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Beyond 'Just Comes' and 'Know-It-Alls': Exploring Strategies to Deal with Returnee Stigmas During Diaspora Return Visits for Knowledge Transfer

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Abstract

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer as well as conversations with stakeholders in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Somaliland, this paper examines returnee stigma in the case of short-term return visits. The diaspora members in this study choose of their own volition to participate in the programme and are mostly highly educated with valued expertise in a certain field. We find that despite their skills, education and voluntariness, the returnees still experience and prepare for stigmatization in their return visits. We examine, first, the general stigmatizations that stakeholders perceive that diaspora members and returnees experience; second, diaspora members' actual experiences of stigmatization, and third, the strategies used by diaspora members to prevent and counteract the stigmatization. The findings show that stigma towards the highly skilled diaspora members in return visits is rooted in the perceived inequalities among the home employees and communities of origin in comparison to these diaspora members, which are underpinned by global inequalities in terms of citizenship and access to international mobility. These findings contribute to the academic literature on return and returnee stigma by discussing return visits for knowledge transfer as a distinct type of return mobility, exploring returnee stigma in a context other than post-deportation and showing that diaspora returnees use preventive and counteractive strategies. Diaspora return programmes should include preparation and coaching of returnees on stigma to enhance their (re)integration and optimise their contribution to the development of the countries of origin.

Keywords Return visits · Stigma · Knowledge transfer · Capacity development · Diaspora return programme

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Introduction

Return visits are an important aspect of migration and transnational lives (Baldassar, 2001; Miah, 2022; Oeppen, 2013). However, with the exception of Kuschminder, (2014), little research has been conducted on return visits for the purpose of knowledge transfer. As examined here, such visits constitute a structured and governed mode of transnational mobility, which intrinsically links them to geopolitics (Collyer & King, 2015; Hyndman, 2012). Our findings show that these links with geopolitics are particularly relevant in the case of knowledge-transfer visits by highly skilled migrants, as they are underpinned by different power relations putting returnees in a favourable position when compared to local communities.

In this paper, we examine how respondents on return visits for knowledge transfer both experience and manage returnee stigmas. The core purpose of these diaspora return visits is to contribute to knowledge transfer and the capacity development of individuals and host institutions in the country of origin. In order to successfully do this, trust is essential, and diaspora members on return visits must be able to gain the trust of their colleagues (Kuschminder, 2014). A core challenge in this process is encountered with returnee stigmas, due to the perceived power inequalities on the part of the local staff in the host organisation. These tensions hamper the creation of a functional working environment.

This article seeks, first, to explore the forms of returnee stigma that are experienced by diaspora members engaging in short-term return visits for knowledge transfer in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Somaliland[1]; second, it seeks to understand how diaspora members on such return visits create strategies to counteract and prevent these stigmas. The analysis presents three strategies that we term *adapting*, *signalling* and *addressing*, which such returnees use to counteract and prevent negative stigmas. The strategies entail *adapting* to the country and its culture, *signalling* commonality, approachability and respect and *addressing* stereotypes, labels and misconceptions. The next section provides a theoretical introduction to return visits for knowledge transfer and returnee stigmas.

Return Visits for Knowledge Transfer in the Context of Global Economic Inequalities

This paper focuses on returnee stigmas during short return visits; however, within the broader project, the concept of 'diaspora' is used in its wider sense — referring essentially to all immigrants as diaspora members — which is common among policymakers and practitioners. Whether or not respondents in this study identify as diaspora members depends on the individual. In the Ethiopian context, skilled returnees are often referred to by locals as diaspora members, even after they have lived in the country for over a decade (Kuschminder, 2017). Our data collection

[1] Somaliland refers to the self-declared state of Somaliland, internationally considered as an autonomous region of Somalia. Due to its status as a *de-facto* state, Somaliland will be referred to as a country throughout this paper.

showed that this was also the case for Sierra Leone and Somaliland, where the term 'diaspora' was sometimes used by respondents instead of 'returnee'. Therefore, we consider the individuals in this study as diaspora members on return visits who engage in knowledge transfer based on diaspora programmes with a focus on development and underpinned by geopolitical concerns of (under)development in the Global South.

