

GOVERNANCE UNCOVERED EPISODE 53 TRANSCRIPT

Diaspora Mobilization in Times of Crisis

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered, a podcast brought to you by the Governance and Local Development Institute, at the University of Gothenburg. This podcast is supported by the Swedish Research Council.

In today's episode, we have Dalia Abdelhady, Associate Professor in Sociology at Lund University, joining us in a conversation on diasporas. We'll discuss how events back home, whether natural disasters or political crises, affect diaspora communities and how they engage with their homelands.

So in talking about the floods and the earthquake in Libya and Morocco, I wouldn't say like this was the first time. Like either groups were activated the diaspora stance, but it definitely was in a critical event that kind of reignited perhaps the diasporic attachment.

We are also joined by Hamza Ouhaichi, a board member of the Moroccan Association in Malmö, Sweden, and a PhD student in computer science at Malmö University. Hamza will talk about how they work with community support at the Moroccan Association in Malmö and their recent emergency response efforts after the devastating earthquake in Morocco.

When the earthquake happened, I was actually in Morocco. I was in touch with the association here, and they told me to reach out to with the public services there, basically. And whenever we have a mission that is connected to Morocco, we usually go through the embassy or the consulate.

Don't forget to hit that subscribe button so you never miss an episode. And without further ado, let's get into the episode!

Our first guest today is Dalia Abdelhady, who has done extensive research on diasporas, from her early work on the Lebanese diaspora in New York, Montreal, and Paris to her recent co-editing of the "Routledge Handbook of Middle East Diasporas." Her insights shed light on the ever-evolving nature of diasporic communities and how community members navigate their relationships with their homelands over time.

We'll also explore the dynamic interplay between diasporas and various types of crises, be it natural disasters, political conflicts, or uprisings. Dalia emphasizes that these events can either reinforce diaspora identities or lead to reevaluating one's connection to the homeland.

Dalia offers a multifaceted perspective of diaspora communities, as some aim to preserve cultural and ethnic identities, while others aspire to challenge traditional norms and create new ways of engagement.

The conversation concludes with a thoughtful discussion on recent global crises, such as the Israeli-Gaza conflict and natural disasters in North Africa, highlighting how people from diverse backgrounds are moved to engage, not just as co-ethnics but as concerned global citizens.

Dalia, I want to thank you for joining us today, to be here with Ghadeer and I, to talk about how events back home, whether we're talking about natural disasters or we're talking about political events, affect diasporas and how they then subsequently would engage in these events. And sometimes sending aid or engaging otherwise. So, I know you've done a lot of work on diasporas, and I'd like the listeners just to hear a little bit about the work you've done, and what you found?

So first of all, thank you both for inviting me, in general, and also for inviting me to talk about a topic that is so dear to me and and yeah, personal in so many ways, but also something that I've been working on for so many years. I started working on diasporas when I was still a PhD student. My PhD project that also eventually turned into a book, it was on the Lebanese diaspora in New York, Montreal and Paris. And I kind of like, I've followed members of the Lebanese diaspora for about a decade and wrote about different things that they've experienced as things were changing in Lebanon, but also the way their own relationship with their homeland changed, the longer earlier over time, based on how long they've been gone. And I have recently co-edited the *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Diasporas*, which gave me an opportunity to also kind of like gain a more general overview of the research that current scholars are writing about and doing as far as the aspects of the Middle East are concerned, so this is very briefly the work I have been doing.

Great. You mentioned Lebanon, of course, that's yet another place we didn't mention when we were talking about sort of the sets of crises, but it's another place which has really experienced, you know, what some people call "the triple crisis" between the port explosion and the financial crises also has had its fair share of just trauma, essentially, that has taken place. When you look at how things change overtime for individuals, can you tell us a little bit about the ways in which the relationship to home changes overtime and then give us a sense of if that means that it changes with regards to the kinds of either existing conflict that we're seeing in, in the Palestinian, Israeli case or with regards to the sets of earthquakes or floods that we saw in Morocco and Libya, does that also change overtime?

