

LEVERAGING DIASPORA EXPERTISE: A STRATEGIC ASSET FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



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Cuso
International

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CPO	Country Program Office
Cuso	Cuso International
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
MAXQDA	MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis Software
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
OCIC	Ontario Council for International Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs



Executive Summary

This study examines the engagement of diaspora volunteers within Cuso (Cuso)'s volunteer cooperation program to gain better insight into their experiences, motivations, and contributions. It specifically focuses on volunteers' cultural or heritage ties to their placement countries and examines how these connections shape their volunteer experience. The research further aims to: undertake comparative analysis with other volunteer groups to highlight unique aspects of volunteers that are representative of cultural communities; understand the diverse experiences, motivations, and contributions of volunteers from cultural communities supported by Cuso; highlight best practices and lessons learned from Cuso's history, engaging culturally diverse volunteers and partnerships; identify challenges and barriers faced by these communities in engaging or returning to their country of heritage; and explore the impact of cultural community contributions on local partners and communities.

This qualitative study draws on thematic, narrative data gathered through in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse set of stakeholders involved in Cuso's programming. These include diaspora volunteers, Cuso staff, local partner organizations, and Canada-based diaspora engagement partners. The sample reflects the geographic coverage of Cuso's operations, spanning Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada. The data analysis identified several themes that characterize diaspora volunteer engagement in line with the study objectives.

Our results show that diaspora volunteers, while sharing linguistic or cultural connections with host communities, may also be perceived as external actors due to their Canadian background, professional status, or migration histories. Also, many of them participate during periods of professional transition, such as retirement or mid-career shifts, when they seek to apply accumulated expertise in ways that align with personal values and heritage connections. They are perceived as efficient operational assets by local partners; their cultural knowledge, language skills, and social networks usually facilitate communication, reduce cultural adjustment challenges, and support organizational capacity-building through skills transfer. In addition, they frequently commit to completing assignments, sometimes beyond the scope of their contract, doing multiple placements, and staying in contact even after their placements.

We also found that volunteer engagement is shaped by institutional mediation and program structures. Recruitment strategies, pre-departure training, and ongoing support mechanisms play a critical role in facilitating successful placements, and their engagement extends beyond overseas placements.



The presence of diaspora volunteers introduces new dynamics within traditional North–South development relationships, considering them as cultural mediators who could bridge expectations between local and foreign actors and negotiate conflicting institutional logic. However, the findings show some shortcomings of institutional engagement with diaspora communities in development cooperation.

One recommendation is that governments treat diaspora groups as strategic partners and create enabling frameworks for transnational collaboration. Also, donors and implementing organizations should support skills-based volunteering, fund partnerships with diaspora organizations, and develop targeted recruitment, training, and support mechanisms. Overall, diaspora volunteers bring valuable cultural knowledge, professional expertise, and transnational networks that can significantly strengthen development partnerships.

Finally, diaspora engagement must not be reduced to symbolic or identity-based inclusion. Effective programming demands robust institutional frameworks, intentional outreach strategies, and differentiated support mechanisms that account for the heterogeneity of diaspora experiences.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Diaspora engagement has become a prominent theme in international development policy and practice. Migrants and their descendants maintain economic, social, and cultural ties with their countries of origin, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange, investment, and transnational collaboration. Development scholars increasingly recognize diaspora communities as important actors in development processes, contributing through financial remittances, professional expertise, and social networks.

Cuso has a long history of working with culturally diverse volunteers in Canada. Volunteer cooperation programs represent one avenue for mobilizing diaspora volunteers. Over the last 60 years, the organization has collaborated with volunteers, including those who maintain strong ties to the countries where they serve, such as first-, second-, and third-generation migrants. These volunteers often contribute to development initiatives through skills transfer, capacity building, and community engagement. Diaspora volunteers bring linguistic competence, cultural familiarity, and personal connections that can enhance development initiatives. Their transnational experiences often position them as bridges between international organizations and local communities.

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has also emphasized the importance of engaging the diaspora in international development, and previous GAC research conducted in 2016–2017 highlighted the diversity of the diaspora. The present research builds on these earlier insights by examining how culturally diverse volunteers engage with Cuso programs in practice.

1.2 Research Purpose and Rationale

Despite increasing recognition of diaspora engagement in development, limited empirical evidence exists on how diaspora volunteers experience international cooperation programs. Much of the existing literature focuses on financial remittances or diaspora entrepreneurship, while fewer studies examine the role of diaspora volunteers with and within development organizations.

The purpose of this research is to address this gap by documenting the experiences, motivations, and contributions of culturally diverse volunteers within Cuso programs. The study also aims to generate insights that can inform institutional strategies for engaging diaspora communities more effectively.



This research builds on GAC's earlier work on diaspora engagement while focusing specifically on volunteer cooperation. By analyzing perspectives from volunteers, staff, and partner organizations, the study provides a multi-stakeholder view of diaspora engagement in practice.

The findings are intended to support future program development within Cuso and contribute to broader discussions on diaspora participation in development cooperation.

Situated at the intersection of migration studies and development practice, this study responds to growing policy interest in mobilizing diaspora communities as development actors. While existing discourse has emphasized the economic role of diasporas, mainly through remittances and investment, their participation in technical cooperation and knowledge exchange remains underexamined. This research addresses that gap by exploring how diaspora volunteers contribute to North–South inequality and how their engagement mediates institutional relationships between Canadian organizations and their counterparts in the global South.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study seeks to understand the diverse experiences, motivations, and contributions of volunteers from the diaspora who participate in Cuso programs. This includes examining how diaspora volunteers' cultural, linguistic, and professional backgrounds influence their engagement. It aims to identify the incentives, challenges, and barriers that diaspora volunteers encounter when engaging in international development initiatives.

The research also explores the impact of diaspora volunteer contributions on local partners and communities, including on project delivery. By analyzing the perspectives of local partner organizations and Cuso staff, the study assesses how culturally diverse volunteers influence collaboration, knowledge transfer, and community relationships. Finally, the research intends to highlight best practices and lessons learned from Cuso's experience working with diaspora volunteers. By identifying successful engagement models and institutional strategies, the study hopes to inform future program design.

1.4 About Cuso

Cuso is a Canadian-founded and led global development organization dedicated to addressing poverty and creating opportunities for equity. At Cuso, we believe in the transformative power of collaboration and action. For over six decades, we have worked



alongside communities - in Canada and around the world – to create sustainable change, fostering economic growth, social well-being, and resilience.

Cuso's partnership model helps build bridges between governments, community organizations, private sector actors, and equity-deserving groups. Through our innovative programs, dedicated volunteers, and strong partnerships, we support communities with the tools, education, and resources to build brighter futures for everyone.



2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The terminology surrounding diaspora and cultural communities has evolved significantly over recent decades, reflecting both academic debates and policy shifts. Cultural identities are no longer viewed as fixed but as continually reshaped by history, culture, and power, making diasporic identity a constantly renegotiated process shaped by shifting social contexts and generational change (Aydin, 2023; Lefort, 2023). The literature on diaspora engagement spans multiple academic traditions but remains limited on how governments, international agencies, and NGOs attempt to mobilize diasporas for development (Sinatti & Horst, 2015).

Within development practice, diaspora is generally understood as individuals and communities living outside their country or region of origin while maintaining a sense of identity and engagement (including engagement with development initiatives) with that country or region of heritage (Cuso International, 2015). Diaspora members show a strong desire to reconnect with ancestral roots. For them, heritage tourism, language learning, and cultural practice serve as mechanisms for roots-seeking, a deliberate reconstruction of ethnic origin as both identity anchor and emotional homecoming (Marschall, 2017). Reconnecting with ancestral roots supports building a sense of self and preserving family history. (Mehtiyeva & Prince, 2020).

2.2 Diaspora Engagement in Development

Canada represents a unique context for diaspora engagement. In 2021, immigrants were 23% of Canada's population, and by 2031, nearly half of Canadians aged 15 and over are projected to be foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. This positions Canada as a critical laboratory for understanding diaspora engagement in international development. Contemporary diaspora populations are in a unique position to challenge current development models and experiment with new approaches (Cuso International, 2015).

Diaspora volunteers are positioned to access and share opportunities, resources, and networks between their countries of residence and heritage (Cuso International, 2015; Faris 2013). This bidirectional knowledge flow recognizes that diaspora members bring richness of knowledge, skills, experience, and multicultural perspectives, from both their heritage and current home countries (ibid). Governments in both home and host countries now see the benefits of diaspora involvement and look for ways to collaborate. Diaspora engagement in development is often framed around individual choices, but research suggests diasporas



are better understood as communities whose actions are shaped by shared practices and social systems rooted in lived experience (Diaspora and Development Research, 2018). Mobilization based on understanding diasporas as communities rooted in a national home with a shared group identity is more likely to succeed than narrow economic models.

In Canada, GAC has actively engaged with diaspora and cultural communities through consultations and programming initiatives. The Ontario Council for International Cooperation (OCIC) has facilitated consultations specifically focused on cultural communities' international cooperation activities and opportunities to deepen engagement (Cuso International, 2015). These policy dialogues reflect governmental recognition of diaspora as development actors beyond traditional remittances. However, a national diaspora engagement strategy that includes a research agenda as well as a coordinated approach across different stakeholders such as GAC, IRCC, and Heritage Canada is missing. Cuso's own experience on different Volunteer Cooperation Programs (VCP) reflects decline in funds to build capacities for local diaspora organizations.

2.3 Volunteer Motivation and Experience

Key motivations for educated migrants to return and contribute include a social framework of mutual help, meaningfulness of work, giving back, transfer of skills, role-driven contributions, a sense of belonging, a drive for betterment, and being inspired by others, with motives rooted in individual agency and experiential learning shaped by migration experiences (Chiemi & Tatsuya, 2025; Appe 2024; Faris 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Giving back is often associated with emotional drivers that connect someone to a transnational community and lead to a sense of obligation (Appe 2024). Cuso's programmatic experience identifies distinctive characteristics of diaspora volunteers that differentiate them from other volunteer populations. Diaspora individuals and groups demonstrate a higher likelihood of being interested in or already engaged in the development process of particular countries; maintaining engagement over longer periods and more regularly than other volunteer types; and possessing social and cultural connections with associated skills enabling quicker and deeper engagement in development cooperation (Cuso International, 2015). Sustained engagement of diaspora volunteers is reflected in how they access and share opportunities, resources, and networks bidirectionally between countries of residence and heritage. Continued involvement alongside strong interest and "stake" in sustainable economic and social development often translates into long-term commitment to development engagement (ibid).



Diaspora volunteer programming requires consideration of unique challenges that may affect volunteer success and well-being. These include security risks that may differ for diaspora volunteers returning to countries of origin, family expectations and obligations while in-country that can create competing demands on volunteer time and energy, and psychological complexities of returning after extended absences or, for second and third generation diaspora, experiencing countries of heritage for the first time as adults (Cuso International, 2015). Programming must provide adequate preparation, ongoing support, and recognition of these distinctive dimensions of diaspora volunteer experience.

Volunteers are often seen as ‘one of us’ by the host community. They ‘hit the ground running’ and are faster than other international volunteers in their learning curve. However, sometimes their identity is to their disadvantage to them, as they might be treated unfairly or seen as wealthy and expected to help (Faris 2013).

2.4 Impact and Value Creation in Development Volunteering

In addition to sending economic remittances, diasporas promote trade and foreign direct investment, create businesses, spur entrepreneurship, and transfer new knowledge and skills (Newland & Plaza, 2013). Policymakers increasingly recognize engaged diaspora as an asset, or even a counterweight to the emigration of skilled and talented migrants, particularly in high-risk investment environments where diaspora networks reduce informational and relational barriers to entry. Diaspora engagement is a catalyst for sustainable development, investment, and innovation, and has gained renewed policy attention, with emerging sectors such as the green economy, digital transformation, and infrastructure identified as priority areas for diaspora-led investment and entrepreneurship (GFMD, 2025). Diaspora communities also contribute through social remittances, i.e., the flow of ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital. Social remittances circulate through multiple channels, return visits, correspondence, and digital communication, and encompass norms, practices, identities, and social capital (Levitt, 1998). For volunteer-sending organizations, diaspora volunteers are by nature active providers of social remittances, making their engagement a uniquely multidimensional development contribution.

