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Abstract

Diaspora humanitarianism the range of practices through which dispersed communities mobilise resources, knowledge, and solidarity to assist crisis-affected populations in their countries or regions of origin has moved from the margins to the centre of humanitarian scholarship and practice over the past decade. This article synthesises a cross-section of recent conceptual, empirical, and policy literature to map the field's principal debates, from the effectiveness case for diaspora engagement, through the ethical and theoretical reframing of humanitarianism around relationality and care, to the digital transformation of diaspora giving and organising. Drawing on case material from Congolese refugee communities in Nairobi, Somali diaspora networks spanning the Horn of Africa and Europe, and Australia-based diaspora responders, the review identifies four cross-cutting themes: comparative advantage and speed of response; the inadequacy of universalist humanitarian principles for capturing diaspora motivations; the reconfiguration of “near” and “far” diaspora relations through digital platforms; and the persistent coordination gap between diaspora actors and the formal humanitarian system. The article closes by identifying emerging issues digital financial infrastructures, gendered patterns of engagement, protracted-crisis fatigue, and the institutionalisation of diaspora engagement frameworks that constitute a research agenda for the field, and reflects briefly on how Islamic ethical concepts of amanah (trusteeship) and ummah solidarity offer an additional interpretive perspective for diaspora humanitarian obligation in Muslim-majority displacement contexts.

Keywords: *Diaspora humanitarianism, relational humanitarianism, digital diaspora, near-far diaspora, humanitarian infrastructures, Somalia, Congolese refugees, Nairobi*

1.0 Introduction

The international humanitarian system has, for much of its modern history, been organised around a set of Universalist principles humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence codified through the Red Cross movement and reproduced across the United Nations humanitarian architecture. Yet a large and growing body of scholarship over the past fifteen years has documented that a considerable share of the assistance reaching crisis-affected populations does not travel through this formal system at all. It moves instead through remittance channels, informal community networks, diaspora associations, and, increasingly, digital platforms connecting dispersed communities to their homelands. This informal but substantial architecture of assistance has come to be labelled diaspora humanitarianism.

Diaspora humanitarianism is not new. Dispersed communities have supported homeland populations in times of crisis for as long as migration itself has produced dispersed communities. What has changed is the scale, visibility, and technological mediation of these practices, alongside a growing recognition among researchers, donors, and international agencies alike, that diaspora actors are often first responders in acute emergencies and durable actors across protracted crises. This recognition has, in turn, generated a distinct and rapidly expanding literature: literature reviews assessing diaspora effectiveness, ethnographic case studies of specific diaspora communities, large multi-country research consortia, and institutional frameworks designed to better coordinate diaspora and formal humanitarian actors.

This article offers a comprehensive review of this literature, organised thematically rather than chronologically. It draws on six bodies of work that, taken together, span the conceptual, empirical, and policy dimensions of the field: the foundational effectiveness literature represented by Bostrom et al.'s (2016) CDA Collaborative review; the theoretical reframing of diaspora humanitarianism around relational care ethics, as advanced by Fernandez et al. (2025) (2025) and the associated study by Rejón et al. (2025); the digital and generational dynamics of diaspora engagement, illustrated through Godin and Héritier's (2025) study of the Banyamulenge Congolese community in Nairobi; the institutional coordination architecture represented by the International Organization for Migration's (2023) Framework for Diaspora Engagement in Humanitarian Assistance and the regional, infrastructure-focused research programme on Somali diaspora humanitarianism led by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in partnership with the University of Nairobi, the Rift Valley Institute, and Rako Research and Communication Centre. Each of these strands is examined in turn before the article draws out cross-cutting themes and identifies emerging issues warranting further research and policy attention.

Conceptualising Diaspora Humanitarianism

Definitions of diaspora humanitarianism converge on a shared core: it is transnational assistance, mobilised by migrant and refugee communities, directed toward crisis-affected populations with whom the diaspora shares kinship, ethnic, religious, or national ties. Where definitions diverge is on scope. Some scholars restrict the term to acute emergency response goods, cash, and services delivered in the immediate aftermath of conflict or disaster. Others adopt a broader reading that folds in longer-term development assistance, advocacy and lobbying in host-country political systems, and even the everyday, seemingly mundane transfers of money and information that sustain households across borders in the absence of any singular crisis event.

The literature also increasingly distinguishes between diaspora communities by their relative proximity to the crisis. Van Hear and Cohen's (2017) work on the spheres of diaspora engagement

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with conflict distinguishes diasporas by distance and contiguity, noting that communities settled far from the homeland are shielded from the direct consequences of conflict in ways that neighbouring, or “near,” diasporas are not, with implications for how each group's humanitarian engagement is motivated and structured. This near/far distinction has since become a productive analytical device, most notably operationalised in the Nairobi-based Congolese case discussed later in this review.

Theoretical Frameworks: From Universalist Principles to Relational Care

A central theoretical contribution of the recent literature is the argument that the ethical vocabulary of mainstream humanitarianism is poorly suited to explain diaspora practice. Fernandez et al. (2025), publishing in *Global Networks*, develop a conceptual framework from a comparative study of eight Australia-based diaspora communities and their responses to a range of humanitarian crises. Their central finding is that diaspora humanitarian interventions are built on transnational, reciprocal relationships and everyday care practices that bind dispersed kin and community together, in contrast to the one-directional provision of goods that characterises much traditional humanitarian action. Where the classical principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence presuppose a disinterested, Universalist relationship between helper and helped, diaspora humanitarianism is explicitly partial: it is motivated by kinship, obligation, and continuing relationship rather than by an abstract commitment to suffering humanity as such.

