

A Diaspora-Portal as a door to knock on for non-monetary development in small economies: a diaspora policy proposal based on an Armenian Diaspora Online Survey

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In academic economic discourse, diasporas have largely been considered potential conduits for [economic development](#) in their self-identified ancestral homelands. This has been particularly true for [Armenia](#). Mostly through the efforts of individuals and/or organizations, diasporas throughout the world, including the Armenian diaspora, have a history of offering significant charitable, humanitarian, or [financial support to the ancestral](#) homeland primarily in an occasional manner. Often, these efforts are dependent on fundraising efforts in the local diaspora communities. Despite these contributions however, there is no established [institutionalized system](#) that can facilitate mutually beneficial outcomes for both the home-country and the diaspora. Also to consider are the possible non-monetary contributions diasporas can offer through stronger involvement in the home country's economic and social development.

With these overarching thoughts regarding diasporas and their economic impacts on the homeland, I created a survey for the Armenian diaspora with the intent of capturing respondents' inner motivations for engaging with homeland in a capacity that would be conducive to economic and social advancement in Armenia. I collected 513 valid anonymous responses to the survey from 2015 through the spring of 2018. The survey, [Armenian Diaspora Online Survey \(ADOS\)](#), was conducted in English, anonymous and completely independent from external funding and organizational endorsements. Despite the limitations of the survey, I was able to glean certain characteristics of the (mainly U.S. based) Armenian diaspora which helped further my understanding of the dynamics of the Armenian diaspora and its engagement with the homeland.

There are clearly some methodological issues [when studying "diaspora," due to the idiosyncratic nature of the very concept](#). For instance, the concept of diasporan-age. "Old diaspora" refers to the established longtime residents of the host economies with altruistic motives for their distant homelands. These are separate from the "new diaspora" comprised mostly of recent immigrants and often labor migrants who have yet to develop a strong foundation in their adopted host economies. This is especially significant for the Armenian diaspora, in which much of the Western Armenian diaspora (could be identified in the ADOS as those who indicated Western Armenian language as their primary) is the "old", for which the connection to the present Republic of Armenia is more symbolic, given the nation's history, than purely "ancestral" in its narrow definition of land of origin.

These and many other distinctions appear to be relevant in evaluating effectiveness of the diaspora to homeland engagement models and specific propositions for engagement in the small economies such as Armenia.

Several general factors may explain the variation in diaspora-home involvement, e.g. 1) distance between expat's host and home country; 2) relative age of the diaspora; 3) political aspects of the home economy; 4) nature of expatriate's social and economic status; 5) educational and cultural background; and other. All seem to be relevant in the specific case of Armenia, as directionally confirmed in the ADOS results.

Still, for small economies, such as Armenia (and its neighboring Georgia, for example) active diaspora is one of the [dominant forces of post-socialist economic transformation](#), leading to the country's social, economic, cultural, and institutional changes, adding an extra link to the outside (and competitive) global marketplace.

Despite it all, it is unclear what may be an effective way of streamlining this, albeit abstract, diaspora potential towards self-perceived ancestral homeland, as seen by plethora of diaspora-home engagement platforms (a nice review [here](#) and a summary analysis in [chapter 8 here](#)).

Diaspora Portal: A Method of Engagement

The emphasis in the ADOS responses on non-monetary involvement with Armenia, naturally leads to a possible solution in form of a web-based diaspora-portal (DP) in which interested individuals or organizations in the diaspora could signal their intent, making it accessible through a database to stakeholders in the homeland.

Examples of non-monetary engagement, as suggested by the ADOS responses are many, ranging from volunteer services in rural areas, teaching specific subjects, taking a summer off from assignments in their country and going to Armenia as engineers, software developers, medical doctors, or offering a range of classes and options for interaction via online communication. The common thread in all of those few hundred responses, was lack of knowledge of who and how to contact or where to indicate their interest. It is important to account for the specific context of an altruistically driven diasporans sustaining competitive pressures in their respective professional fields.

There simply needs to be a formal door that "diaspora" (as abstract as it is) could knock on to signal its interest in involvement, whatever it might be instead of random one-time efforts.

As such, the diaspora-portal could also serve as a centralized method of formally connecting professionals globally and fostering engagement between individuals with mutual altruistic intentions and interests towards the homeland, creating a collaborative environment to work on projects which could be integral to the home-country's development needs.

The DP may serve as a novel initiative to sustain development in small open economies with large national diasporas, such as Armenia, by harnessing and directing the constructive energy of human capital and stepping beyond the [ad hoc and personified remittances](#), or arrangements [tackling labor migration](#), or unclear prospects of a [diaspora bond](#), or other monetary-based efforts.

Challenges aside, the hope is the results of the ADOS may cultivate an informed discussion on the topic and contribute to effective diaspora-home country policies and initiatives.

All of this, of course, sits upon a broader philosophical assumption, that it is in the mutual interest of the two entities—home and diaspora—to build a stronger connection with one another.

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