Measuring the impact of diaspora engagement is not straightforward. It is hard to separate what diaspora volunteers specifically contribute from other factors influencing outcomes, and many of the most valuable benefits, such as skills transfer, knowledge sharing, and shifts in community attitudes, are difficult to quantify (Newland & Plaza, 2013). But the value of diaspora volunteering extends beyond the communities being served. When a diaspora volunteer travels to their country of origin, they also carry with them the values, practices,



and ways of working shaped by their life in the country of residence; effectively acting as an informal ambassador for their country of residence and generating diplomatic and reputational benefits that go well beyond the development project itself (Coakley, 2024). For volunteer-sending organizations, building evaluation tools that capture both sides of this equation is an important and largely unmet challenge (Agunias & Newland, 2012).

2.5 Organizational Considerations for Engaging Cultural Communities

Strengthening cultural identity and emotional connections with countries of origin remains a vital pathway for engaging second- and third-generation diaspora members, with cultural expressions through food, music, and art fostering a sense of pride and belonging, while structured initiatives such as internships, volunteer programs, and cultural exchanges provide additional engagement opportunities (GFMD report, 2025). Volunteer-recruiting organizations can improve recruitment and retention by aligning persuasive messages and task assignments with volunteers' specific motives, as volunteers stay longer when their roles match their motivations (Okun, 1994; Clary et al., 1998).

Practical experience in diaspora volunteer recruitment demonstrates the importance of strategic partnerships with diaspora organizations. Cuso's mapping of Caribbean diaspora organizations identified extensive networks, including community associations, alumni groups, media outlets (print, radio, television), and professional councils (Cuso International, 2015). These partnerships serve multiple functions: they help raise awareness of volunteer-abroad opportunities among diaspora communities who are often outside the international development sector. They provide recruitment channels, offer cultural competency insights, facilitate community trust-building, and enable co-planning and co-management of development initiatives.

There is skill diversity among diaspora groups (Statistics Canada, 2023; Cuso International, 2015) that should be considered for recruitment. Effective partnership models take into account the diverse organizational landscape of diaspora communities. Multi-stakeholder partnerships represent an emerging model, as demonstrated by Cuso's collaboration with the Jamaica Diaspora Institute. The Caribbean diaspora in Canada, for example, demonstrates sophisticated organizational structures spanning community associations, professional networks, academic alumni groups, business councils, and cultural organizations (Cuso International, 2015). These organizations possess community trust, cultural knowledge, and networks that formal development agencies often lack. Such



models demonstrate how institutional partnerships can provide sustainability beyond project cycles.

Public engagement through diaspora communities also represents an important partnership dimension. Diaspora Speaker Series events, community consultations, and collaborative symposia serve dual purposes: they mobilize diaspora participation in development programming while simultaneously raising awareness and engagement among broader diaspora communities not directly involved in volunteering (Cuso International, 2015). These engagement strategies recognize diaspora communities as both volunteers and constituencies for development education and advocacy, and for recruiting diaspora volunteers.

Resource constraints such as limited budgets, volunteer leadership, and administrative capacity within diaspora community organizations also affect engagement capacity (Cuso International, 2015).

2.6 Gaps in Existing Research

Despite growing interest in diaspora engagement and international volunteering, several significant gaps remain in the literature. There is limited research on specific approaches to engage cultural communities, organizational barriers and needs, comparative analysis of diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers, and practical partnership models. Research on how diaspora volunteers experience barriers, women's experiences, and long-term diaspora volunteer engagement remains limited. This research seeks to contribute insights and practical considerations to fill the identified gaps in the literature.



3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the engagement of diaspora volunteers in Cuso's programs. A qualitative methodology was selected to capture lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices related to diaspora engagement, dimensions that are difficult to measure through quantitative methods alone.

The research conducted in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders involved in Cuso's work, including diaspora volunteers from different countries/regions, Cuso staff in Canada and country offices, local partner organizations, and Canada-based public engagement partners. This multi-stakeholder approach enabled the study to capture perspectives across different levels of Cuso's volunteer ecosystem.

This design supported the exploration of the motivations, experiences, and contributions of diaspora volunteers while identifying institutional lessons and challenges related to their engagement.

3.2 Sampling and Participants' Profiles

A total of 27 interviews were conducted as part of this study. Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation across the main categories involved in Cuso's volunteer engagement and management.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they allow participants to describe their experiences while enabling the research team to explore specific themes relevant to the study objectives. Volunteers who self-identified as diaspora volunteers were contacted using the snowball sampling method; we asked local partners and Country Program Office (CPO)s to propose names and eventually introduce the research team. The research team shortlisted several potential interviewees for each group based on predetermined criteria (see [Appendix B](#)). Interviewees were scheduled for interviews after confirming their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

The respondents included diaspora volunteers, Cuso staff based in Canada and other country offices (including Benin, Colombia, Ethiopia, Jamaica, and Peru), local partner organizations, and diaspora engagement actors in Canada. Interviews were conducted in



English, French, and Spanish, reflecting the linguistic and geographic diversity of the respondents. All interviews were translated and transcribed into English for analysis.

This purposive sampling strategy enabled the study to compare perspectives across different actors involved in Cuso's volunteer programs. The sample also reflects a diversity of professional backgrounds, migration experiences, and geographic contexts, considering the heritage connections of the diaspora volunteers to countries across Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Table 1 shows the distribution of interviews by respondent categories and geographical context.

Table 1. Distribution of interviewees by respondent category and geography

Respondent category	Number of interviewees	Geographic Context
Diaspora Volunteers (including current and alumni)	12	Benin, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Jamaica, Nigeria, Peru
Cuso Canada Office Staff	5	Canada
Cuso Country Program Staff	5	Benin, Colombia, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Peru
Local Partner Organizations	3	Cameroon, Ethiopia, Peru
Diaspora / Public Engagement Partners	2	Canada
Total	27	

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection relied primarily on in-depth interviews, using interview guides adapted for each respondent category. This was supplemented by a systematic review of documents related to diaspora engagement.

Different interview guides were designed for each respondent category (see [Appendix A](#)) to ensure that the questions were pertinent and captured their insights. The questions were organized around several thematic areas, in line with the study objectives. Interviews were conducted virtually and lasted 45-90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed using Fireflies.ai. The transcripts were subsequently reviewed for inaccuracies and to ensure clarity before qualitative coding and thematic analysis using MAXQDA.



The study also reviewed internal documents and background materials related to Cuso's volunteer engagement initiatives: these provided contextual information about recruitment strategies, program structures, and previous research on diaspora engagement.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. The analysis followed a structured coding process consisting of three stages:

- **Open Coding:** Initial codes were assigned to segments of interview transcripts based on recurring themes related to volunteer motivations, institutional processes, and volunteer experiences.
- **Axial Coding:** Related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories representing key dimensions of diaspora engagement.
- **Thematic Integration:** These categories were then connected to the analytical framework used in the findings and discussion sections.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and how the data would be used. Several steps were taken to protect participant confidentiality:

- Interview transcripts were anonymized
- Identifying details were removed from quotations used in the report
- Data were stored securely on password-protected systems, accessible only to authorized persons

The research also recognized the importance of cultural sensitivity when discussing issues related to identity, migration histories, and diaspora engagement. Interview questions were designed to allow participants to describe their identities and experiences using their own terminology.



3.6 Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

While this study provides rich, in-depth insights into diaspora volunteer engagement, several limitations should be noted. First, the scope of the study is limited to Cuso's programming: the findings reflect the experiences and organizational context of one institution. Perspectives from volunteers engaged through other organizations operating in the diaspora engagement space were not captured, which may limit the transferability of findings to other organizations.

The study does not include the perspectives of government bodies or funders, actors who hold significant influence over the design, resourcing, and direction of diaspora engagement programming. Their absence from the sample implies that structural and policy-level dynamics may be underrepresented in the analysis.

The geographic coverage of the study, spanning West and East Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada, does not extend to Northern and Southern Africa, Europe, or Asia, regions where diaspora communities and volunteer programs are also active. Future research that broadens this geographic scope could yield additional insights and surface dynamics not captured here.

The sample size is relatively small, so not all the substance of the volunteer's experience might be captured in this study. Relying only on in-depth interviews without combining surveys or focus group discussions might have limited the richness of perspectives captured.

Some strategies were used to mitigate these limitations: engaging multiple stakeholder groups allowed the research to triangulate perspectives across volunteers, staff, partner organizations, and diaspora/public engagement partners. Also, the use of systematic coding helped ensure that patterns identified in the data were based on consistent analytical procedures.



4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed several recurring themes related to diaspora volunteer engagement and experiences. One of the most prominent themes relates to volunteer motivations. Many participants described their engagement as motivated by a desire to reconnect with their cultural heritage and contribute to communities connected to their personal histories. Themes such as “giving back”, “cultural awareness”, and “personal meaning” frequently appeared in volunteer interviews. Several volunteers also emphasized professional motivations, noting that they wished to apply their skills and expertise to development initiatives.

A second theme concerns the role of diaspora volunteers as cultural mediators. Interview data tagged under the themes “cultural mediation”, “social capital”, and “skills transfer” show that volunteers often helped facilitate communication between international organizations and local communities. Partner organizations frequently described diaspora volunteers as bridges who could navigate both institutional expectations and local cultural contexts.

However, the analysis also revealed several challenges peculiar to diaspora volunteer engagement. Themes such as “not local enough”, “challenges>contextual mismatch”, and “volunteers’ fears” indicate that some diaspora volunteers experience identity tensions when returning to their countries of heritage. In some cases, local communities may perceive diaspora volunteers as outsiders due to their residence abroad or professional backgrounds.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of institutional support mechanisms. Themes such as “recruitment processes”, “support mechanisms”, and “importance of close follow-up” indicate that effective volunteer engagement depends on structured recruitment strategies and ongoing support during placements.

4.1 Key Themes Identified Across Respondent Groups

The qualitative analysis, using MAXQDA software, allowed us to compare how different participant groups discussed diaspora engagement. The coding analysis revealed different thematic emphases across the groups. Volunteers primarily discussed motivations and identity-related experiences, while Cuso Canada and country program staff emphasized institutional processes such as recruitment and volunteer management. In-country partner organizations and Cuso country program staff frequently highlighted skills transfer and



cultural mediation, reflecting their direct collaboration with diaspora volunteers during placements; they also had a high interest in the contrast between diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers, as they developed more arguments on this theme. This comparative coding analysis (see Table 2) demonstrates how different actors within the volunteer ecosystem perceive diaspora engagement from distinct perspectives.

Table 2. Distribution of key themes across stakeholder groups (MAXQDA Coding)

Themes	Volunteers	Canada Office Staff	Country Office Staff	Partner Organizations
Motivations (giving back, personal meaning)	High	Medium	Low	Low
Cultural mediation	Medium	Medium	High	High
Skills transfer	Medium	Medium	High	High
Institutional processes (recruitment processes, support mechanisms, partnerships)	Low	High	High	Medium
Personal meaning, cultural awareness	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Contextual mismatch	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Diaspora vs international volunteers	Low	Medium	High	High

Table 3 presents the findings, organized into six interrelated dimensions that reflect the structure of the coded data. These dimensions are examined in more detail below, showing how the evidence illustrates each.

- layered positionality
- life-course timing and biographical embeddedness
- diaspora volunteers as operational assets
- institutional mediation and cultural infrastructure
- transnational bridging roles
- reconfiguring North–South volunteer dynamics.



Table 3. Alignment between Objectives, Research Questions, Analysis Themes, and Findings

Study Objectives	Research Focus	Key Themes	Dimensions
Comparative analysis between diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers	How do diaspora volunteers differ from other volunteers?	Diaspora vs international volunteers, cultural mediation, skills transfer	Diaspora volunteers as operational assets; reconfiguring North–South volunteer dynamics;
Understand the motivations and experiences of diaspora volunteers	What motivates diaspora volunteers, and how do they experience placements?	Giving back, personal meaning, cultural awareness, and professional motivations	Life-course timing and biographical embeddedness
Identify best practices and institutional lessons	What practices support successful diaspora volunteer engagement?	Support mechanisms, recruitment processes, importance of close follow-up, quality of placements, partnerships	Institutional mediation and cultural Infrastructure
Identify barriers and challenges	What obstacles affect diaspora volunteer participation?	Not local enough, contextual mismatch, volunteers’ fears, and financial challenges	Layered positionality; transnational bridging roles
Explore impacts on local partners and communities	How do diaspora volunteers contribute to development outcomes?	Skills transfer, cultural mediation, social capital, professional diaspora networks	Diaspora volunteers as operational assets

4.2 Layered Positionality: Between Insider and Outsider

Across interviews, diaspora identity is consistently described as fluid, self-defined, and context-dependent. A volunteer mentioned that:

“Your parents remind you of home, of what their childhood was like... and when you leave home, you live like a Canadian, following Canadian rules, but



there's a sort of unspoken understanding that you're living two realities that are compatible".