So most immigrants, they maintain some level of relationship with the places where they come from, right? I mean, most of them have family, or friends, or feel nostalgic towards the places where they grew up, so it it's not, it's not surprising, right? And academically speaking, now people have been emphasizing and have understood the transnational connections that people have to their homeland, right, they're in one place, they belong to it, right, they migrated and they want to build the life. But they also like, they'll continue to have a relationship with the homeland. But with diaspoaras specific, right, either in the theoretical framework or as something that we use really in everyday language these days, I mean diasporas are defined by their relationship with their homeland. If we take like the classical example of the Jewish diaspora, it was a group of people who always had this longing to a homeland, and they just they could not return. Now that definition has been updated and changed, and that applies to various groups that are not necessarily groups that cannot return to a homeland. But that could be like, you know, self exile or just even just regular migrants like everyday migrants, can still be understood as diasporas. And for me, the key

aspect is that, like in the life of a migrant, right, they connect to the places where they migrate to, right. They want to build the life, they want to work, start families, be part of their communities day-to-day. And then they have this continuing relationship with the places they come from, for whatever reason that may be. And of course it varies from one person to another, right? So we can't like say that it's strong for everybody who, you know, migrated recently or anything like that. But then what's interesting also is that migrants maintain the connection or a sense of community with other people from the same country of origin around the world. So when I studied the Lebanese, for example, what fascinated me was that you can look at the Lebanese family that like there are members somewhere in South America, North America, Europe, even China, right. One family that's spread all over the world. And then they maintain connections and interaction, sometimes on a daily basis. So that definitely changes their understanding of who they are in their place in the world and that, what I think, is fascinating and kind of like unique about diasporas.

Is it also fair to say that it changes their relations with others within the same country? In other words, that if I'm Lebanese and I'm near other Lebanese, that I have a connection with them, and share a sense of, obligations or how we should engage with each other. Because you of course see lots of diaspora communities, right? That the Lebanese are going back in time, the Italians or the Germans, I mean, that they stick together and stay together. Is that a romanticized version of the world? Or does that really exist?

I mean, first of all, right, so so yeah, so people who do not migrate at all, they continue to be affected by the process of migration. And this is something that migration scholars have been paying more attention to these days, that migration is not just about the immigrant, the migrants who moves, but it's also the people they leave behind. Again, take Lebanon as an example, I mean, the the country survived for decades, right, for many years during the Civil War and after the civil war. And we can think even like, the more recent, you know, triple crises that you mentioned, the role of, like the Lebanese people around the world is very important here in, in order to understand how people are surviving day-to-day. And how, like the entire country did not, I mean, people can argue that it it's already collapsed, right? But it's still doesn't collapse, right? It's still there. There's still some sense of coherence and the level of stability as minimal that can be, and the diasporas are very important here. So yes, so first, the people who don't move are still affected by diasporas to a large extent. And as you said, when people move, yes, the relationship with the places where they come from change in unexpected ways. So people, of course, leave because they have a reason to leave, right? I mean, they could be economic reasons, could be like a sense of adventure, it could be whatever reason that they have to leave. But it takes a level of detachment, right, for a person to make a decision, I don't wanna live in this country anymore. I'm gonna leave my family, the places where I grew up, my friends and everybody. So you have to detach to a certain extent. Then you go to a new place and then that sense of detachment can like hit you in the face, that like it, you know, something happens. It's like, you realize that you actually, you're more attached than you thought you were. And that's why, I mean, many people go out and seek co-ethnics, even like sometimes people I talk to, I mean they would say like, they're friends with people in, in the diaspora, but these people, they would never be their friends had they stayed in Lebanon, for example, right? Because there is something about, you know, coming from a similar place, or appreciating the same food, or just like laughing at the same jokes. It definitely makes people feel more connected than otherwise.

When we're thinking about how diasporas might be responding then, to crises that occur back home, how much should we understand these responses as being kind of dyadic between individuals who are outside, and family members and others who are inside? And how much are they driven by that community, which evolves, the one that is around diaspora, whether it's Lebanese or Moroccan or others?

