

## **Some lessons from an Armenian Diaspora Online Survey: a Diaspora Portal and non-monetary development initiatives in small economies**

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Diasporas have long since been argued to be the potential conduits for [economic development](#) in their self-identified ancestral homelands. This has been particularly true for [Armenia](#); however, there is no established [institutionalized system](#) that can facilitate mutually beneficial outcomes for both the home-country and the diaspora.

Largely through the efforts of their individual members or organizations, diasporas across the world, including the Armenian diaspora, have a track record of offering significant charitable, humanitarian or [financial support to the ancestral](#) homeland in a primarily occasional manner. Often, these efforts are dependent on fundraising efforts in the local diaspora communities.

There may also be non-monetary paths, however, to a diaspora's stronger involvement in the home country's more sustainable economic and social development. It is then important to attempt to understand that potential and the possible types of such applied involvement.

From 2015 to the spring of 2018, I organized those thoughts in an online survey I created, called the [Armenian Diaspora Online Survey \(ADOS\)](#), which consisted of [28 questions \(with sub-queries\)](#). The survey was conducted in English and was completely independent (with no external funding or any organizational endorsements). Over time, the ADOS was promoted to various online community groups via social media, by email, and in various [news outlets](#).

By April 2018, the ADOS had collected 513 valid anonymous responses ([raw data may be viewed here](#)). Broadly, much of respondents' anonymous responses regarding their willingness to engage with Armenia stands in contrast to popular opinion polls or hypothetical conclusions by extrapolation. The first ADOS results were presented in May 2018 at a [conference at Columbia University](#) in New York with subsequent presentations later that year in Armenia.

### **Interpreting the Results**

The first group of questions in the ADOS were demographic. Respondents identified themselves as 44.4 percent female and 55.6 percent male. 99.2 percent of the entire sample identified as Armenian (for 82.7% of respondents, both parents were Armenian). There was a relatively close distribution across two age groups with 30 percent born between 1960-1979 and 27 percent born between 1980-1989 (while 21 percent were born between 1930-1959 and 1990-1999 each).

In terms of current professional occupations, 10.3 percent of respondents identified themselves as students and 4.1 percent as retired (69 percent of respondent indicated "Other" as their occupation without specifying their occupation in this question but directly alluding to it in later questions on proposed professional involvement with home country). In terms of education, 62.2 percent of respondents had some college degree with another 15 percent with a graduate degree, across a wide range of fields in social science, humanities, and technical specialties.

Majority of respondents ranked their Armenian language (with Eastern Armenian as the official language of the Republic of Armenia and Western Armenian as predominantly spoken in the Armenian diaspora of Europe, Middle East, and the Americas) proficiency as high (37.6 percent said they were native). Western Armenian was the dominant language (57.3 percent). Several respondents reached out directly by email to inform that they considered both Eastern and Western as native and were fluent in both. Unfortunately, the survey did not permit to choose both.

Several questions asked about respondents' origin, including country of birth, permanent residence, citizenship, and current residence. The majority of respondents belonged to the "old" diaspora (defined [here](#) and [here](#)) and the geographic spread of was quite diverse. Over 62 percent of respondents chose USA as the country of their current residence with Canada the second largest at 7 percent and Russia at 4 percent.

An overwhelming majority of survey takers had visited Armenia (73.3 percent having been to Armenia at least once and 42 percent within the year of taking the survey). As one might expect, the visits to homeland were largely short-term (one to two weeks). This result does not necessarily imply a touristic nature of the visit, since business travel is short spanned as well, though 58.7 percent of responses indicated no direct immediate family ties in Armenia (a result that will be important again below).

Interestingly, respondents followed news on Armenia regularly and expressed strong (49.6 percent) and somewhat strong (30.6 percent) emotional attachment with Armenia (as historic and cultural homeland) and broader Armenian world. Though with varying degrees, respondents were largely interested in Armenian history, politics, culture, economic situation, and, critically, social development. Curiously, it was the older (1930 through 1979) and the younger (1990-1999) age groups that indicated the strongest degree of local Armenian community involvement.