This illustrates the inner tension of diaspora volunteers and how they build their identity during their life course.

Another volunteer shared that she moved to multiple countries because of her family:

"In Canada, I'm Canadian, but Beninese. In Senegal, I'm Canadian and Beninese. In Benin, I'm Canadian and Senegalese but not really Beninese; just a bit, because my surname is Beninese. So yes, because of that, people immediately think, 'Oh, you're Beninese' but you're Beninese in a different way, actually".

A diaspora engagement partner based in Canada further complicated the term by noting that the label "diaspora" can carry social connotations within community contexts. In some cases, it may imply economic privilege or foreignness. As a result, some individuals prefer to identify using hyphenated identities such as "Ethiopian-Canadian" rather than adopting the broader diaspora label. This observation suggests that the term itself is politically and socially loaded and that its meaning may shift depending on context and audience.

These dynamics become particularly visible in relation to power and perception. While diaspora volunteers often possess cultural familiarity and language skills that facilitate engagement with local communities, they may also be perceived as externally privileged due to their Canadian citizenship, professional credentials, or socioeconomic status. A Cuso staff member involved in volunteer preparation for deployment explained that training sessions explicitly address questions of power and positionality, encouraging volunteers to reflect on how they see themselves compared with how they may be perceived by local partners and local communities. In this sense, diaspora volunteers frequently occupy a liminal position, navigating a space that is neither fully insider nor entirely outsider.

4.3 Life-Course Timing and Biographical Embeddedness

A second major finding concerns the biographical timing of volunteer engagement. Several participants described diaspora volunteering as emerging during periods of personal or professional transition. A Cuso Country Program staff member recounted the example of a volunteer who had retired in Canada and decided to return to their country of heritage to "give back" to local communities. Similar patterns appear across multiple interviews, where participation in volunteer programs follows career consolidation or a period of post-migration stability.



These narratives suggest that diaspora engagement is often embedded within broader life trajectories. Rather than representing a spontaneous act of altruism, volunteering frequently occurs after individuals have accumulated professional expertise, achieved financial stability, and engaged in personal reflection about their relationship to their country of origin. In this sense, the decision to volunteer reflects both symbolic and practical considerations, combining a desire to reconnect with cultural heritage with the opportunity to apply professional skills in meaningful ways.

Importantly, the timing of diaspora engagement also intersects with institutional needs. Participants emphasized that many volunteers bring decades of professional experience, which aligns closely with Cuso's skills-based placement model. A representative from a partner organization in Latin America explained that host institutions typically seek volunteers whose professional profiles match the technical requirements of specific projects. From this perspective, cultural affiliation alone is not sufficient; effective placements require alignment between volunteer expertise and organizational needs. These observations highlight the increasing professionalization of volunteer programs.

Many participants described their engagement with Cuso as occurring during periods of personal or professional transition. For example, several volunteer respondents indicated that they joined volunteer programs after completing major career milestones or approaching retirement. In these cases, volunteering was often framed as an opportunity to apply professional expertise in ways that aligned with personal values and social impact goals. For example, one volunteer in Jamaica said,

"So, I graduated from university in 2024, in Canada, from the Department of Social Science. I studied political science with a specific focus on tourism in the Caribbean...I hadn't immediately gone into work right after I graduated. I was actually working as a chef throughout university, and I kept on working as a chef after I had graduated. But I did want to find a role that would let me use my educational background."

While the biographical timing of diaspora volunteering defies easy generalization, and a more systematic comparison with non-diaspora volunteers is beyond the scope of this study, the interview data reveal that life stage and generational position shape not only when diaspora individuals choose to volunteer, but what the experience means to them and where it leads afterward. For instance, for some first-generation diaspora volunteers, whose personal histories include migration from the country of heritage, placements can represent a form of return migration. In some cases, participants described choosing not to return to Canada at all, having found a renewed sense of belonging, familiarity, and social embeddedness in the country of origin. For these individuals, volunteering functioned as a



pivotal moment of re-rooting, reshaping long-term life decisions, and challenging the assumed temporality of volunteer placements.

By contrast, second-generation diaspora volunteers, often born or largely raised in Canada, tended to describe their experience in terms of exploration and negotiation of identity rather than return. While many reported strong emotional and symbolic connections to their country of heritage, their trajectories more frequently involved returning to Canada after the placement. However, this return was not necessarily a simple reversion to a prior state. Rather, participants described a transformed sense of self, marked by a more complex and reflexive understanding of belonging, as well as an increased capacity to navigate transnational identities.

For a smaller subset of third-generation diaspora participants, where connections to the country of heritage are more attenuated, engagement appeared less driven by personal or familial ties and more by professional motivations or broader commitments to international development. In these cases, the experience more closely resembled that of non-diaspora volunteers, although cultural curiosity and symbolic affiliation still played a role.

4.4 Diaspora Volunteers as Operational Assets

A third theme emerging from the interviews concerns the operational advantages associated with volunteers from the diaspora. Country offices frequently described diaspora volunteers as relatively low-risk placements. A Country Program staff member noted that:

“Once they arrive here...they integrate very easily because they already know the culture a little. There are not the kind of early departures that we sometimes see with volunteers who are not from the diaspora.”

Similarly, another CPO staff member observed that these volunteers often “have an edge” because they are familiar with communication styles and cultural expectations in the communities where they serve. A local partner in East Africa developed this point and shared about a volunteer placed in their organization:

“She was able to speak the local language and easily communicate with both the staff and the community.”

Participants suggested that this operational advantage appears across several dimensions. Volunteers from the diaspora were often described as experiencing less cultural adjustment, adapting more quickly to workplace norms, requiring less intensive supervision, and demonstrating strong retention throughout placements. From the perspective of program



management, these characteristics position such volunteers as stabilizing actors within volunteer cooperation programs, helping reduce onboarding challenges and facilitating smoother collaboration with local partners.

At the same time, the findings indicate that this operational advantage coexists with a degree of institutional ambiguity. Despite the recognition of their value, engagement with volunteers from the diaspora is not systematically formalized within program structures. A Cuso Canada staff member involved in volunteer training explained that pre-placement training is largely standardized across all volunteer groups. While facilitators may adapt discussions when participants share diaspora backgrounds, there is no dedicated training stream specifically designed for volunteers with cultural ties to the host country.

In addition, a CPO staff member highlighted challenges related to recruitment visibility and communication with the Canada Office during the recruitment process. These observations point to an underlying tension: while volunteers from the diaspora are widely recognized as operationally beneficial, their distinct contributions are not always reflected in formal program strategies or institutional frameworks.

4.5 Institutional Mediation and Cultural Infrastructure

The analysis also highlights several institutional processes that shape how diaspora volunteers engage with Cuso programs.

Another key insight emerging from the interviews concerns the structured nature of institutional mediation of local cultures by volunteer programs. Adaptation to the local context is not assumed to occur naturally but is supported through institutional preparation and orientation processes. On this topic, a CPO staff member said:

“Once volunteers arrive, they participate in an in-country orientation where we explain housing arrangements, security considerations, and how they will work with partner organizations.”

While many of these challenges are common across all volunteer groups, the findings suggest that diaspora volunteers experience them differently depending on their level of connection to the host country. Stronger cultural familiarity may reduce certain adaptation challenges but can also create overconfidence or lead to underestimation of contextual risks. On the other hand, weaker ties may increase adjustment difficulties, bringing their experiences closer to those of non-diaspora volunteers.



However, several participants highlighted tensions between standardized program frameworks and the complexity of local contexts, where institutional expectations do not always fully align with on-the-ground conditions. For instance, such mismatches can manifest in everyday challenges, as illustrated in one case evoked by a CPO staff in Latin America:

“She arrived and all the houses seemed very poor to her... nothing met her expectations, so it was very difficult to find accommodation because nothing was acceptable for her.”

To address this type of situation, a CPO staff member described how detailed orientation sessions are provided to incoming volunteers, covering topics such as local dress norms, food etiquette, awareness of social hierarchies, and security considerations. While these protocols apply to all volunteers, the study respondents indicated that they are particularly important for those who do not share cultural familiarity with the host country.

Similarly, a Cuso Canada Office staff member involved in volunteer preparation explained that pre-departure training modules include sessions on intercultural communication, conflict management, and discussions about power and privilege. These sessions encourage volunteers to reflect on how their identities and backgrounds may influence interactions with local partners and communities.

Importantly, these reflections are not limited to volunteers without cultural ties to the host country. The study participants noted that volunteers from the diaspora are also encouraged to reflect on their perceptions of familiarity and risk. In some cases, volunteers who feel culturally connected to a country may underestimate certain contextual risks or institutional dynamics, making structured preparation equally relevant.

Overall, these findings indicate that volunteer integration is supported through institutional frameworks designed to facilitate adaptation across diverse cultural backgrounds. While volunteers from the diaspora may require fewer adjustments in some areas, the process of integration remains guided by structured training and program support mechanisms rather than occurring spontaneously. Some diaspora-specific gaps were identified, particularly in relation to identity navigation, expectations from local communities, and the absence of tailored preparation addressing these dynamics. Unlike non-diaspora volunteers, diaspora participants may face implicit expectations to “belong” or perform culturally, which can create additional pressures not fully addressed in current training frameworks.



4.6 Transnational Bridging and Domestic Legitimacy

The interviews revealed how diaspora engagement operates across both international and domestic contexts. Diaspora engagement extends beyond overseas volunteer placements and operates within Canada through community partnerships and public engagement initiatives. A Cuso Canada office staff member described how collaborations with diaspora associations help amplify organizational storytelling and support volunteer recruitment efforts. In several cases, these relationships are formalized through memoranda of understanding with community organizations that promote volunteer opportunities and share program information within their networks.

The findings also highlight the role of diaspora-led media and community platforms in disseminating information about volunteer opportunities for diaspora members. A diaspora community partner based in Canada explained that media organizations and community networks can play a key role in circulating information about development initiatives and volunteer opportunities within culturally specific audiences. These channels often reach communities that may not be directly connected to traditional development communication platforms.

Participants emphasized that such partnerships contribute to strengthening Cuso's visibility and credibility within diaspora communities in Canada. By engaging trusted community organizations and communication platforms, the organization can expand its outreach and build stronger relationships with culturally diverse audiences.

These findings suggest that diaspora engagement operates across both international and domestic contexts. Beyond their roles in overseas placements, diaspora volunteers and community partners contribute to broader transnational networks that connect Canadian communities with international development initiatives. In this sense, diaspora engagement functions not only as a pathway for individual volunteer participation but also as a mechanism for building bridges between domestic constituencies and global development programming.

4.7 Reconfiguring North–South Volunteer Dynamics

Finally, the analysis revealed that the presence of volunteers from the diaspora confounds the traditional North–South framework often associated with volunteer cooperation programs. Historically, international volunteering has frequently involved professionals from Western countries traveling to work with organizations in the Global South. Participants



noted that volunteers with cultural ties to host countries introduce a different dynamic within this model.

Diaspora volunteers often combine Canadian citizenship and professional training with cultural familiarity and linguistic competence linked to their countries of heritage. As a result, they occupy a position that differs from both traditional international volunteers and local staff. Several interviewees observed that this positioning can facilitate communication and relationship-building with partner organizations, while also reflecting broader patterns of global mobility and migration. To illustrate, a Country Program Officer said:

“When diaspora volunteers arrive, it changes the dynamic a bit. They’re not seen the same way as other international volunteers. They understand the culture, sometimes the language, and they may even have family here. But at the same time, they come with Canadian professional experience. So, they sit somewhere in between.”

At the same time, participants indicated that this hybrid position can create complex perceptions. While cultural familiarity may reduce certain forms of social distance, diaspora volunteers may still be perceived as externally privileged due to their professional background, economic status, or access to international networks. These dynamics can influence expectations and interactions within project environments.

