to reclaim homeland but can also be used to improve living conditions and/or bolster respect for human rights.<sup>9</sup> There is growing evidence that diasporas can be committed to non-violent conflict resolution. Although much literature has focused on the diasporas' negative roles in conflicts in their homelands, an effort has been made in recent years to examine their more ambiguous nature, and to consider the positive contributions that diaspora members can make to their homelands.<sup>10</sup>

Baha Baser finds evidence of diaspora communities effectively contributing to the promotion of peace in their respective homelands, noting: “Diasporas can have a positive political impact on peacemaking through

human rights advocacy raising awareness among the host land public and decision-makers.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, diasporas can potentially direct political support to pro-peace-making actors in their homelands, and can participate in these initiatives as advisers. For example, in Afghanistan in 2001–2002, diasporas were instrumental in the smooth transition of power: they played a critical role in negotiations among various factions leading to the formation of the post-Taliban government.

Giulia Sinatti et al. suggest that collaborations between diasporas and governmental and non-governmental actors can assist in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction initiatives. Indeed, immigrants increasingly succeed in promoting development in their country of origin through the transfer of social, financial, cultural and human capital. Furthermore, diaspora representatives tend to organise themselves in their country of residence, and formulate plans for community development in their homeland.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, the Democratic Progress Institute (2014) rightly states that:

*Rather than try to fit diaspora populations into the mould of peacemakers or peace breakers, it is necessary to understand that their role in conflict is both subjective and fluid. They may be viewed as peacemakers by some and as peace breakers by others, and they may redefine themselves as one or the other as a conflict unfolds.*<sup>13</sup>

The role of diasporas is, therefore, not unconditionally positive or negative. They have a multi-faceted role to play in conflict, and can prolong it, reframe it or assist in facilitating peace.

It is important for peacemakers to be aware of both the positive and negative elements of diasporas in conflicts, and to be able to place them along a continuum. This can enable peacemakers to be more effective when engaging diasporas in dialogue processes.

# 1. Case study – Laos: diaspora as the main entry point

## BRIEF BACKGROUND: THE HMONG IN LAOS

In the early 1960s, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began recruiting indigenous Hmong people in Laos to support covert US activity, which came to be known as the ‘Secret War’. One strategic objective of the US was to defend the Mekong Plain, and therefore Thailand, against the advance of the Pathet Lao (‘Lao Nation’, a Laotian communist movement) and its Vietnamese backers. The US also sought to intercept the personnel and military equipment that flowed from North Vietnam to South Vietnam by way of Laos. Lastly, the US was interested in maintaining an anti-communist government in Laos by supporting the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao. When the US withdrew its troops from the region in 1975, support for the Hmong ceased. The Pathet Lao overthrew the royalist government, leaving the Hmong exposed to accusations of treason.

---

Simply establishing the willingness of both sides to engage was an important initial outcome.

---

An exodus of some 300,000 refugees began, mostly to camps in Thailand.<sup>14</sup> In the years to come, many refugees were resettled to the United States (250,000),<sup>15</sup> with smaller numbers being accepted by France (15,000) and Australia (2,000).<sup>16</sup> Of the Hmong people who remained in Laos, between 2,000 and 3,000 were sent to re-education camps, where as political prisoners they served indeterminate – sometimes life-sentences, enduring hard physical labour and difficult conditions.<sup>17</sup> Other Hmong (estimates vary between 10,000 and 20,000 people), mainly former soldiers and their families, escaped to remote mountain regions. At first, these loosely organised groups staged attacks against Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops. Others remained in hiding to avoid conflict. Initial insurgency activities launched by these small Hmong militias led to military counter-attacks by government forces.

The Hmong communities, which were either resettled or driven into hiding in the mountains, suffered well-documented human rights abuses at the hands of the Laotian government. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International regularly reported on the killing of Hmong people hiding in the jungle, forced labour and sexual abuse of Hmong women and girls by members of the Laotian army, as well as alleged forced repatriation from Thailand.<sup>18</sup>

Today, many Hmong live peacefully in villages and cities in Laos. However, small groups (300–500 people) – including many second- or third-generation descendants of former CIA-backed insurgents – remain internally displaced in remote parts of Laos.<sup>19</sup> Access to Hmong-populated areas in the country remains restricted by the authorities, which fuels concerns in the Hmong diaspora about protection and human rights issues.

## ENGAGING THE LAO HMONG DIASPORA AND LAO GOVERNMENT

Representatives of HD began the process of engagement in 2008. At that time, between 300 and 1,000 Hmong were estimated to be still hiding in the jungle. The total number of Hmong refugees in camps in Thailand was around 5,000 people. It was not known how many of these were in genuine need of international protection, due to limited access by humanitarian organisations and difficulties with screening processes. Human rights groups alleged forced repatriation and expressed concern about individuals within this group who had reason to fear for their safety if forcibly returned to Laos.