Return Visits for Knowledge Transfer

Return visits can take on a variety of purposes and have different impacts on the migrant and the origin and destination countries. Miah, (2022) presents a typology of various forms of return visit for different purposes, including routine visits, ritual visits (such as a birth or death), care visits, roots visits (to the ancestral homeland), rights visits (to exercise citizenship or to vote), pre-return visits (preparing for an eventual return), economic visits (for business) and leisure visits. In this paper, we address an additional type of return visit that is conceptually distinct — for the purpose of knowledge transfer and capacity development. These visits can be facilitated by an international organisation or through a non-governmental organisation. They can also be actioned by the individuals themselves (Kuschminder, 2014). They can overlap with economic visits in that the individual may receive a stipend or salary for such a visit; however, we argue here for a conceptual distinction of visits for knowledge transfer, acknowledging that they can overlap with other categories.

Return visits for knowledge transfer share key characteristics with other types of return visit. While the exact length of return visits may vary, a key characteristic of both return visits in general and return visits for knowledge transfer in particular is their limited timeframe and temporary nature (Duval, 2004; Miah, 2022). What distinguishes return visits from tourism is the attachment which return visitors have to their destination, as migrants make return visits 'to either their external homeland or another location in which significant social ties exist' (Duval, 2004: 51).

Since return visits allow migrants to maintain these social ties in their country of origin (Conway et al., 2009; Duval, 2004), scholars have emphasised the transnational character of return visits. Duval ,(2004: 54) conceptualised the return visit as 'a transnational exercise through which multiple social fields are linked'. This is also the case for return visits for knowledge transfer and diaspora members who conduct them maintain transnational ties to their ancestral country of origin. Many of these diaspora members had engaged in a previous return visit prior to that for knowledge-transfer purposes, thus reflecting that most of them maintain contact with family and friends in their country of origin. Therefore, these return visits form part of a broader transnational process of diasporic return, which can take various forms (Galipo, 2018; King, 2000; Olsson & King, 2008; Tsuda, 2019).

Finally, return visits are a way to test the 'desire to return' (Baldassar, 2001). As Conway et al. (2009) point out, repeated return visits allow migrants to assess the conditions for return. Return visits for knowledge transfer allow diaspora members to gain insights into the professional working environment in their country of origin, offering them a perspective that they do not receive during other types of return visit

(with the exception of economic visits). Even though return for knowledge transfer is mostly pursued by highly skilled diaspora members, such visits differ from professional mobility, where factors such as monetary incentives and opportunities for career advancement are at the forefront (Mahroum, 2000). In contrast, return visits for knowledge transfer are generally rooted in an altruistic motivation to contribute something to the country of origin (Kuschminder, 2014).

Attitudes Towards Diaspora Members on Return Visits and the Role of Returnee Stigmas

A trusting relationship between diaspora members on return visits and their local colleagues is essential for successful knowledge transfer and change (Ammassari, 2004; Kuschminder, 2014; Van Houte & Davids, 2014; Wang, 2014). The attitude of the non-migrant population towards returning diaspora members may be 'welcoming but also ambivalent or hostile' (Shuval, 2000: 47). As Turner & Kleist, (2013: 195) note, diaspora members might benefit from the 'self-fuelling diaspora effect' and a diaspora position that 'signals agency, authenticity, responsibility and resources and [it] might be conducive to getting access to funding or other advantages'. On the other hand, diaspora members and returnees may encounter mistrust from locals, who perceive them as a threat to their jobs or to local values (Galipo, 2018; Gmelch, 1980; Hammond, 2015). Finally, returnees might experience general or returnee-specific xenophobic attitudes (Wang, 2014).

Negative attitudes that have a discrediting effect towards returnees are prevalent in different types of return migration. In Bosnia, refugee returnees were called *pobjeclice*, meaning 'those who ran away scared for no reason', creating a negative stigmatisation of cowardice (Stefansson, 2004: 58). Similarly, Oeppen, (2009) found that skilled Afghans returning to Afghanistan from the USA were referred to as 'dogwashers' — stigmatising them as having performed low-skilled and degrading work. Schuster & Majidi, (2015) have demonstrated the stigmas associated with deportation in Afghanistan, creating vulnerability and exclusion. Deportees also experience gendered stigmas, as demonstrated by Golash-Boza, (2014) in Jamaica, where male deportees become dependent on remittances from the UDS and cannot meet societal expectations of fulfilling the role of breadwinner. Finally, Kuschminder, (2017) has found that female returnees in Ethiopia from student-migration experiences have also faced several gender-based stigmas upon return wherein their educational achievements are disrespected because of their gender. These negative attitudes or stigmas have a demoralising effect on various groups of return migrants, including skilled, student and refugee returnees and deportees.