On this basis, Fernandez et al. (2025) propose that feminist ethics of care, together with the concept of relational humanitarianism advanced by Brun and Horst (2023), offer a more accurate perspective for analysing diaspora practice. This theoretical move has significant implications. It suggests that policy efforts to fold diaspora actors into the formal humanitarian system risk misunderstanding what motivates diaspora engagement in the first place, and that metrics of effectiveness borrowed from the professionalised aid sector may not capture the value diaspora actors place on relational continuity, emotional and psychosocial support, and culturally specific practices of mourning, remembrance, and mutual obligation. A striking illustrative case cited in this literature is that of Sahrawi refugees, who have organised digital transnational advocacy networks specifically to raise the funds needed to bury relatives and friends who die in the refugee camps, an act of care that sits entirely outside the categories through which conventional humanitarian programming is designed and evaluated.

The companion study by Rejón et al. (2025) complements this theoretical argument with survey evidence from six Australia-based diaspora communities. It finds that diaspora contributions concentrate at the household level, display gender-differentiated patterns, and vary systematically according to the type of crisis involved: sociopolitical upheaval, armed conflict, or natural disaster. Importantly, the study also documents a persistent coordination gap between diaspora communities and the formal humanitarian sector, even though diaspora respondents expressed clear willingness to cooperate with other actors. This coordination gap recurs as a theme across nearly every strand of the literature reviewed here.

The Comparative Advantage of Diaspora Actors: The Effectiveness Literature

If the theoretical literature complicates how diaspora motivation should be understood, an earlier and still widely cited strand of research makes the case for diaspora actors on grounds of comparative operational advantage. According to Bostrom et al. (2016), humanitarian effectiveness and the role of the diaspora remains a foundational reference point across the field, cited extensively in subsequent empirical work. Its central claim is that diaspora communities

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possess a high degree of access, local knowledge, and capacity for rapid mobilisation that together make them valuable assets for improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response in their countries of origin.

A study by Bostrom et al. (2016) supports this point, emphasising that diaspora actors' comparative advantages in access, local knowledge, and capacity for rapid mobilisation allow them, despite lacking the organisational scale and formal neutrality of professionalised aid agencies, to outperform such agencies on rapid mobilisation, cultural sensitivity, and direct access to populations that international actors struggle to reach. This effectiveness literature also documents the sheer scale of diaspora contributions relative to official channels. Diaspora remittance flows to fragile and crisis-affected states have been estimated to exceed official humanitarian aid to those same states by a factor of roughly six, a figure that recurs across the diaspora humanitarianism literature and underlines why researchers argue that formal humanitarian planning cannot responsibly treat diaspora engagement as peripheral.

Digital Transformation and Near-Far Diaspora Dynamics: The Nairobi Case

A third body of scholarship of literature examines how digital platforms are reshaping the internal architecture of diaspora humanitarianism itself not merely how diaspora communities communicate with crisis-affected relatives, but how power and responsibility are distributed within the diaspora across geography and generation. Godin and Hérítier's (2025) study in Fennia, based on the Banyamulenge Congolese refugee community in Nairobi, is among the most detailed treatments of this dynamic to date.

The study addresses a gap the authors identify in prior diaspora scholarship: research on diaspora humanitarianism has traditionally centred the relationship between the Global North and the Global South, largely overlooking transnational and trans-local connections among diasporas that are geographically closer to their countries of origin (Godin & Hérítier, 2025). Godin and Hérítier instead centre the near diaspora (refugees settled in a first country of asylum, in this case Kenya), and examine how this group interacts with the far diaspora resettled in North America, Europe, and Australia, as well as with the homeland itself, in everyday humanitarian acts.

Their central empirical finding concerns the reshaping of intra-diaspora power relations through social media, particularly YouTube. Diaspora-produced YouTube channels some based in Nairobi, others owned or co-led by resettled Congolese abroad generate both income and a renewed sense of collective belonging, functioning as spaces in which the near and far diaspora recognise one another as part of an imagined transnational family. These channels also perform an economic function: far-diaspora members sometimes facilitate the registration and monetisation of near-diaspora channels, occasionally charging commissions or providing banking access for financial transfers through services such as Western Union, WorldRemit, or mobile money. Godin and Hérítier (2025) further showed that a traditional community support mechanism, the mutuality system, has been successfully adapted for the digital era and integrated into WhatsApp, particularly among Congolese youth in Nairobi, illustrating how digitalisation does not simply replace but often extends and re-embeds pre-existing communal obligations. The study situates these dynamics against a backdrop of overlapping crises (protracted displacement, economic hardship, the COVID-19 pandemic, and legal precarity) that have collectively altered roles and relationships within the diaspora.

This Nairobi-based research connects to a wider literature on refugees as digital economic actors. Related scholarship on Congolese refugee YouTubers in Nairobi argues for a bottom-up

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understanding of refugee connectivity that recognises displaced populations as already digitally engaged, rather than treating digitalisation solely as something delivered to refugees by humanitarian and private-sector programming. This literature also cautions, following Madianou's (2019) influential critique, that digital humanitarian tools can reproduce pre-existing power asymmetries and reshape rather than dismantle colonial relationships of dependency, an important corrective against overly celebratory accounts of digital diaspora humanitarianism.

Institutional Coordination: Frameworks for Diaspora–Humanitarian System Engagement

A fourth strand of the literature is policy- and practice-oriented, addressing the coordination gap identified above directly. The most developed effort in this space is the International Organization for Migration (2023) Framework for Diaspora Engagement in Humanitarian Assistance, developed in partnership with the Haiti Renewal Alliance and funded through USAID, with contributions from dozens of diaspora organisations and institutional humanitarian actors gathered over roughly three years of multi-stakeholder consultation beginning in late 2020.