Yeah, I have a very specific theoretical understanding of what diasporas is. So, I'll start that by saying that diasporas are not entities that are just out there. Being a migrant does not make one immediately a member of a diaspora, but diaspora is formed in particular circumstances, right, in particular contexts. One important factor in this process of formation of a diaspora actually is critical events in the homeland. So, we can see that, for example, like we talk about Coptic Egyptians who may not necessarily identify, historically speaking, as members of a diaspora, they didn't have a strong sense of being Coptic Egyptians. But we see that in the 70s, when, like, there were critical events happening to Copts in Egypt, that the political mobilization that they had in, well, in places like France or in North America, that allowed them to form a diaspora. I mean, create a sense of community that's also politically active, that's also interested in affecting things in the homeland. So we can see this with various groups, so groups that have been more or less, not very active politically or socially. Like think of Tunisians, for example, who are usually like small numbers in various places, but when the uprisings happened in Tunisia, people outside felt it was a critical moment for them that activated something, their interest in what was happening in Tunisia. So critical events are very important in the formation of diasporas. Some would argue that actually without these critical events, you would not necessarily have diasporas as such. So in talking about the floods and the earthquake in Libya and Morocco, I wouldn't say like this was the first time. Like either groups were activated the diaspora stance, but it definitely was in a critical event that kind of reignited perhaps the diasporic attachment.

So that's really interesting. And I guess what it makes me think about is the potential differences between different types of events back home. If we think about something like the earthquakes or the floods, I mean, there's a bit of politicization over this, but they're very different events, than say for example, the civil war in Syria, or even if we're thinking about what takes place in Lebanon and the way in which people see that as internally divisive, right. So how does that affect the relationship among members of the diaspora? How does that even, given the way that you've defined diaspora, which I find really fascinating, how does that shape the formation of diasporas?

Well, unfortunately, divisions in the homeland get reflected among members of the diaspora as well, right? So if, you know, there are various factions in Syria, these same groupings are also present in the diaspora as well. So you can find, like, very similar divisions, but you can also find some groups who would try to overcome these divisions. The example of the Lebanese, the case I know the most about, there were people who had emphasized that they left Lebanon for a reason, like sectarian strife, was kind of like a big reason for why people left. And if they've left because of sectarian strife, they definitely did not have no interest in recreating that kind of division in the diaspora. And they longed for creating the kind of community that they always wanted. So you can find like the, you know, the utopian vision, maybe perhaps, more actual lies in the diaspora, but you can also find similar divisions and conflicts replicating themselves in the diaspora as well. In that sense, perhaps I

can emphasize that when I talked about how critical events are important for the formation of diasporas, I mean this is both in the negative and the positive sense. So you can have crises, of course, they're very important. I mean, I mentioned historically the Coptic case. That's a negative event that triggered this diaspora consciousness and awareness. But positive events also, I like to think of, like the uprisings as being, you know, one of these, like, positive events where people were proud to attach, really, to the homeland again, it was a definitely more of a positive euphoric almost experience of like being with co-ethnics and co-nationals when you're unable to go back for whatever reason.

And that's a great example because the other thing that had struck me about your earlier comment, was that we can think about diasporas, and we've talked about them as Lebanese or Moroccans or Palestinians, et cetera. But we can also think about cross-cutting the ethnic experience of it, right. And of course, here often thinking of Arabs, but we can also think of religious or sectarian or other sets of divisions. So how do we think about the fact that diasporas, like many identities, are cross cutting and and multiple, right, so that we have people who may identify as Arab very broadly, as Tunisian very specifically, at times, the uprisings is one example, but there are times when these things, come into tension with each other. Where the events on the ground really pull at being Arab versus being Tunisian or right now, what we're thinking about, you could make an argument with regards to the Palestinian-Israeli case, that being of different nationalities, may put you in a different juxtaposition to the case. How do we understand that, and how do we understand how diasporas form, and people form their relationship with diasporas, particularly when they might have tensions between them?

Well, I mean, diasporas are just another form of identity, right? So we, already accept that identities are multiple, and can be contradictory. So diasporic identities are very similar way there can be multiple and can also be very contradictive. Depending on what the trigger is, one may feel part of the Tunisian diaspora, or a Moroccan diaspora, but then something else may happen and they've become members of Arab diaspora, where they have not necessarily identified as Arabs before. But also, one of the things that I write about in my book, *The Lebanese Diaspora*, is that, yes, I mean people have the national attachment, the ethnic attachments. Sometimes the attachment to any particular neighborhoods, particular villages and towns that they come from. Families, I already mentioned that example. But we also see people moving beyond all of these, like traditional understandings and formations of identity, to something that's a little less traditional. So by that I mean, like I mentioned, the example of people saying, well, we left because of sectarian strife, we don't want to replicate that on the diaspora. For them, it becomes an important identifying factor for them that they seek affinities and connections with people who believe in, have similar beliefs, regardless of where they come from. So people who, for example, leave because of issues of inequality, right, economic or political or religious, whatever inequality, they are outside of their homeland, and then they realize, well, these are the issues that really matter to them and people can share the same opinions and interest in doing something about them, without coming from the same country. So they find themselves mobilized and part of communities, sometimes, as other immigrants, but sometimes also with, like, you know, people who share political ideals in general. So we can also talk about these as like, you know, diasporas in a in a more loose way. But diasporas can be formed around all kinds of causes and identities and affiliations.