Despite the prevalence of these experiences across different types of return migrant, the terminology has been less consistent. While studies on deportees have used the term 'stigma' to refer to those negative attitudes with a discrediting effect which forced returnees experienced (see Golash-Boza, 2014; Schuster & Majidi, 2015), other studies, which clearly discuss instances of stigmatisation with other return groups — such as Oeppen, (2009) amongst the highly skilled or Kuschminder, (2017) regarding student returnees — do not explicitly use the term

stigma. We argue that following Goffman's, (1963: 3) theory of social stigmas, which defines a stigma as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting', these negative attitudes are best referred to as stigmas. In this study, we specifically use the term 'returnee stigma', as being a 'return migrant' is the attribute that creates isolation and rejection from the group. We purposefully use the term returnee in an encompassing manner — including permanent returnees as well as diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer — to emphasise that the stigmas experienced by diaspora members on return visits are similar to those felt by other types of returnee.

Less research has been conducted on the returnee stigmas confronting highly skilled returnees who discuss the challenges of reintegrating or being 'able to fit back in' upon return (Ammassari, 2009). Kuschminder, (2017) found that skilled female return migrants to Ethiopia frequently discussed having to change their behaviour in order to be accepted by locals. This strategy was used both to combat returnee stigmas and to create relationships with the locals. This process can be considered one of vernacularising: 'Vernacularizers take the ideas and practices of one group and present them in terms that another group will accept' (Levitt & Merry, 2009: 446). This process is considered vital for translating international ideas into local culture, a process closely associated with knowledge-transfer practices that seek to bring new ideas and ways of working into local host institutions. Finally, in some cases, returnees have expected to experience negative stigmas from family and society which, in the end, do not materialise. Wong, (2013) found that some women returning to Ghana expected negative stigmatisation due to divorce but, instead, were supported and embraced by their families for their independent decisions.

Stigmas can also be attached to highly skilled returnees wherein there is the expectation by locals that returnees will bring wealth, resources and expertise to the country, but this expectation is not met. This therefore places added pressure onto the returnee to perform, be successful and benefit the country. When the above-mentioned culture clashes occur, this can place strain on the returnee when trying to cope with this type of stigma.

Case Study and Methods

The diaspora-return programme 'Connecting Diaspora for Development' (CD4D),[2] operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) The Netherlands, has been selected for a case study. The first phase of the project, which is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operated from 2016 to 2019 and included Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Morocco, Sierra Leone and Somalia. The project's second phase started in 2019. As part of the project, diaspora members conduct assignments at selected public organisations within certain target sectors in their country of origin, the aim being to contribute to knowledge transfer and capacity development. As a continuation of the IOM's Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals (TRQN) project, the programme links diaspora members with Dutch

[2] More information about the project can be found here: https://www.connectingdiaspora.org/

residency to institutions in their countries of origin. The change in the name of the project in 2016 was strategic in that organisers wanted to stress to locals that participants were not 'returning'. The idea of 'return' itself could be threatening to locals who may perceive diaspora members as a threat to their jobs, not least due to the differential power position in the international and national job markets.

The host institutions were selected by the IOM and are mostly ministries and higher-education institutions, as well as hospitals in some countries. As CD4D follows a demand-driven approach, Terms of Reference for the assignments were developed jointly with the host institutions before being published on the IOM's website for diaspora members to apply. The IOM then selected diaspora members who are established migrants in the Netherlands, based on their qualifications. These members then conducted one or multiple assignments at a host institution, the length of which ranged from 2 weeks to 3 months, in some cases followed by one or two extensions of up to another 3 months.

This paper draws on qualitative interviews with 35 diaspora members who conducted CD4D assignments in three of the target countries of the first phase. While data were also collected in Afghanistan, Ghana and Iraq, around 60 per cent of all assignments took place in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Somaliland (diaspora members could conduct more than one assignment) and about 50 per cent of all participants from the programme were from these three countries. As the data were also more complete in these three countries, they have been selected to illustrate how knowledge transfer and capacity development take place within CD4D as a whole. The IOM operates CD4D in Somalia — in Mogadishu and Hargeisa (Somaliland). For logistical reasons, in-country interviews could only be conducted in Somaliland. A total of 53 diaspora members conducted assignments in Ethiopia (11), Sierra Leone (14), and Somaliland (28). Of the 53 diaspora members, 40 were interviewed — 8 in Ethiopia, 9 in Sierra Leone, and 23 in Somaliland). Five interviews with respondents in Somaliland have been excluded from the analysis due to the lack of full information as they consisted of brief conversations and were not voice-recorded.

