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Public-Private Partnership Programs with U.S.-Based Diasporas ^[1]

At an evening event in New Delhi during President Obama's January visit to India, he announced the Indian Diaspora Investment Initiative (IDII) to the U.S.-India Business Council and the world:

"A new public-private partnership to help millions of proud Indian-Americans directly invest in India's future...[the IDII] will allow folks back home to generate a new stream of financing for Indian businesses that are investing in non-traditional, and too often overlooked, markets -- whether it's providing health care to rural communities, or improving water and sanitation, to opening up some of those new bank accounts."

The IDII is a public-private partnership, or PPP, that exemplifies multi-purpose, multi-stakeholder engagement with diverse, global publics. This PPP includes a diaspora numbering three million in the U.S. alone and 25 million worldwide. A U.S. Agency for International Development press release explained that later this year, the Calvert Foundation (an implementing partner) will tender specially bonded notes to U.S. retailers, Indian Americans, and others, in order to support socioeconomic growth in India and the U.S., and help individual investors realize a personal return on investment.


In addition to the IDII's promise of greater economic and social cooperation, both Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi score political points for committing to a "shared vision of inclusive growth" and engaging across the transnational network of Indians and Indian Americans to shape the PPP. The Indian diaspora provides a diverse base of technical and cross-cultural expertise to the IDII. With strong mutual interest from both governments, private sector partners, and civil society organizations, the IDII is off to a healthy start.

As with all PPPs, managing this project for high-value public diplomacy and development results is challenging. Socioeconomic conditions and interests of the IDII stakeholders -- partners, investors, taxpayers, and beneficiaries -- are changeable. Matching the U.S. and Indian leaders' rhetoric of commitment to inclusive growth, monitoring of conditions, negotiation of interests, and evaluation of IDII results calls for participation of all stakeholder groups. Multi-stakeholder engagement in M&E throughout the partnership combined with transparent, respectful, and cross-culturally sensitive relations can increase the PPP's value and the credibility of all partners. Budgeting for ongoing facilitation and M&E is necessary, as is factoring in contingencies for any disagreements or conflicts that may emerge among partners.

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The turn in public diplomacy over the past decade to culturally contextualized information programming, relationship building, collaborative stakeholder engagement, and participatory, evidence-based design, monitoring, and evaluation practices respond to the challenges of managing PPPs. They come in the nick of time, because PPPs are increasingly the approach of choice for meeting public demands and leveraging non-governmental resources. Diaspora diplomacy has long been a dimension of U.S. statecraft and is now on the rise because of the increasing numbers and advocacy of U.S.-based diasporas. At the same time, greater demand and declining public resources for government programs has led to more PPPs. Diasporans with a sense of “moral co-responsibility” initiate and follow calls to contribute their nuanced cross-cultural experience to PPP messaging campaigns, two-way dialogues, and all kinds of multi-stakeholder projects.

PPP involvement of different sub-groups within a diaspora increases diversity, inclusion, participation, and therefore credibility. The interests of sub-groups vary, and working through the disagreements and conflicts among these stakeholders, especially as other conditions of the PPP change, increases the likelihood of project success and builds confidence in problem-solving and conflict mediation. Applying this logic in the management of the IDII could mean the participation of Indian Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, secularists, and others in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of the PPP.

On a smaller scale, yet with similar intentions, subnational efforts in diplomacy, trade, and cultural cooperation have been ongoing at least since U.S. President Eisenhower convened the 1956 White House conference on citizen diplomacy. Sports diplomacy involves states and cities at least as much as it does national governments. The city of Chicago partially sponsors 28 sister city partnerships, fueled in part by talented multi-generational diasporas. Formed in 1991 upon the independence of Ukraine, the Chicago-Kyiv relationship  has spawned artistic, educational, medical, business, governmental, media, sports, and technology exchanges. Recently these ties have deepened into campaigns to counter trafficking of Ukrainian women and to fundraising for humanitarian relief in Eastern Ukraine.

At local and national levels, governments will continue facing reductions in social programs, infrastructure projects, and economic development. Hyper-competitive globalized markets add to the pressure to innovate new mechanisms to share investment risk, generate public resources, and foster private enterprise. Diasporas and other publics want to increase their professional and civic participation and make a difference, so momentum is strong for PPPs involving these and other diverse global publics.

The India Diaspora Investment Initiative, Sister Cities, and other PPPs have great potential to expand trade, tourism, educational, cultural, and scientific ties. As publicly supported programs taking place under dynamic political conditions, all of their key stakeholders are needed to help shape and measure their return on investment. This research explores the space for inclusive, participatory design, monitoring, and evaluation of PPPs and how their multiple stakeholders perceive the capacity of the projects to foster intercultural understanding, conflict mediation, and socioeconomic development.