The Framework's stated objectives are twofold: to increase the capacity of diaspora organisations and institutional humanitarian actors to coordinate, communicate, and collaborate with one another, and to increase the reach and effectiveness of interventions across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. It explicitly recognises diaspora communities as early responders who bring intellectual, social, economic, political, and cultural capital to crisis response, and it provides practical models and process flowcharts spanning the full crisis-management cycle: preparedness, prevention, response, and recovery. An early global survey conducted as part of the Framework's development drew more than 120 diaspora respondents from over 35 countries, generating comparative data on how diaspora members currently participate in humanitarian assistance, the barriers they encounter, and the sectors and phases of assistance in which they are most active.

The Framework has since been piloted and documented through country case studies, including a completed case study of Filipino diaspora engagement in the United States (focused on strengthening internal coordination, preparedness, and information-sharing among diaspora organisations, and on building mutual knowledge with government, United Nations, and private-sector humanitarian actors in the Philippines) and a Somalia case study, whose full publication remains pending at the time of writing but whose existence signals growing institutional attention to the Horn of Africa diaspora dynamics discussed below. Read alongside the effectiveness and relational-care literatures reviewed above, the IOM Framework represents an attempt to operationalise, at the level of practice, insights that the academic literature has so far mostly generated at the level of theory and case study.

Regional Deep Dive: Somali Diaspora Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Infrastructures

The most sustained regional research programme reviewed here is Diaspora Humanitarianism in Complex Crises (D-Hum), a collaborative project running from 2019 to 2024 and led by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in partnership with the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Rift Valley Institute, and the Rako Research and Communication Centre in Hargeisa, Somaliland (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019). D-Hum examined how Somali diaspora groups mobilise, channel, and deliver humanitarian assistance to Somalia during complex, protracted crises, based on multi-sited and simultaneous fieldwork conducted across Somalia, Kenya, and Europe.

Theoretically, D-Hum's principal contribution is the concept of humanitarian infrastructures, an analytical frame that combines literature on post-disaster infrastructure recovery with analysis of social institutions and networks, encompassing not only the material forms of transport that move goods across borders, but also communication systems and technologies, and the institutions, social networks, and personal relations that facilitate or block the movement of support (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019). Drought commissions, elder committees, religious institutions, international humanitarian agencies, and family and clan ties all condition how assistance is mediated and distributed, shaping which populations benefit from and which are excluded from humanitarian assistance. The project further develops the notion of affective circuits (social webs of care and obligation) as integral parts of these infrastructures, alongside their interactions with local institutions and international humanitarian agencies. This infrastructural framing allows researchers to trace assistance as it moves from crisis-affected areas in Somalia, through hubs where humanitarian agencies and diaspora organisations concentrate (Nairobi's Eastleigh neighbourhood prominent among them) to diaspora settlement countries in Europe and North America.

Methodologically, D-Hum adopted a transnational social field perspective, examining the multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged and transformed across sites, and combined simultaneous multi-sited fieldwork with a matched sample methodology linking respondent networks between East Africa and Europe (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019). The project advanced three guiding hypotheses: that diaspora humanitarianism is characterised by growing coordination and consolidation with local and national Somali institutions while running largely parallel to the international humanitarian system; that it reflects gender and generational divisions and power structures present both in Somalia and within the diaspora, shaping who benefits from diaspora interventions; and that it is flexible, personalised, and adaptable, and therefore typically quicker to mobilise than the international humanitarian system (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019).

A significant conceptual finding from the D-Hum research programme, articulated in its policy brief *Recognising Diaspora Humanitarianism* (Danish Institute for International Studies, n.d.), is that the diaspora's humanitarian role resists clean institutional compartmentalisation. Diaspora groups are tied to their homelands in multi-faceted ways, are active before, during, and after emergencies, and are not bound by the legally ratified agreements that structure formal humanitarian action; instead, they are guided substantially by family ties and by moral and religious obligation. Because of this, diaspora assistance tends to blur the conventional distinction between short-term relief and longer-term development, remittances being the clearest illustration of assistance that simultaneously performs both functions. This finding has direct relevance for donor and government policy frameworks that continue to fund relief and development through separate, siloed instruments.

Illustrative Cases from Somalia and East Africa

The conceptual claims reviewed above are best tested against concrete, empirically grounded cases, and Somalia and the wider East African region offer an unusually rich body of documented evidence. This section draws together five such cases: the mechanics of remittances and hawala as a form of humanitarian infrastructure, drawing on detailed household-level survey data; the marginalisation, gatekeeping, and clan-differentiated resilience dynamics revealed in the most

recent (2022–2023) crisis; Nairobi's Eastleigh district as a diaspora financial and organisational hub; recent real-time reviews of diaspora response coordination in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and clan-differentiated access to diaspora support in southern Somalia, to ground the review's theoretical claims in specific, regionally grounded evidence. Table 1 collects the key quantitative figures drawn from this literature to give a consolidated sense of scale before the narrative cases are discussed in turn.

Table 1: Key Figures on Diaspora Remittances and Humanitarian Aid in Somalia and East Africa

Metric	Figure	Source
Somali diaspora remittances (annual, 2017–2020)	USD 1.3–2.0 billion	Majid et al. (2017); World Bank (2020)
Share of Somali population receiving remittances	~40%	Majid et al. (2017)
Average monthly household remittance (Somalia)	USD 229 (USD 254 north; USD 191 south)	Majid et al. (2017)
Remittances as share of Somali GDP	~20% (2017)	World Bank (2020)
Dahabshiil's role in Somali hawala/mobile-money landscape	Dominant operator; pioneered eDahab mobile money (2015)	Iazzolino & Stremlau (2023)
Formal humanitarian aid to Somalia (2022, peak crisis year)	USD 2.2 billion	Hailey et al. (2023)
Somalia humanitarian cash response via mobile money (2022, peak reach)	4.7 million people	Hailey et al. (2023)
Diaspora remittances to fragile states vs. official humanitarian aid	~6 times humanitarian aid	Development Initiatives (2017), as cited in Danish Institute for International Studies (2019)
Congolese diaspora remittances (2023, comparative East/Central African case)	USD 3.3 billion	Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination (2025)
Somali aid-excluded households citing remittances as alternative support	4%	Hailey et al. (2023)
Estimated diversion of formal humanitarian aid in Somalia	10–50% of resources	Hailey et al. (2023)

Note. All figures are drawn from the sources cited in the right-hand column; see the References list for full citations. Figures are not directly comparable across rows, as they draw on different reference years, geographic scopes, and measurement methodologies; they are presented together to give an order-of-magnitude sense of scale rather than a single reconciled dataset.

