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Knowledge diasporas: moving frontier of development

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Abstract :

Today, the diaspora appears as a possible asset, for many countries' development. In this vision, reconnection with high skilled expatriate human resources has acquired a particular momentum. However, this focus outside of the national territory suffers from a lack of tools to translate itself into a tangible contact and actual mobilization. Evidence brought from the CIDESAL project, about Latin-american diasporas, reveals the experimental works and reflections attempted in this direction. Migration trends evolution, occurring at the global as well as regional level, points to the reinforcing process of diaspora constitution. It deserves to be followed and sometimes managed, requiring information gathering and the shaping of adequate instruments[1]. The chapter looks at both inputs and brings basic principles for a fertile relationship between diasporas and countries.

Biodata :

Jean-Baptiste Meyer is senior researcher at IRD. He coordinated the international project "CIDESAL", Creation of Knowledge Diasporas Incubators for Latin America – with the purpose of concretely strengthening network links for effective developments.

[1] Parts of this text have been produced for the introductory note – "a pragmatic approach to diasporas"- and conclusive remarks –"digital humanities and transnational governance"- of the book: Meyer J-B. (ed.) 2015, *Diaspora : Towards the New Frontier*, IRD/UDELAR editions, Paris/Montevideo, https://www.documentation.ird.fr/hor/fdi:010065854

Ancient concept, new evidence and fashionable reference

Diaspora… The word until recently sounded like an original form exotic organization, like a myth attached to some kind of an exceptional society. When we started using it to describe contemporary patterns of societal relationships during the 1990s (Sheffer 1986, Cohen 1997, Meyer et al. 1997), we were first received with surprise, then often with strong skepticism (Gaillard and Gaillard 2003, Lowell and Gerova 2004). Surprisingly, in one single decade, what was once a vision has become a conventional view. Doubts quickly vanished under convergent evidence and the term 'diaspora' imposed itself as a major concept to describe a globalizing world in a socio-historical perspective (Dufoix 2008, Gamlen 2014).

After the paradigm shift announced in the late 1990s (Meyer and Charum 1995, Khadria 2001), the emerging migration-development nexus has heavily referred to the expatriates' connection as a positive asset (Faist, Fauser, Kivisto 2011). Interest has quickly developed from international cooperation agencies, finding a promising opportunity for effective North-South transfers, relieved from exogenous or tied aid problems.

The recent awareness of diasporas' importance and resources (IRD / Barré et al. 2003, World Bank / Kuznetsov 2006, OECD 2012) soon faced policy issues and the question of feasibility (EPFL 2010, UNCTAD 2012, France MAE and OECD 2012, Diaspora Matters 2012, IOM and MPI 2012). The very titles of the publications from these agencies point to their concern about instrumental answers to the challenge of engaging the diasporas in development processes[2]. After the inflation of expectations that diasporic initiatives and resources could help set up capacities in developing countries, the policy concern has, today, become essentially pragmatic.

How can diasporas be used for creative purposes, in development perspectives?

This is today's big question, as pointed at by previous endeavors mentioned above. However, we suggest a different approach. Instead of focusing on political, organizational and management proposals, it appears necessary to turn towards a more fundamental

[2] (emphasis in bold from the author) « Scientific diasporas : **How can** developing countries **benefit from** their scientists and engineers abroad ? », (Barré et al. 2003); "Diaspora networks and the international migration of skills: **how countries can draw** on their talent abroad" (Kuznetzov 2006); "an **action oriented toolkit** to assess **good practices** of skilled migrants and scientific diasporas" (EPFL 2010); "**Harnessing** remittances and diaspora knowledge to build productive capacities" (LDCs UNCTAD annual report 2012); "**Harnessing** the skills of migrants and diasporas to foster development: policy options" (MAE-OECD 2012); "Global Diaspora strategies **toolkit**: **harnessing the power** of global diasporas" (Diaspora matters 2012); "Developing a **road map** for engaging diasporas in development: a **handbook** for policy makers and practitioners in home and host countries" (IOM-MPI 2012)

approach. It assumes that diasporas, as transnational entities, require a kind of post-state governance. And it looks for new tools appropriate for this.