The first author interviewed the diaspora members in person after they had finished one or multiple assignments. These interviews were scheduled in public places, such as cafés and libraries, in the city in the Netherlands where the diaspora member lived. Where in-person interviews were not possible, the conversation took place via Skype or phone. A few interviews with diaspora members were also conducted in the assignment countries when the participants were still there during the visit of the researcher. Verbatim transcriptions were made with the help of research assistants. After transcription, all the interviews were inductively coded by the first author using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. As the interviews had been conducted as part of the evaluation of CD4D, diaspora members' strategies were not the main focus of the interviews. Yet, diaspora members were asked how they experienced interactions with staff at the host institution, whether they experienced any challenges when working with them and if they thought that the staff treated them differently (positively or negatively).

The diaspora members in this study chose of their own volition to participate in the programme and are mostly highly educated, with valued expertise in a certain field. The majority of respondents have at least a Master's degree. Diaspora

members had generally obtained their education — at least, their highest degree — in the Netherlands or another European country. Respondents were, on average, 40 years old at the start of their first assignment, with ages ranging between 26 and 72 years. Respondents were predominantly male; of the 35 respondents, six were female, which is in line with the overall rather low rate of female participants within the CD4D project. Apart from one respondent, all the others had been born in the assignment country; the interviews showed that a few of the younger respondents could be considered as 1.5 generation migrants, having moved to Europe as children. Most respondents had spent at least half of their lifetime in the Netherlands.

The data from the interviews with diaspora members were complemented by 21 conversations with stakeholders in Ethiopia (6), Sierra Leone (9) and Somaliland (6). Stakeholders included national institutions responsible for diaspora affairs and international and non-governmental organisations working with diasporas directly or indirectly and were identified through a desk review and snowball sampling.

Empirical Findings

The roots of returnee stigmas will first be discussed by drawing on the key stakeholder interviews to explain the different types present in the three countries. Second, we illustrate the way that respondents experienced these returnee stigmas before, thirdly, presenting a typology of respondents' strategies for addressing them.

The Roots of Returnee Stigmas

Returnee stigmas were present in each country, and some were similar across all three. The first stigma that is prevalent in all three countries is that diaspora members might impose a threat to locals' jobs when working in the same office. Perceived inequalities in terms of professional development appear at the basis of these attitudes among the locals. One respondent in Sierra Leone, Stakeholder 5, stated:

> If a diaspora [member] is coming to work in this office, for instance, probably the local staff will think that the diaspora [members] want to take over their jobs. That's something that happens a lot…Because if the diaspora [member] is working very well, probably the office might want to keep him and if they keep him definitely the local will lose their job or they would be below the diaspora [member] because the diaspora [member] has more experience, more knowledge in what he or she has acquired abroad.

This is similar to findings by Hammond, (2015) where diaspora members in Somaliland were accorded higher social status than locals and perceived as having a competitive advantage in receiving high-ranking and well-paid positions. In some cases, it is true that diaspora members are preferred over locals for positions. One Somaliland stakeholder explained that having a European or North American passport is regarded as a comparative advantage for certain positions. Due to the lack of international recognition of Somaliland, international travel is easier for individuals with a foreign passport. This means that, for positions that require international

travel, including many government positions, returnees or diaspora members with a foreign passport may be the preferred candidates. These perceived differences in treatment create resentment towards diaspora members among the local population who perceive that the former think that they are 'better than locals' (Stakeholder 1, Ethiopia) or 'know-it-alls' (Stakeholder 6, Sierra Leone). Apart from competition for jobs, this resentment may also be created through the special treatment of diaspora members, for example in the form of tax benefits in Ethiopia. In Sierra Leone and Somaliland, the fear of unfair competition seems to go beyond the work sphere, as the perception exists that diaspora members entice away locals' wives, who are attracted by the higher social status attributed to diaspora members.