The Mechanics of Remittances as Humanitarian Infrastructure

A detailed household-level study conducted for the World Bank and the Rift Valley Institute provides among the most granular empirical accounts available of how remittances function as social protection in Somalia. Based on 237 household interviews, 73 key informant interviews, and 38 focus group discussions across Somaliland, Puntland, and southern Somalia, together with diaspora interviews conducted in London, Birmingham, Bristol, Columbus, Minneapolis, Nairobi, Garissa, and Mandera, the study found that roughly 40 percent of the population received

remittances, with receipt concentrated in specific lineages and extended families rather than distributed evenly across society (Majid et al., 2017). Remittance-receiving households reported an average monthly transfer of approximately 229 United States dollars, sent predominantly from the United States and the United Kingdom, with Kenya, Sweden, and Saudi Arabia particularly important for households in southern Somalia (Majid et al., 2017). The study documented two indigenous Somali mechanisms through which this money is pooled and redistributed: qaraan, a clan-based collection historically used to pay blood-money compensation and now used to fundraise for a wide range of communal needs, and zakat, the Islamic obligation to donate a fixed proportion of wealth annually, which respondents described local traders as using to informally cancel the debts of the poorest customers (Majid et al., 2017). Remittances were reported to fund food purchases above all else, followed by education, and to materially improve recipient households' access to credit from local shopkeepers, who extend credit preferentially to known remittance recipients on the basis of trust, character, and clan relationship (Majid et al., 2017).

The same study documented the fragility of this infrastructure under external regulatory pressure: Somali money-transfer operators experienced account closures by a United States bank in 2011, a threatened termination of Dahabshiil's relationship with Barclays Bank in the United Kingdom in 2014, and a three-month closure of Somali money-transfer offices in Kenya following the 2015 Garissa University attack, each episode causing delays, increased transaction costs, and a shift of remittance flows toward less traceable informal channels (Majid et al., 2017). The study's most direct illustration of clan-differentiated access to diaspora support comes from El Berde, in northern Bakool, where three neighbouring clans exhibited starkly different capacities to mobilise diaspora assistance during the 2017 drought: the Reer Hassan received support at both the family and the wider clan-community level, with clan members contributing from Europe, Kenya, and North America; the Ogaden mobilised support only at the level of smaller family units; and the Rahanweyn reported receiving little diaspora-related support of any kind (Majid et al., 2017), a pattern the study notes was also observed during the 2011 famine.

Marginalisation, Gatekeeping, and the Limits of Diaspora and Aid Infrastructure

A 2023 review conducted under the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub's Humanitarian Rapid Research Initiative, based on 118 interviews, 37 community interviews concentrated among the historically marginalised Leysan, Gelidle, and Jiddo sub-clans, and a telephone survey of 760 people, offers the most recent and most methodologically extensive account of how Somali capacities (including diaspora connectivity) have evolved since 2011 (Hailey et al., 2023). The review found that historically marginalised sub-clans have, over the decade since the 2011 famine, been "catching up": Leysan interviewees described young men who were children in 2011 now working as breadwinners able to support extended relatives, and clan-level collective mechanisms capable of settling hundreds of displaced households with shelter, water, and food before any humanitarian or government support arrived (Hailey et al., 2023). By contrast, the Gelidle (an agropastoral clan with few urban or diaspora connections concentrated in Qansahdheere, Dinsor, and Baidoa districts) remained comparatively exposed; one Gelidle elder interviewed for the study reported that entire villages emptied into displacement camps during the 2022 drought, with mobile-phone-enabled kin networks nonetheless allowing people "to call each other and send money to each other to support those trapped in the villages" in ways that were not possible in 2011 (Hailey et al., 2023). A documented case from the same review illustrates the mechanics of transnational diaspora mobilisation directly: a UK-based businessman's sub-clan WhatsApp group provided 150 United States dollars per month for three months to pastoral relatives identified as

most in need, funding water trucking, food, and livestock fodder specifically so that herders would not be forced to abandon their animals and move to town (Hailey et al., 2023).

The same review cautions against overstating the reach of diaspora and remittance infrastructure. In a telephone survey of Somalis who had needed but not received humanitarian assistance, only 4 percent cited remittances from family abroad as an alternative source of support, and only 3 percent cited zakat from local businesspeople, with most aid-excluded respondents reporting no informal support of any kind (Hailey et al., 2023). The review further documented that aid diversion by "gatekeepers" (intermediary actors who control access to internally displaced populations) was systemic, with independent estimates suggesting that between 10 and 50 percent of resources are diverted before reaching intended recipients, and with interviewees describing common arrangements in which assistance is split three ways between government officials, implementing non-governmental organisations, and camp residents themselves (Hailey et al., 2023). These findings temper the effectiveness literature's emphasis on diaspora comparative advantage: even where remittance and diaspora infrastructure functions well, it operates alongside, and is not a substitute for, a formal aid system whose own distribution mechanisms remain compromised by entrenched corruption and marginalisation dynamics.

