

Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminar

Summary Report 3

Diaspora, Transitional Justice and the Politics of Legitimacy



Introduction

On 07th July 2026, the Renaissance Strategic Centre at ARDD, in collaboration with ODI Global, convened the third session of the Local Governance Comparative Approaches Seminars. The series consists of four seminars that collectively explore the evolution from activism to governance, culminating in a policy brief.

The third seminar built upon themes that had emerged throughout the previous discussions. Having explored the mobilization of activist movements and their transition towards local governance, participants turned to two cross-cutting issues that repeatedly surfaced across different country experiences: the role of diaspora communities and the challenge of transitional justice. Although often examined separately, both ultimately revolved around the same underlying question: who possesses the legitimacy to shape political futures in societies experiencing conflict, fragmentation and political transition?

Rather than seeking universal answers, participants explored how legitimacy is continually negotiated between those who remain, those who leave, and those attempting to rebuild institutions amidst ongoing conflict. In doing so, the discussion challenged conventional assumptions about exile and return, justice and reconciliation, and the relationship between activism, governance and political transformation.

Diaspora: Living Between Home and Abroad

Participants stressed that diaspora communities should not be understood as coherent political actors. Diasporas are diverse and evolving communities whose identities change over time as individuals acquire new citizenships, establish new social networks and redefine their relationships with their countries of origin.

Yet despite this diversity, participants repeatedly returned to the notion of diaspora as occupying an "in-between" political space—neither fully belonging to their adopted societies nor entirely detached from the countries they left. This liminal position creates both unique opportunities and significant tensions.

Operating outside the immediate constraints of authoritarian rule or armed conflict often gives diaspora communities greater freedom to organize politically, mobilize support, and engage international actors. At the same time, geographical and social distance can produce political realities that differ from those experienced by activists working within conflict-affected societies. Participants also recognized that diaspora communities can themselves become marginalized in new spaces. In some cases, such as the Kurdish diaspora, this could translate into renewed

activism focused on raising awareness and organizing protests, rather than engaging in more substantive forms of political work.

Several participants observed that political innovation frequently emerges from younger generations living abroad. Student movements have historically provided spaces where young activists encounter alternative political systems while interacting with other diaspora communities confronting similar struggles. New political ideas therefore often develop not simply through exposure to host countries but through exchanges across different diasporas, leading participants to question whether diaspora activism should always be viewed as distinct from activism occurring within countries themselves.

Beyond Remittances: From Financing Activism to Supporting Governance

Although the discussion moved well beyond the traditional focus on remittances and financial support, participants acknowledged that diaspora funding has historically played an indispensable role in sustaining activist movements. The Kurdish experience was cited as an example where diaspora networks provided the financial infrastructure that enabled political mobilization long before formal governance institutions emerged.

However, an important distinction emerged between financing activism and financing governance. Activist movements can often survive through voluntary contributions and international solidarity. Governing institutions cannot. They ultimately depend upon predictable domestic revenue, taxation, and a legitimate social contract with the populations they serve. As movements evolve into governing authorities, their relationship with diaspora funding necessarily changes.

Participants also cautioned that external funding can unintentionally reinforce local inequalities. Different diaspora communities may support competing political, ethnic or regional constituencies, thereby reproducing fragmentation rather than overcoming it. The Kurdish experience illustrated how remittances could contribute to unequal access to education, technical skills and political influence among communities with differing access to relatives abroad. Participants noted that such dynamics could give rise to a kind of ‘red bourgeoisie’: individuals based abroad who, by virtue of the time and resources they were able to devote to activism, came to occupy increasingly prominent positions within movements. At the same time, this could have the more positive effect of allowing those with technical skills to remain within the country, reducing brain drain.

Several participants also questioned whether international funding channeled through diaspora organizations always reflected local priorities. Drawing upon Syrian experience, one participant noted that donor-driven funding sometimes prioritized issues that resonated internationally while communities continued struggling to meet far more immediate needs. Such dynamics raise broader questions about the independence and accountability of civil society organizations operating between international donors and local communities.

Many therefore argued that the diaspora's greatest comparative advantage lies not simply in financing activism, but in connecting local experiences to international policy debates. Greater freedom of movement, political access and communications infrastructure enable diaspora communities to elevate local voices into international policy spaces, influence diplomatic discussions and advocate for communities that often struggle to make themselves heard internationally.

The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria was raised as an illustrative case: while the visibility generated by diaspora artists and public figures in the UK and US brought valuable international attention, participants suggested that longer-term impact was ultimately determined by those diaspora members who sustained their commitment and dedicated time to political action at home.