Overall, the findings suggest that diaspora volunteering introduces additional layers of complexity into existing development relationships. Rather than replacing traditional volunteer cooperation models, the participation of diaspora volunteers reflects broader processes of transnational mobility and the increasingly interconnected nature of development practice.



5. Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The findings from this study highlight several lessons regarding the engagement of diaspora volunteers in international development. Cuso's experience demonstrates that diaspora volunteer engagement can strengthen development partnerships when institutional processes, volunteer motivations, and partner needs are effectively aligned. At the same time, the findings reveal that such engagement demands both flexibility in adapting to the schedules and capacities of often volunteer-run diaspora organizations, and careful attention to identity dynamics, institutional structures, and contextual realities in partner countries.

One key lesson is that diaspora volunteers often bring unique strengths to volunteer cooperation programs. Their cultural familiarity, language skills, and social networks can help build trust with local partners and facilitate communication between organizations operating across different cultural contexts. These qualities can enable diaspora volunteers to serve as effective cultural mediators, translating institutional expectations into locally meaningful practices.

However, the findings also indicate that these advantages do not eliminate the need for structured program support. Even volunteers with strong cultural ties to the host country require institutional preparation, clear role definitions, and ongoing program support. Effective engagement, therefore, depends not only on volunteers' individual attributes but also on the institutional systems that support them.

Another important lesson concerns the diversity of diaspora experiences. Volunteers from the diaspora do not represent a single homogeneous group. Their connections to countries of heritage vary widely depending on generational background, migration histories, and professional trajectories. Recognizing this diversity is essential for designing inclusive engagement strategies.

Finally, the interviews highlight the importance of partnerships between development organizations and diaspora networks in Canada. Such partnerships can expand recruitment pipelines, strengthen public engagement efforts, and create opportunities for ongoing collaboration between diaspora communities and development actors.



5.1 Successful Engagement Practices

Several successful engagement practices emerged from this study. They demonstrate how diaspora volunteers can effectively contribute to development programs when institutional support mechanisms and volunteer motivations are aligned with partner needs.

One practice involves skills-based placements that match diaspora volunteers' professional expertise with partner organization priorities. Several local partner organizations emphasized that the most effective placements occur when volunteers' technical knowledge corresponds directly with institutional goals and needs. When volunteers are assigned roles that align with their professional backgrounds, both volunteers and partners report stronger collaboration and more tangible outcomes.

Another successful practice relates to structured cultural orientation and training processes. Although diaspora volunteers may possess familiarity with the cultural context of their placements, the study revealed that structured training sessions remain essential. Orientation programs addressing topics such as intercultural communication, organizational expectations, and power dynamics help volunteers navigate complex social and institutional environments.

A third engagement practice involves collaboration with diaspora associations and community organizations in Canada. Public engagement partners described how community networks can serve as effective channels for disseminating information about volunteer opportunities. These partnerships can increase awareness of volunteer programs and create spaces for dialogue between development organizations and diaspora communities.

Finally, several participants highlighted the importance of ongoing volunteer support and follow-up during placements. Regular communication between volunteers and program staff helps identify challenges early and ensures that volunteers feel supported throughout their assignments.

Together, these procedures demonstrate that successful engagement of diaspora volunteers requires a combination of volunteers' expertise, institutional preparation, and collaborative partnerships.



5.2 Lessons Learned

In addition to identifying successful engagement practices, the interviews also revealed several challenges that offer important lessons for future programming. These challenges relate to recruitment processes, identity dynamics, and institutional coordination.

One lesson concerns the visibility of volunteer opportunities within diaspora communities. Several participants suggested that many individuals with relevant expertise may not be aware of available programs. This finding indicates that development organizations may need to strengthen outreach and engagement strategies targeting culturally diverse communities.

Another challenge relates to the complex identity dynamics experienced by diaspora volunteers returning to their countries of heritage. While cultural familiarity can facilitate integration, volunteers may also encounter expectations from local communities or family networks. These expectations can create additional pressures that volunteers must navigate during their placements.

Institutional coordination also emerged as a challenge in some cases. Participants described situations where unclear expectations between volunteers and the local partner organizations created difficulties in project implementation. These experiences highlight the importance of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and communication channels within volunteer programs.

Finally, contextual factors such as security concerns, financial considerations, and differences between project design and local realities can influence volunteer experiences. Addressing these challenges requires flexible program management and continuous dialogue between volunteers, partner organizations, and program staff.

Participants also suggested that risk perception differs between diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers. Diaspora volunteers were often described as having greater contextual awareness of security risks, even after long periods abroad. However, this familiarity can sometimes lead to reduced vigilance. For example, one program officer noted that a volunteer experienced a security incident after not following recommended precautions, illustrating how perceived familiarity may shape risk behavior.

These lessons underscore the importance of viewing diaspora engagement not simply as an opportunity but also as a process that requires careful planning and ongoing support.



5.3 Unique contributions of Diaspora Volunteers

The interviews conducted for this study also provide insights into how diaspora volunteers compare with other international volunteers participating in development programs. Interviewees from CPOs and local partner organizations frequently described differences in adaptation, communication, and relationship-building.

One notable difference relates to cultural familiarity. Diaspora volunteers often have prior knowledge of cultural norms, communication styles, and social expectations in the countries where they serve; such knowledge may not be available to non-diaspora volunteers. This familiarity can facilitate faster integration into local organizational environments and help volunteers build trust with community members.

However, participants also emphasized that diaspora volunteers may encounter identity dynamics that differ from those experienced by other international volunteers. While non-diaspora volunteers are typically perceived as external actors, diaspora volunteers may face expectations related to their cultural heritage or family connections. These expectations can shape how volunteers are perceived within local communities, which could be positive or negative.

Another comparative insight relates to communication. Volunteers from the diaspora often possess language skills that facilitate interaction with local partners. At the same time, variations in accent or dialect may sometimes create subtle communication challenges.

Overall, the comparative analysis suggests that diaspora volunteers bring distinct strengths to volunteer cooperation programs while also navigating unique identity dynamics. Recognizing these differences can help organizations design engagement strategies that leverage the strengths of culturally diverse volunteers while addressing the challenges they may encounter.



6. Strategic Recommendations

The findings from this study highlight several opportunities to strengthen the engagement of diaspora volunteers in international development. These recommendations are intended to support nonprofit organizations, donors, governments, local partners, diaspora engagement partners, and implementing partners in designing more inclusive and effective diaspora engagement strategies.

Overall, the research suggests that diaspora engagement should be approached as a strategic partnership rather than as a supplementary component of development programming. Volunteers from the diaspora bring valuable expertise, cultural knowledge, and transnational networks that can enhance development initiatives when effectively integrated into program design.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of institutional frameworks that support diaspora engagement. Recruitment strategies, training programs, and partnership models must be designed in ways that recognize the diversity of diaspora experiences and the complexity of transnational identity.

The recommendations presented below focus on program design, recruitment strategies, organizational capacity, partnerships, monitoring and evaluation systems, and alignment with national development policies.

Formal recognition of these contributions could include the development of diaspora-specific recruitment streams, the integration of diaspora identity as a variable in volunteer databases, and the adaptation of orientation modules to address diaspora-specific dynamics. Additionally, monitoring frameworks could include indicators capturing cultural mediation, retention rates, and relationship-building outcomes associated with diaspora volunteers.

6.1 Program Design and Delivery

Development programs seeking to engage volunteers from the diaspora should prioritize skills-based placements that align volunteers' expertise with partner organization needs. Matching volunteers' professional competencies with clearly defined project objectives that align closely with local partners' goals helps ensure that placements generate meaningful outcomes for both volunteers and partner organizations.

Program design should also incorporate flexible engagement practices that accommodate diverse volunteer profiles. Volunteers from the diaspora may differ in terms of generational



background, professional experience, and levels of connection to their countries of heritage. Recognizing this diversity enables programs to create more inclusive pathways to participation.

Structured orientation programs are also essential. Such orientation should address intercultural communication, power dynamics, and expectations associated with volunteer placements. Even volunteers with cultural familiarity benefit from preparations that help them navigate the institutional context of development programs. Such support may include tailored pre-departure sessions addressing identity and expectations, mentorship from diaspora alumni, facilitated connections with local networks upon arrival, and structured reflection spaces during placement to navigate identity-related challenges.

In addition, program delivery should include mechanisms for continuous engagement and feedback between volunteers, program staff, and local partner organizations. Regular communication helps address challenges early and ensures that volunteer placements remain responsive to evolving project needs.

Finally, orientation programs for volunteers should incorporate diaspora-specific modules addressing identity negotiation, expectations from local communities, and risk perception. While full program redesign may not be necessary, targeted adaptations within existing volunteer management structures could significantly improve volunteer preparedness and address diaspora-specific dynamics

6.2 Recruitment and Outreach

Strengthening recruitment strategies targeting diaspora communities represents a key opportunity for expanding volunteer engagement. Development organizations should collaborate with and invest in diaspora associations, professional networks, and community organizations to increase awareness of volunteer opportunities.

Outreach efforts should also emphasize the diversity of pathways through which interested, qualified individuals can contribute to development initiatives in their countries of origin. This includes targeting individuals at specific career stages. A diaspora engagement partner noted strong interest among "internationally trained professionals" and those "in retirement" who wish to return and offer skills in fields such as healthcare or law. Recruitment strategies for development organizations should therefore include direct outreach to government agencies and private sector employers to reach professionals approaching retirement or those at mid-career seeking, as one partner described, a "refreshing" professional experience in their heritage country. Inputs from in-house program development teams as



well as local partners can help identify potential partners among government agencies or private sector employers.

Communication strategies should be improved and tailored to the specific networks and communication channels used by diaspora communities. This may include partnerships with community media organizations, social media platforms, and diaspora professional associations. Alternatively, development organizations could be to reach out to government agencies or private companies to contact those who are close to retirement or those at the mid-career level who want a more diverse professional career path.

Recruitment strategies should prioritize high-impact entry points such as diaspora media platforms, professional associations, and community events. Evidence from this study suggests that visibility remains a key barrier; therefore, targeted communication campaigns using trusted diaspora channels should be prioritized over broad, non-differentiated outreach strategies.

Public engagement (PE) partners can meaningfully contribute to program delivery well beyond the recruitment stage. Evidence from this study suggests that PE organizations are embedded in diaspora communities in ways that give them ongoing visibility into volunteer experiences, professional capacities, and community dynamics. Program design and outreach should consider formalizing the role of PE partners across the full volunteer cycle, including pre-departure preparation, in-placement check-ins, and alumni engagement, not only as recruiters but as sustained community anchors who help ensure that diaspora volunteer placements remain contextually grounded and mutually beneficial.

Finally, recruitment messaging should highlight the value of diaspora expertise in development programs while recognizing the complexity of cultural identity and belonging.

6.3 Organizational Capacity

The first step to strengthen organizational capacity is to collect meaningful data on volunteers with diasporic roots. Collecting data from applicants or potential volunteers would be the first step in designing evidence-based policies. The current estimate of 60% of Cuso's volunteers being of diasporic origin was obtained by staff and is not based on volunteers' self-identification. The availability of data from applicants or potential volunteers with diasporic roots would provide more information on their self-identities. Diaspora volunteers could be offered other placements in the country/region of their diasporic origin.

Organizations seeking to strengthen diaspora engagement must also invest in internal capacity-building. Staff responsible for diaspora partnerships/engagement, volunteer



recruitment, training, and program management require resources and training to effectively support diaspora volunteers. Importantly, roles within organizations are often fluid; volunteers could transition into staff positions at country or head offices, bringing firsthand experience that enriches program design and delivery. The experience of these individuals who have navigated both roles is particularly valuable and should be systematically documented to strengthen diaspora engagement over time. In addition, institutional learning processes should document successful engagement practices and identify areas for improvement.

Organizations should integrate diaspora identification into volunteer management systems to better track participation, retention, and outcomes. Additionally, monitoring frameworks could include indicators capturing cultural mediation, retention rates, and relationship-building outcomes associated with diaspora volunteers. This would enable evidence-based programming and allow organizations to formally recognize the operational advantages associated with diaspora volunteers.

Organizations should also consider establishing internal focal points or advisory groups dedicated to the engagement of diaspora volunteers and diaspora communities at large. These structures can help coordinate initiatives, facilitate knowledge exchange, and support strategic planning.