The Lao Ministry of Ethnic Affairs handled the country’s estimated 49 ethnic minority groups. Any form of conflict with the Hmong population was officially denied. Officials stressed how well the Hmong are integrated into Lao society, citing their representation in the Politburo as a leading example. Armed attacks on buses and other vehicles in 2003, for example, were carried out by ‘bandits’, argued the Communist Party.<sup>20</sup>

All the same, the Hmong Committee under the umbrella of the Foreign Ministry was established to deal with Hmong in the Phalak resettlement village and other such villages that were under development, as well as with Hmong insurgents who remained in hiding in the jungle. Notably, this committee was the only such body dedicated to a single minority group. The government unofficially acknowledged that an insurgency of sorts still existed. According to sources in the government, there were fewer than 1,000 Hmong guerrilla fighters remaining in the jungle, who continued to receive financial and other support from elements of the Hmong diaspora, mainly based in the US.

The Hmong diaspora has had changing roles since 1975. When HD began working on this conflict in 2008, the diaspora was divided into three factions: liberal groups in favour of reaching out to the Lao government; hardliners; and an entire

spectrum of disparate groups in between these extremes. The hardliners were split into two groups – one working on creating a pure Hmong Nation, and one whose motivation was simply to prolong the conflict for financial reasons. The latter, for example, regularly spread rumours about attacks of the Lao Army against the Hmong. These groups were also in communication with the Hmong hiding in the jungle, stressing that a Hmong army stood ready to support them and fight the Lao government.

In total, some 3–5% of the Hmong population living in Laos was directly affected by the conflict. However, a larger number was suffering the consequences of the situation. The majority of the Hmong diaspora in the US, for example, was wary of travelling to Laos for fear of persecution. If the Hmong conflict were to end, it would have had a major impact on US-based fundraising activities of the diaspora, for whom prolonging the conflict and thus their own personal enrichment, was an objective. According to US-based experts, such fundraising activities represented tens of millions of dollars annually.<sup>21</sup>

Against this background, HD decided to explore whether there was a way to open a discreet dialogue between the Lao government and the Hmong diaspora which might eventually reconcile the two sides. Considering the political sensitivity of the topic and that no other sustainable high-level dialogue or reconciliation initiatives existed, simply establishing the willingness of both sides to engage was an important initial outcome.

HD first tried to find ways to approach the Lao government. It identified a government interlocutor who believed that much of the conflict in Laos was fuelled by the diaspora and was therefore interested in building communication channels with the diaspora via HD. He stressed early on that dialogue would happen directly between the diaspora and the government. HD was welcome to shuttle between the two sides, and advise both sides on the talks.

At the same time, relationships with a range of key figures from across the diaspora were initiated in total secrecy. These discussions posed risks for representatives of the Hmong diaspora who would have been seen as traitors by their communities.

Having identified a willingness among the diaspora and the Lao government to engage in the necessary talks, HD decided to assist in work that would lead to reconciliation. Multiple rounds of discreet and unofficial discussions among the concerned parties of Hmong, Laotian government and

HD mediators took place in Europe and the United States from 2008 to 2011.

These engagements started small and quiet, gradually becoming more open and inclusive. The format of the meetings was initially of bilateral nature between individuals or small groups from the diaspora and the main interlocutor from the Lao government. The content of the discussions was firstly general and then became technical and strategic. At these meetings, both sides got to know each other, outlined their perceptions of the other, and discussed the past and current situation, as well as ideas for the future. Additional objectives of the meetings were to identify confidence-building measures for both sides, and to support the redefinition of the relationship between them. Later rounds aimed at broadening the informal dialogue and getting the support of the Lao government for confidence-building activities to take place in Laos. Areas of particular interest were gender, youth issues, repatriated persons, education, and economic development of Hmong communities in Laos.

Eventually, after four years of cautious preparation with both sides separately, and seven rounds of discreet and informal talks between these conflict parties, HD secured a significant measure of trust with the highly suspicious Hmong diaspora and ultra-cautious Lao government. At the end of 2011, HD's engagement culminated in the visit to Laos of a diverse delegation of key figures from the ethnic-Hmong diaspora in the United States and France. The delegation attended unprecedented high-level meetings on a range of topics with senior officials of the Lao government. This was the first public outcome of the project. The objective of these meetings was to formalise the informal dialogue process that had begun four years earlier.

During these meetings, the parties agreed that the 'Hmong issue' needed to be resolved, the diaspora indicated its willingness to contribute to the future development of Laos, and the government welcomed this. An indicator for progress was the government's willingness to talk with a wider circle of Hmong diaspora members, including individuals who were perceived as hardliners. These talks helped to build trust on both sides, and finally led to discussions for further confidence-building measures, as well as possible areas for cooperation, mainly within education, health and business. As an indirect result, the Lao government implemented a permanent residency law, and then set up a Department for Lao Overseas Affairs. An informal follow-up delegation held additional rounds of talks with the government in May 2012 to continue relationship-building and discuss implementing confidence-building measures.