Representation, Polarization and Return

Participants noted growing efforts in several African countries to create parliamentary representation for diaspora communities and to involve diaspora actors in Presidential Delivery Units responsible for implementing political programs. While such initiatives recognise the continuing importance of diaspora engagement, they also expose difficult questions of representation. Diasporas themselves are politically fragmented, socially diverse and geographically dispersed. No single representative can easily claim to speak on behalf of such varied constituencies.

The question of polarization between diaspora and actors on the ground also emerged. Participants cautioned that differing experiences can create tensions. Those living abroad may underestimate the compromises required by those operating under conditions of violence or authoritarianism. Conversely, local actors may question the legitimacy of those advocating political change from abroad.

Examples from Myanmar illustrated these dilemmas clearly. While civil society leaders inside the country increasingly sought ways to reduce violence and create political space for negotiation, parts of the diaspora rejected such approaches, favoring more uncompromising positions. The Syrian case offered a further example: diaspora networks played an important role in supporting civil society since 2011, but the fall of the regime and continuing human rights violations against different communities deepened tensions and divisions. Diaspora groups were said to have at times contributed to political polarization through hate speech or the promotion of contested narratives. Participants observed that diaspora communities can sometimes develop political realities that become increasingly detached from rapidly evolving conditions on the ground, shaped more by the political environment of the countries in which they now live rather than by the actual needs of communities at home.

Participants also highlighted the growing vulnerability of diaspora communities to organized misinformation campaigns. Large and politically influential diaspora populations increasingly become targets of external actors seeking to shape electoral outcomes, influence public opinion

or deepen political polarization. Experiences from Armenia illustrated how diaspora communities can themselves become arenas of geopolitical competition, while social media often amplifies conflicts that have become considerably more nuanced on the ground. Similarly, participants noted that Russian disinformation actors have sought to amplify conflicting narratives circulating between Israeli and Palestinian perspectives within Muslim diaspora communities, not out of any genuine investment in either position but specifically to fuel conflict and division.

The question of return generated particularly rich discussion. Participants observed that political transitions frequently expose tensions between those who remained throughout conflict and those returning after years abroad, often possessing greater educational opportunities, international experience or financial resources. While returnees may contribute valuable skills and perspectives, they may also encounter resentment from communities that bore the direct costs of conflict and resistance.

Examples from Madagascar, South Africa and Rwanda illustrated that successful reintegration requires managing expectations on both sides if new inequalities are not to undermine political transitions.

Finally, participants noted that diaspora influence extends well beyond politics and finance. Through music, language, food and cultural production, diaspora communities increasingly shape international narratives about conflict and identity. While this can strengthen international solidarity, participants also cautioned against forms of cultural representation that unintentionally marginalize local voices or substitute external interpretations for lived experience.

Eventually, there can be no single model for understanding diaspora engagement. Their influence depends not only on the willingness of diaspora communities to remain engaged, but equally on the willingness of domestic actors to integrate them into emerging political processes.

Transitional Justice Beyond the Post-Conflict Paradigm

The second part of the session challenged one of the central assumptions underpinning conventional approaches to transitional justice: that justice begins only after conflict ends. Participants argued that this increasingly fails to reflect political reality. Across many contemporary conflicts, fragmented authority, recurring violence and prolonged instability mean that societies attempt simultaneously to govern, negotiate and pursue accountability while conflict continues.

Transition is therefore no longer a clearly identifiable moment separating war from peace. Rather, it has become a prolonged and contested political process. This raises fundamental questions. Should justice wait until conflict has ended? Or should accountability begin even while violence persists?

Drawing upon experiences from Syria, Afghanistan, Rwanda and South Africa, participants largely rejected the notion that transitional justice should simply be postponed until ideal political conditions emerge. Indeed, several argued that ongoing conflict often demonstrates precisely why more inclusive justice processes are required.

As one participant observed, conflict should not only be viewed as an obstacle to justice but also as evidence that grievances remain unresolved and that justice mechanisms require strengthening rather than postponement.

Justice, Stability and Political Reality

Participants revisited the longstanding tension between political stability and accountability.

Afghanistan was discussed as an example where international actors prioritised short-term political stability by incorporating warlords into emerging political institutions. While this facilitated an immediate political settlement, participants argued that it simultaneously entrenched systems of power that later made meaningful accountability almost impossible. This prompted broader reflection on whether justice delayed ultimately becomes justice denied.

Several participants cautioned against presenting stability and justice as competing objectives. Rather, failure to address structural injustices early may itself undermine long-term political stability.