In contexts of limited resources, priority should be given to interventions with the highest impact on program effectiveness. These include strengthening partnerships with diaspora organizations for awareness-building and targeted recruitment, improving pre-departure preparation to address identity and contextual challenges, and introducing light-touch adaptations to existing orientation sessions rather than full program redesign. Evidence from this study suggests that even incremental improvements in these areas could enhance retention, reduce onboarding challenges, and improve placement outcomes.

Importantly, the question of retention extends beyond the placement itself and into post-placement trajectories, which emerge as highly differentiated across diaspora profiles. The findings suggest that these trajectories are shaped not only by life stage but also by generational position within the diaspora.

Across these generational categories, life-course dynamics remain central. Younger volunteers, particularly among second-generation participants, often emphasized their flexibility and ability to transition between contexts, less attached to property ownership or family responsibilities. Mid-career professionals described more complex negotiations between professional obligations, family life, and transnational engagement. Retirees,



frequently among first-generation diaspora, reported more stable return trajectories, anchored in established lives in Canada, even when placements reactivated strong connections to their countries of origin.

Taken together, these findings suggest that post-placement support and reintegration programming should move beyond one-size-fits-all models. Instead, organizations should adopt differentiated approaches that account for both life stage and generational positioning within the diaspora, recognizing that diaspora volunteers need tailored placements. It entails allowing more flexible placements for diaspora volunteers who generally extend their stay and consider having a permanent volunteers' channel for those who decide to remain in the country of origin, because some of them mentioned that they will continue to give back to the community when their engagement with Cuso ends.

6.4 Partnerships and Networks

Partnerships with diaspora organizations represent an important avenue for strengthening engagement with the diaspora. These partnerships can facilitate recruitment, support public engagement initiatives, and create opportunities for collaborative development projects.

Development organizations should also explore partnerships with professional diaspora networks that connect skilled migrants with development initiatives in their countries of origin. These networks can provide valuable expertise and facilitate long-term knowledge exchange.

Specific recommendations emerging from the study include formalizing collaboration agreements with diaspora organizations, co-designing outreach strategies with community partners, and leveraging diaspora media platforms to increase program visibility. These approaches can strengthen recruitment pipelines while building trust within diaspora communities.

Partnerships with diaspora organizations should extend beyond recruitment to include co-design of programs, ongoing volunteer support, and post-placement engagement. These actors can serve as continuous bridges between Canadian and international contexts, enhancing both program relevance and sustainability.

Finally, partnerships with community organizations in Canada can help amplify diaspora voices in public engagement efforts related to international cooperation.



6.5 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Monitoring and evaluation systems should incorporate indicators that capture the contributions of diaspora volunteers to development initiatives. These indicators may include measures of skills transfer, partnership development, and knowledge exchange.

Qualitative evaluation methods, such as interviews and case studies, can provide valuable insights into how diaspora engagement influences development outcomes. These methods can also help document the experiences of volunteers and partner organizations.

Sharing lessons learned across organizations and partners can help ensure that best practices are applied consistently across programs.

Organizations should also establish feedback mechanisms that allow volunteers and partner organizations to share their experiences and recommendations. Integrating this feedback into program design can support continuous improvement.

While these indicators can apply to all volunteers, incorporating them systematically would enable future comparative analysis between diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers, addressing a key gap identified in this study.

6.6 Alignment with GAC Strategy

The findings of this study align with several of GAC's existing policy commitments relevant to diaspora engagement in development. Strengthening diaspora engagement can contribute to Canada's international development objectives by mobilizing the expertise and networks of culturally diverse communities.

The VCP through which Cuso receives funding, explicitly positions volunteerism as a mechanism for engaging Canadians in international development within Canada and requires that Canadian organizations work in collaboration with their developing country partners to define local needs and ensure that the expertise and skills of volunteers are closely aligned with identified needs.

Development programs that engage diaspora volunteers can also support broader public engagement goals by strengthening connections between Canadian communities and international development initiatives.

Diaspora engagement is relevant to the convergence of trade and development, with diaspora volunteers contributing unique skill sets and local knowledge that can enhance the effectiveness and targeting of development initiatives. Ensuring alignment with the GAC



strategy requires collaboration between government agencies, development organizations, and diaspora communities. Such collaboration can help ensure that diaspora engagement initiatives remain inclusive, responsive, and aligned with broader development priorities.

While the findings of this study broadly align with GAC's strategic emphasis on diaspora engagement, they also reveal several areas where implementation remains partial. Diaspora engagement is not yet fully institutionalized within program design, and existing approaches do not sufficiently account for the diversity of diaspora profiles or the importance of identity dynamics. Furthermore, opportunities to leverage diaspora networks for partnerships, recruitment, and sustained engagement remain underdeveloped. These gaps suggest that while the strategic direction is consistent with GAC priorities, further efforts are needed to translate policy commitments into structured, differentiated, and sustainable programming approaches.



Conclusion

This study examined the engagement of diaspora volunteers within Cuso's projects. Drawing on interviews with volunteers, program staff, local partner organizations, and Canada-based diaspora communities, the research provides insights into motivations, experiences, contributions, and challenges associated with diaspora volunteer engagement.

The findings demonstrate that diaspora volunteers play a distinctive role within development initiatives. Their cultural familiarity, linguistic competence, and transnational networks enable them to act as bridges between international organizations and local communities. At the same time, these volunteers navigate complex identity dynamics that shape their experiences during placements.

The research also highlights the importance of institutional structures that support diaspora engagement. Effective recruitment strategies, structured training programs, and strong partnerships with diaspora organizations can enhance the impact of VCPs.

However, the study also identifies challenges that may limit engagement, including recruitment visibility, identity dynamics, and contextual constraints. Addressing these challenges requires flexible program design and ongoing dialogue between volunteers, local partner organizations, diaspora communities, and program staff.

Overall, diaspora volunteers represent an important resource for international development initiatives. By recognizing the diversity of diaspora experiences and strengthening institutional support mechanisms, development organizations can create more inclusive and effective engagement strategies that benefit both local partners and diaspora communities.



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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guides

INTERVIEW GUIDE: VOLUNTEERS & ALUMNI

INTRODUCTION: Hi! My name is David Ngam, and I'm a Social Scientist appointed by Cuso International as a Consultant to interview you today. How are you?

Thank you for making time for this interview. We're conducting a study to understand how Cuso, as an institution, engages with diaspora volunteers, focusing on recruitment, support, partnerships, and further exploration of opportunities. **Diaspora** refers to people who live outside their family's country of origin but still feel connected to it—through culture, heritage, or roots.

A **diaspora volunteer** is an individual from that community who chooses to give back by volunteering in their country of origin. For example, if a volunteer grew up in Canada but their parents or grandparents are from Tanzania (*here enter the country of the staff or partner*), and they volunteer in Tanzania (*change name*), that's diaspora volunteering! Although it is based on self-identification, the definition is not set in stone. Are you familiar with that concept?

Your experience as a Cuso volunteer gives us a unique perspective on these areas. Based on that background, you have been selected to help Cuso better understand the motivations and challenges of working as a diaspora volunteer living in their country of origin, assess their contributions, and identify opportunities to enhance these contributions and the partnership with Cuso.

Your insights will be used to inform our internal learning. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. This discussion will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. However, your information will remain confidential throughout the process. If you prefer to be anonymous, we will keep it that way. We will use Fireflies (an AI tool) to prepare the transcript of this interview. The interview transcript will be accessible only to Cuso's diaspora research team and me. Is this okay with you? Do I have your consent to proceed?



(Pause here for a “Yes” or “No” response.) Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

1. IDENTITY AND MOTIVATION

- Can you tell me a bit more about yourself?
- What does “diaspora” or “cultural community” mean to you?
- Do you identify as part of a diaspora or cultural community? If so, could you tell me a bit about your connection to that community? (*Probe: a little bit of migration/generational story*)
- What motivated you to volunteer internationally with Cuso International? Was this your first volunteer experience? What motivated you to volunteer in (*name of the country*)? (*Probe: Any family back there? What other factors motivated you? Did you extend your placement? How long did you initially think you would volunteer? And for how long did you actually volunteer?*)

2. VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE AND CONTRIBUTION

Predeparture:

- What were your expectations, ideas, and thoughts regarding volunteering before you left? What did you feel confident about? What were you nervous/concerned about?

In-Placement:

- How did your cultural, linguistic, or professional background shape your volunteer experience? Can you share a specific example?
- In your experience, given your unique position as a person of your background and from Canada, what value did you bring to the local partners and the community?
- What connections, if any, did you make between your ties to your community of origin and your work during the placement?



- Did you interact with other diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers from Canada? How was your experience different from theirs?
- What challenges did you face during your placement? These could be personal, logistical, situational (such as political instability) or related to working with the institution or local partners. How did you overcome/deal with these challenges?
- What are/were your biggest learnings while in placement? (*Probes: Increase in knowledge of international development? Did you experience any change in your values or what you value? Did you perceive any increase in your ties to the country of placement? Did you view your life in Canada differently?*)
- Contributions to development, while in placement:
 - What was your specific role or task that you performed, and how did it contribute to the delivery of the partner's projects?
 - In your view, did your work contribute to the overall work of the partner? How? Can you share any examples or stories that illustrate this impact?
 - How do you think your skills and experience helped strengthen the capacity of local partners or organizations? Were there any training, mentoring, or knowledge-sharing activities you led?
 - What changes, if any, did you observe in the local community as a result of your work? Do you think your contribution made a difference at the community level?
 - Do you think that your placement was long enough to make a difference in the work of the partner or in the community? Would a longer placement be helpful or not, to make such a difference?

Post-placement (*only for alumni*):

- How did you feel when you came back or when your placement ended?
- When did you decide to come back?



- Was reintegration back into your life in Canada a challenge in any way?
- Would you choose to volunteer again? Would you choose to volunteer again in the country where you volunteered or in another country? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- Would you consider future engagement with Cuso (e.g., volunteering again, alumni meetings, public speaking, being a panelist or a volunteer mentor)? Why or why not?
- Looking back, what support or preparation from Cuso could have improved your experience?
- Do you think Cuso should introduce training or resources specifically tailored for diaspora volunteers? What would that look like?

4. LOOKING FORWARD

- What factors do you think might encourage or limit the participation of Canada-based cultural communities in volunteer programs like Cuso's?

CONCLUSION: That covers all my questions. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and perspectives. Is there anything else you think is important for us to know that we haven't discussed?



INTERVIEW GUIDE: CANADIAN STAFF

(VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT/ENGAGEMENT)

INTRODUCTION: Hi! My name is David Ngam, and I'm a Social Scientist appointed by Cuso International as a Consultant to interview you today. How are you?

Thank you for making time for this interview. We're conducting a study to understand how Cuso, as an institution, engages with diaspora volunteers, focusing on recruitment, support, and partnerships. **Diaspora** means people who live outside their family's country of origin but still feel connected to it—through culture, heritage, or roots.

A **diaspora volunteer** is an individual from that community who chooses to give back by volunteering in their country of origin. For example, if a volunteer grew up in Canada but their parents or grandparents are from Tanzania (here enter the country of the staff or partner), and they volunteer in Tanzania (change name), that's diaspora volunteering! Although it is based on self-identification, the definition is not set in stone. (*Are you familiar with that concept?*).

Your role and work experience as a Cuso member working with volunteers give you a unique perspective on these areas. Based on that background, especially with diaspora volunteers, you have been selected to help Cuso better understand the motivations and challenges of working with them, their contributions, and identify opportunities to enhance these contributions and the partnership with Cuso.

Your insights will be used to inform our internal learning. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. This discussion will be recorded, transcribed with Fireflies (an AI tool), and analyzed. However, your information will remain confidential throughout the process. If you prefer to be anonymous, we will keep it that way. We will use Fireflies (an AI tool) to prepare the transcript of this interview. The interview transcript will be accessible only by Cuso's diaspora research team and me. Is this okay with you? Do I have your consent to proceed? (*Pause here for a "Yes" or "No" response.*) Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?



General information

1. Can you tell me more about your roles and responsibilities, and how long you have been with Cuso?
2. In what ways do you interact with volunteers? (If not answered in the first question already)
3. Within your work at Cuso, what does the term "diaspora" mean to you?
4. In your role, how often do you, or have you in the past, come in contact with diaspora volunteers?
5. Can you give me 2-3 examples of diaspora volunteers that come to mind as we speak?