## THE PARTIES AND THEIR POSITIONS

The original position of the Lao government had been to stress to international groups working in the country that engaging on Hmong-related issues was entirely unacceptable. They viewed 'Hmong issues' as an internal threat to national security. The Lao government was aware that the Hmong diaspora had a destabilising impact on both Laos and Vietnam. When government representatives agreed to meet with members of the diaspora, they stressed that, to solve this conflict, this regional aspect needed to be addressed.

Over time, the government proved its desire for and commitment to continued engagement by gradually bringing the talks with the diaspora into Laos. The government interlocutor had fully briefed the Communist Party leadership in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The civilian side of the government had been supportive of this engagement for some time. The Ministry of Defence was more sceptical, but it had finally deployed a General dealing with Hmong issues for the duration of the meetings in Europe to support the main interlocutor in the background.

---

## On the diaspora side, the main challenge was fragmentation into tight-knit sub-groups.

---

The government had been under international pressure to address the Hmong issue. Progress on this issue would facilitate its efforts to better integrate in the regional and international community and thus enhance the country's social, economic and political stability. Lastly, the government was certainly also interested in benefiting from the potential investment and transfer of know-how from the Hmong diaspora.

On the diaspora side, the main challenge was fragmentation into tight-knit sub-groups. The diaspora's internal divisions were deep and ran along ideological and clan lines. From the outset, HD paid special attention to these factors, through an exhaustive stakeholder mapping and conflict analysis. The Hmong representatives HD chose to work with were selected on the basis of their influence on different clans and interest groups, and/or because they were strategists and thinkers involved in Hmong-related politics. They were established and upcoming leaders, with potential ability to bridge the older Hmong leaders and the younger Hmong generation abroad.

Members of the Hmong diaspora strongly believed that they had a valuable contribution to make to the future of Laos, by providing finance and know-how. Some participants in the dialogue were initially critical of the sincerity of the government. However, during the talks, perceptions changed. While feelings of suspicion never entirely ceased, there was acknowledgement that the situation in Laos has changed and that the time has come to close the chapters of the past.

## THE ROLE OF THE THIRD PARTY

Both sides indicated to HD that the slow and careful approach, including the preliminary rounds of informal dialogue in Europe, had been vital in establishing the willingness to redefine relations and improve official government policies towards Lao-Hmong overseas communities. Such policies included a law allowing Hmong (and other Lao in exile) to apply for permanent residency and to buy property in Laos. As a result of such policies, the Hmong diaspora became more comfortable with the situation in Laos and the hard-line elements in the diaspora lost traction. HD's project managed to re-establish trust between the diaspora, local Hmong and the government. However, continued work was needed in Laos not only to 'cement' this trust, but also to enable wider dialogue between the government, the Hmong and other ethnic groups.

In addition to the rounds of discreet dialogue in Europe and the US, capacity-building events on dialogue were held with the government and the diaspora. HD undertook numerous missions to engage with officials in Vientiane and leading figures in the diaspora's communities and political factions. These actions helped to build the trust that later made it possible for the Lao government to publicly host an all-Hmong delegation in an official capacity.

A critical issue for HD was to maintain low visibility, while at the same time building its profile among the relevant stakeholders. Powerful elements in the diaspora had long fuelled animosity between the diaspora and the Lao government. Thus, publicity of HD's efforts to facilitate a discreet dialogue between members of the diaspora and the Lao government had to be avoided. This was also necessary to provide protection to diaspora leaders participating in the dialogue. Equally, the engagement needed to be kept confidential in Vientiane, where, despite the gradual opening of the government to the outside world, overtures to the Hmong could easily have fallen prey to political infighting. Any leak would have caused the government to stop engaging with the Hmong representatives. Hence, initially only very few top government decision-makers were aware of the process. Towards the end of the process, the visibility of the dialogue increased.

---



## 2. Case study – Papua: diaspora as necessary for dialogue

### BRIEF BACKGROUND: CONFLICT IN PAPUA

West Papua is the largest region of Indonesia, and is located in the western half of the island of New Guinea. Nowadays, the region consists of two provinces, Papua and West Papua. Papua is among Indonesia's richest provinces. The population of about 3.6 million comprises ethnic Papuans, who are Christians, and predominantly Muslim 'migrants' from other parts of Indonesia. Migrants currently constitute more than half of the population. The region was first colonised by the Dutch in 1828, left Dutch rule in 1962 and was briefly under UN administration. In 1963 it joined the Indonesian state. Since then, Papua has been in the grip of violent conflict fuelling a low-intensity armed insurgency and resulting in chronic human rights abuses.

Papuan resistance can be categorised into two groups:

1. Secessionist, as represented by the armed Papua Freedom Organisation (OPM) and many exiled Papuan groups; and
2. Movements willing to remain within Indonesia, though demanding a more efficient implementation of the 2001 Special Autonomy Law No. 21 (Otsus).