And so, when we think about how diasporas are affected by events that are taking place, right, events back home. How should we think about the nature of their engagement, or the extent to which that may differ depending on either the type of event that we're talking about, or the type of diaspora that's been formed?

OK. I guess to answer that question, I need to illustrate a little bit with an example. So one chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Diasporas*, is on Tunisian diaspora in France and Italy. Tunisians and France were historically like a bit more organized politically in terms of organizations than the one in Italy. But OK, so yeah, uprisings happen in Tunisia, members of the diaspora are becoming very interested in what's happening in the homeland, and they want to have an impact, right? They want, they want to be part of the process of change. A few of them go back, you know, run for office, right. Participate politically, you know all of that but. Then they also they got disillusioned fairly quickly, like many other politicians in Tunisia, regardless of whether they matter or not. And in their case, I mean, they have the option of just, like, going back to either France or Italy and continuing with the political engagement or struggle there. But it no longer became so much focused on Tunisia. They realized that their political role. or the changes that they want to see in the world, again, can happen anywhere and in different ways, and not just by specifically affecting what's happening in Tunisia. Another chapter about Palestinians in Denmark who, well, different contexts, of course, and, I mean, different critical events. But the chapter specifically gives an example of a group of second generation, so people who were born and raised in Denmark and having the opportunity to go back and participate in, like, you know, these diaspora tours, to go to Palestinian villages and see things on the ground. And, of course, there they kind of like perhaps somewhat hit with their realization that they're not the same kind of Palestinian as the Palestinians who are, like, still there and, you know, experienced occupation in a very specific way. But they go back to Denmark and their sense of their danishness, and what they want to do in Denmark for their own Palestinian communities, for the neighborhoods, for like other marginalized immigrants, it becomes strong and becomes an important source of their identity of who they are. So diaspora, it can trigger these things, but it also, I guess my point is, that it can also change the relationship that people have with the countries where they live, in important ways. And these are in my opinion, I would say, there are positive changes, right? I mean people wanting to be a positive factor in social change, not just in the homeland, but in the spaces they occupy day-to-day.

I like that example and I like sort of the emphasis on the ways in which these can be positive, partly because my own experience, especially as you know, watching Arab diasporas after 9-11 in the US, was that you can also see times when they seem to become quite negative, right? Or, you know, at at times when the people around, suddenly, maybe it's not so sudden, but experience and express very much that you're an outsider, you're in other. So how do we understand the ways in which existing crises or events may also tear at the relationship between diasporas and others within the country?

That's a hard question. I think, we can think of this process of otherness as an important factor in the formation of diasporas. I think if people will fully assimilate, not that it's a word I would like to use, but like, if you know, we can imagine a process of full assimilation, then people would have no reason to be part of a diaspora. So those who are attracted to a diasporic community of sorts, and

incomplete, or kind of, like a contentious relationship with the countries they live in, and that what draws them to, you know, diasporic communities. So I think marginalization, otherness in general, is an important factor in the formation of diasporas. I hope that answers your question.

It very much does, thank you. So when we think about, again, this pull towards engagement, and you mentioned this in terms of the Tunisians who went back, and of course we also saw Egyptians who went back to Egypt, Libyans went back to Libya and even probably percentage wise greater numbers after the fall of Gaddafi, we get this one reaction can be: I'm going to return and do something, right. Then, of course, for many people, return isn't really an option either, because they don't want to be involved in politically in in these ways or involved in this directly. So we see a lot of other ways of trying to kind of mobilize as a community, send support if we're talking about natural disasters back home, and really try to engage in those ways. Can you tell me a little bit about those efforts, when the diaspora comes together to try to engage back home, does it reinforce diaspora and the meaning of diaspora on the one hand? There was a discussion about how sometimes people don't necessarily know exactly what needs to get sent back, and then you can send too much back and, which in my mind also brings up the question of does it demonstrate how far away you are right? If suddenly you find that how you responded wasn't necessarily what was needed, does it make you feel more distant from, you know, your community? OK, now I don't, I'm not only not there, right, but I'm not there and there's this gap between my understanding and the reality. How does this all affect the diaspora?