Placement of diaspora volunteers

6. Overall, how would you describe your experience with placing/training /interacting with diaspora volunteers?
7. In your work, to what extent is the cultural community an important part of identity for diaspora volunteers?
8. What are some of the motivations of diaspora volunteers who choose to volunteer in their country/region of origin? In your opinion, do they have a specific preference as to where they volunteer?
9. Have you observed any differences in the placements (e.g., choice of local partner, location, length of placement, renewal of placement, involvement of family, etc.) of diaspora volunteers?

Incentives and Challenges of Diaspora Volunteers

(For the Travel and Safety Advisor, ask this from a safety and security perspective)

10. Based on your experience, do diaspora volunteers have specific advantages when they choose to volunteer in their country or region of origin or heritage?

Probing questions: How do they blend in with the need to reorient themselves with the country? Do they seem to have romantic notions, or are they realistic? Do they have existing social networks, like family and friends,



that help them adapt? Is it easier for them to adapt? Figure out logistics such as housing, travel, follow do's and don't's?

As compared to non-diaspora volunteers, what are their specific advantages?

11. Similarly, do they have specific challenges or barriers?

Probing questions: Are they perceived as 'too Canadian' or foreign? Do they need to relearn ways of working?

How do diaspora volunteers reconcile differences between their life and work in Canada and that in their country or region of heritage?

Gender norms: Do men and women, but especially women, need to relearn/ work their way around gender norms and expectations? How do they negotiate this?

12. Do you have any specific observations to share about diaspora volunteers prior to their departure? Say in the SKWID or PSEA training?

Contributions to project delivery and impact

13. On average, how long are volunteer placements? What length would you consider as a long-term placement? Which placement types – short /medium/long term – do diaspora volunteers engage more with?

14. On average, do volunteers work with the same partner or change when they extend their placement? Do you have any specific observations regarding volunteers' work with local partners?

INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

15. Are there any advantages or disadvantages for Cuso to engage more with diaspora volunteers? If so, what would those be?

16. Are there ways in which Cuso's recruitment or onboarding approaches can be revised to engage diaspora volunteers better?

17. Has it been challenging, if at all, to support or work with diaspora volunteers?



18. What key lessons has Cuso learned from past engagement models or partnerships with diaspora organizations? *(for Global Talent Advisors)*

19. What opportunities do you see for Cuso to enhance and deepen its engagement with diaspora, both in volunteering and in partnerships?

20. Do you have suggestions regarding how Cuso could improve/increase our engagement with diaspora volunteers?

CONCLUSION: This has been very insightful. Thank you for sharing your perspective. Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share?

If you think of anything else, please feel free to email me, or we can even jump on a quick call to discuss. Thank you for your time. Bye!



INTERVIEW GUIDE: CUSO CPO STAFF

INTRODUCTION: Hi! My name is David Ngam, and I'm a Social Scientist appointed by Cuso International as a Consultant to interview you today. How are you?

Thank you for making time for this interview. We're conducting a study to understand how Cuso, as an institution, engages with diaspora volunteers, focusing on recruitment, support, and partnerships. **Diaspora** simply means people who live outside their family's country of origin but still feel connected to it—through culture, heritage, or roots.

A **diaspora volunteer** is someone from that community who chooses to give back by volunteering in their country of heritage. For example, if a volunteer grew up in Canada but their parents or grandparents are from Tanzania (here enter the country of the staff or partner), and you volunteer in Tanzania (change name)—that's diaspora volunteering! It is based on self-identification really; the definition is not set in stone. *(Ensure there is shared understanding, if not explain a bit more).*

Your role and work experience as a CPO Staff working with Cuso volunteers give you a unique perspective on these areas. Based on your organization's experience hosting and working with Cuso volunteers, especially diaspora volunteers, *(name of partner organization)* has been selected to help Cuso better understand the motivations and challenges of working with diaspora volunteers, their contributions, and identify opportunities to enhance these contributions and the partnership with Cuso.

Your insights will be used to inform our internal learning. The interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes. This discussion will be recorded, transcribed with Fireflies (an AI tool), and analyzed. However, your information will remain confidential throughout the process. If you prefer to be anonymous, we will keep it that way. The interview transcript will be accessible only by Cuso's diaspora research team, including me. Is this okay with you? Do I have your consent to proceed? *(Pause here for a "Yes" or "No" response.)* Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?



GENERAL INFORMATION

- Can you tell me more about your roles and responsibilities, and how long you have been with Cuso?
- In what ways do you interact with volunteers? (If not answered in the first question already)
- Within your work at Cuso, what does the term "diaspora" mean to you?
- In your role, how often do you, or have you in the past, come in contact with diaspora volunteers?
- Can you give me 2-3 examples of diaspora volunteers that come to mind as we speak?

1. PERCEPTIONS AND ROLES

- In your experience, how would you describe the role of volunteers from the diaspora compared to other international volunteers?
- Overall, how would you describe your experience with interacting with diaspora volunteers?
- What are some of the motivations of diaspora volunteers who choose to volunteer in their country/region of origin?
- Have you observed any differences in the placements (e.g. choice of local partner, location, length of placement, renewal of placement, involvement of family, etc.) of diaspora volunteers?
- What specific benefits do these volunteers bring to project outcomes and local partners?

2. COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION

- Based on your experience, do diaspora volunteers have specific advantages when they choose to volunteer in their country or region of origin or heritage?
- Similarly, do they have specific challenges or barriers? (Gender norms readaptation?)



- From your observation, how well do the expectations of volunteers from the diaspora align with the realities on the ground for partners and communities?
- Can you describe any unique challenges or specific needs you have noticed when supporting these volunteers?
- What factors are key to ensuring a successful collaboration between a diaspora volunteer and a local partner?

3. PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

- Are there any advantages or disadvantages for Cuso to engage more with diaspora volunteers? If so, what would those be?
- Are there ways in which Cuso's recruitment or onboarding approaches can be revised to engage diaspora volunteers better?
- In what ways could Cuso better integrate the specific expertise and backgrounds of diaspora volunteers into our programming?
- What opportunities do you see for Cuso to enhance and deepen its engagement with diaspora, both in volunteering and in partnerships?

CONCLUSION: Thank you for these detailed and practical insights. They are extremely helpful. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

If you think of anything else, please feel free to email me, or we can even jump on a quick call to discuss. Thank you for your time. Bye!



INTERVIEW GUIDE: CUSO LOCAL PARTNERS

INTRODUCTION: Hi! My name is David Ngam, and I'm a Social Scientist appointed by Cuso International as a Consultant to interview you today. How are you?

Thank you for making time for this interview. We're conducting a study to understand how Cuso, as an institution, engages with diaspora volunteers, focusing on recruitment, support, and partnerships. **Diaspora** simply means people who live outside their family's country of origin but still feel connected to it—through culture, heritage, or roots.

A **diaspora volunteer** is someone from that community who chooses to give back by volunteering in their country of heritage. For example, if a volunteer grew up in Canada but their parents or grandparents are from Peru (here enter the country of the staff or partner), and you volunteer in Peru (change name)—that's diaspora volunteering! It is based on self-identification really; the definition is not set in stone. *(Ensure there is shared understanding; if not explain a bit more).*

Your role and work experience as a Cuso partner working with Cuso volunteers give you a unique perspective on these areas. Based on your organization's experience hosting and working with Cuso volunteers, especially diaspora volunteers, Hiwot Ethiopia (*name of partner organization*) has been selected to help Cuso better understand the motivations and challenges of working with diaspora volunteers, their contributions, and identify opportunities to enhance these contributions and the partnership with Cuso.

Your insights will be used to inform our internal learning. The interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes. This discussion will be recorded, transcribed with Fireflies (an AI tool), and analyzed. However, your information will remain confidential throughout the process. If you prefer to be anonymous, we will keep it that way. The interview transcript will be accessible only by Cuso's diaspora research team, including me. Is this okay with you? Do I have your consent to proceed? *(Pause here for a "Yes" or "No" response.)* Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?



General information

1. Can you tell me more about your roles and responsibilities, and how long you have been with Name of the partner?
2. In your role, what ways do you interact with volunteers? *(If not answered in the first question already)*
3. How many volunteers have you received from Cuso International or any other volunteer sending organizations during the past 5 years? *(If they don't have an exact number, ask for an estimate)*
4. Typically, what roles do volunteers work in with your organization? (Probe: job titles)
5. Within your work with Cuso as a partner, what does the term "diaspora" mean to you?
6. Of the volunteers that your organization has received, how many of them would you say are or have been diaspora volunteers?
7. Can you give me 2-3 examples of diaspora volunteers that come to mind as we speak?

Working experience with diaspora volunteers

8. Overall, how would you describe your experience working with diaspora volunteers from Canada?
9. What specific strengths do these volunteers bring to your projects and organization? (e.g., technical skills, cultural understanding, language, etc.)
10. In your work, to what extent is cultural community an important part of identity for diaspora volunteers?
11. Can you give an example of how a volunteer's lived experience or cultural knowledge improved a project outcome or the collaboration itself? *(This is an important question, probe more. Ask for more examples.)*



12. On the other hand, can you relate specific examples where you encountered challenges or gaps with diaspora volunteers? How were these challenges/gaps addressed? Was it easier or more difficult to address these challenges with diaspora volunteers? (*Probe: These could be related to cultural expectations, communication, or technical approaches.*)

Motivation and integration of Diaspora Volunteers

13. In your view, how well do the volunteers' expectations align with the realities and needs of your organization and the communities where you work you are working with? Are these expectations different for diaspora and non-diaspora (Canadian) volunteers?
14. Based on your experience, do diaspora volunteers have specific advantages during their volunteering in their country or region of origin or heritage?

Probing questions: Are these advantages related to their diaspora status? In your opinion, what is their level of connection with the local reality? Do they have existing social networks, like family and friends, that help them adapt? Is it easier for them to adapt? Figure out logistics such as housing and travel and follow the do's and don'ts. As compared to non-diaspora volunteers, what are their specific advantages?

15. Similarly, do they have specific barriers?

Probing questions: Are they perceived as 'too Canadian' or foreign? Do they need to relearn ways of working? How do diaspora volunteers reconcile differences between their life and work in Canada and that in their country or region of heritage?

16. Gender norms: Do men and women, but especially women, need to relearn/ work their way around gender norms and expectations? How do they negotiate this?
17. How do you evaluate the level of engagement of diaspora volunteers compared to non-diaspora volunteers?

Probing questions: In your opinion, how do they maintain their motivation? Are there situations where diaspora volunteers lose motivation?



SUPPORT AND FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

18. Are there any advantages or disadvantages for Cuso to engage more with diaspora volunteers? If so, what would those be?
19. Are there ways in which Cuso's recruitment or onboarding approaches can be revised to engage diaspora volunteers better?
20. How could Cuso better prepare or support these volunteers before and during their placements for it to be an effective placement for you?
21. Looking beyond individual volunteers, do you think engagement with diaspora community networks would be of advantage to your organization and work? (*Probe: In what ways? This could be in ways other than volunteering.*)

CONCLUSION: Your feedback is critical for helping us improve. Thank you again for your partnership with Cuso and for your time today. Is there anything else you'd like to mention? If you think of anything else, please feel free to email me, or we can even jump on a quick call to discuss. Thank you for your time. Bye!



INTERVIEW GUIDE: DIASPORA/PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS (CANADA-BASED)

INTRODUCTION: Hi! My name is David Ngam, and I’m a Social Scientist appointed by Cuso International as a Consultant to interview you today. How are you?

Thank you for making time for this interview. We’re conducting a study to understand how Cuso, as an institution, engages with diaspora volunteers, focusing on recruitment, support, and partnerships. **Diaspora** simply means people who live outside their family’s country of origin but still feel connected to it—through culture, heritage, or roots.

A **diaspora volunteer** is someone from that community who chooses to give back by volunteering in their country of heritage. For example, if a volunteer grew up in Canada but their parents or grandparents are from Ethiopia (here enter the country of the staff or partner), and you volunteer in Ethiopia (change name)—that’s diaspora volunteering! It is based on self-identification really; the definition is not set in stone. *(Ensure there is shared understanding; if not explain a bit more).*

Your role and experience as a Cuso Public Engagement Partner, working with diasporas in general, gives you a unique perspective on these areas. Based on your organization’s experience working with Cuso to engage volunteers, especially diaspora volunteers, has been selected to help Cuso better understand the motivations and challenges of working with diaspora members, their contributions, and identify opportunities to enhance these contributions and the partnership with Cuso.