Papua is also afflicted with local conflicts among indigenous tribes, and tensions between indigenous people (often Christians) and settlers (often Muslims). In addition to the central question of Papuan identity, land disputes exacerbated by mineral exploitation and the propagation of religious faith provide further factors propelling tension and conflict.

---

In the Papua context, the diaspora was not an entry point for dialogue, but an important stakeholder in resolving conflict.

---

In 1999, the Government of Indonesia began serious efforts to address the province's problems by designating it a special autonomous region. Autonomy was expected to reduce the disparity between Papua and other provinces. In reality, it has not significantly improved governance and development, and, as a result, Papuans are disillusioned with it. This has prompted calls for dialogue, which have been nurtured by two home-grown initiatives. As a result of these initiatives, dialogue has become part of the public discourse about

how to manage the Papuan conflict and a discreet dialogue process is underway involving key government and Papuan stakeholders.

### THE PAPUAN DIASPORA

The Papuan diaspora can be divided into three categories as follows:

1. Those who have lived in Papua, but had to flee due to political and/or security reasons. This group is the most active, and constitutes the diaspora leadership.
2. Second- or third-generation Papuans born and raised in third countries who remain actively involved in Papuan affairs.
3. Second- and third-generation Papuans born abroad and who identify themselves as Dutch or Australian, and who have little interest in the Papuan struggle.

Active Papuan exiles have established representational offices in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, the US and elsewhere, making it relatively straightforward to identify interlocutors. There are only a handful of leaders driving the diaspora's activities and all claim to be legitimate representatives of the Papuan people. Their common cause is to lobby foreign governments and international organisations for a review of the Act of Free Choice and a new act of self-determination, causes regarded with great suspicion within Indonesia.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of 2014, the main diaspora groups set up a coordinating umbrella body, the United Liberation Movement of West Papua (ULMWP). This group combines the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL), Federal Republic of West Papua (NRFPPB), and National Parliament for West Papua (NPWP), and is said to be accepted as a representative Papuan body by groups inside Papua and West Papua.

### HD'S ENGAGEMENT IN PAPUA

The goal of HD's work in Indonesia since 2008 has been to facilitate and support an inclusive dialogue process between the Government of Indonesia and Papuans, resulting in a mutually agreed action plan that helps resolve the Papua conflict. The initiative has established for the first time a suitable framework for dialogue.

A direct result of HD's work has been the establishment of a Papuan civil society network: the Papua Peace Network (PPN). Led by Father Neles Tebay (and initially the Indonesian Institute of Sciences), the Network has in turn designed and initiated dialogue between the Indonesian government and Papuans. HD's support to the establishment of the Network has been through strategic advice and capacity-building on negotiation skills and peace-process design. Prior to the establishment of this network, the Indonesian government had no credible Papuan interlocutor with which to engage.

The PPN's main roles were to act as an internal mediator and facilitator to reduce the fragmentation that characterises Papuan society and to prepare for a future process of dialogue with Jakarta, in terms of both substance and process. The PPN has, for example, conducted over 50 public consultations all over Papua. Starting with indigenous people and progressively bringing in migrants, PPN members have sought to provide a safe space for dialogue, explore how dialogue can provide a useful tool in resolving conflict, and outline a vision for a common future that reflects the aspirations and concerns of Papuan populations and gives legitimacy to the process.

---

## This dialogue effort has contributed to a shift in government policy away from imposing solutions and towards consultation with the Papuan community.

---

In order to bolster this effort to build a dialogue between Jakarta and Papua, in 2008, in cooperation with HD's Indonesian partners, HD initiated contact with the Papuan movement in exile, including the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL). HD believed that it was important to link the PPN with the diaspora to inform them about the work of the PPN, while at the same time opening channels between diaspora and government. The meeting served to assess whether there was space for dialogue. Engaging the Papuan diaspora was important, even though the extent of its influence was not entirely clear from the outset. The diaspora had links to the international community, internationalised the

conflict, and was therefore an important factor that needed to be represented in any kind of dialogue.

The Coalition at that point was the umbrella body of the diaspora, and also the political arm of the armed Papua Freedom Organisation (OPM) based in Papua. HD's objective was to understand its approach to dialogue. The Coalition agreed to collaborate towards the unification of Papuan groups within and outside Papua. In subsequent years, similar meetings have taken place with diaspora groups all around the world to discuss a vision for the future of Papua and criteria for electing a team of negotiators should a dialogue between Jakarta and Papua ever materialise.

Although the diaspora has continued its struggle for self-determination, over time all diaspora groups except one also expressed support for the HD-led dialogue process to seek a solution within the framework of the NRKI (Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia). The diaspora saw the usefulness of the PPN's initiative. Diaspora representatives agreed that such a process is the only realistic way forward, and the only possibility for resolving the conflict. What contributed to their support was fatigue with the decades-long struggle that has not resulted in much progress. The diaspora also understood the importance of meeting with government officials.