In Latin America today, diasporas receive much political attention. Like in many parts of the world, they are essentially perceived as extensions of national constituencies. To represent this, central administrations often symbolically stretch the national territory, to include the diaspora within a new division, in addition to the traditional ones. For instance, in Argentina, it is the 23rd Province (*Provincia veintitres*), while in Uruguay, there is the 20th Departement (*Departamento Veinte*). It is a proper way to epitomize an entity which is impossible to circumscribe and to try to deal with it in a juridically satisfactory manner. But it is also a denial of the intrinsic extraterritoriality of the diaspora. It is a semantic inclusion within traditional borders of something which remains actually beyond, by definition. It is, thus, an illusory shortcut to translate what the countries are actually trying to reach: their new frontier.

From old myth to new prospects

For the historian Arnold Toynbee, the diaspora is the normal step between the ending nation-state system and the advent of a world society (Toynbee, cited in Dufoix, Guerassimov and Tinguy 2010). In such a perspective, the current expansion of national policies through diasporic networks may be interpreted as an attempt to adapt locally bounded entities to purely global challenges. The concept of frontier - from American history (Turner 1895, White 1991)- deserves to be imported here since it grasps the double dimension of both elusive limits and mobilizing dynamics, through which collective identity is maintained, updated and developed.

However, is the diaspora discourse of today a performative myth like the frontier speech of the past? In order to go beyond simply rhetorical arguments which cannot, alone, sustain collective action for long, there is a definite need for means and investments. This is where all the policy documents referred to above come into the picture. They try to operationalize the objective of diaspora engagement and mobilization. Public policy aims and programmes are thus listed and, sometimes, implemented. A handbook collecting best practices recorded in many different contexts is proposed, providing governments with a standard scheme of activities development (IOM and MPI 2012). Isomorphism, derived from the transposition of national experiences produced somewhere, to other countries and settings, is even noticed (Gamlen 2014), with obvious risks of irrelevant organization.

In fact, the implementation of a diaspora strategy collides with the limits of traditional public policy, within nation-state borders. For instance, how can a government plan actions with the

country's expatriates when no –or only a few- statistics and knowledge about them depends on its own services? How can a reach out policy be actually designed and organized if most of these expats are not well identified and located? How can actions be proposed to them if their skills and abilities are not well defined and expressed in accordance with their potential partners' objectives? Lastly, where can shared activities be organized and take place if there is no common space for interaction?

Pragmatic leap

Traditional international cooperation may partly overcome some of these limitations. Information exchange, profiling and matching exercises, distant communication devices etc. have, for instance, been developed in this context by both origin and hosts countries together in the co-development programs. Multilateral agencies have also gained momentum with their unrivalled ability to deal with the dispersal of diasporic communities (IOM MEDA programme, EU African Diaspora project, for example). However, there is an important constraint over these attempts: information remains essentially subordinated to national settings, not only for data collection but also for its very definition, production and access; and space is bounded by sovereignties with impossible overlap, making transnational interaction dynamics virtually impossible, if no substitute is found for an effective meeting place.

Every diaspora project today is confronted with this contradiction: national conditions for a transnational purpose. Countries remain "containers" and "methodological nationalism paradigm" still rules the world (Beck 2006, Glick Schiller 2009). To escape from these enclosures and proceed towards a new frontier, information and space should no longer depend on nation-states' borders. The CIDESAL project created devices that were less state dependent in order to produce these new conditions. It focused on three countries with precocious diaspora policies: Argentina, Uruguay and Colombia, and drew lessons from their history. It explored new information sources, channels and indicators. It experimented with original instruments to open room for co-actions of distant potential partners.

In doing so, a mix of social and engineering sciences was used. History, anthropology, sociology, economics, demography, geography, communication, information science and technology were mobilized. Six teams from public and private organizations have been involved for five years, in four countries. The results of these efforts are some paths opened in the open field of cosmopolitanism that this book presents. Following the pragmatic approach of former explorers, in search of new tools, it is a genuine attempt of actual

“realistic cosmopolitanism”, in line with Ulrich Beck’s vision at the eve of the millennium. These concrete steps in the wild west translate utopia into credible options.