Eastleigh, Nairobi, as a Diaspora Humanitarian and Financial Hub

Nairobi's Eastleigh estate offers an East African-based illustration of how diaspora financial infrastructure concentrates spatially. Academic research on Eastleigh's transformation from a quiet residential suburb into a major East African commercial hub shows that this development built on pre-existing cross-border Somali trade networks, diaspora and Kenyan sources of capital, and regional and global processes that intensified after the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). The estate's hawala money-transfer economy operates substantially without formal contracts, relying instead on clan- and kinship-based trust to coordinate transfers across the diaspora (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). Dahabshiil, founded in 1970 by an Isaaq entrepreneur as a general trading and remittance-broking enterprise, grew during Somalia's civil war into the dominant hawala operator by channelling diaspora remittances to displaced populations, and later became a major shareholder in Somali telecommunications infrastructure before launching its own mobile-money platform, eDahab, in 2015, illustrating how diaspora financial infrastructure in the region has evolved from purely informal money transfer into integrated mobile-money ecosystems (Iazzolino & Stremlau, 2023). Somali business ventures in Eastleigh are frequently financed through pooled contributions from extended diaspora networks of cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws, a pattern of informal, trust-based cooperative economics documented in the academic literature on the estate (Carrier & Lochery, 2013). This informal financial infrastructure is also demonstrably fragile: in 2015, Somali money-transfer offices in Kenya were closed for three months following the Garissa University attack, forcing recipients toward costlier, slower formal channels (Majid et al., 2017). This episode illustrates directly the governance tension identified elsewhere in this review between informal diaspora financial infrastructures and the regulatory frameworks of host and transit states.

Coordinated Real-Time Reviews: Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination initiative (DEMAC) has conducted several real-time reviews directly relevant to the East African region. A 2021 review of Somali diaspora organisations identified twenty-two organisations regularly active in humanitarian response, based predominantly in Europe and North America and responding mainly to sudden-onset crises such

as floods and cyclones alongside displacement and drought (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination, 2021). A subsequent 2023–2024 real-time study examined diaspora responses to the Gu-season floods in Beledweyne and to armed conflict in Jubaland, finding that diaspora organisations raised over 1.1 million United States dollars in 2022 alone, increasingly transferred leadership roles to locally based Somali staff, and maintained operational access even in areas controlled by non-state armed groups (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination, 2024). Later that year, the historic Deyr-season floods of October–December 2023, linked to El Niño, affected thirty-six districts, displaced 1.7 million people, and triggered a further cholera outbreak, prompting continued DEMAC-supported diaspora response.

A closely comparable and more recent case, directly relevant to the Congolese diaspora material discussed earlier in this review, is DEMAC's 2025 real-time review of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, conducted following the M23 militia's seizure of Goma in January 2025 and the resulting displacement of more than 3.8 million people across North and South Kivu by June of that year (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination, 2025). The review mapped fifty-three Congolese diaspora organisations, of which thirty-four were operating directly in the Kivu provinces, and found that most had been established after 2005 and were registered across Europe, North America, and, notably, East Africa, underscoring the same near/far diaspora geography documented by Godin and Héritier (2025) in Nairobi (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination, 2025). Congolese diaspora remittances were estimated at 3.3 billion United States dollars in 2023 alone, again substantially outpacing institutional humanitarian funding to the country.

Synthesis: Clan, Kinship, and the Uneven Geography of Diaspora Support

Taken together, the household-level and clan-comparative evidence surveyed above qualifies the effectiveness literature reviewed earlier in this article in an important way: diaspora humanitarianism's comparative advantages in speed, access, and local knowledge are real and well documented, but they are also structurally uneven, concentrated within specific lineages and extended families as a function of historical migration patterns rather than distributed evenly across crisis-affected populations (Majid et al., 2017). Communities such as the Rahanweyn and Somali Bantu, and specific agropastoral sub-clans such as the Gelidle in the Baidoa area, have historically had markedly fewer members in the diaspora and correspondingly weaker access to remittance-based humanitarian infrastructure, even as broader social change over the decade since 2011 has gradually extended diaspora and urban connections to some previously excluded groups (Hailey et al., 2023; Majid et al., 2017). For research and policy focused on southwest Somalia specifically, this suggests that diaspora humanitarianism should be treated not as a uniformly available resource but as one whose distribution itself reflects, and can reinforce, pre-existing patterns of clan-based marginalisation, precisely the kind of power-structure question the D-Hum programme's humanitarian infrastructures framework was designed to surface.

Ethiopia and South Sudan: Extending the Regional Perspective

Widening the regional perspective beyond Somalia to Ethiopia and South Sudan shows both strong continuities with, and instructive departures from, the Somali case: continuities in the centrality of digital mobilisation and kinship-based remittance channels, and departures in the more prominent public role played by organised religious institutions in each country's diaspora humanitarian response.

The Ethiopian Diaspora and the Tigray Crisis

The conflict that broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020, between the federal government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, displaced close to a million people internally and drove more than 60,000 refugees into Sudan, while the federal government restricted humanitarian aid access into the region until early December 2020 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021). In the resulting access vacuum, diaspora and diaspora-linked actors became disproportionately important channels of information and support for affected populations, a pattern of rapid, network-mediated mobilisation broadly comparable to the Congolese YouTube and WhatsApp dynamics documented by Godin and Héritier (2025) in Nairobi.

A distinctive feature of the Tigray case is the entanglement of diaspora humanitarianism with a pre-existing, politically embedded relief institution: the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), founded in 1978 as the civilian relief arm of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and, prior to the conflict, the lead agency for food assistance in the Joint Emergency Operation consortium (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021). Although REST's senior leadership was removed by the federal government at the outset of the crisis, the organisation retained substantial operational capacity and, with support from Catholic Relief Services, continued to deliver significant volumes of food assistance despite severely constrained humanitarian access (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2021). The Tigray case therefore illustrates a dynamic largely absent from the Somali material reviewed above: diaspora-linked relief infrastructure that is simultaneously humanitarian and overtly political, raising accountability and neutrality questions that the broader diaspora humanitarianism literature has yet to theorise fully.

