

# Migration-as-development repackaged? The globalizing imperative of the Singaporean state's diaspora strategies

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Diaspora strategizing is becoming an important field of public policy in countries that seek to advance development through migration. Diaspora strategies present a way of complicating interpretations of development, as countries that represent different levels of development seek to mobilize diaspora networks nonetheless. While Singapore's diaspora strategies prioritize diaspora knowledge networks, it bears the stamp of the country's colonial history, postcolonial priorities and developmental state apparatus. We suggest that these factors result in a distinctive diaspora strategy characterized by a centralized and technocratic approach more similar to diaspora strategies found in emerging economies. Earlier research on diaspora strategies has been concerned with assessing successes or failures, but a more critical scholarship that questions the logics and outcomes of diaspora strategizing is emerging. We bring the Singaporean case into dialogue with four such critiques: first, the intellectual foundations of diaspora-centred development; second, the hyperextension of state infrastructure for emigration and stakeholder alignment; third, the selective mobilization of the idea of diaspora; and fourth, the evidence base upon which diaspora-centred development is predicated. Our goal is to further critical interrogation into the logics, efficacy and sustainability of diaspora strategizing. We situate our analyses in the international literature on diaspora knowledge mobilization.

**Keywords:** diaspora strategies, emigration, migration and development, affinity diaspora, Singapore

## Introduction

With the demise of the brain drain thesis, there has arisen interest in the way migrant communities continue to support from afar the development of their countries of origin. As the migration and development nexus is rethought, a new area of public policy known as 'diaspora strategy' has emerged. Diaspora strategies refer to initiatives by migrant-sending states seeking to capitalize upon the potential benefits represented by their diaspora populations. Such diaspora engagement projects promise to deliver development opportunities through tourism, the export of 'nostalgia goods', remittances, philanthropy, business networks (knowledge sharing, brokerage, mentoring, training), investment, patronage, advocacy, volunteerism, and circular and return migration. Diaspora strategies are commonly championed in low- and middle-income countries, such as Armenia, India, Mexico, China, Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Jamaica, El Salvador, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, Ghana and Morocco. But it is important to note that more economically advanced countries such as Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Australia, Israel, Scotland, Ireland and Singapore also pursue diaspora strategies. On occasion they call attention to the need to maximize remittance flows, harness the voluntary labour provided by diaspora corps, foster diaspora investment, attract diaspora tourists and encourage diaspora philanthropy. But more often they focus upon the

role of diaspora knowledge networks (DKN) as a source of global competitive advantage and a mechanism for brokering integration into the global economy.

We focus on the city-state of Singapore to critically examine the diaspora strategies pursued by the Singaporean state and their underlying development logics. Our purpose is to set the Singaporean case into global relief and show how it informs wider debates concerning the assumptions and approaches that characterize diaspora strategizing and diaspora knowledge networks. Singapore's ascent to the summit of the global economy has been particularly striking. The country's development has been guided by the People's Action Party (PAP) since 1959, a few years before Singapore became independent from Britain in 1963 and from Malaysia in 1965. Under the PAP government, Singapore pursued an export-oriented industrialization policy and built infrastructure to entice transnational corporations (TNC) to set up branch plants in the country. Gradually it moved up the value ladder from labour-intensive low-technology manufacturing and assembly functions (in the 1960s and 1970s), to higher value-added, capital-intensive TNC investment in manufacturing (in the 1980s), followed by research and development (in the 1990s), and now as a hub for global financial services (from 2000). Nurturing and globalizing Singaporean companies abroad is becoming a development priority for the Singaporean political leadership. Diaspora strategizing, or harnessing the development potential and knowledge networks represented by Singaporeans abroad, is one means through which this development vision is to be achieved (i.e., diaspora-centred development).