Whose Justice?

Participants also explored the political nature of accountability itself. The Syrian experience illustrated how deeply contested questions of justice remain. Communities often disagree fundamentally about who should be considered victims, perpetrators or even heroes. A figure regarded by one community as responsible for atrocities may simultaneously be viewed by another as a martyr or defender.

This raises difficult questions about whether transitional justice should focus exclusively on former regimes or encompass violations committed by all actors, including armed groups, extremist organizations and those who economically benefited from conflict.

Several participants argued that acknowledgement itself represents an important form of justice. Calling massacres by their proper name, documenting violations and recognising victims publicly may constitute essential first steps even where broader accountability mechanisms remain politically unattainable.

Participants further distinguished between establishing an absolute historical truth and developing a sufficiently shared understanding of the past to enable communities to live

together again. One participant reflected that while absolute truth may remain elusive, societies can still construct forms of shared truth capable of supporting coexistence.

Justice, Reconciliation and Community Healing

Perhaps the strongest consensus emerged around the relationship between accountability and reconciliation.

Participants rejected the idea that these represent competing objectives. Rather, they were viewed as mutually reinforcing elements of broader social transformation.

The South African experience illustrated both the possibilities and limitations of this approach. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission transformed international thinking about transitional justice, participants observed that continuing economic inequality, xenophobia and unresolved historical grievances demonstrate that democratic transition remains an ongoing process rather than a completed event. Several argued that psychological healing and material reparations had never been fully achieved, allowing unresolved trauma to re-emerge decades later.

Participants similarly reflected on Rwanda's experience, particularly the challenges associated with the return of diaspora communities and the long-term social consequences that continue to evolve.

Across cases, participants argued that transitional justice extends well beyond criminal prosecution. Documentation, truth-telling, community dialogue, institutional reform, memorialization, reparations and psychological healing all constitute essential components of rebuilding trust.

Particular emphasis was placed on locally owned dialogue processes that enable multiple experiences and narratives to emerge. Participants cautioned that internationally designed justice frameworks can unintentionally privilege formal legal approaches while overlooking local traditions through which communities remember violence, process trauma and rebuild relationships. Rich stories of healing may therefore become lost as complex lived experiences are translated into standardized international concepts of justice. Relatedly, participants observed that younger generations do not always inherit knowledge of the specific mechanisms once put in place to support healing among survivors of genocide and mass violence, meaning that hard-won lessons risk being lost over time. Sustaining this knowledge across generations and keeping dialogue spaces open was seen as essential to preserving a shared ambition for a stable and harmonious society.

Participants also highlighted practical entry points capable of building trust across political and sectarian divides. Support for survivors of gender-based violence, families of the disappeared, former political detainees, displaced communities and children affected by conflict were all cited as examples of areas where dialogue may begin despite continuing political disagreement.

Ultimately, participants argued that transitional justice exists to serve society rather than political institutions. Sustainable reconciliation therefore depends upon creating locally owned spaces where disagreement can be expressed, different experiences acknowledged and the structural causes of conflict openly examined.

Emerging Reflections

Several overarching conclusions emerged across both discussions.

First, legitimacy remains fundamentally relational. Whether discussing diaspora engagement or transitional justice, participants consistently argued that political authority cannot simply be claimed through military victory, financial resources or international recognition. It must be continually negotiated with the communities most directly affected.

Second, contemporary political transitions are increasingly non-linear. Governance, conflict, justice, activism and reconciliation now unfold simultaneously rather than sequentially, requiring approaches that are adaptive rather than based on assumptions of a clear progression from war to peace.

Third, local ownership emerged as a recurring principle. International actors and diaspora communities can play indispensable supporting roles, but durable governance and meaningful reconciliation ultimately depend upon locally legitimate institutions and processes shaped by those living the realities of conflict.

Finally, participants reflected that the seminar series itself represents something different from many conventional policy discussions. Rather than providing a snapshot of individual country experiences, it has begun to reveal a broader trajectory across diverse contexts. As conflicts become increasingly protracted and state authority more fragmented, new forms of governance are emerging from below, driven largely by younger generations, civil society and local communities. These realities remain insufficiently reflected in international policy debates, which continue to focus predominantly on humanitarian delivery and formal political settlements.

Bridging these two conversations—the lived realities of local governance and the priorities of international policy- may ultimately prove one of the most significant contributions of the network emerging from this initiative. These reflections will provide an important foundation for the fourth and final seminar, which will explore how the lessons emerging across the series can contribute to the development of a broader international network on activism and local governance.