However, the goal of independence – similar to that achieved by East Timor in 2002 – is omnipresent. Although this may sound like a contradiction, it is a frequently observed phenomenon: groups demand independence, then agree on some sort of autonomy but never really give up the dream of independence. In Aceh, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was fighting for independence but then accepted autonomy within Indonesia, although the desire for an independent state still exists.

Overall, this dialogue effort has contributed to a shift in government policy away from imposing solutions and towards consultation with the Papuan community. In the last two years, the Indonesian government has become more open towards dialogue with Papuan representatives and expressed interest in meeting the diaspora.

In the Papua context, the diaspora was not an entry point for dialogue, but an important stakeholder in resolving conflict. It is of symbolic importance, and has some influence on the ground, providing inspiration, guidance and funding to certain groups within Papua. The diaspora is linked to the armed Papua Freedom Organisation. For logistical and security reasons, it was often easier to contact the Movement via the diaspora rather than in Papua.

---

## 3. Lessons learned: reflections on the case studies

Engagement with any diaspora should be designed according to the specifics of the particular context. However, some methodological commonalities emerge from the two cases considered here, and may be useful in other contexts.

### WHEN TO ENGAGE A DIASPORA

The two case studies of Laos and Papua have some similar characteristics, leading to the conclusion that, in intractable conflicts, diasporas can play a useful role towards conflict resolution. When governments officially deny that any form of conflict or even tension exists, the diaspora may already be involved in some form, and may well have symbolic or monetary significance to either the government or groups operating on the ground. In Laos and Papua, access to conflict areas is very limited for national as well as international actors and, therefore, any form of non-military third-party intervention is very difficult. In Laos, the diaspora was the only entry point for dialogue; in Papua it was one of many stakeholders in other settings.

### UNDERSTANDING THE DIASPORA

When a third party interested in working in a conflict is conducting its initial conflict analysis, it should carefully consider the role of the diaspora, and make a strategic decision about whether it is an important player. Diasporas are often highly fragmented, with radical, moderate or indifferent factions.<sup>23</sup> The radical factions often cause and help prolong or expand the conflict.

In the case of Laos, elements of the Hmong diaspora were spreading misinformation and propaganda among both the diaspora and Hmong communities. However, within the broader diaspora, there was a strong desire to return home without fear, for the purposes of family reunification and holidays, rather than for large-scale resettlement. The vast majority had no stake in an armed struggle. For the third party, thus, it is essential to gain extensive familiarity with the possibility of conflicting goals within diaspora politics before engaging any members of the diaspora. In the case of Laos, it was first about identifying the underlying motivation of the diaspora, analysing what was possible in the current political context, and then working with the politically motivated diaspora on defining its role and strategies towards dialogue and reconciliation.

There are some common reasons for diaspora involvement in the country of origin. Diaspora groups are often committed

to preserving or restoring 'their nation', although this can entail a political vision that conflicts with that of the ruling government – as in the Papua case for example where the diaspora for many years called for independence and was not willing to discuss any middle way forward. Over time, a diaspora may seek accommodation, rather than comprehensive reform.

Conflict-generated diasporas characteristically develop networks based on the solidarity of shared ethnicity that emphasise identity, and work to keep hopes of political change alive from abroad. In Indonesia, many prominent diaspora leaders have been involved in establishing the armed group, the Papua Freedom Organisation. They feel committed to the organisation's cause but have also directly experienced the consequences of this conflict. These leaders, in HD's experience, usually remain well connected throughout their lifetime to their country of origin, not only with people on the ground but also with governments and international and civil society organisations. However, second and third generations, with exceptions, tend to settle into their life in their new place of residence. They often ideologically support the 'cause of their people' but are less active or connected than first-generation leaders.

---

Diasporas, through a capacity-building process, moderate their often hard-line stance and start developing constructive approaches to conflict resolution.

---

### IDENTIFYING RELEVANT ACTORS WITHIN A DIASPORA

A further challenge is identifying diaspora members who already play or could play a positive role in conflict resolution. In Laos, HD consulted widely with academics, diplomats and civil society groups in the US, Laos and Thailand, as well as with Hmong communities mainly in the US, France and Australia to map the diaspora. This allowed HD to identify individuals of suitable age, gender, clan affiliations, religious backgrounds and professions who were willing to work on improving the relationships with the Lao government and with each other. Simultaneously, HD was in contact with the Lao government to find out which, if any, of these individuals were

unacceptable to them as interlocutors. In Papua, it was a few individuals – some living in Papua and some researchers from other parts of Indonesia – who made a dialogue process likely.

HD built the capacity of the identified individuals on a range of matters, including process and strategy design and negotiation skills, and helped advise them on how to dialogue with the government. This led to the setting up of the Lao Hmong Overseas Steering Committee (LHOC) and the Papua Peace Network. LHOC is comprised of 20 mainly US-based Hmong leaders who have demonstrated commitment to improving the diaspora's relationship with the Lao government and working towards reconciliation.