The second returnee stigma that was mentioned in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone is that diaspora members lack any understanding of local issues as they have not lived through the difficult situations that locals had to endure, such as war and poverty. This is furthered by feelings of envy that diaspora members are the ones who had the opportunity to leave the country, which allowed them to obtain high levels of education which, upon return, gives them a comparative advantage. Such notions have been discussed for instance by Fransen & Kuschminder, (2012), who identified the resentment of locals towards returnees who received support from the UNHCR for their housing projects. In Sierra Leone, the perceived lack of contextual knowledge and shared experiences, among other aspects, is commonly expressed through use of the term 'JCs' ('Just Comes'). As one stakeholder explained, the term is used to refer to diaspora members arriving for short visits at the end of the year, expressing locals' resentment and envy towards (presumably) wealthy and well-educated diaspora members who only return to their country of origin for leisure. Meanwhile, the locals — who have experienced and continue to experience challenging situations in Sierra Leone — resent these leisure visits that display unobtainable wealth for them.

Third, a country-specific stigma identified in Ethiopia is that diaspora members — and therefore returnees — have long been regarded as supporters of the opposition, a perspective which was helped along by a continuous emphasis of the Ethiopian government on the political engagement of the diaspora. In Ethiopia, the representative of the Ethiopian Diaspora Agency said that the picture of the diaspora in Ethiopia is predominantly negative, because the government has not actively promoted a positive picture in the past, for example by publicising stories of successful diaspora investment, something which the new agency aims to change. The current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, has put new emphasis on engaging the diaspora since he took up his position in April 2018 and has taken a more positive stance towards its members compared to previous governments (Krippahl, 2018). The geopolitics of diaspora engagement matter as they trickle down to the way that the highly skilled diaspora members on return visits are received by their colleagues which, in turn, may impact on diaspora members' contributions.

Despite the presence of three main types of stigma, the stakeholder interviews highlighted that there is also a recognition that diaspora members make positive contributions through skills transfer, remittances and investments. In Somaliland, Stakeholder 5 described diaspora contributions as 'one of the driving forces of the country'. It is evident that feelings towards diaspora members and returnees are

mixed, and both positive and negative sentiments are present in each of the focus countries. On the whole, the negative sentiments appear to be more prevalent than the positive ones and are more problematic for the knowledge-transfer process. If diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer are negatively stigmatised and not accepted, their potential to transfer knowledge and to contribute to capacity development may be limited. This relates to Levitt & Merry's, (2009) concept of vernacularisation. Therefore, we focus in this paper on how these negative returnee stigmas are addressed by diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer. This section has identified three types of stigma. The next section discusses how these were reflected in the experiences of the diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer.

Respondents' Experiences of Stigmas

Whether or not a returnee experiences stigmas depends on several factors, including the context in which diaspora members and locals are in contact, where individuals return from (e.g. Europe or North America or within Africa) and whether the diaspora member's return is temporary or permanent. A returnee who becomes part of a workplace, even if only temporarily, is often viewed as more threatening than someone who returns for leisure visits. This is because good employment positions are highly competitive and, as demonstrated above, there is a fear that returnees will take locals' jobs. Therefore, it is expected that returnee stigmas are stronger in the context of temporary workplace assignments for knowledge transfer.

Diaspora members who participated in CD4D were acutely aware of potentially negative attitude towards them in their country of origin — knowledge gained through their transnational ties over the years or acquired in the early days of their visits. One perception is that diaspora members may be perceived as arrogant know-it-alls or 'show-offs', as discussed in the previous section. For example, diaspora member (DM) 22, from Somaliland, stated:

> […] know-it-all diaspora. That is the perception they have of diaspora [members] — nosy, know-it-all and not adjusted, not polite and a threat to them as well. So, because I have been here longer, I knew already that perception would exist and I could really sense and see what was happening.

Other diaspora members also voiced that they were aware that they might be perceived as a threat, as locals may fear that those on return visits for knowledge transfer have come to take away their jobs.

While several diaspora members related that they started their assignments with these negative perceptions in mind, the recollections of their actual experiences were more diverse. This also means that in several cases, diaspora members who were expecting to be confronted with a negative attitude did not experience any negativity from the host-institution staff during their assignment. Of the 35 diaspora members interviewed for this study, 11 experienced negative stigmas at the host institution, feeling that staff there perceived them as a potential threat to their jobs. The diaspora members reported that they sensed mistrust towards them at the start of their

assignment, which they attributed to them being from the diaspora. One diaspora member in Somaliland commented on previous experiences with diaspora members who were awarded high-level positions — such as Director General or Minister — and who then contracted other diaspora members for consultancy jobs. Four diaspora members experienced negative attitudes outside, although not within, the host institution. Some diaspora members stated that the locals labelled them as foreigners which, depending on the situation, either seems a way to assume and signal a lack of understanding of local issues or may imply an acknowledgement of assumed foreign expertise.