While Singapore's diaspora strategies have been underpinned by development imperatives similar to those undergirding the diaspora strategies of other economically advanced countries (prioritizing the mobilization of diaspora knowledge networks), it bears the stamp of the country's own unique colonial history, postcolonial considerations, developmental state apparatus and rapid emergence as one of Asia's most successful economies. We suggest that these factors result in a distinctive diaspora strategy characterized by a centralized and technocratic approach more similar to diaspora strategies adopted by emerging economies. Earlier research on diaspora strategies has been concerned with assessing the successes or failures of diaspora strategies, but a more critical scholarship that questions the logics and outcomes of diaspora strategizing has emerged in recent years. We bring the Singaporean case into dialogue with four such critiques: first, the intellectual foundations of diaspora-centred development; second, the hyperextension of state infrastructure for emigration and stakeholder alignment; third, the selective mobilization of the idea of diaspora; and fourth, the evidence base upon which diaspora-centred development is predicated. Our goal is to further critical interrogation into the logics, efficacy and sustainability of diaspora strategizing. We situate our analyses in the international literature on diaspora knowledge mobilization. Our examples are from emerging economies such as China and India that have led the mantle in leveraging on DKN to advance their developmental status, as well as countries that are economically advanced but still aspire towards diaspora strategies for a developmental advantage in the knowledge-based economy (e.g., Scotland, Ireland and Canada).

This paper is informed by the authors' academic research on migration, development and diaspora strategies, and one of the author's consultancy experiences. The latter includes convening and participating in policy conferences and workshops on diaspora strategies and engaging with think tanks and stakeholder organizations amongst other activities. For the case of Singapore, the other author conducted ethnographic research and interviews with overseas Singaporeans in London from 2004 to 2005 (Ho, 2008;

2009). In combination, the authors have conducted research on the diaspora strategies of Armenia, China, Canada, Ireland, Latvia, Scotland and Singapore (e.g., Boyle & Kitchin, 2008; 2011; Ho, 2011; Ho & Ley, 2014). Further informing this paper are analyses of newspaper articles, websites and government publications about the Singaporean diaspora. The authors also conducted formal and informal interviews in 2012 with representatives of government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and private organizations in Singapore that interact with overseas Singaporeans. For confidentiality reasons, these organizations will not be named unless the information mentioned is in publicly available reports.

The next section situates the paper in the key debates on migration as development as well as critical diaspora studies. Here we also identify four areas where diaspora strategies might be usefully subjected to critical scrutiny. Following that we pay attention to Singapore's evolving development strategy and the changing importance of the Singaporean diaspora to the country. The subsequent section brings Singapore's diaspora strategies into a conversation with the four areas of critique identified. We conclude the paper with suggestions on how our analyses inform the wider study of diaspora strategies.

### **Migration as development and emerging critiques of diaspora strategies**

Migration as development is traditionally associated with development agendas where migrants' remittances, investments and philanthropic contributions go towards reducing poverty and securing better living conditions for their families and conationals. Diaspora communities have moulded, and are moulding, institutions and development opportunities in their homelands. As recognition of their contributions grows, diaspora strategizing is emerging as an important new field of public policy for countries that have experienced significant emigration (Kuznetsov, 2006; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Gamlen, 2008a; Newland, 2010; Aikins & White, 2011; Boyle & Kitchin, 2011). Harnessing migration as a strategy for development in emigration countries is prompted by the rise of migration and the transnational links that migrants continue to retain with their homelands after moving abroad (Skeldon, 2008). These views of development tend to focus on migration flows moving from 'developing' to 'developed' economies (e.g., Nyberg-Sørensen *et al.*, 2002; Kuznetsov & Sabel, 2006), thereby neglecting the gradations of 'development' status within these categories. Diaspora strategies present a way of complicating these interpretations of development through initiatives by countries that are at different levels of development, but seek to mobilize diaspora networks nonetheless.

Arguments against the shortfalls of relying on remittances for development have prompted a new emphasis on entrepreneurialism and skills mobilization within diaspora networks (Mullings, 2012). Such DKN, populated by emigrant subjects embodying human and social capital, are targeted by a growing number of migrant-sending countries, including those higher up the economic value chain. Countries with 'developed' economies are in fact adopting diaspora-centred development similar to 'developing' states, albeit to harness advanced development goals such as scientific and technological innovation and higher education and training. Alongside this, they pursue global capital and human capital to advance their economic competitiveness. The goal is to maintain their advantage in a competitive global knowledge-based economy where emerging countries are fast catching up in the pecking order of manufacturing and production.

