

Diaspora participation and engagement

UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group

In 2021 [the UK atrocity prevention working group](#) came together to share experiences with, approaches to and responsibilities of how the atrocity prevention and human rights sector engages with diaspora communities. This outcomes document sets out a number of the challenges faced by our Working Group members that are led by or work with diaspora communities and individuals. It presents principles of constructive, inclusive working to improve how we, and others in the atrocity prevention and human rights sector, work.

Diaspora communities and the Working Group

The Working Group is a coalition of UK-based organisations which exists to cooperate, collaborate, and share knowledge with the aim to improve the UK's prediction and prevention of mass atrocities. Many of our members work directly with diaspora communities from origin countries that have experienced and/or continue to experience mass violence, including North Korea, Syria, Sudan and Myanmar. Members work with diaspora communities of different sizes, from the large Sri Lankan community to the much smaller North Korean one, and that have varied experiences of arrival in the UK, from communities of Holocaust survivors to those fleeing violence in Syria. Our members work on atrocity prevention and political change in origin countries as well as on UK risks of identity-based violence – from hostile immigration policies to rises in COVID-related hate – that impact many British communities, including those that may identify as members of diaspora communities. This means there is both a wealth and diversity of experience within the Working Group. There are also members of the Working Group who do not work directly with diaspora communities, but through their contributions to atrocity prevention still impact and are influenced by diaspora communities and individuals. This diversity makes clear that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to diaspora participation and engagement for atrocity prevention organisations. This document is therefore not a blueprint, but rather provides guidance, views of our members, and materials for further learning.

This document draws from the experiences of members of the Working Group, and although we work with, co-create, collaborate, and advocate with diaspora communities, we do not speak on their behalf. As with many organisations working towards the prevention of identity-based violence and other human rights violations, the relationships between our member organisations and diaspora communities are rarely clear-cut; many staff members of Working Group organisations are members of diaspora communities themselves.

Towards horizontal and intersectional change

Seeking to reflect on and improve how our members work with diaspora communities is rooted in a commitment to horizontal change where we know that no single community must be expected to shoulder the necessary work to build a world free from mass violence. Sharing this burden requires internal conversations to ensure our strategies for change are rooted in meaningful inclusion and do not inadvertently perpetuate the injustices that underly what we seek to prevent. The Working Group is a space of reflection and learning for our sector to ensure our words of solidarity are matched by our actions.

We must get better at acknowledging how our work is shaped by and can be complicit in societal systems of exclusion in the UK and elsewhere. Many barriers to diaspora participation and engagement are products of this unequal reality. This includes but is not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, xenophobia, and the intersections between these and other systems of exclusion. These systems have shaped persisting harmful assumptions held by government officials, journalists and

non-diaspora civil society, including our own sector, that diaspora organisations and individuals are biased, political and too emotional or personally invested. Alongside wider societal barriers experienced specifically by diaspora communities, such as unsure citizenship status or mental and physical consequences of trauma, these false and flawed perceptions hinder diaspora engagement and participation. Engagement with and participation of diaspora communities in our work must therefore not be extractive but make space for the crucial roles diaspora communities can and do play in atrocity prevention – from shaping UK foreign policy to transition processes within origin countries.

Dynamics within diaspora communities

Diaspora communities are not monolithic. While members of diaspora communities can and do play key roles in human rights and atrocity prevention advocacy, other members might be apathetic or be opposed to such advocacy. When deciding to collaborate with diaspora communities, it is also important to guard against reinforcing systems of marginalisation and exclusion within these communities. Internal dynamics must be considered when engaging diaspora communities. Without being conscious of such dynamics, engagement and participation can become dominated by groups that hold certain privileges or powers. This can obscure the breadth of voices, experiences and ideas within the community, erode the legitimacy of engagement and its outcomes, and become a source of conflict in itself.

Atrocity prevention and human rights organisations have a responsibility to be transparent and clear about expectations of impact and change when working with diaspora communities. Members of diaspora communities might want an exclusive focus on their country situation from Government or want the UK to commit to actions not in its remit. If expectations are set too high they will likely not be met. This can rupture the trust with diaspora communities, damaging difficult to rebuild relationships. A consequence when trust is broken is that diaspora communities lose faith in the wider system, not just in a particular organisation.