In addition, diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer in Somaliland experienced gender-specific stigmas. For some female diaspora members in Somaliland, being labelled as a foreigner extended beyond their experiences at the host institution and was present for them daily. Female diaspora members seem particularly to experience locals being able to tell immediately that they are from the diaspora — for instance by the way they walk and dress. This aspect has been discussed by Peutz, (2010) and Tiilikainen, (2011) as part of their research on deportees in Somaliland. They showed that returnees were labelled as *dhaqan celis* — 'a person who is being returned to culture' (Tiilikainen, 2011: 77). Furthermore, one female diaspora member who participated in the CD4D project said that 'people judge you before you have done anything'. From her experience, locals would think that, because she grew up in Europe, she has low morals and is easier for men to get than local women. Her account of her experiences resembles what Schuster & Majidi, (2015: 644) refer to as a 'stigma of contamination'.

In line with the findings from the stakeholder interviews, not all diaspora members experienced stigmas in the host institutions where they conducted their assignments, either feeling that they were regarded as locals or, even though the staff regarded them as foreigners, that this was without the negative connotation. One diaspora member (DM 15, Sierra Leone) mentioned having been referred to as the 'Dutch friend', another as a 'brother from the diaspora' (DM 12, Sierra Leone). In some cases, the foreign reference was made in a positive way to signal acknowledgement of assumed foreign expertise, by referring to the diaspora member as the 'Expert from the Netherlands' (DM 4, Ethiopia). At the same time, as one respondent highlighted, this may create expectations towards diaspora members with regard to connections and monetary contributions.

Diaspora Members' Strategies to Prevent and Counteract Returnee Stigmas

As discussed in the previous section, 11 diaspora members experienced negative stigmas. Yet, due to the high awareness of stigmatisation, a total of 21 diaspora members reported employing some type of strategy to prevent or counteract it. Through the ways in which diaspora members articulated their awareness of negative diasporic stereotypes, they also showed an attempt to distance themselves from them, for instance, by considering the negative image as a product of a lack of self-awareness of other diaspora members. At the same time, their awareness of

potentially negative attitudes towards diaspora members has framed how they present themselves and how they interact with staff at the host institution.

Three types of strategy to prevent or counteract returnee stigmas were identified: *adapting* to the country and its culture; *signalling* commonality, approachability and respect and *addressing* stereotypes, labels and misconceptions. These strategies overlap and are not mutually exclusive. All are either employed as *preventive* or *counteractive* strategies or both. Thereby, counteractive strategies were used as a response to stigmas by diaspora members who experienced negative attitudes from staff during the visit at the host institution, while preventive strategies were used by diaspora members to avert stigmatisation.

Preventing Returnee Stigmatisation

Eight of the diaspora members interviewed for this study reported what can be characterised as a strategy of *adaptation*. Three of them used this strategy preventively; they did not report experiencing stigmatisation at the host institution, which could be attributed to their having employed this strategy. *Adapters* recounted that when they are in the country of origin, they try to act in a way that they perceive is typical for the country. Even though the majority of respondents reported having transnational ties, this first strategy was adopted in an attempt to not appear different from locals. In practice, this included diaspora members trying to adapt as much as possible to local customs and behaviours, especially in the areas of punctuality and time management, as well as aspects such as dress codes and ways of communication. Acknowledging that cultural differences with regard to these aspects might exist and that they, themselves, might have adopted some of the Dutch or European ways of doing things, this approach meant that they tried to display them less. For a few diaspora members, this strategy seemed to come naturally. As one respondent (DM 8, Ethiopia) said: 'I adapt. When I am there, I am Ethiopian, when I am here, I am Dutch'.

Other respondents reported how employing this strategy was the result of a learning process, as they realised over time that they cannot change the way in which things work at the host institution or in the country at large. They saw the need to adapt to improve their interactions with staff. As the majority of respondents had some previous experience in the country of origin, such as prior temporary, longer-term return or short-term visits, they adopted this strategy preventively.