There is now a growing literature that interrogates the premises, effects and outcomes of diaspora strategies. Some of these critical commentaries challenge state-

sponsored definitions of national belonging and the politics of obligation (Mohan, 2006) or highlight the elided migrant histories that do not correspond to the state's vision of diaspora (Mani & Varadarajan, 2005). Others problematize the neoliberal overtones and governmentality techniques driving diaspora strategies, the highly selective ways in which these strategies mobilize globalizing entrepreneurial subjects (Larner, 2007; Ragazzi, 2009; Mullings, 2012) or the asymmetrical spaces of development that arise when diaspora strategies target emigrants based mainly in a network of global and globalizing cities (Ho, 2011). Despite the hype associated with diaspora knowledge networks, their effectiveness has been questioned in several ways including the nature of the networks and tangibility of their activities, the sustainability of their membership base, and the ability of conditions in the country of origin to complement the potential presented by DKN (Meyer, 2011).

In this paper, we contribute to this emerging critical literature by abstracting from international experience four particular areas of concern. We pose these four areas of concern in terms of somewhat provocative statements to set them into sharp relief. These questions will be revisited later in this paper where we examine them against the case of Singapore. By critically examining the logics and effects of development imperatives underpinning the Singapore's diaspora strategies, we also use the Singaporean case to qualify, fortify and extend frameworks that offer critical readings of diaspora strategies.

First, notwithstanding the rich intellectual history of Development Studies, to date diaspora-centred development lacks firm theoretical bases and is implemented opportunistically by migrant-sending states at the prompting of global development agencies.<sup>1</sup> Policy makers tend to deploy concepts such as human capital, social networks, knowledge economies and DKN carelessly when formulating diaspora engagement policies. Inasmuch as there are strong scholarly advocates of DKN (e.g., Turpin *et al.*, 2008), other scholars view diaspora strategizing more circumspectly (e.g., Seguin *et al.*, 2006; Cao, 2008; Meyer, 2011; Mullings, 2011). Meyer (2001: 95), for example, acknowledges that there is a lack of consensus concerning the assumptions on which human capital calculations should be based, and while social networks activate skills, studies suggest these arise from an 'unplanned convergence of elements' (2001: 103) rather than purposeful diaspora strategizing. Seguin *et al.* (2006) also highlight empirical gaps in comparative assessments on how knowledge mobilization can be best fostered by countries through diaspora strategizing. Furthermore, skills can be notoriously difficult to define, such as in cases where professionals experience deskilling after emigrating (e.g., Bauder, 2003; McGregor, 2008). Separately, in a recent study of the return migration outcomes accompanying Jamaica's diaspora strategizing, Mullings (2011) suggests that entrenched prejudices in the local labour market 'challenges the possibility of human capital enhancement that state-enabled diaspora strategies promise' (2001: 37). Deliberations like these lead us to consider in this paper whether the intellectual vision articulated by the Singaporean political leadership and its implementation is compatible with the country's political norms and societal culture. This affects the viability and sustainability of diaspora strategies that policy makers formulate and the targets of significant state investments.

Second, as a type of development agenda, diaspora strategies have attracted an excessive and undeserved level of pomp and fanfare. A series of new institutions and projects are being built by migrant-sending states even if the diaspora constituencies they engage are ill-defined; diaspora strategies are consuming precious resources as blueprints and bureaucracies are imposed on diaspora populations (e.g., Mani &

Varadarajan, 2005). Yet, the support of an appropriate range of stakeholders in sending states must be enrolled if diaspora strategies are to be effective. Thus one may also question if diaspora strategies attend sufficiently to the range of stakeholders who might make or break their effectiveness, while taking into account the existing scale, history, geography and nature of diaspora-homeland relations. We show in the case of Singapore that although an extensive emigration state infrastructure has not emerged from diaspora strategizing, the growing state centralization of diaspora strategizing sidelines other stakeholders.