Without confronting these barriers and perceptions, our sector will fail to fully reflect the communities we work with and for. This has the chance to alienate diaspora communities and thus limit the ownership of atrocity prevention, including its many tools, strategies, and resources, by these communities. It prevents opportunities to co-create and grow atrocity prevention as crucial voices bringing in experience and expertise are missing from the conversation. Horizontal change requires a table inclusive of all voices and it is our shared responsibility as a sector to pull up more seats or reimagine the table altogether.

Reciprocity must be at the heart of collaboration

To prevent our work from becoming extractive or tokenistic, it is important to integrate reciprocity in the participation of and engagement with diaspora communities. Reciprocity includes contributing to dismantling the barriers diaspora communities and their organisations face. This involves short-term actions including providing media training or editorial feedback, to more longer-term avenues to strengthen the organisations and communities we partner with through actions like creative distribution of funding and sharing space through co-created agendas and shared facilitation. Taking tangible steps to uphold the sustainability and capacity of partners like diaspora communities is fundamental to reciprocity.

The UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group is an evolving space of learning, listening, and exchanging best practices to transform our sector, always with the aim to improve how we can predict and prevent mass atrocities.

Members of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group strive to:

- Listen to and include diaspora voices to co-create atrocity prediction and prevention strategies
- Avoid tokenism and acknowledge the complexity of and systems of exclusion within diaspora communities by always asking the question who is missing from this conversation, why, and what steps are needed to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation?
- Develop and communicate clear and feasible expectations on outcomes of our work when partnering or engaging with diaspora communities
- When documenting crimes or rights violations experienced by members of the diaspora, ensure staff have necessary engagement training and interviewees are aware of the risk of secondary trauma, options to withdraw and further services where they may seek support
- Revisit recruitment, onboarding and retention strategies to help mitigate the systemic barriers members of diaspora communities face when applying for positions at and while being employed by our member organisations
- Provide fair and appropriate compensation for services, time and knowledge shared by diaspora individuals, communities and organisations
- Intentionally seek out members of specific diaspora communities for short-term opportunities such as translation, graphic design and catering, especially for projects about their communities
- When amplifying diaspora voices through media engagement, provide necessary and appropriate media training and support to avoid retraumatisation, and work closely with journalists to prevent mischaracterisation, stereotypes and other harm
- Collaborate with partners in the Working Group and the wider sector to share best practices, resources, knowledge and expertise
- Connect the struggles diaspora communities face in their countries of origin or transit to those they may experience in the UK, such as racist policing, housing insecurity, and discriminatory immigration policies

Resources

Below are resources – reports, podcasts, poetry – that explore experiences of diaspora communities within our sector and beyond it

- Yomn Al-Kaisi, [Engagement between human rights NGOs and diaspora communities](#), Prevention Perspectives, February 2022
- Mariko Hayashi, [Consultation burnout and a fear of being forgotten](#), The International Public Policy Observatory, August 2021
- Jess Gifkins, [Queering atrocity prevention](#), Protection Approaches, December 2021
- Jamie Hagen, [On the fieldwork we choose not to do](#), April 2021
- Meara Sharma, [for the sake of the sun](#), Adi Magazine, Winter 2019
- The Migration and Diaspora Podcast: [The "Who", "What", and "How" of diaspora engagement](#), March 2021
- Zaffar Kunial, [The Word](#), Poetry Unbound, December 2020
- Shabaka, [COVID-19 and impact on Sudanese Communities in the UK](#), March 2021

Best practice

Below are additional resources on and examples of best practice of diaspora participation and engagement that have come directly from members of the UK atrocity prevention working group

- Ceasefire's report [In the name of protection: minorities and identity in the Syrian conflict](#) was created by working closely with members of Syrian diaspora communities as experts, designers and translators
- [Syrianotes.org](#) is created, edited and published with diaspora members and amplifies the voices of Syrians through sharing writing, art, and resources
- Peace Direct, ADESO, WCAPS and Alliance for Peacebuilding's [Time to decolonise aid](#)
- Trauma-informed practice and preventing the vicarious trauma of non-diaspora members is part of the working group's [commitment to self-care](#)