In general, despite their interest in Armenia's ongoing socio-economic development there was limited interest in moving to Armenia for permanent settlement or for work (implying a time-limited contract). In a slight deviation, the youngest age group expressed the strongest relative desire in moving to Armenia on a permanent basis (20.2 percent strong possibility within the group, and the highest across groups). This latter result is likely to be expected as the prospect of changing one's domicile, necessarily require solid answers to questions about employment and sustained living standards. Both factors that are easier adjusted in the formative early years of one's professional growth.

Further, as might be expected in a diaspora study, majority of respondents (59.6 percent) indicated that had previously donated to an Armenian organization while 82.8 percent indicated readiness to help mainly to organizations based in Armenia or in diaspora (as opposed to individuals), though majority currently are not providing any assistance to anyone in Armenia. On average, respondents indicated a willingness to contribute on an annual basis anywhere between \$100-\$500 to support such an organization.

This somewhat reserved willingness to provide monetary assistance (several answers indicated financial constraints) was significantly offset by the respondents' emphasis on non-financial assistance. A range of options provided in the survey questions appeared to be insufficient as many took on to the comments sections to elaborate on the various opportunities of soft skills transfer they were willing to explore.

Specifically, individual ADOS responses indicated strong preference for lectures and knowledge sharing as a means of non-financial assistance to Armenia, with voluntary teaching opportunities, research cooperation, infrastructure collaboration and medical services as next popular. Largely, these choices reflected respondent's individual professional background and strongly correlated with education levels. Several respondents with college or doctorate degree indicated interest in teaching, including some specifying "free of charge" over the summer. Others offered their services in consulting, diplomacy, sport teams coaching (hockey, specifically), and even joining the military reserves. Again, much of the stronger responses came from the college educated sub-groups of all ages.

Before moving to conclusions, it is also important to briefly mention some of the obstacles preventing a more active engagement with Armenia in the view of respondents to the online ADOS. One of the common threads were the comments about perceived institutional irregularities in Armenia. It is not possible to judge how those opinions were formed, but it became clear that such views drove some of the individual response (**visible in raw data**). Others suggested lack of personal funds to a sufficient degree to imply any active involvement with Armenia. Of course, these responses came from individuals who also signaled their strong interest in the social and economic development initiatives in Armenia.

Perhaps, most importantly for applied policy actions, and better articulated, were comments about lacking organizational infrastructure that would nourish such active involvement and encourage stronger connections between diaspora-based specialists and their counterparties in respective professional entities in Armenia. Potential educators are willing to connect either online or travel to Armenia should there were established infrastructure to engage with local peers, provided accommodations for longer stays, and interest in volunteer initiatives.

It is important to note, that respondents' interest was not in just humanitarian or charitable assistance, but significantly in joint cooperation, including in business and education projects. This latter observation leads the diaspora-home country engagement at a completely new, more sophisticated level of development in the technological age.

## Drawing Conclusions from Results

Based on the above, despite its limitations, the online ADOS project attempts to capture relevant information about respondents' inner motivations for (and factors deterring) engaging with homeland in a capacity that may be conducive to economic and social advancement. Here, a range of non-monetary opportunities becomes the cornerstone in a new development model.

Diasporan-age is also an explanatory factor. The “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” (post-1990s independence) diaspora comprised mostly by recent immigrants and often labor migrants who are yet to develop strong foundation in their adopted host economies. This is especially significant for Armenia, where 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.

There are clearly some methodological issues when studying “diaspora,” due to the idiosyncratic nature of the very concept. [As argued elsewhere](#), in the specific Armenian case, it is erroneous to view diaspora as a monolithic entity, instead, it is more of a dispersion.

Such distinctions appear to be relevant in evaluating effectiveness of the diaspora to homeland engagement models and specific propositions for engagement. Armenia's new diaspora in the ADOS results claims higher education levels, though somewhat lower income. Across post-socialist economies, the patterns [are quite diverse despite existence of relatively sizeable expatriate communities](#).