Third, diaspora strategies aim to extend national membership, rights and responsibilities beyond the territory associated with the nation-state. They are often framed by discourses that underline the importance of the overseas citizenry to the nation-state, the bureaucratic reforms needed to address the needs and tap on the resources of citizens abroad, and the legislative changes required to extend rights to such citizens (Itzigsohn, 2000; Levitt & de la Dehesa, 2003; Smith & Bakker, 2005; Gamlen, 2008b). But policy makers of diaspora strategies rarely pause to ask questions found in critical diaspora studies: which groups should be counted as legitimate members of the diaspora? Is it only the first generation of emigrants or are later generations to be included? Does the citizenship status of members of the overseas community matter? What is to be done about those with no overt ties to a sending country but who feel a strong sense of affinity with that country and its people? Diaspora strategies often create diaspora groupings inasmuch as they delimit, map and quantify these communities, resulting in inclusions and exclusions (Ho, 2011). We not only highlight such cleavages in our discussion on Singapore but also extrapolate from these debates to consider the potential for cultivating a more inclusive definition of the Singaporean diaspora that extends to foreigners with affinity ties to the country.

Finally, more attention needs to be paid to the type of development produced by diaspora-centred development, which to some observers amount to an extension of new globalized, neoliberal governmentalities (see Larner, 2007; Ragazzi, 2009). For example, which social groups stand to win or lose from such projects (Pellerin & Mullings, 2013)? Do diaspora strategies consolidate existing spatial inequalities and divisions in the sending state? Or do they promote forms of development that facilitate a cascading of benefits and opportunities to communities that are less globally mobile? What is the socio-economic footprint of diaspora-centred development in countries of origin? In the empirical analysis on Singapore we show that despite the intellectual vision articulated by the political leadership, these questions remain unanswered, and the development benefits to be derived from investing in diaspora engagement are uncertain. Before we develop the above arguments, we set out the historical link between migration and development in Singapore and the way this has evolved into contemporary diaspora strategizing.

### **Diaspora strategies as a paradigm shift in Singapore's development approach**

Linda Low (2001) traces Singapore's economic evolution from a developmental state focused on inviting foreign direct investments (FDI) for industrialization and export-oriented trade (following decolonization and its subsequent separation from the Federation of Malaya) towards a second phase that promoted regionalization. Migration featured prominently in this second phase of Singapore's development strategy in two ways. First, the Singaporean state liberalized immigration policies inviting foreigners with the desired skills set to contribute to the economy's new foci on financial services

and information communications technology (ICT) as well as to promote knowledge innovation and entrepreneurship. Second, the state encouraged Singaporean businesses and citizens to venture abroad as an extension of the Singaporean economy (Yeoh & Willis, 1999; Bunnell *et al.*, 2006).

This emphasis on migration as development remains in what we can refer to as a third phase in Singapore's developmental strategy where the link between economy and extraterritoriality is key (Phelps, 2009). While Phelps focuses on the creation of Singapore-led joint venture parks abroad, this paper looks at diaspora strategies as a developmental strategy that has triggered the interest of the Singaporean political leadership. The then Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong reportedly said during a trade mission to the southeastern Chinese city of Xiamen:

We need to attract foreign investments and resourceful investors into Singapore to grow the size of our gross domestic product . . . but with the limited size of the Singapore market, the country also needs its people to invest overseas. *These Singaporeans help the country to grow its gross national product*—which calculates both the income generated at home as well as abroad by its citizens (*The Straits Times*, 2009a; emphasis added).

Goh's speech underlines how the Singaporean diaspora is to be capitalized for positioning Singapore advantageously in the global knowledge economy. While Goh emphasized entrepreneurship in this speech, the human capital of overseas Singaporeans are also targeted for developing strategic growth sectors in ICT, biomedical research, human resources training and research, clean technologies, higher education and the cultural industries. Harnessing knowledge innovation for scientific and technological development as well as improving productivity and efficiency builds higher-value development than the manufacturing and production industries of yesteryear.