Taking the new context into account

Today, geopolitical and technological transformations have substantially modified the conditions for mobilisation of the diasporas. Recurring socio-economic challenges in the North and rapid growth of opportunities in certain regions of the South have generated new dynamics. These have in turn led to emerging countries eventually becoming poles of attraction (see other chapters in this volume). In Latin America, for example, the economies now require an influx of skills and calling on the diaspora has thus become more pressing and more specific. In Uruguay, the diaspora is invited to fill in particular shortages in qualified employee profiles that are not exclusively intellectual, such as of skilled trades or technicians (Lema 2015). Neighboring Argentina presses for the return of its researchers through repatriation programmes that are heavily advertised (Luchilo 2015). Brazil offers mobility grants to attract senior and junior academic personnel from abroad to its universities and laboratories. For these countries and others, the diaspora is explicitly called upon to participate in training their human resources that are required for current developments more than ever before.

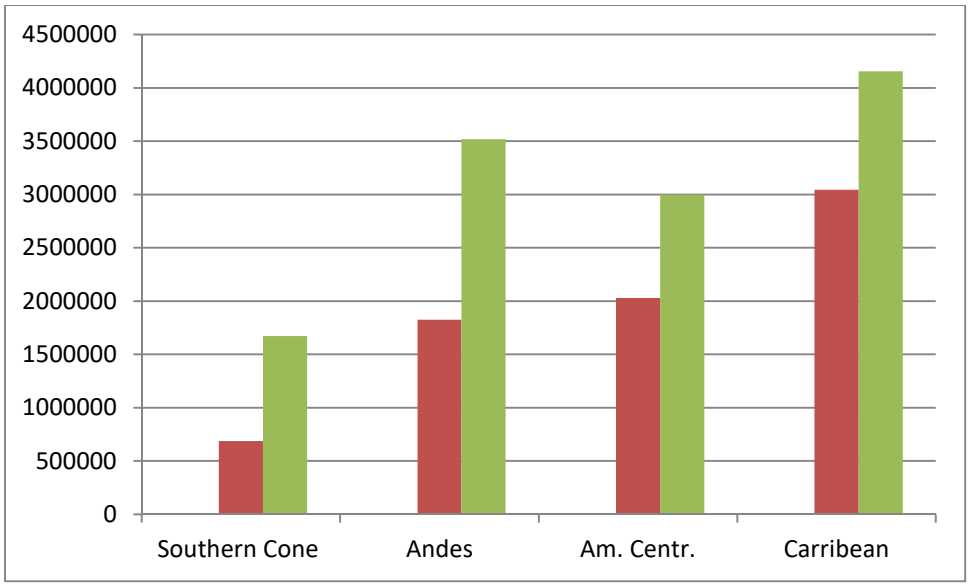
In contrast to the past when pro-active re-insertion programmes scarcely expressed a specific and constructed demand, those of today are based on needs that are more clearly identified and have better data-mining tools. The dynamics of the emergence of these countries on one hand and the *ad hoc* activation of the diaspora on the other are, therefore, complementary in the same way as the findings of the case studies on China and India, which are often cited.

Evolving migration from Latin America

Like most regions in the world, migration to and from Latin America has significantly increased. Recent OECD data show that countries of this organization receive in 2010 50% more migrants than they used to, only 10 years before, with a total of 15 439 162 persons. Interestingly, the pattern of geographical orientation has moved from North America to other attractive regions: mainly Europe but also South America itself. In particular, Spain and Portugal have seen a tremendous increase of their immigrants from this region, from 693 000 to 1 936 000 and 66 550 to 150 000, respectively. Such an increase, over 100%, is much

more than what any other receiving country, in particular big ones like Canada and the United States of America, experienced during the same period. The locus of emigration within the region also shifted from the north to the south, with a diminishing relative part of Central America and the Caribbean while the one of Andean countries and those from the southern cone expanded (see figure 1).

Figure 1 : Evolution of Latin American emigration per sub-region of origin



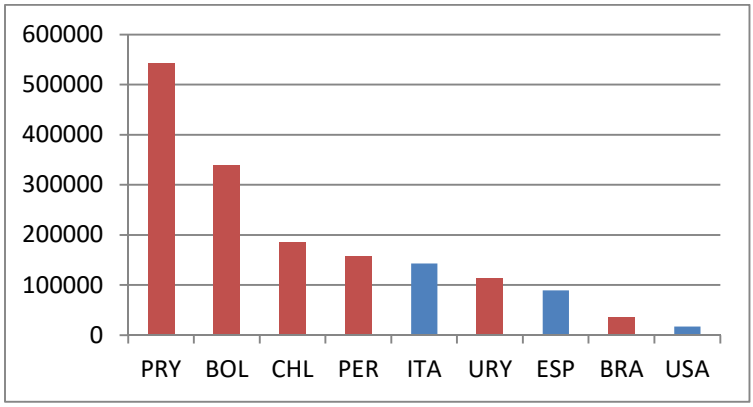
As for all regions, the skills component of the migrant populations has increased. ¼ has a higher education degree, in 2010 and it represents 8% of the people of the same level at home. Such a rate is above all the one of other developing regions except sub-Saharan Africa. It varies excessively among countries. Caribbean islands have exceptional proportions (50% and over) while Brazil is, at the opposite, with a uniquely low rate of professionals abroad, though higher than in 2000 (from 1.8 to 2.6%). Argentina essentially holds a highly skilled diaspora (40% of all migrants having a university degree). Interestingly enough, these two countries have also become magnets for human resources from their neighbors and remote parts of the world as well.