The South Sudanese Diaspora: Remittances and Civicness in Exile

South Sudan presents a case in which diaspora engagement has been the subject of direct policy intervention. A joint research project by the International Organization for Migration and the Government of South Sudan's Ministry of Finance and Planning examined the Australia–South Sudan remittance corridor in detail, finding that South Sudanese remittance recipients are heavily dependent on diaspora support to cope with the consequences of forced migration, displacement, and extreme poverty (Ferro, 2021). Remittances to South Sudan were estimated at 1.2 billion United States dollars in 2021, equivalent to nearly a quarter of national GDP, despite average transaction costs of 9.66 percent (among the highest in the East and Horn of Africa region), and the report noted that remittances had been instrumental in the mobilisation that helped secure South Sudan's independence, with a persistent emotional connection continuing to shape diaspora giving since (Ferro, 2021). The study issued twelve policy recommendations, including stronger regulatory compliance for unlicensed remittance and foreign exchange operators, and its joint launch with the South Sudanese government (at which an official stated that its findings would directly guide government engagement with the diaspora) illustrates a more formalised, state-partnered model of diaspora recognition than is yet evident in the Somali case.

At the community level, ethnographic research on South Sudanese refugees in Cairo describes a form of associational life the authors term "civicness in exile": community associations organised around ethnic groups such as the Fertit provided direct support to newly arrived or destitute refugees, lobbied humanitarian and church organisations for assistance, and in some cases engaged in public advocacy directed at the South Sudanese government itself (Ibreck & Seeka, 2022). Crucially, this associational capacity was underpinned by transnational remittances mobilised from South Sudanese diaspora members in Europe, Australia, and the United States, channelled

through the same kind of "translocal" kinship and ethnic-community networks documented in the Somali and Congolese cases (Ibreck & Seeka, 2022). The South Sudanese case thus reinforces a theme recurring throughout this review: diaspora humanitarian capacity is generated less by formal organisational structures than by dense, ethnically organised transnational networks that formal humanitarian and government actors struggle to see, let alone coordinate with directly.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Diaspora Resource Mobilisation

A theme that cuts across the Somali, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese material reviewed in this article, but that has so far been treated only implicitly, is the role of religious institutions (mosques, churches, and their affiliated charitable structures) as key nodes in diaspora humanitarian infrastructure. This role merits explicit treatment because it recurs, in different confessional forms, across every country case examined in this review, and because it offers a further concrete illustration of the "affective circuits" and institutional mediation that the D-Hum programme's humanitarian infrastructures framework identifies as central to how diaspora assistance is channelled and distributed (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019).

In Muslim-majority contexts such as Somalia, this review has already shown how zakat (the obligatory annual almsgiving that is one of the five pillars of Islam) and the related clan-based qaraan collection function as informal mechanisms through which diaspora and local wealth are pooled and redistributed to the poorest households, often mediated by local traders acting as de facto community treasurers (Majid et al., 2017). This pattern is consistent with the wider literature on Islamic faith-based humanitarian organisations, which finds that Islamic jurisprudence obliges Muslims to a religiously grounded commitment to charitable giving and human solidarity, formalised historically through waqf, or religious endowment, and institutions such as sadaqat jariya, or perpetual charity, which historically funded education, healthcare, and social welfare infrastructure in Muslim societies and continue to inform the programming of contemporary organisations such as Islamic Relief Worldwide and the Kuwaiti Direct Aid Society (Khafagy, 2020). The same literature documents faith-based organisations adapting religious authority structures for crisis response outside the Horn of Africa as well, as when faith leaders in West African countries repositioned themselves during the Ebola epidemic to replace fear-based messaging with messaging grounded in hope and communal solidarity, leveraging pre-existing religious trust networks to shift community health behaviour (Khafagy, 2020).

In South Sudan, the ecumenical Sudan Council of Churches and its successor bodies (including the New Sudan Council of Churches, formed in 1989 to reach populations cut off from assistance during the civil war, and today's South Sudan Council of Churches, comprising Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Protestant, Orthodox, and Coptic member denominations) occupy a dual role that has no precise Somali equivalent. Academic analysis of the Council's peacebuilding work describes it as long a key player in conflict resolution at both the local and national levels, combining direct pastoral, educational, and aid efforts to heal trauma and encourage nonviolent dispute resolution with sustained engagement in national reconciliation processes (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013). This dual humanitarian-mediation role illustrates a further dimension of the "humanitarian infrastructures" concept: religious institutions in South Sudan function not only as channels through which diaspora and local resources are distributed, but as trusted intermediary authorities capable of brokering access and legitimacy in ways that both diaspora organisations and international humanitarian agencies typically cannot achieve on their own (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013).

This comparative material suggests that religious institutions perform at least three distinct functions within diaspora humanitarian infrastructure across the cases reviewed in this article: first, a redistributive function, pooling and channelling diaspora and local wealth toward the poorest community members through mechanisms such as zakat, qaraan, and church-run relief programmes; second, a legitimating and trust-building function, in which religious authority substitutes for the institutional trust that a weak or contested state cannot provide, evident in both Somali traders' use of religious obligation to manage credit relationships and the South Sudanese churches' role as an accepted mediating authority; and third, in some cases, a directly political function, as illustrated by REST's origins as a movement-linked relief agency in Tigray and by the South Sudan Council of Churches' engagement in high-level peace diplomacy. Future research on diaspora humanitarianism (including the further development of the D-Hum humanitarian infrastructures framework) would benefit from treating religious institutions as a distinct category of humanitarian infrastructure in their own right, rather than folding them into the more generic category of "local institutions" that the existing literature tends to use.