Building the capacity for dialogue, mediation and facilitation of diaspora members often helps the diaspora assess realistic options to move forward and facilitate participation in something positive. In many cases, this means that diasporas, through a capacity-building process, moderate their often hard-line stance and start developing constructive approaches to conflict resolution. Therefore, capacity-building can be a way to transform the diaspora's role in a conflict.

In most if not all contexts there is not 'one diaspora'. There are different, often opposing groups that form the diaspora. Capacity-building combined with bilateral meetings with (upcoming) leaders makes it possible to form a coordination body of members from different diaspora factions. This makes it easier to know who to talk to. And this further supports the transformation of the diaspora's role into a positive one, by mitigating diaspora internal conflict. Action is concerted towards resolving the conflict at hand, rather than in-fighting, which often means greater coordination and cooperation.

The process in Laos started with the government and the diaspora only, leaving local communities almost entirely outside. HD as well as the diaspora in talks with the government brought up the situation of local Hmong, and discussed measures to improve their situation. The diaspora, from the outset, talked through its own channel with Hmong leaders to get an understanding of their grievances and vision for a better future.

### POSSIBLE ROLES FOR THE DIASPORA

Diaspora contributions to dialogue and peacemaking take many shapes. Contributions are often made by individuals – for example, through the sending of remittances to family members – but may also be made collectively.

Diasporas can serve as an entry point into mediating (or facilitating) dialogue in a conflict as they are usually already involved in some way. While they might be perceived as being responsible for causing or prolonging conflict, home governments at the same time may perceive talking to diasporas as less intrusive than engaging with third parties.<sup>24</sup> Diaspora members, in addition, often have access to members sharing their ethnicity who live in areas not accessible for third parties.

## The role of diaspora representatives may shift over the course of a process, and the same individuals may have more than one role.

Diaspora members are further valuable as advisers to the facilitator. They are relative easily accessible, and have knowledge about the context and dynamics not available to outsiders. They may help determine acute needs in their country of origin, and can also keep third parties abreast of the latest developments – especially in relation to peripheral areas and/or issues not covered in international news media. In a context of a tribal society such as Papua, such inside expertise is crucial. Diaspora motivations (political, financial, ideological or otherwise), however, need to be carefully examined and understood, and the 'advice' provided to the facilitator must be taken with a great deal of caution and an awareness of these conflicting motivations. Members of the Hmong diaspora, despite being seen by the Lao government as troublemakers and having fled several decades ago, have connections not only to activists in their countries of origin and residence, but also often to government officials.

Diaspora members can further serve as mediators and facilitators between different diaspora factions. In the Laos case, the group built with help from HD was able to moderate hardliners in the diaspora, disseminate accurate information about the situation of the Hmong in Laos, and facilitate discussions with opposing groups. This helped to reduce the fragmentation both within the diaspora and in communities in Laos. What is important is that diasporas have opportunities to apply what is learned during capacity-building sessions. Their voices need to be taken seriously and they need to be given a role in, for example, agenda-setting.

Diasporas tend to organise themselves in their countries of residence so that they can actively engage in community

initiatives and development-oriented interventions, be involved in decision-making, or influence policy-makers in their countries of both residence and origin.<sup>25</sup> Each of these roles may prove useful in the course of a peace process.

The diaspora can enhance communication, acting as a bridge between conflicting parties, or passing messages between officials in their countries of origin and potential peacemakers or other stakeholders interested in peace-building in the country of residence. The diaspora can do this in some cases in both official and unofficial capacities.

As HD experienced in Laos, members of the diaspora may also be one party to the dialogue. This is in cases where the diaspora has significant influence on the course of the conflict.

Once the dynamic between parties has improved, diaspora leaders may return to their home country and contribute to development. As a result of this engagement, many diaspora representatives involved in the processes described here now spend time in their home countries in volunteer positions – advising local businesses, sharing experience with the government or teaching English. It is important to note that the role of diaspora representatives may shift over the course of a process, and the same individuals may have more than one role.

### ROLE OF THE THIRD-PARTY FACILITATOR

The engagement of diasporas requires an enabling environment. Diaspora members spontaneously develop networks, and transfer resources and knowledge back and forth. Third parties can make constructive use of these resources by strategically choosing to work with diasporas. Such strategic engagement may support the transformation of ‘negative’ diaspora roles into more positive ones.

---

Sealing a deal is never an end in itself, and therefore the rules of engagement must be adhered to at all times.

---

Governments need third parties to reach out to diasporas because it is often politically too risky for governments to do it by themselves. Working through a third party is therefore ‘safer’ and often makes it more likely that such under-

takings remain confidential. In case of failure, the third party and not the government is to be blamed which is a convincing argument for many politicians and officials. Third parties specialising in mediation have the expertise and the resources (including time) required to reach out to diasporas without any political agenda. This, in addition to the fact that third parties are often relatively powerless, makes them less threatening than governments for diasporas to talk to.