Argentina and Brazil immigrant populations today are quite different (see figure 2a and 2b)

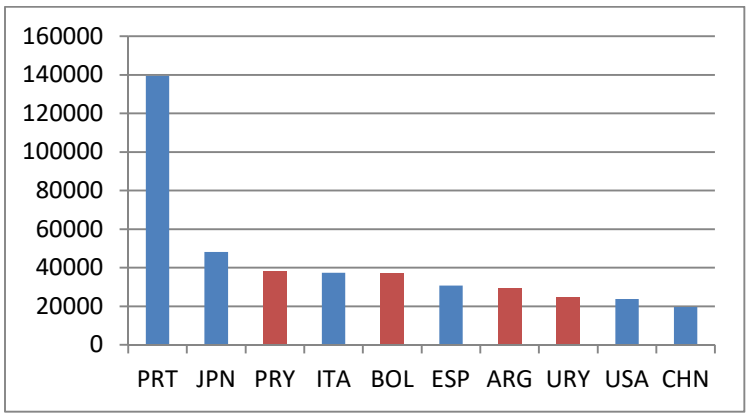
Figure 2a and 2b

Main origin countries of immigrants to Argentina (a) and Brasil (b)

a)



b)

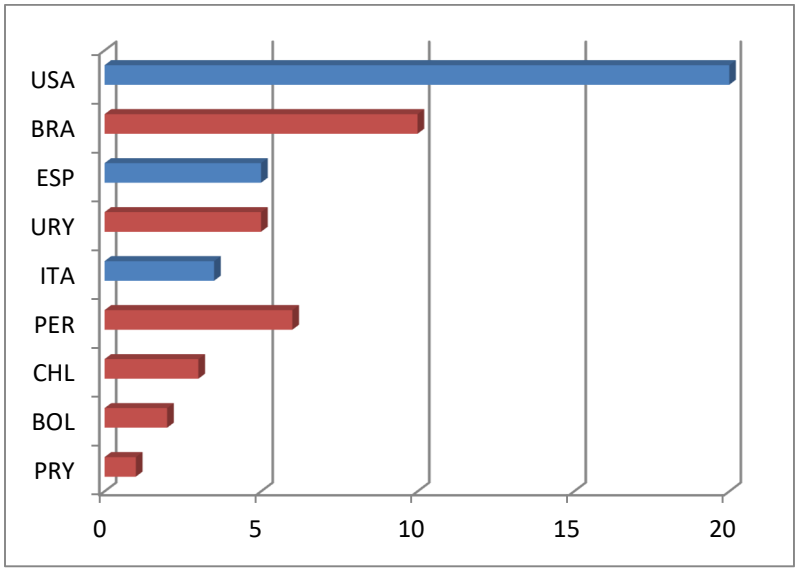


While Argentina basically attracts neighboring populations, people migrating to Brazil come from very different locations. If the traditional European contacts of Argentina (Italy and Spain) are expectedly reasonably well represented, the outstanding part of Portuguese migrants in Brazil is a clear demonstration of an exceptional link between both poles of the migration system.