The total population of Singapore (amounting to 5.40 million) consists of 3.31 million citizens, 1.56 million nonpermanent residents and 531 200 permanent residents (National Population and Talent Division *et al.*, 2013). Less well known is the existence of an estimated 207 000 Singaporeans living overseas (National Population and Talent Division *et al.*, 2013; see Table 1), the target of the Singaporean state's diaspora strategy.

During the 1970s and 1980s emigration was viewed as a sign of disloyalty to the newly independent nation. But rising emigration rates (Yap, 1999) coupled with the new strategy emphasizing the internationalization of Singaporean human capital led to

Table 1. Population of overseas Singaporeans (in hundred thousands).

Year	Population
<b>2003</b>	157.1
<b>2004</b>	157.8
<b>2005</b>	163.0
<b>2006</b>	168.2
<b>2007</b>	172.0
<b>2008</b>	181.9
<b>2009</b>	180.7
<b>2010</b>	184.4
<b>2011</b>	192.2
<b>2012</b>	200.0
<b>2013</b>	207.00

Source: NPTD, 2013.

a change in the state's attitudes. The transition was signalled tentatively in government speeches initially and subsequently incorporated into the mission of a government agency, Contact Singapore (set up in 1998), alongside its original mandate to headhunt highly skilled foreigners for Singapore. Ad hoc initiatives for overseas Singaporeans remained ensconced in Contact Singapore and peripheral to recruiting highly skilled foreigners (known in local parlance as 'foreign talent' for a time). Meanwhile, the state's pro-immigration scheme has gradually created a social rift arising from animosity towards foreigners perceived as competing with Singaporeans for jobs and housing. Alongside this have been complaints that foreigners are sidelining talented Singaporeans, thus prompting emigration. The emigration of young and educated Singaporeans is a cause of concern for the political leadership, because it affects not only the country's population structure but also leadership renewal. As such, in recent years the political leadership stresses the importance of making Singapore into a 'global talent capital' instead. This catchphrase shifts the emphasis away from capturing 'foreign' talent to a more inclusive label that includes 'Singaporean' talent based locally as well as abroad.

Signalling more than a shift in rhetoric, two landmark moves further formalized the state's diaspora strategizing. In 2004, Singaporean parliamentarians amended the constitution to enable Singaporeans born overseas and Singaporean women abroad to pass on Singaporean citizenship to their children born abroad. These changes recognize that more Singaporeans are going and remaining overseas but Singapore still wants to retain ties with them (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 2004). Although the dual citizenship restriction remains, the citizenship law changes formalized the significance of overseas Singaporeans to the country. Later in 2006 a new government agency named the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU) was established under the Prime Minister's Office. It took over the secondary mission of Contact Singapore to reach out more proactively to overseas Singaporeans and facilitate return migration. The OSU organizes professional networking activities for overseas Singaporeans and an annual festival known as 'Singapore Day' in different global cities to celebrate Singaporean culture and remind overseas Singaporeans of the homeland.<sup>2</sup> The event receives significant media coverage in Singapore. The OSU website further allows overseas Singaporeans to exchange information and opinions about life abroad and missing home.

Contact Singapore, and later OSU, offices around the world were set up to organize events, mobilize overseas Singaporean communities and create key activity nodes with connectivity to Singapore. Figure 1 below illustrates the geographical spread of overseas Singaporean communities as identified on the OSU website. Some regions, like north-east Asia and Europe, have a stronger overseas Singaporean presence than others (such as Africa). Within a region, certain countries also have denser nodes of connectivity to Singapore. For example, Figure 2 depicts the density of networks linking China to Singapore through the presence of overseas Singaporean communities. Through these material and virtual ways, the imaginarity of a Singaporean diaspora landscape comes into existence.