Six of the diaspora members who did not experience stigma at the host institution described how they mainly engaged in efforts to *signal commonality, approachability and respect*. Exclusively used as a preventive strategy, the essence of this approach seems to be an intent to avert being perceived as an 'other' by highlighting commonalities. For instance, as a common perception is that diaspora members are know-it-alls, one diaspora member reported trying to show staff that s/he had not only come to teach but was willing to learn from the local team as well. In a formal training session, the diaspora member running it opted to ask a participant in the session who had some prior knowledge in the topic of training to give a presentation. In so doing, the diaspora member tried to 'show [the host institution staff] that

everybody can learn from each other' (DM 2, Ethiopia). DM 10, from Sierra Leone, stated that, in order to gain the trust of host-institution staff, one should focus on being 'consistent and respectful':

> And the only way to prove to those people who are sceptical…is to be consistent and respectful. And respect them for being sceptical. Because that's also human nature. Because maybe, because of their experience with other diasporas [they are sceptical].

Furthermore, this strategy also entailed showing staff that the diaspora members are also (respectively) Ethiopian, Somali(lander) or Sierra Leonean — or that, even though they are diaspora members, they also have close ties to their country of origin. Although more common as a counteractive strategy, one diaspora member reported having addressed any potential misconceptions upfront. Through a meeting with staff at the start of the assignment, the diaspora member openly told staff about the limited timeframe of the assignment and its supportive nature. This appeared to have been successful as the diaspora member did not experience any negative attitudes and was able to contribute to knowledge transfer.

Counteracting Returnee Stigmas

Adaptation was discussed above as a preventive strategy. The interviews showed that it is also being used as a strategy to counteract returnee stigmas. Four of the diaspora members who reported having experienced stigmatisation at their host institution employed this strategy. In addition, one diaspora member who was experiencing negative stigmas more generally — although not at the host institution — also used this strategy. For diaspora members who had less return experience or had not been involved in the work environment in their country of origin, this learning process, which leads to adaptation, took place during CD4D. DM 22 (Somaliland) described having learnt to understand the ways in which staff at the host institution said that they did not know how to go about a certain task. As the reaction of the staff member was very different to the behaviour which the diaspora member was used to in the Dutch work environment and the diaspora member had no previous work experience in the Somaliland context, it took him or her some time to recognise this difference. The diaspora member then adapted his/her way of communication accordingly, describing this learning process in the following way:

> A person who does not want to say 'I do not know how to do that', so […] they will say 'Yeah, yeah, I will do it, I will do it' and you come back a few hours later, you ask about it and he is telling you 'Oh this broke, or that broke' or, you know, some sort of excuse. At first, I used to get upset, like 'Why did you not just call me or let me know, like what is wrong with you?' But now, I will start asking questions like 'Oh, so how did it break?' 'What happened?', 'Oh, we do not really know how to do this', 'That is fine you should have just told me'. Done. 'I will explain it to you for the next time'. So now it is a whole different way of, you know, doing things instead of how I was [doing them at] first.

Less subtle than the other approaches, a group of diaspora members preferred to use a strategy of directly *addressing* stereotypes, labels and misconceptions. This was employed as a counteractive strategy by seven diaspora members who experienced stigmatisation at the host institution, as well as by two diaspora members who experienced stigmas during more general interactions. To overcome the mistrust they experienced by the staff at the host institution, these diaspora members used open communication. One (DM 11, Sierra Leone) said:

> I had to reassure them that I don't come to take their job. I am just here to help. To do capacity building and I am doing it absolutely out of free will. And that it is something that will benefit them. It is not for my own personal benefit.

This strategy entailed diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer providing information about the CD4D scheme and explaining the selection criteria for programme participants. As the CD4D programme has been designed as a needs-based project, implemented through temporary assignments, explaining the characteristics of the project made it clear for host-institution staff that diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer are merely a temporary support for the host institution and plan to return to the Netherlands after their assignment; therefore, they are not competing for host-institution staffs' positions. This seems crucial as the main stigmatisation experienced by diaspora members is being perceived as a threat to locals' jobs. In a few cases, a lack of clarity about the project modalities also created a feeling among local staff that they had been deprived of the opportunity to apply, themselves, to become a CD4D participant. In this case, explaining that only diaspora members who are resident in the Netherlands can apply to participate in the programme helped to ensure the willingness of staff to work with the diaspora member, especially for locals who questioned why they had not been allowed to apply themselves.