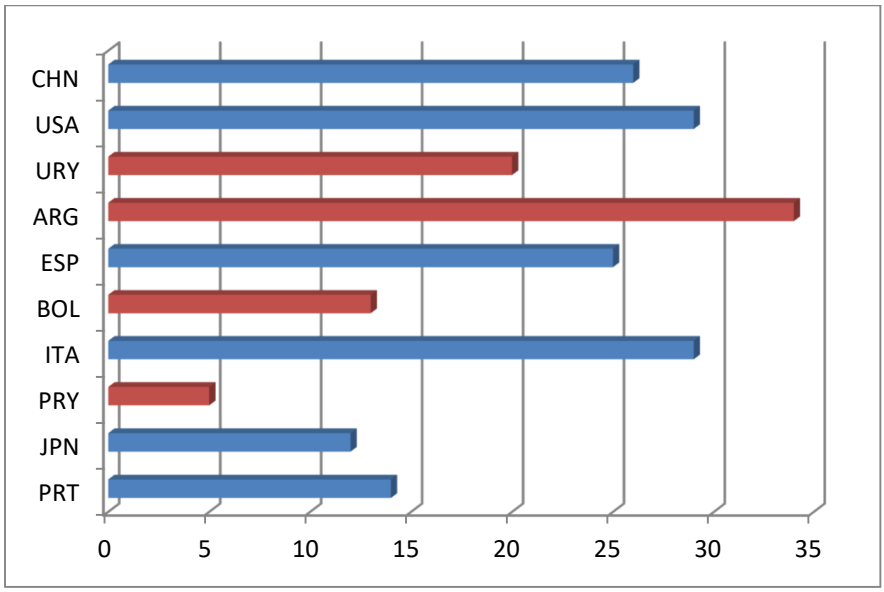
When looking at skills component of these populations, there are interesting differences figures 3a and 3b).

3a and 3b : Argentina and Brazil, skilled migrants population per country of origin

3a



3b



While migrants in Brazil are often highly skilled, it is much less the case for Argentina. Moreover, skilled migrants in Argentina principally come from highly developed countries, or emerging neighbors, Meanwhile, Brazil receives skilled migrants from all sorts of countries. Its main migrants sending ones (Portugal and Japan) - highly developed- have rather a below average proportion of professionals among their emigrants to Brazil.

A clear picture of these mobility and diaspora exchange between Europe and Latin America, especially the Southern Cone, is that there is an intensive circulation going on and that recent years have significantly expanded this movement, in both directions.

New features of diasporas

Today, the diaspora is also better known than before. Its dimensions and the diversity of its components are not without some surprises. The Latin American observatory of diasporas (MICAL) has revealed that the previously visible parts of them – composed of the well-established so-called 'homeland associations' – represent only a small fraction of the highly skilled expatriate populations who maintain an effective professional link with their countries of origin (Meyer 2015).

In short, it appears that the new form of the diaspora link is, more often at individual level and direct, without going through an association or a formal collective entity. Despite being dispersed and fragmented, this new form of diaspora linkage is particularly productive because it signifies its presence by its results in terms of scientific and technical cooperation.

The fragmented character of the diaspora adapts well to the current configurations of *internet*, with a *web* 2.0 more favorable to individual interactions through *blogs* and *microblogs* or small, focused, reactive groups, such as those enabled by the social networks with exchange of multi-media contents appropriate for facilitating the transnational co-existence of migrants with their diverse backgrounds (Blanco 2015).

It would not be trivial to observe that computer scientists originating from India who shuttled between Bangalore and Silicon Valley – paragons of the innovative action of the diasporas – were among the first to tap massively into the blogosphere. This enabled them to exchange technical information, market signals, job opportunities and strategic guidance.Such remote interaction could eventually make it possible to overcome a limitation of the earliest diaspora networks: that of communication by mailing lists to begin with, and later on through the website of the association. While the first frequently choked, by excessive "noise", the real actions under way (Pellegrino 2015), the second, too hierarchical (*top down* from the website to the members or occasional visitors), lacked spontaneous initiatives to spread adequately (Caplan 2015).

Diaspora incubators

After several years of accumulated experience and many examples of networks, it was possible to identify the need for support systems for the creation, development and continuity of diaspora links. The idea of diaspora incubators condenses this function of support, which can reassure the home countries and also many other actors (host countries, international agencies, NGOs, decentralized cooperation and institutions). This idea arises from the fact

that if the associative structures of the diasporas of knowledge are entities that are often self-organized, their enhancement, as well as the emergence of other convergent actors and initiatives, would require consequential support. The communities concerned with the diaspora link must invest in it in order to capitalize on the cross-fertilizations that it generates.