The diaspora strategies implemented by the Singaporean state aim to achieve two goals. First, it extends nation building extraterritorially by cultivating a sense of community and national identity amongst Singaporeans abroad. Singaporeans abroad are regularly reminded of their ties and obligations to Singapore. For example, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed a group of overseas Singaporeans in Perth by saying, 'You are part of an information network for us because [ . . . ] you know what's happening in your own countries, and if you keep in touch with Singapore as well, then we will benefit from your antenna and tentacles' (*The Straits Times*, 2009b). Such reminders serve to mobilize

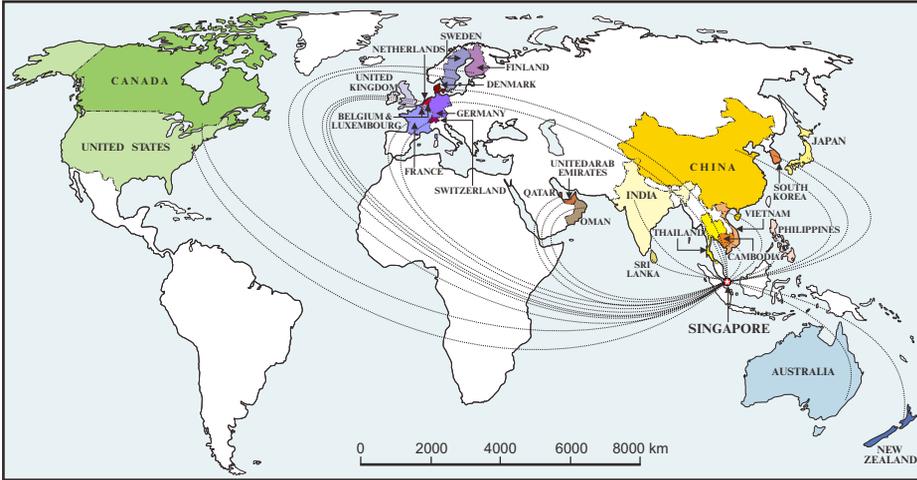


Figure 1. Countries 'connected' to Singapore through clubs of overseas Singaporeans listed on the OSU website. Source: Ho, 2013. Reproduced with permission from NUS Press.



Figure 2. Geographical concentration of Chinese cities with overseas Singaporean clubs as listed on the OSU website. Source: Ho, 2013. Reproduced with permission from NUS Press.

the contributions of overseas Singaporeans for economic and nation-building purposes. Second, and of particular interest to this paper, are the efforts to capitalize upon overseas Singaporeans to spur development of a higher order than the remittance industry and other financial transfers normally associated with development. As Kuznetsov and Sabel (2006: 3) observe of the tangible and intangible benefits presented by the international mobility of talent:

Expatriates do not need to be investors or make financial contributions to have an impact on their home countries. They can serve as “bridges” by providing access to markets, sources of investment, and expertise. Influential members of diasporas can shape public debate, articulate reform plans, and help implement reforms and new projects. Policy expertise and managerial and marketing knowledge are the most significant resources of diaspora networks.

While the case studies in the above edited volume by Kuznetsov (2006) focus on ‘developing economies’, the same observations about mobilizing the human capital embodied in nationals abroad can be made of the diaspora strategies taken up by a growing number of high-income and middle-income countries. In their view, the knowledge represented by emigrants form ‘epistemic networks’ (Faist, 2008: 31), where ideas are exchanged in a club-like manner: members can access the potential spin-offs of knowledge appropriation, while nonmembers are excluded. In the next section, we bring the Singaporean case into dialogue with the four critiques of diaspora-centred development raised earlier in this paper.

### **Reflections on Singapore’s diaspora strategies to date**

The diaspora strategies of the Singaporean state gained momentum only in recent years. While it may be too early to make definitive judgments on Singapore’s performance relative to these four areas of concern, we can make preliminary observations. Our intention here is to use the four critical strands sketched out above to mark out the specificities of the Singaporean case when set into global relief and propose how the Singaporean case informs critical literature on diaspora strategies.