In summary, several 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 status abroad, including income flows; 5) educational and cultural background; and other. All seem to be relevant in the specific case of Armenia, as directionally confirmed in this online survey.

It is clear that the strong Armenia-diaspora bond must be maintained and nurtured by both sides. For small economies, such as Armenia (and its neighboring Georgia, for example) active diaspora is one of the [dominant forces of post-socialist change](#), leading in the country's social, economic, cultural, and institutional transformation, adding an extra link to the outside (and competitive) global marketplace.

## A Diaspora-Portal Proposal

In Armenia, now, as a dedicated diaspora ministry undergoes a profound change, and in the age of blockchain and new technology, perhaps the answer to stronger productive diaspora-home country link comes by way of establishing a diaspora-portal (DP) as a web-based sorting database. Something of the sort, as far as technology goes, has already been pioneered by Estonia, with its [e-residency program](#)—a country that for some reason serves as a perennial benchmark for Armenia since the early 1990s (though, one should be cautious with a direct comparison of the two macroeconomic transformations). Elsewhere, we proposed diaspora-led initiatives such as [Diaspora Regulatory Mechanism and Migration Development Bank](#) as conduits to stronger diaspora (dispersion) to historical homeland bond (earlier work by others focused on the new-labor migrant driven diaspora in the post-socialist world, [here](#) and [here](#)).

By means of the proposed web-based diaspora-portal anyone in the diaspora—signaling readiness (or in Armenia signaling a need)—could submit their interest in involvement in whichever capacity appropriate by registering online and filling out a pre-set form. The new blockchain technology, with some aspects of it pioneered by Armenia's booming sector, will ensure veracity of the data and security of any exchange.

An algorithm immediately verifies and clears a new request and allocates this data in an appropriate bucket. The latter action results in 1) the information being distributed to the subscribers on the receiving side and 2) automatically

storing in the general searchable database. There is a possibility for automatic filtering and sorting and matching in case of precisely submitted DP signal.

Technical specifications may further be enhanced but the end result is a possible connection with someone in the diaspora willing to provide non-financial service, volunteer their time, effort and share their knowledge with a recipient individual or a group in Armenia.

As a new technological solution to a centuries old problem of small country development, the diaspora-portal will also offer the much-needed formalized institutional backbone connecting professionals across the world with development needs in Armenia. This can be a transparent and trustworthy way to overcome the obstacles raised in the ADOS.

At the forefront is the collective potential of the cultural and ethnic diaspora, regardless of its categorization as either old, new, or temporary labor migrants. As such, the DP may serve as a novel initiative harnessing and directing the constructive energy of human capital and stepping beyond the [ad hoc and personified remittances](#), or unclear prospects of a [diaspora bond](#), or other monetary-based efforts to sustain development in small open economies with large national diasporas.

Methodological challenges notwithstanding, the online survey results are quite directional and, it is hoped, may guide a more informed diaspora-home country policy and initiatives. Clearly, the diversity of data offers an opportunity for a curious researcher to slice and dice these results with a range of filters (e.g. by geographic origin, gender, age, professional occupation, etc.). As this Armenian Diaspora Online Survey closed in April 2018, it would also be interesting to see how perceptions may have changed in the new environment in a follow-up. Perhaps this can be a subject for current and future researchers to take on.

Lastly, the lessons from the ADOS, while based on the case of Armenia, are relevant for other small [transition economies](#). Overlapping waves of migration, internal political and cultural divisions divide national diaspora within, creating what this project refers to a dispersion.

This project finds tangible indications that modalities of diaspora involvement and deterring factors appear to be significantly more complex and diverse than previously assumed, requiring closer scrutiny by development economists and diaspora scholars. In this context, creating a diaspora-portal may help address some of the primary needs of development in a small country with large (and underexplored) diaspora potential.

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

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