Emerging Issues and Gaps in the Literature

The Coordination Gap Remains Unresolved

Despite a decade of research and the development of institutional frameworks such as IOM's, diaspora communities and formal humanitarian actors remain poorly coordinated, as documented above (Rejón et al., 2025). Future research would benefit from longitudinal evaluation of whether frameworks such as IOM's actually narrow this gap over time, rather than simply documenting its existence.

Aid Diversion and Gatekeeping Undercut the Formal System's Own Effectiveness

The 2023 Somalia review discussed above adds an important qualification to the effectiveness literature that is easy to overlook: diaspora and remittance infrastructures are frequently praised for out-performing formal aid on speed and access, but formal humanitarian aid in the same context suffers from significant, systemic diversion (independently estimated at between 10 and 50 percent of resources) driven by entrenched gatekeeper networks that control access to displaced populations (Hailey et al., 2023). Any comparative claim about diaspora effectiveness therefore needs to specify what it is being compared against; a formal system compromised by systemic diversion may set a lower effectiveness bar than the literature's celebratory framing of diaspora comparative advantage sometimes implies. Future research would benefit from directly comparable loss and diversion estimates for diaspora-channelled remittances and for formal humanitarian aid within the same crisis, rather than treating the two literatures as separate.

Digital Financial Infrastructures and Their Governance

The digitalisation of diaspora giving (through YouTube monetisation, WhatsApp-based mutuality systems, and mobile money and remittance platforms) is reshaping both the scale and the governance of diaspora humanitarian transfers, often faster than research or regulation can track. The Nairobi Congolese case demonstrates that these digital channels can simultaneously extend traditional communal obligation systems and introduce new intermediary roles, commissions, and dependencies between near- and far-diaspora members. Further research is needed on the regulatory, taxation, and consumer-protection dimensions of these informal financial infrastructures, particularly as they intersect with anti-money-laundering compliance regimes that have historically been hostile to informal remittance channels serving fragile states.

Gender and Household-Level Dynamics

Survey evidence from the Rejón et al. (2025) study shows that diaspora humanitarian contributions display clear gender-differentiated patterns and concentrate at the household level, yet much of the broader literature continues to analyse diaspora organisations at the collective or associational level. Reconciling household-level and organisational-level analysis, and disaggregating diaspora humanitarian practice by gender, generation, and legal status, remains an underdeveloped area.

Protracted Crises and Diaspora Fatigue

Much of the effectiveness literature was developed with acute-onset emergencies in mind. Yet cases such as the Congolese Banyamulenge in Nairobi and the Somali diaspora studied by D-Hum are defined by protracted, overlapping crises: displacement compounded by economic hardship, pandemic disruption, and continuing legal precarity. The literature would benefit from more explicit theorisation of diaspora fatigue, the sustainability of diaspora giving across years or decades of crisis, and how diaspora obligation is renegotiated as a crisis moves from emergency to chronic condition.

From Theory to Institutionalisation

Finally, there is an emerging gap between the theoretical sophistication of the relational-care literature and the practical, flowchart-based logic of institutional frameworks such as IOM's. Reconciling a policy architecture built for coordination and measurable effectiveness with an ethical framework that treats diaspora humanitarianism as fundamentally relational, partial, and care-based is likely to be one of the central intellectual and practical challenges facing the field over the next decade.

An Islamic Ethical Perspective on Diaspora Humanitarian Obligation

While the literature reviewed above is largely secular in its theoretical vocabulary, several of its central findings resonate closely with Islamic ethical concepts long familiar in the study of Muslim charitable and communal obligation. The D-Hum finding that Somali diaspora assistance is guided substantially by family ties and moral and religious obligation rather than by ratified agreements maps closely onto the Islamic concept of amanah: trusteeship or moral responsibility toward those to whom one is bound by kinship, community, and faith. Likewise, the relational and reciprocal character of diaspora humanitarianism identified by Fernandez et al. (2025) echoes the principle of ummah solidarity, in which obligation to the wider community of believers is understood as continuous and relational rather than episodic or transactional. Reading the diaspora humanitarianism literature through this perspective does not require abandoning its secular analytical categories; rather, it suggests that concepts such as amanah, shura (consultative decision-making, evident in the collective, negotiated character of diaspora mutuality systems), and adl (equitable distribution of assistance within and beyond the community) offer a complementary interpretive resource for understanding diaspora humanitarian practice in Muslim-majority displacement contexts such as Somalia, and merit fuller integration into future comparative research.

2.0 Recommendations

The evidence reviewed above (particularly the scale of remittance flows relative to formal humanitarian aid, and the persistent coordination gap documented across the Somali, Congolese, and Australia-based diaspora cases) points toward two linked sets of practical recommendations:

measures to formally recognise diaspora contributions as a legitimate and substantial pillar of humanitarian response, and measures to strengthen coordination between diaspora actors and the formal humanitarian and development system. These recommendations draw directly on the mechanisms and gaps identified in the IOM Framework, the D-Hum research programme, the DEMAC real-time reviews, and the Somalia-specific remittance and capacity literature.

Recognising Diaspora Contributions

First, humanitarian needs assessments and response plans in Somalia and comparable East African contexts should systematically incorporate remittance and diaspora-support data alongside formal aid flows, rather than treating diaspora assistance as background context. Given that Somali diaspora remittances of an estimated 1.3 to 2 billion United States dollars annually rival or exceed formal humanitarian funding in most years (see Table 1), excluding this flow from official needs and response analysis produces an incomplete picture of who is, and is not, receiving support, and risks misdirecting scarce formal aid toward populations that already have strong diaspora connections while under-serving those that do not (Majid et al., 2017).