A few things I want to say here. The definition of diaspora, the traditional, at least the definition of diaspora, it's all about the return, right? It's all about the desire to return to a homeland. So in some ways, we can think of like people who actually return, right? I mean that this is kind of like the end stage of a diaspora, the diasporas will cease to exist once people actually return and that, there's an argument there. But then also I mentioned a couple of examples already about like how they asked was actually become activated once people returned because they realized well, no, this is not what I want. And they leave again. And sometimes, yes, there are moments and events where people feel alienated more so than before from their homeland as well, this is perhaps somewhat of a personal example, but like, you know, I'm from Egypt, and when the Egyptian uprisings were taking place, of course I was very excited. I participated in all kinds of, like, protest, solidarity events that in the States, I was in the States at the time, and it was, it was a moment to like, really be hopeful about things changing in Egypt. But then I quickly realized, that those who are allowed to speak and and given center stage were mostly men. And when I tried to say something about it, I was told like, no, not now, right? We discuss this later, but now we have a common goal, and I was like: well then this is not my struggle. This is not what I want, and I was reminded again of kind of like, OK, I left for a reason. And that was kind of like it was a sad realization, but it made me also think, well, like this is not my revolution. And indeed it wasn't. I wasn't, you know, I was gone from Egypt for a good decade by the time the revolution was happening. So yes, it was not mine. It was something that I could relate to, something that made me happy at a particular time. But it was not necessarily my own personal political struggle. Like, you know, most people who where, you know, participating in it. It can, it can have that effect on you as well.

Yeah. And that's interesting because that's an effective, like you said, it's one that's your engagement with others in the diaspora, right, which triggers and reminds you of some of the ways in which what's, expected or some of the ways in which how people relate to each other, don't sit well with how you want to live. That's very key. Which also brings up the extent to which you, I don't know if you would dichotomize this way, so feel free to push back, because on the one hand I'm hearing about diaspora communities which are trying to create a different, non-sectarian, when you know, Lebanese tend to sort of have a lot of politics revolving around sectarianism, gender neutral in places which tend to be very patriarchal coming from. So they actually try to say, OK, I think you used the word utopian, set up a vision in a way, of engaging that is very different, right? There's others which are essentially trying to recreate home-away. You hear this a lot in the States where people want to maintain close connections with the diaspora because there's a whole notion of making sure that what you're doing is creating a bubble of home where you've now moved to. Those strike me as two very different ways to think about what engaging with others who are from the place where you're from and maybe even longing to go back, but in one case, to go back to a new and improved country,, and the other one to go back to the place that they left. But they seem strikingly different in their essence. So do we see those? And how do they engage or interact with each other, sort of how do we think about that?

I guess in my head, I make the distinction between ethnic or national community, right? So we can talk about the Lebanese in well, New York, or Palestinians in Denmark, right? I mean these are like, you know, nationally defined communities that happen to be made-up of immigrants. So that's one thing. But diasporas are something else. If it's just one of the same, then we don't really need the to use the term diaspora at all. But many people do anyway, right? I mean, people use that as a synonym to immigrant communities, but I don't. So for me diaspora has to offer something new and different, and for me that new and different is the desire to move beyond the traditional, the traditional understanding of identity as a, you know, an ethnic national identity, the traditional setup on society, just like I mean. You know, try to kind of like come up with something new and different and that sometimes leads to just like, getting rid of the ethnic completely, or the national completely. And sometimes, it doesn't. It depends. So I mean I would say if we look back at the uprisings, I think it definitely, perhaps the fact that it can't happen in multiple countries in the same time, but I think it also it did something to like, I mean an Arab diaspora that perhaps was not as strong before. Arab communities abroad, Arab diasporas ebbs and flows. It goes up and down that sense of arabness and mobilization around the word Arab. And I would say like in more recent years, I think this awareness or that sense of arabness, has been stronger. And then after 9/11, as you mentioned, but even like after 9/11, I think there were there were times when people talked about the backlash. So like, and 9/11 creating also a sense of community. And, you know, rallying around othered identity.