As with the incubation of innovative enterprises, the role of linking heterogeneous actors is essential. A review of several hundred diaspora networks carried out in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century made it possible to rationalize past experiences and to conceptualize the functions that were required for such incubators (Meyer and Wattiaux 2006, Meyer 2011). This conceptualization is derived from the socio-economic *actor-network theory* which postulates four operations for successful innovation processes (Latour 2005): problematization (convergence of meaning), mobilization (involvement of actors), enrolment (definition of the network) and interessment (consolidation of the link). These have been transposed into four operational functions, which were tested during the project entitled Incubators of Knowledge Diasporas for Latin America (CIDESAL).

The first consisted of finding the actors, in the first place the active members of the diaspora. New techniques of semi-automatic research were developed to identify and locate them. Here it was a question of overtaking the traditional methods of location and storage in under-utilized databases, as previous experiences had revealed (Caldas, SANSA, MIDA, etc.). Very often they affected only a fraction of the expatriate populations, those who had already been incorporated within the ambit of associational and diplomatic communities. The data collected by these traditional methods rapidly became outdated because of the relative volatility of the diaspora. In contrast, the instruments being used currently aim at continuous and more detailed updating of information (Meyer 2015, Turner et al. 2015).

The second function was concerned with the area of communications. It was necessary to get in touch with the expatriates and to convince them to join in reinsertion efforts. This exercise could not be undertaken in a massive and indiscriminate way but rather with the involvement of the actors at an early stage in the definition of the kinds of relationship that they intended to have with their partners. The tools used enabled this introduction which was both broad and specific. Platforms of digital exchange offered places where these first links could be established (Blanco 2015).

The third function is not wholly distinguishable from the preceding one. It was that of constructed interaction through individual and targeted partnerships. The detailed description of the skills of the diasporas, which is possible today, makes it possible to match them to the specific requests or projects of the country and of its communities (Turner et al. 2015). To do so, it is necessary to organize these projects and requests. The constitution of strategic

alliances in the home country to bring about the conformity of actions with the diaspora could also be achieved through digital platforms (Blanco 2015).

Finally, the last function is that of sustainable involvement of the actors in a productive or simply creative relationship. The engagement of expatriates for their home countries is not easy because they have, by their position abroad, already been captured by many other networks, in particular those from highly knowledge intensive regions where they pursue their main activities. The challenge is thus of stabilizing their interests for engagement with their home countries by the countries showing commitments towards their diasporas.. Symbolic or substantial incentives and compensations, national programmes ostensibly promoting their participation and facilitating their working remotely, offering comparable and even better conditions or benefits compared with person what are offered to individuals, are some of the options that constitute possibilities of sustainably engaging these much sought after human resource communities. The host countries also have an important role to play in these efforts, in fueling these dynamics from which they too can benefit, by partially allowing and encouraging their highly qualified immigrants for engaging in collaborative projects, particularly by reinforcing their infrastructures of better communication and interaction (Caplan 2015).

Principles for policy

People of the diasporas are not subjects who can be governed as an extra-territorial extension of the national population. They form a civil society with several allegiances which, as a result, requires a special kind of governance founded on several unique principles.

The first is that of pluralism. Diasporas are heterogeneous and have multiple identity-based affiliations which cannot be reduced to a monolithic representation. Their contacts in the home countries should also be pluralistic for projects which are naturally diverse and varied. Experience has showed that any attempt at bureaucratic monopolization of the diaspora fails rapidly.

The second principle is that of horizontality. The world of knowledge is essentially that of peers, of equals, among whom relationships are not hierarchical. This form of relationship is favorable for reactive exchanges on complex themes. The collegiality between the diaspora and the home community deserves to be maintained and cultivated.

A third principle resides in the idea of flexibility. The geographic as well as professional and social mobility of actors is important. Their roles should be able to evolve and the networks

integrate these changes. We observed, for example, that the proponents of cooperation are very often circular migrants, that is, people who were part of the diaspora and then returned and could eventually leave again.

There are two ways to apply these three principles and make them work: organization on the one hand and technology on the other. The constitution of a multipartite structure where actors and representatives of diasporas and home communities can operate forms part of the first. Installing platforms for remote multilateral interactive exchanges belongs to the second. To set up tools that converge towards these two modes – that are often combined – the contribution of the host and home countries is a determinant. This articulation of organizational and technological options for the development of new entities, that is the contemporary diasporas, is a techno-politicy approach. It is the combination of tools provided by programs in the digital humanities and a transnational governance founded on the participation and empowerment of non-state actors which can enable this development and shape these new world relationships.

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