Second, donor governments and humanitarian agencies should formally acknowledge diaspora organisations as a distinct category of humanitarian actor within coordination architecture (for example, dedicated diaspora seats or observer status on Humanitarian Country Teams and protection and cash-working groups), building on the precedent of minority-led organisations gaining representation on Somalia's Humanitarian Country Team (Hailey et al., 2023) and on the IOM Framework's explicit recognition of diasporas as early responders bringing intellectual, social, economic, political, and cultural capital to crisis response (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

Third, national disaster management authorities, such as Somalia's Disaster Management Agency, and regional bodies such as the East African Community, should consider establishing honorary or advisory recognition mechanisms for diaspora humanitarian contributions, paralleling existing recognition frameworks for other categories of humanitarian actor. Publicising aggregate diaspora contribution figures (of the kind assembled in Table 1) in national humanitarian response plans and annual reports would help make visible a form of assistance that is currently large in scale but largely invisible in official reporting, consistent with the D-Hum programme's finding that diaspora humanitarianism resists clean institutional compartmentalisation precisely because it is rarely counted alongside formal aid (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2019).

Fourth, recognition should extend to the household and community level, not only the organisational level. The evidence that most diaspora assistance flows through family, clan, and kin networks (via mechanisms such as qaraan and zakat) rather than through registered diaspora organisations (Majid et al., 2017) means that organisation-centred recognition frameworks, including the IOM Framework and DEMAC's organisational mapping exercises, systematically undercount the true scale of diaspora humanitarian engagement; future recognition mechanisms should find ways to credit this household-level activity, for instance through periodic remittance and social-support surveys of the kind conducted by Majid et al. (2017) and Hailey et al. (2023), rather than relying solely on registries of formal diaspora organisations.

Strengthening Coordination between Diaspora and Formal Humanitarian Actors

Fifth, humanitarian coordination bodies should invest in dedicated diaspora liaison functions, modelled on DEMAC's country-level coordination role in Somalia and the Democratic Republic

of the Congo, to provide a standing channel through which diaspora organisations can share operational information, access security and access briefings, and align programming with formal humanitarian actors without being absorbed into or subordinated by the formal system (Diaspora Emergency Action & Coordination, 2021, 2024, 2025). The persistent "coordination gap" documented by Rejón et al. (2025) suggests that the barrier is structural rather than attitudinal, and that dedicated liaison capacity, rather than further exhortation, is what is required to close it.

Sixth, financial regulators and humanitarian donors should work jointly to protect and formalise hawala and other diaspora remittance channels rather than treating them primarily as compliance risks. The repeated disruptions documented in this review (United States bank account closures in 2011, the threatened termination of Dahabshiil's relationship with Barclays Bank in 2014, and the three-month suspension of Somali hawala operators in Kenya, including Eastleigh-based firms, following the 2015 Garissa University attack) each demonstrably increased costs and delays for recipient households without a correspondingly clear counter-terrorism benefit (Majid et al., 2017). Establishing durable "safe corridor" arrangements between hawala operators and correspondent banks, of the kind Dahabshiil has intermittently pursued in the United Kingdom, would reduce this recurring source of humanitarian harm.

Seventh, coordination mechanisms should explicitly account for the clan-, gender-, and geography-based unevenness in diaspora connectivity documented throughout this review. Because diaspora support is concentrated in specific lineages and historically well-connected communities (Majid et al., 2017), formal humanitarian actors should treat strong diaspora presence in an area as a reason to prioritise formal assistance elsewhere rather than as a proxy for reduced need, and should apply the same area-based and community-informed targeting principles increasingly used for internally displaced populations (Hailey et al., 2023) to identify communities (such as certain Gelidle, Rahanweyn, and Somali Bantu populations in and around Baidoa) that lack diaspora connectivity and are consequently doubly exposed when the formal system also under-delivers.

Eighth, and finally, coordination frameworks should build in independent monitoring of resource diversion on both sides of the diaspora–formal system divide. Just as the formal humanitarian system in Somalia has been shown to lose an estimated 10 to 50 percent of resources to gatekeeper diversion (Hailey et al., 2023), diaspora-channelled remittances face their own accountability challenges around monitoring and trust, which the literature shows are currently managed informally through personal relationships and community reputation rather than through formal mechanisms (Majid et al., 2017). Coordination platforms that build shared, jointly governed accountability standards (rather than assuming that informal diaspora channels are inherently more trustworthy, or that formal channels are inherently more accountable) would allow both systems to complement rather than simply parallel one another.

3.0 Conclusion and Research Agenda

This review has traced the diaspora humanitarianism literature across four cross-cutting themes: the comparative operational advantage diaspora actors bring to crisis response; the theoretical case for understanding diaspora practice through relational care rather than universalist humanitarian principles; the digital reconfiguration of near- and far-diaspora relations; and the persistent, only partially addressed gap between diaspora actors and the formal humanitarian coordination system. Regional case material from Nairobi's Congolese community and the Somali diaspora across the

Horn of Africa and Europe demonstrates that these dynamics are not abstract but are concretely embedded in specific communities, technologies, and institutional histories.

The literature is unambiguous that diaspora humanitarianism is neither peripheral nor temporary. It constitutes a durable, substantial, and in many respects more agile complement to the formal humanitarian system, one whose remittance-based scale (see Table 1) exceeds official humanitarian financing to many fragile states. The research agenda that emerges from this review calls for closer attention to the governance of digital financial infrastructures underpinning diaspora giving; disaggregated, gender- and generation-sensitive analysis of household-level diaspora practice; sustained theorisation of diaspora engagement across protracted rather than acute crises; and a more deliberate effort to reconcile the relational, care-based ethics that appear to actually motivate diaspora humanitarian action with the coordination-oriented institutional frameworks now being built to harness it. For scholars and practitioners working in the Horn of Africa and East Africa specifically, the convergence of rigorous regional research programmes such as D-Hum with emerging institutional frameworks such as IOM's offers a rare opportunity to ground future policy in empirically and theoretically robust scholarship rather than in the more celebratory assumptions that characterised earlier diaspora engagement discourse.

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