Your insights will be used to inform our internal learning. The interview should take approximately 60 minutes. This discussion will be recorded, transcribed with Fireflies (an AI tool), and analyzed. However, your information will remain confidential throughout the process. If you prefer to be anonymous, we will keep it that way. The interview transcript will be accessible only by Cuso’s diaspora research team, including me. Is this okay with you? Do I have your consent to proceed? *(Pause here for a “Yes” or “No” response.)* Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?



1. GENERAL INFORMATION

- Can you tell me more about your roles and responsibilities, and how long you have been with your organization?
- Can you tell me a bit more about your organization?
- *(Probe on– mission, how long you have been working on this mission, size of the organization, etc, how you interact and engage with diaspora individuals, how they participate in the organization, what activities the organization does in general and with diaspora)*
- How does your organization understand and use the terms "diaspora" or "cultural community"?
- Has your organization actively collaborated with diaspora groups or cultural community volunteers on projects or initiatives? If so, what was the nature of that collaboration?
- Since when has your organization been partnering with Cuso? How does this partnership serve you? Do you partner with other similar organizations?
- Within your membership, how would you describe the overall interest in international or diaspora-led volunteering initiatives? Additionally, do you track how many members apply for or participate in volunteer opportunities abroad?
- In your role, how often do you, or have you in the past, come in contact with those who have volunteered to work in their country of origin after being in Canada?

2. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

- In your experience, in what ways do diaspora members choose to engage with their country of origin?
- Do you think they identify more with the country of origin or the country where they were raised? Do you think that sense of belonging is related to the relationships they have built/saved in each country?



- How is the diaspora members' engagement or decision to volunteer influenced by their family or the community?
- In your experience, how would you describe the motivations of diaspora members to volunteer in their country of origin?

3. KNOWLEDGE ON FORMER DIASPORA VOLUNTEERS *(skip if they have no connection with diaspora volunteers)*

- How is the volunteer experience for them? Do they think differently about their country-of-origin post volunteering? Do they experience stronger bonds?
- Post-volunteering, what do diaspora volunteers think about Canada? Do they think differently, perceive things differently?
- What are some of the challenges faced during the volunteer placement? How do they navigate these challenges?
- Do any opportunities open up when diaspora volunteers go to their country of origin?

4. Opportunities and challenges faced at an organizational level

- Is volunteering in-country important for your organization? If yes, why?
- In what ways does your organization promote diaspora volunteering?
- What role(s) can Cuso play in promoting diaspora initiatives?
- What significant opportunities do you see for amplifying diaspora voices in Canada's public engagement and international development work?
- In your opinion, what forms of partnership would make engagement with diaspora and cultural communities more meaningful, equitable, and sustainable for all parties involved?
- What role can an organization like Cuso play in facilitating these kinds of partnerships?



CONCLUSION: This has been very helpful for understanding the broader landscape in Canada regarding diaspora. Thank you for your valuable perspective. Is there anything we didn't cover that you think is important?



Appendix B: Detailed breakdown of participant demographic characteristics

Table 4. Distribution of Interview Participants by respondent category and selection criteria

Respondent category	Number of interviewees	Geographic Context	Selection criteria
Diaspora Volunteers (including current and alumni)	12	Benin, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, Grenada, Jamaica, Nigeria, Peru	• North-South Volunteer with ties to Canada (PR or citizen). • Should have volunteered for one year or longer in the country of their diasporic origin • Age (young /middle aged/senior) • Gender • Spoken language (English, French, and Spanish) • Volunteering status (alumni and current volunteers) • If alumni, the volunteer should have volunteered with Cuso during the last 10 years
Cuso Canada Office Staff	5	Canada	• Have closely worked with different diaspora volunteers • Cuso staff from 3-5 years
Cuso Country Program Staff	5	Benin, Colombia, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Peru	• Representation from LAC and Africa (anglophone and francophone) • Have closely worked with volunteers such as SHARE Program Officers • Cuso staff from 3-5 years
Local Partner Organizations	3	Cameroon, Ethiopia, Peru	• Selected interviewee should be LP staff for considerable amount of time and be familiar with



			the work of the partner, interacted and worked with diaspora volunteers on firsthand basis. • Have received diaspora volunteers and have closely worked with them • Longstanding Cuso partner that has hosted diaspora volunteers in the last 5-7 years. (Preferably before or from the beginning of SHARE, from VOICE or another bilateral program). • 1 partner in LAC, 1 in anglophone Africa, 1 in Francophone Africa
Diaspora / Public Engagement Partners	2	Canada	Interviewee should have worked with the partner organization for 3-5 years amount of time and with a considerable number of diaspora volunteers
Total	27		



Appendix C: Extensive literature review

C.1 Conceptual Framework

C.1.1 Defining Diaspora and Cultural Communities

The terminology surrounding diaspora and cultural communities has evolved significantly over recent decades, reflecting both academic debates and shifts in policy. Cultural identities are no longer seen as fixed, but as something that is continually repositioned through history, culture, and power (Hall, 1990). Diasporic identities emerge from the tension between orientation towards places of origin, specific migration histories, solidarity among diaspora group members, and lived realities in countries of residence, making them, in Hall's terms, a matter of becoming as well as being (Hall, 1990). This dynamic quality means diasporic identity is always being renegotiated and in a constant state of change, shaped by shifting social contexts and generational change (Aydin, 2023; Lefort, 2023).

The literature on diaspora engagement spans multiple academic traditions and country cases, with researchers identifying five main thematic clusters in the literature alone, including home and host country development, diaspora roles in fostering international entrepreneurship, and the systemic questions about diaspora roles in sustainable development (Panibratov & Rysakova, 2020; Newland & Patrick, 2004). However, there remains limited research exploring how Western governments, international agencies, and NGOs attempt to mobilize diasporas for development (Sinatti & Horst, 2015).

The shift from "diaspora" to "cultural communities" terminology reflects recognition of complexity and diversity within these populations. Diaspora is inherently heterogeneous, often lacking a unified stance (Gevorkyan, 2021).

Within development practice, diaspora is generally understood as individuals and communities living outside their country of origin while maintaining a sense of identity and engagement with that country or region of heritage. These transnational connections position diaspora communities as important actors in development processes, as they often maintain social, cultural, and professional ties that facilitate engagement with development initiatives in their countries of heritage (Cuso International, 2015).

C.1.2 Generational Considerations and Transnationalism

According to Kebede (2019), the second generation of diaspora communities creates hybrid identities at the intersection of ethnic and national origins and the racial categories of host societies, often contesting being boxed into embracing identities that stem from specific



histories and experiences not shared by recent immigrants. Social contact and visits, however infrequent, are symbolically important as they help the second generation construct ethnic identities within racialized structures of their birth country, facilitating a sense of belonging and pride in heritage (Viruell-Fuentes, 2006; Barber, 2017).

Transnationalism involves a broad range of economic, sociocultural, and political cross-border activities that modify people's sense of belonging to places, affect their citizenship and nationality, change their aspirations and decisions in everyday life, and influence their identity (GeoJournal, 2020). Social networking sites facilitate what has been termed "cyber-transnationalism," creating intradiasporic linkages among the second generation characterized by lateral ties across the globe rather than just vertical ties to homelands (Lee, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2017).

C.1.3 Identity, Heritage, and Belonging

People with a diasporic background/identity navigate between the cultures of their homeland and their new country, blending practices from both. This creates hybrid identities that challenge the idea of a clear divide between home and host cultures.

Transnational people experience multiple national identities. Second-generation migrants often experience being 'in-between' as ideas of ethnicity and belonging aren't fixed, they shift during everyday interactions. (Bradatan et al., 2010; Brubaker et al., 2005). Furthermore, Third-generation (and beyond) migrants often experience a revival of ethnic identity, but one that is more symbolic and chosen (Stone & Harris, 2017). It becomes an optional identity resource rather than an imposed one; the anxiety and conflict of in-betweenness tend to diminish as ethnic identity becomes less socially imposed.

This dynamic is further complicated by a recurring desire to reconnect with ancestral roots. For many diaspora members, heritage tourism, language learning, and cultural practice serve as mechanisms for roots-seeking, a deliberate reconstruction of ethnic origin as both identity anchor and emotional homecoming (Marschall, 2017).

Often, reconnecting with ancestral roots is related to wanting to build a greater narrative of oneself and history (Mehtiyeva & Prince, 2020). These processes of self-identification and self-discovery aim to preserve their family's histories and create a more meaningful sense of self.

Additionally, research shows that immigrants returning to the homeland can help them connect with their roots, lead to self-realization, and changes in identity (Umejei, 2022).



C.2 Diaspora Engagement in Development

C.2.1 The Canadian Context and Diaspora Demographics

Canada represents a unique context for diaspora engagement. According to the 2021 census, almost one in four people in Canada (23%) are immigrants. While the United States hosts the largest absolute number of international migrants globally (52.4 million), Canada leads G7 nations in migrants as a share of total population (23%), reflecting its proportionally higher immigration intake relative to population size (United Nations, 2024; Statistics Canada, 2022). Also, Statistics Canada (2010) projected that by 2031, nearly one-half (46%) of Canadians aged 15 and over would be foreign-born or would have at least one foreign-born parent. This demographic reality positions Canada as a critical laboratory for understanding diaspora engagement in international development.

The unprecedented size and transnational mobility of contemporary diaspora populations place them in unique positions to challenge current development models and experiment with new approaches (Cuso International, 2015). In 2024, more than 304 million people, representing 3.7% of the global population, live in countries other than those in which they were born (United Nations, 2024), a figure that has nearly doubled since 1990, reflecting accelerating patterns of globalization and interconnectedness.

Within specific diaspora communities, significant demographic concentrations exist. The Caribbean diaspora in Canada comprises 578,695 Canadians (1.8% of Canada's total population), with 335,230 reporting single ancestry and 243,470 reporting multiple ancestries, primarily from Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti (Statistics Canada, 2006). In 2021, it was recorded that 5.6% of Canada's racialized population was either first, second, or third generation Latin American (Statistics Canada, 2023). Further data from 2021 specifies 774,510 individuals from the Canadian population having Caribbean cultural or ethnic origins.

C.2.2 Brain Drain, Brain Circulation, and Brain Exchange Models

The evolution from "brain drain" to "brain circulation" represents a fundamental shift in understanding skilled migration's development impact. Brain circulation refers to the circular movement of skilled labor across nations, differing from brain drain, which describes one-way emigration, with expectations that brain circulation will gradually increase due to factors such as globalization, removal of limits on human mobility, dual citizenship, and career desires (Daugeliene & Marcinkeviciene, 2009). A holistic approach integrating return and contribution motivations identified five motivations for educated migrants to return and contribute: a social framework of mutual help, role-driven contributions, a sense of belonging, a drive for betterment, and being inspired by others, with



motives rooted in individual agency and experiential learning shaped by migration experiences (Chiemi & Tatsuya, 2025).

Cuso's programmatic experience over six decades reinforces the brain circulation model, identifying "brain exchange" as a key objective where diaspora volunteers are positioned to access and share opportunities, resources, and networks between their countries of residence and heritage (Cuso International, 2015). This bidirectional knowledge flow recognizes that diaspora members bring richness of knowledge, skills, experience, and multicultural perspectives, alongside understanding of society, culture, context, and sometimes language of both their heritage and current home countries (ibid).

C.2.3 Practical Models of Diaspora Engagement

A study by the International Organization for Migration and the Migration Policy Institute found over 400 government and civil society groups working with diaspora communities. Interestingly, more than one-third of these groups were created after 2005. Governments in both home and host countries now see the benefits of diaspora involvement and look for ways to collaborate. Diaspora communities are recognized as having strong ties to their home countries while also being well integrated into their new ones (IOM & MPI, 2013).

Diaspora involvement in development has largely been understood by focusing on individual choices and motivations. However, diasporas may be better understood as communities where actions are shaped by shared practices and social systems based on lived experience (diaspora and development research, 2018).

In Canada, GAC has actively engaged with diaspora and cultural communities through consultations and programming initiatives. The Ontario Council for International Cooperation (OCIC) has facilitated consultations specifically focused on cultural communities' international cooperation activities, interests in working with government stakeholders, and opportunities to deepen engagement (Cuso International, 2015). These policy dialogues reflect governmental recognition of diaspora as development actors beyond traditional remittance-

Mobilization based on understanding diasporas as communities rooted in a national home with a shared group identity is more likely to succeed than narrow economic models.