Conclusion

This article has explored how diaspora members who complete return visits for knowledge transfer and capacity development within a diaspora return programme deal with returnee stigmatisation. In this context, diaspora members are hailed for development purposes, and it is generally assumed that they are familiar with the country of origin and can reintegrate easily. We provided a first exploratory analysis of forms of returnee stigma, how they are experienced in the specific context of return visits for knowledge transfer and the strategies that diaspora members use to prevent and counteract stigmatisation. Through interviews with diaspora members on return visits, as well as with stakeholders, we found that stigmatisation was underpinned by different assumptions such as diaspora members being a threat to locals' jobs and lacking any understanding of local issues, as well as country- and gender-specific stigmas. The stigma of diaspora members posing a threat to locals' jobs is the most prevalent, and this fear is highly important in this context due to the unique type of temporary visit where diaspora members are placed directly in the

work context and are expected to vernacularise and create knowledge transfer and change.

A key finding of this study is that diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer show a high awareness of returnee stigmas and employ different strategies to try to address them. Of 35 diaspora members, 21 voiced that they employed some type of strategy. The strategies that were identified in this study are *adapting, signalling* and *addressing*, strategies which should be regarded as overlapping and not mutually exclusive. The strategies are either employed in a *preventive* or a *counteractive* move, or both. Nine diaspora members thus used the strategies in a counteractive manner as they experienced negative stigmas from the staff at the host institution. These diaspora members either *adapted* or *addressed*. The other group of returnees did not experience stigmatisation at the host institution yet; based on previous experiences, they used strategies to avoid it. These latter nine diaspora members mostly used *signalling* as a preventive strategy. In addition, three diaspora members used broader strategies as they experienced stigmas more generally, although not at the host institutions.

It should be noted that this paper focuses on returnees in very specific contexts. Return visits take place through a diaspora-return programme, meaning that the return is planned, restricted to a pre-defined time period and takes place voluntarily. In addition, diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer are supported financially as well as administratively for the duration of their stay. Furthermore, those on return visits for knowledge transfer are selected based on their skills; hence, they are mostly highly educated with valued expertise in a certain field. It is also important to highlight that the three countries examined in this study are among the least developed in the world and have experienced high levels of skilled emigration. How diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer experience and respond to returnee stigmatisation is important as trust has been identified as an important enabler or inhibitor of knowledge transfer in previous studies (Boh & Xu, 2013; Joia & Lemos, 2010; Kuschminderet al., 2014; Levin & Cross, 2004; Narteh, 2008; Riege, 2005; Sun & Scott, 2005). Yet, it has to be acknowledged that returnee stigmatisation is not the only factor at play; the absence of returnee stigmas by no means guarantees knowledge-transfer success, as other factors may play a role as well, such as the organisational environment or characteristics of the knowledge receivers.

Nonetheless, our study expands on Miah's, (2022) typology of return visits by discussing those for knowledge transfer as a distinct type of return visit and situating them within the broader field of diaspora return and the geopolitics of (under-)development. It demonstrates how returnee stigmatisation is experienced and addressed within the unique context of return visits for knowledge transfer, building on previous research on highly skilled return visits (Oeppen, 2013). The results show that even though diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer engage in voluntary visits, they experience negative attitudes from locals as they are perceived as being a threat to locals' jobs. While this fear shows recognition of the skills of the diaspora members, the very fact that diaspora members on return visits for knowledge are mostly highly skilled individuals may contribute to this stigmatisation. In addition, the findings demonstrate that female diaspora members on return visits in

Somaliland experience gendered stigmas, similar in part to what has been discussed in previous research as a 'stigma of contamination' (Schuster & Majidi, 2015). They illustrate that some diaspora members on return visits for knowledge transfer do experience stigmas similar to those which deportees experience, though compounded by their perceived privileged status on the part of the locals.

Regarding policy and programming, our findings demonstrate the importance of preparing diaspora members on knowledge transfer for these possible stigmas and the need to have a bi-directional movement of professionals for knowledge transfer from the Global South to the North. Diaspora members who were aware of the stigmas and acted to prevent them from the start of the assignment found that they had succeeded. If programme implementation includes the preparation and coaching of diaspora members on these stigmas, then the members can act to prevent them and increase the possibility of success in their assignment. The occurrence of gender-specific stigmatisation furthermore calls for considering intersecting social identities in policy and programming. These strategies would enhance the professional (re) integration of these diaspora members and optimise their contribution to development in their countries of origin.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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