I'm struck by on the one hand, when we talked about diasporas, the fact that it seems like diaspora is motivated or defined around the notion of return. And then you had just said that there was a way in which it was also motivated, in some ways, around an idea of change. So not just returned to what was, right, cause I was saying that I saw two senses of diaspora, one which people who want to, and you nicely sort of separate ethnic communities versus diaspora, but people who, even if they want to return, but they also, in the meantime, want to maintain and preserve what was back home and essentially transfer it into their new place. If you're in the US, you hear people who will talk about making sure that they stay with their community, because they know how to raise the children, they

know how to sort of live right, and it's a preservational perspective. Versus one which is about, it's sectarian back home, but we want to be anti-sectarian, it's hierarchical and patriarchal back home, but we want to be gender neutral. So a notion of creating a community that is different, right? Yes, I still long for a home and I want to go home, I want it to be different because the reason I left was because it wasn't different. So I see those as two quite different ways of thinking about community.

I actually wrote an article about the myth of return, and about how, well, we can understand this massive return as something that brings members of diaspora together, and it's not something that people may want to actually like, kind of like see happening, right? The ultimate return to a homeland. But when I wrote about it, I actually emphasized the kind of like, the myth part of it, that even when when people can go back, most people actually don't go back. But they wanna live, with this kind of like idea that maybe one day in the future or like, some people would want to be buried in the homeland. So there's no actual interest in return-return. But like, you still want to maintain some kind of relationship because that's an important part of your identity perhaps. You mentioned the word like, some groups can be interested in maintaining ethnic ties and communities to preserve a culture, a way of life or a certain way of doing things. You can think of this so people who are interested in preservation. But I like to think of diaspora as aspiration. Again, diasporas are not entities that already exist, right, but something that happens and gets created in response to something. So if they're responding to something, then that response usually include an interest in affecting the process. So Copts in North America, they, it wasn't that, they just got together because they felt sorry for themselves even though they were in North America and they're not in Egypt, but they're interested in affecting things in Egypt. And that led to like a rise and like of the diasporic consciousness at the time. And we can think of this for a lot of other groups as well. And that's very different from, again, from ethnic communities or just like want to get together with people who speak the same language and eat the same food and raise the kids the same way.

Final question, I'm going to ask you about in terms of thinking about the ways in which people engage, either if we're talking about the earthquakes and floods in terms of trying to send things home, or if we're now, at the time we're taping this, of course, is Israeli Gaza crisis and you see a lot of people kind of mobilizing the streets and, you know, trying to be very active in response to the crisis. Should we understand that as co-ethnic mobilization and then apart from the notion of diaspora as longing in a sense of belonging and even mythical, if you will, but sense of return? Or is there a way in which this is, that this engagement is particularly strong because there is something about it that is about maintaining that connection and demonstrating a real intent of being there?

So you mentioned a couple of examples that are somewhat difficult to just like keep only within the diasporic concept. So we mentioned like Israel, Gaza, and earthquakes and floods in North Africa. And both of those examples were moments where people were mobilized in general, regardless of where they come from. So like now we're seeing kind of like the large scale mobilization that's happening all over the world, like I don't want to call it pro-Palestinian but just like but anti-genocide, right? So this has nothing to do with where people come from. It's just like, it's something about ideals and moral values. And the same thing you know, with what happened in North Africa, earthquake in Syria, Turkey, not so long before that was, yes, of course, people who come from these regions have a completely different attachment to what's happening, of course, and nobody

can even, you know, begin to understand that kind of attachment. But everybody else also is feeling something about it, because the scale of suffering is so large that we, we all have to think about it and we all have to engage with it.

That's an excellent point. Thank you for talking to us today. Is there anything else that we didn't get to touch on that you want to make sure that you had a chance to explain to us?

No, thank you. If you have any other questions, I'll be happy to answer them. I mean, this was, yeah, definitely a nice conversation to have. So thank you.

Thank you. Thank you so much. Truly appreciate it.

Likewise.

Now, we will hear from Hamza Ouhaichi from the Moroccan Association in Malmö, and how they work to support Moroccan community building in Malmö, Sweden, but also how they mobilized to help on the ground in Morocco after the devastating earthquake on the 8th of September, 2023.

How do you know what a community thousands of miles away truly needs? Hamza gives us valuable insights on establishing effective communication channels, collaborating with community leaders, and understanding the unique challenges of rural areas.

Hi, Hamza, thank you for coming to that podcast. So first, would you please introduce yourself to our audience?