Third parties can assume various roles and offer a range of services, all depending on the context. A key role certainly is their ability to open channels of communication, initially often through delivering messages between diasporas and governments. At a more advanced stage, third parties can at the very least facilitate dialogue between diasporas and governments; at times they are in a mediating role. If not between governments and diasporas, mediation is frequently needed within the diaspora and/or the government because of the often fragmented and conflicting internal factions. As outlined above, a key role of third parties can be to build the capacities of both sides in terms of dialogue, facilitation and mediation. This often softens hard-line positions and opens the window for dialogue.

Time and again, the litmus test for third parties is to keep confidentiality. The role they assume is always privileged with access to very sensitive information, which could do considerable harm if leaked in violation of the rules of engagement. Therefore, third parties should not be seen speaking to the press unless agreed by all parties involved. Third parties further need to be careful to remain impartial. It is not up to them to judge which position or cause is the ‘right’ one. Their role cannot be more than identifying pragmatic ways forward that are often imperfect but in the end contribute to reduced human suffering.

Last but not least, in the event that a mediation process is successfully concluded, the third party may play an oversight role, whether actively or passively, officially or not. A third-party facilitator must work to obtain this mandate from both concerned parties, and must never lose sight of this function, which would translate into keeping up to date with the concerned parties and routine follow-ups. Sealing a deal is never an end in itself, and therefore the rules of engagement must be adhered to at all times.

# Conclusion

Diasporas often represent hardened positions; they tend to be fragmented and have a 'double face'. They often support opposing causes, such as in Papua where they supported dialogue while also calling for independence.

Third parties need to carry out careful stakeholder mapping, carefully cultivate relationships and provide regular coaching to their contacts. This requires time, and ideally a trusted contact in the diaspora who is identified early on. Conflict resolution and mediation are not short-term processes producing miracles quickly. This applies equally to dialogue efforts with diasporas. Conflict parties join a dialogue process with pre-formed opinions and hard-line expectations and, if anything, they are often chosen by their parties for this very quality. The only consolation is that, in some cases, hardliners come to accept that sooner or later they will have to make some compromises. In such cases, this awareness opens the door to mediation. However, dialogues processes may last for a long time, even in cases where international pressure for a settlement is strong and consistent.

---

**Conflict resolution and mediation are not short-term processes producing miracles quickly. This applies equally to dialogue efforts with diasporas.**

---

Maintaining confidentiality about the third party's role and the nature of engagements within both diaspora circles and governments is another key challenge. In the context of such volatile political dynamics, avoiding exposure (at any level) of the third party's role and overall objectives is important. People around a negotiating table can be ruthless if their secrets are leaked to the general public or to persons they consider enemies of progress.

It is a further challenge to convince donors of the worthiness of this approach, especially if the diaspora's influence is unclear. Funders tend to provide grants for activities on the ground, and do not always see the rationale for engaging with diasporas. With diasporas, continuous engagement is necessary, which also helps to minimise the re-emergence of fragmentation within the diaspora as observed in the Papua case study. In this context it was important to have a bridge-building function between the diaspora and those on the inside. Diaspora

actors, due to their emotional link to their home country, are usually committed for the long term; the agenda of third parties and donors is in contrast often short term. Therefore, donor support can help diasporas play a more positive role in conflict resolution.

Public perceptions about diasporas – both abroad and whenever they return home – are a critical part of any comprehensive diaspora strategy. Even if a large part of a diaspora is supportive of conflict resolution, hardliners that are often better organised have huge spoiler potential. As various stakeholders join a process, it is imperative that public perceptions of the conflict and its context are taken into consideration.

Diasporas and diasporic ethnic-politics are often highly volatile and fractious. However, diaspora communities, particularly in intractable conflicts, can be catalysts for dialogue to help facilitate sustainable peace and reconciliation and contribute to social advancement, particularly if supported by impartial third parties. It takes considerable time and resources to identify which elements within a diaspora can play a positive role, to strengthen these elements, and at times build their capacity so that they are able to contribute to the process. There is no doubt that working with diasporas is often sensitive and requires careful planning and the ability to work confidentially.

In this paper, the case studies of Laos and Papua exemplify how engagement with diasporas can be pursued. These cases also demonstrate that, in some circumstances, diaspora communities can be actors who care deeply for the financial and social stability of their people 'at home'. With this view in mind, third parties may want to assess rigorously whether and how diasporas can use their influence to contribute to peace.