C.3 Volunteer Motivation and Experience

C.3.1 Theoretical Frameworks of Volunteer Motivation

The Volunteer Functions Inventory identifies six primary motivations for volunteering: values (expressing altruistic and humanitarian concerns), understanding (gaining knowledge and skills), enhancement (personal growth and self-esteem), career (gaining career-related



experience), social (strengthening social relationships), and protective (reducing negative feelings or addressing personal problems) (Clary et al., 1998).

Meaningfulness of work was found to be an important motivation strengthened when individual volunteers believed they were doing significant and valuable work. (Rosso et al., 2010).

C.3.2 Diaspora-Specific Motivations and Engagement Patterns

Cuso's programmatic experience identifies distinctive characteristics of diaspora volunteers that differentiate them from other volunteer populations. Diaspora individuals and groups demonstrate a higher likelihood of being interested in or already engaged in the development process of particular countries; maintaining engagement over longer periods and more regularly than other volunteer types; and possessing social and cultural connections with associated skills enabling quicker and deeper engagement in development cooperation (Cuso International, 2015).

Diaspora members who maintain ties to countries/regions of origin, or wish to re-establish connections, are often interested and willing to contribute to development in ways extending beyond remittances to family members (Cuso International, 2015). This sustained engagement reflects what has been termed "transnational opportunities," where diaspora members access and share opportunities, resources, and networks bidirectionally between countries of residence and heritage. Continued involvement alongside strong interest and "stake" in sustainable economic and social development often translates into long-term commitment to development engagement (Cuso International, 2015).

C.3.4 Cultural Context and Motivation

As previously stated, some diaspora volunteers might be motivated by the desire to form connections with ancestral cultures. Further research outlines three main motivations for diaspora involvement: giving back, transfer of skills and problem solving, and religious motivations (Appe, 2024). Giving back is often be associated with emotional drivers that connect someone to a transnational community, and lead to a sense of obligation. Second, some individuals may seek to target specific deficits in countries they feel connected to through professional and technical skills. Lastly, feelings of obligation are heightened by individuals' faith.



C.4 Impact and Value Creation in Development Volunteering

C.4.1 Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building

In addition to sending economic remittances, diasporas promote trade and foreign direct investment, create businesses, spur entrepreneurship, and transfer new knowledge and skills (Newland & Plaza, 2013). Policymakers increasingly recognize that an engaged diaspora can be an asset — or even a counterweight to the emigration of skilled and talented migrants, particularly in high-risk investment environments where diaspora networks reduce informational and relational barriers to entry. Diaspora engagement as a catalyst for sustainable development, investment, and innovation has gained renewed policy attention, with emerging sectors such as the green economy, digital transformation, and infrastructure identified as priority areas for diaspora-led investment and entrepreneurship (GFMD, 2025). The full potential of diaspora expertise can only be realized through inclusive, multistakeholder cooperation, data-driven approaches, innovative financial mechanisms, and enabling environments at both national and local levels, including aligning education and training systems with emerging technological sectors (GFMD, 2025).

C.4.2. Contributions through Social Remittances

Beyond financial transfers, diaspora communities contribute through social remittances - a concept Levitt (1998) defined as the migration-driven flow of ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital from receiving to sending-country communities. This framework fundamentally broadened scholarly understanding of diaspora contributions beyond economic measures. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) later expanded the concept, distinguishing between individual and collective social remittances and recognizing that pre-migration experiences shape what diaspora members ultimately transmit back to their homelands. Social remittances circulate through multiple channels — return visits, correspondence, and digital communication — and encompass at least four subtypes: norms, practices, identities, and social capital (Levitt, 1998). Critically, not all social remittances are positive, as they can also transmit materialism or individualism alongside progressive values (Lacroix et al., 2016). For volunteer-sending organizations, diaspora volunteers are by nature active carriers of social remittances, making their engagement a uniquely multidimensional development contribution.

C.4.3. Measuring Impact and Effectiveness

Measuring the impact of diaspora engagement is not straightforward. It is hard to separate what diaspora volunteers specifically contribute from other factors influencing outcomes, and many of the most valuable benefits, such as skills transfer, knowledge sharing, and shifts in community attitudes, are difficult to quantify (Newland & Plaza, 2013). But the value



of diaspora volunteering extends beyond the communities being served. When a diaspora volunteer travels to their country of origin, they also carry with them the values, practices, and ways of working shaped by their life in Canada; effectively acting as an informal ambassador for their country of residence and generating diplomatic and reputational benefits that go well beyond the development project itself (Coakley, 2024). For volunteer-sending organizations, building evaluation tools that capture both sides of this equation is an important and largely unmet challenge (Agunias & Newland, 2012).

C.5 Organizational Considerations for Cultural Community Engagement

C.5.1 Recruitment and Support Systems

Volunteer-recruiting organizations can recruit and retain volunteers by developing persuasive communications that match specific functional motives of individuals or groups, with volunteers assigned to tasks that match their motives more likely to continue volunteering than volunteers assigned to tasks that differ from their motives (Okun, 1994; Clary et al., 1998). Strengthening cultural identity and emotional connections with countries of origin remains a vital pathway for engaging second- and third-generation diaspora members, with cultural expressions through food, music, and art fostering a sense of pride and belonging, while structured initiatives such as internships, volunteer programs, and cultural exchanges provide additional engagement opportunities (GFMD report, 2025).

Practical experience in diaspora volunteer recruitment demonstrates the importance of strategic partnerships with diaspora organizations. Cuso's mapping of Caribbean diaspora organizations identified extensive networks, including community associations, alumni groups, media outlets (print, radio, television), and professional councils (Cuso International, 2015). These partnerships serve multiple functions: they provide recruitment channels, offer cultural competency insights, facilitate community trust-building, and enable co-planning and co-management of development initiatives.

Skills matching represents another critical consideration in diaspora engagement. Analysis of Guyanese diaspora qualifications reveals 27% hold postsecondary qualifications in Business, Management and Public Administration, 19% in Architecture and Engineering, and 14.1% in Health and Recreation fields, with significant gender differences in qualification patterns (Statistics Canada, 2006; Cuso International, 2015). For Jamaican diaspora, top occupational categories include Sales and Services (25.8%), Business, Finance and Administration (21.0%), and Trades and Transport (13.8%), again with notable gender variations. This skills diversity enables targeted recruitment for specific development priorities such as youth employment and entrepreneurship programming.



C.5.2 Partnership Models and Collaboration

Destination countries can work with origin countries on development projects that need technical or financial support. Examples include the EU's Return of Qualified Afghans program and the IOM's Migration for Development in Africa initiative (IOM & MPI, 2013). Diaspora cultural capital can play an instrumental role in delivering sustainable systems of diaspora engagement from the perspective of countries of origin, providing a consistent and reliable avenue for engagement with knock-on effects in understanding various roles cultural engagements can play in more challenging areas (IOM thematic working group).

Effective partnership models must account for the diverse organizational landscape of diaspora communities. The Caribbean diaspora in Canada, for example, demonstrates sophisticated organizational structures spanning community associations, professional networks, academic alumni groups, business councils, and cultural organizations (Cuso International, 2015). These organizations serve as critical intermediaries, possessing community trust, cultural knowledge, and networks that formal development agencies often lack.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships represent an emerging model, as demonstrated by Cuso's collaboration with the Jamaica Diaspora Institute. This partnership integrated global diaspora programming resources into existing youth entrepreneurship initiatives, leveraging academic institutional capacity, digital platforms (diaspora web portal and skills bank), and coordinated engagement across multiple countries (Jamaica, Canada, United States) (Cuso International, 2015). Such models demonstrate how institutional partnerships can provide sustainability beyond project cycles.

Public engagement through diaspora communities also represents an important partnership dimension. Diaspora Speaker Series events, community consultations, and collaborative symposia serve dual purposes: they mobilize diaspora participation in development programming while simultaneously raising awareness and engagement among broader diaspora communities not directly involved in volunteering (Cuso International, 2015). These engagement strategies recognize diaspora communities as both volunteers and constituencies for development education and advocacy.

C.5.3 Addressing Resource Constraints and Barriers

There is recent interest in mapping various diaspora communities, but a less clear idea about how to engage them in the development of the place of origin as well as less resource allocation to strengthen diaspora organizations.



Diaspora volunteer programming requires consideration of unique challenges that may affect volunteer success and well-being. These include security risks that may differ for diaspora volunteers returning to countries of origin, family expectations and obligations while in-country that can create competing demands on volunteer time and energy, and psychological complexities of returning after extended absences or, for second and third generation diaspora, experiencing countries of heritage for the first time as adults (Cuso International, 2015). Programming must provide adequate preparation, ongoing support, and recognition of these distinctive dimensions of diaspora volunteer experience.

Resource constraints within diaspora community organizations themselves also affect engagement capacity. Many diaspora organizations operate with limited budgets, volunteer leadership, and administrative capacity, which can constrain their ability to engage in formal partnerships requiring sustained project management, reporting, and coordination (Cuso International, 2015). Development agencies seeking to partner with diaspora organizations must account for these capacity realities, potentially providing capacity-building support, flexible partnership arrangements, and recognition that diaspora organizations' development contributions extend beyond formal project structures to include advocacy, awareness-raising, and community mobilization.

C.6 Gaps in Existing Research

C.6.1 Gaps in research on volunteer sending organizations

Despite growing interest in diaspora engagement and international volunteering, several significant gaps remain in the literature:

- **Limited research on volunteer-sending organizations' specific approaches to cultural community engagement:** While studies examine diaspora engagement broadly and volunteering separately, attempts by Western governments, international agencies, and NGOs to mobilize diasporas for development have been understudied (Sinatti & Horst, 2015).
- **Insufficient comparative analysis between diaspora and non-diaspora volunteers:** Most research focuses on diaspora populations in isolation rather than systematically comparing their experiences, motivations, and contributions with those of other volunteer groups.
- **Underexplored second and third generation experiences:** The second generation of the New African Diaspora constitutes one of the least studied groups despite its growing size (Kebede, 2019), with this gap extending to other diaspora communities as well.



- **Limited understanding of terminology sensitivities:** While policy documents increasingly shift from "diaspora" to "cultural communities," little research explores how these populations themselves perceive, identify with, and respond to different terminologies.
- **Insufficient attention to organizational barriers and support needs:** Research tends to focus on diaspora motivations and contributions rather than examining institutional structures, resource constraints, and support systems that facilitate or hinder effective engagement.
- **Gaps in longitudinal impact studies:** The impact of diaspora engagement is difficult to assess due to challenges in disentangling causation and correlation, with most research providing snapshot rather than longitudinal perspectives (Castles et al., 2014).
- **Limited documentation of practical partnership models:** While theoretical frameworks abound, detailed case documentation of sustained diaspora-development organization partnerships, including challenges, adaptations, and success factors, remains limited (though Cuso's decade of experience provides important practical insights) (Newland, 2004).
- **Insufficient understanding of diaspora volunteers' distinctive value:** Although programmatic experience suggests diaspora volunteers bring unique contributions through cultural connections, language abilities, and sustained commitment, systematic comparative research documenting these distinctive contributions versus other volunteer populations is limited (Cuso International, 2015).

C.6.2 Gaps at the individual volunteer level

At the individual level, research on the barriers and support needs of diaspora volunteers remains notably underdeveloped. While structural obstacles to volunteer participation — including skills mismatches, financial costs, and organizational culture barriers — have been identified in the broader volunteering literature (Sven et al., 2024), how these barriers are experienced specifically by diaspora volunteers engaging in development work in their countries of origin remains poorly understood. Diaspora volunteers occupy a unique positionality as simultaneous cultural insiders and outsiders, yet the identity tensions, emotional burdens, and psychological vulnerabilities this entails are rarely addressed in volunteer preparation or support frameworks (Cuso International, 2015; Newland & Patrick, 2004). Gender-differentiated barriers represent a further gap, as diaspora women face intersecting structural and cultural constraints that volunteer-sending organizations seldom address in their recruitment or support approaches (IOM, 2024). Finally, post-assignment



reintegration into host-country professional and social life has received minimal scholarly attention, leaving organizations without evidence-based tools to sustain long-term volunteer engagement (Gamlen, 2014). Collectively, these gaps point to an urgent need for individual-centered research that goes beyond motivations to examine the lived barriers that shape diaspora volunteer trajectories.



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