Thank you for having me, Ghadeer. My name is Hamza and I'm a board member at the Moroccan association in Malmö. And I'm also a PhD student at Malmö University in computer science. And thank you for having me.

Thank you. So would you please tell us more about the Moroccan association in Malmö? When did you start and what activities do you do?

The association itself, it started a long time ago, more than 15 years. And it had, it went through different boards, so it had a lot of missions and a lot of visions. And recently, the last three years, almost all board members were changed, and we are focusing now more on social impacts specifically for the Moroccan community. So we organize activities in special occasions like religious holidays and national occasions, and also we look into the needs of the Moroccan community. And also the interests of non-Moroccans in Moroccan culture. And we organize Arabic classes for kids and some social activities like sports, football and other stuff.

Great. So how do you organize those activities? Are the individuals in the association tied together by other networks? Maybe you work or families or social media?

Yeah. So there are different means how we get in touch with our members. Mostly it's word by mouth, so people know each other and they spread the word when we have new members, we use mostly SMS to spread if there are new events or activities, we use social media because you have to use it. But we don't get a lot of interaction out of it. Yeah. And mostly people bring each other and when we meet new people, we invite them to join us.

Can you tell us more about how you organized your emergency response effort to support the victims of the earthquake in Morocco?

When the earthquake happened, I was actually in Morocco. I was in touch with the association here, and they told me to reach out to with the public services there, basically. And whenever we have a mission that is connected to Morocco, we usually go through the embassy or the consulate. And we

are grateful for them here in Sweden because they are usually very helpful in many cases. So in this case, in the emergency, it helped a lot to consult them. Because we received a lot of help from different parts, not only in the Moroccan association in Malmö, but in other countries, and also even in Morocco, even that help became a problem at the end because it was too much and it needed management. It was really good to consult with the authorities. For them to be able to manage at least the roads because there was too much traffic and there were basically no ways close to the most affected areas or helicopters were needed to reach the place. And a lot of needed help was going there, like people, maybe they need more medical help rather than a lot of clothes or food. There were videos where it shows that it was basically thrown or wasted or. Yeah. So, consulting the authorities in Morocco, the consulate or the embassy here in order to know what were the needs, and also, we collected clothes here and we realized it's not a good idea to send clothes from here.

So what did you manage to collect here in Sweden and how did you mobilize the community to communicate what is needed and what's not needed?

So a number of the board members and association members, they made this video call where they call for help and they explain the situation and they focused on the help through donations, money donations. That happened last week, so it's going slowly. Yeah, that's the main thing that we are focusing on now, after trying different things.

So being an organization based in Sweden, and you're usually doing activities for the Moroccan community in Malmö or in Sweden in general, so how do you know the needs of the community back home? So you mentioned a little bit that you, because you were there, and you were communicating with different organizations or the authorities in Morocco, so could you elaborate more on that? How did you coordinate? Did you know the community leaders or the organizations before? How did you reach out to make sure there is coordination between the organization here in Malmö and people back home?

Yeah. So when such thing happen, you basically feel that you are rotating in, in the same place. You are running and screaming and having your phone all the time on you. But uh, there wasn't much coordination on the first, on the very first days. Because it's mostly asking what's going on, you are trying to reach the places that are affected, but it's impossible because everybody went there. I was in touch with two associations there because I was previously a member, or a benefitter from the association, and they had knowledge about the communities there because the earthquake happened in rural areas where the place was already in need of help without an earthquake. So associations already knew what are the needs of such places before the earthquake, so they knew how to reach the place, they knew who, who are the people who are living there, how are they living, yeah, so their main concern was about medical help, because you need to save the people and once you save them, there is no hospital nearby and the places are very distributed or ubiquitous, so it's not the one area. It's very, very small villages. That are far from each other, but in the same region they were all affected, so bringing one hospital or bringing one medical facility, will not solve the problem. It will need at least one ambulance going to at least every small village. So that's what was communicated from Morocco to here and that's why we focused on making

donations for the aim of actually buying an ambulance that would have, you know, a small hospital in it, that could be a mobile hospital, we can say. And in that, it could be used as a vehicle to send more help from here if we need to send something else.

That's perfect. Thank you for sharing this with us and that's a very impressive work. Of course, our hearts are with the victims of the earthquake, and I wish you best of luck in your efforts to support them. Thank you so much for coming to the podcast.

Thank you so much Ghadeer.

Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the episode, and don't forget to like, share, and subscribe if you did!