# Endnotes

- 1 There is no universally accepted definition of diaspora. Shain and Barth suggest “a people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland” Shain, Y. and Barth, A. (2003) ‘Diasporas and international relations theory’, *International Organization* 57(3): 452.
- 2 Ostergaard-Nielsen, E. (2006) *Diasporas and Conflict Resolution: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?* Copenhagen: DIIS.
- 3 Zunzer, W. (2004) *Diaspora Communities and Civil Conflict Transformation*. Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, Berghof Occasional Paper 26.
- 4 Abdi Abdile, M. (2010) *Diasporas and their Role in the Homeland Conflicts and Peacebuilding: The Case of Somali Diaspora*. Diaspeace Working Paper 7.
- 5 Shain, Y. and Barth, A. (2003) ‘Diasporas and international relations theory’, *International Organization* 57(3): 468.
- 6 Smith, H. (2007) ‘Diasporas in international conflict’ in H. Smith and P. Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-makers or Peace-wreckers?* Tokyo/New York: United Nations University Press, pp. 3–17.
- 7 Adamson, F. (2015) *Blurring the Lines: Diaspora Politics and Globalized Constituencies*. Working paper. WPR: World Politics Review.
- 8 Collier, P. (2011) *Conflict, Political Accountability and Aid*. Oxon: Routledge.
- 9 Collier, P. (2011) *Conflict, Political Accountability and Aid*. Oxon: Routledge.
- 10 More authors have started acknowledging the positive role diasporas may play. See, for example: Hall, J. and Swain, A. (2007) ‘Catapulting conflicts or propelling peace: diasporas and civil wars’ in A. Swain, R. Amer and J. Öjendal (eds), *Globalization and Challenges to Building Peace*. London: Anthem Press; Cochrane, F. (2007) ‘Civil society beyond the state: the impact of diaspora communities on peace building’, *Global Media Journal: Mediterranean Edition* 2(2): 19-29; Horst, C. (2007) *The Role of Diasporas in Civil War*. Working paper presented at the CSCW workshop on the transnational facets of civil war, PRIO, Oslo, pp.1-11; European Union Institute for Security Studies (2012) *Diaspora Groups in Peace Processes: Lessons Learned and Potential for Engagement by the EU*. Africa Briefing Report; Brinkerhoff, J. (2011) ‘Diasporas and conflict societies: conflict entrepreneurs, competing interests or contributors to stability and development?’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 11(02): 115–143.
- 11 Baser, B. (2015) *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective*. England: Ashgate Publishing, p.36.
- 12 Sinatti, G. et al. (2010) *Diasporas as Partners in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding*. The Netherlands: African Diaspora Policy Centre, p.6.
- 13 Democratic Progress Institute (2014) *Makers or Breakers of Peace. The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Resolution*. UK: DPI.
- 14 Amnesty International (2007) *Lao People’s Democratic Republic – Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong under Threat*, p. 5. The Hmong population worldwide is estimated to be 4–5 million (Lemoine, J. (2005) ‘What is the number of the (H)mong in the world?’, *Hmong Studies Journal* 6: 1–8).
- 15 Wayne, C. and Udalova, V. (2006) ‘Who is Hmong? Questions and evidence from the U.S. Census’, *Hmong Studies Journal* 6: 1–20.
- 16 As well as in France and Australia, Hmong live in French Guiana (1,500), Canada (600) and Argentina (600) (Lemoine, J. (2005) ‘What is the number of the (H)mong in the world?’, *Hmong Studies Journal* 6: 1–8).
- 17 Vang, T. (2013) *A History of the Hmong: From Ancient Times to the Modern Diaspora*. Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu Press.
- 18 See for example: Amnesty International (2007) *Lao People’s Democratic Republic – Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong under Threat*.
- 19 See, for example, reports and press releases of Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières or Human Rights Watch. One exemplary report is: Amnesty International (2007), *Lao People’s Democratic Republic – Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong under Threat*.
- 20 In 2003, a series of attacks was carried out on buses in Laos, killing about 20 people including foreign tourists. Whereas most experts agree that insurgent elements were responsible for these attacks, the Lao government explained that ‘bandits’ were behind it.
- 21 Discussions between HD representatives and US-based Hmong experts as well as representatives of the Hmong diaspora, 2009.
- 22 The Act of Free Choice was a vote in 1969, observed by the UN, when 1,025 people from Papua who were selected by the Indonesian Military voted publicly to relinquish their sovereignty in favour of Indonesian citizenship.
- 23 See for example: Smith, H. (2007) ‘Diasporas in international conflict’ in H. Smith and P. Stares (eds), *Diasporas in Conflict: Peace-makers or Peace-wreckers?* Tokyo/New York: United Nations University Press.
- 24 See, for example: Horst, C. (2007) *The Role of Diasporas in Civil War*. Working paper presented at the CSCW workshop on the transnational facets of civil war, PRIO, Oslo; European Union Institute for Security Studies (2012) *Diaspora Groups in Peace Processes: Lessons Learned and Potential for Engagement by the EU*. Africa Briefing Report.
- 25 Baser, B. and Swain, A. (2008) ‘Diasporas as peacemakers: third party mediation in homeland conflicts’, *International Journal on World Peace* 25(3): 7–28 (*International Journal on World Peace*, 2008, 25/3).

**oslo**  
F O R U M  
*papers*