#### *Intellectual bases of the agenda*

State technocrats mediate Singapore’s entry into the global economy and embrace a developmental model that has evolved over time. Singapore has positioned itself sequentially as a magnet for FDI in labour-intensive low-technology manufacturing and assembly functions (during the 1960s and 1970s); as a leading destination for higher-value-added, capital-intensive TNC investment in manufacturing (during the 1980s) and research and development (during the 1990s); and finally as a global city for the world’s leading financial services and TNCs (from 2000 onwards). Singapore’s muscular developmental state and recent shift in emphases from localizing global capital to globalizing local capital has furnished it with an approach to DKN which is both unique and problematic.

Diaspora strategies are often framed as governmental strategies pursued by neoliberalizing states bent on securing global competitive advantage by tapping the expertise of expatriate communities (Larner, 2007; Ragazzi, 2009; Mullings, 2012). They furnish sending states with ‘soft power’, ‘human capital’, ‘social capital’ and ‘network capacity’. The Singaporean political leadership projects a clear intellectual and political vision when it invokes the diaspora as a potential agent of development. References to the ‘knowledge economy’, the ‘smart economy’, ‘social capital led development’ and so on are all set into the context of a development logic that seeks to

move home-grown Singaporean industries further up the value chain and onto the international stage. Fostering DKN improves the capacity of indigenous firms to compete in the international market, through knowledge transfer, mentoring, brokering of contacts, provision of advice and so on. For example, in 2009 Singapore Telecommunications Ltd (Singtel) welcomed the return of a prominent overseas Singaporean as a member of its senior leadership, highlighting that 'his keen understanding of the industry is a boost to our efforts to grow our business overseas even as we consolidate our position as the leading service provider in the Singapore ICT market' (Singtel, 2009). In a newspaper interview, former Minister for Manpower Gan Kim Yong commended this example of a successful returning Singaporean (*My Paper*, 2010). When situated in wider state-sponsored discourses, including other pronouncements by the manpower minister (and his successors) on the importance of 'keep[ing] in contact with [overseas Singaporeans so] they will continue to contribute to the country' (*The Straits Times*, 2009a), the Singtel example usefully illustrates the intellectual bases of a diaspora strategy agenda that aims to promote a viable home-grown knowledge economy through the human and social capital embodied by returnees who can mobilize global diaspora knowledge networks.

However, probing questions concerning the intellectual foundations of the diaspora strategies, as we highlighted earlier in this paper, can be directed to examine whether the type of subjectivity cultivated through diaspora strategies resonates with the intellectual bases of the vision projected by political leadership. In studying Singapore's initiatives to develop the biomedical sector, Holden and Demeritt (2008) suggest that the state endorses international bioethical guidance but sidelines the tacit liberalism, which is at odds with the paternalistic political culture and citizenship norms of the city-state. In another sector identified for developing Singapore's knowledge-based economy, innovation and entrepreneurship are supported through policy, but the political leadership remains cautious at the governance level. This creates a situation where 'innovation and entrepreneurship are encouraged but restricted within certain spaces and regulated by certain parameters' (Ng, 2012: 344). The uncertain bases of these sectors identified for diaspora strategizing have a bearing on whether recruiting members of the diaspora or returnees can help promote a viable home-grown knowledge economy for Singapore. The balance that the Singaporean state seeks to attain, namely 'centralised decentralisation' (Ng, 2012), is qualitatively different from the case of China where, as Meyer (2011) observes, multiple organizations at different levels of governance alongside private sector actors and associations have proliferated for diaspora engagement, creating interstitial spaces for competition, collaboration and other creative initiatives. Of course this is not to imply that developmental states cannot work with such ideas as innovation, entrepreneurialism, social capital, soft power and networks; only that the intellectual bases through which such work might be carried out sit awkwardly with thinking on diaspora strategies which assumes less state-centric and more neoliberal forms of global competition. As we show below, the lingering centralization approach found in Singapore impacts the nature of stakeholder alignment during diaspora strategizing.

#### *State infrastructure and stakeholder alignment*

Given its history as a developmental state, it is unsurprising that Singapore has adopted a top-down and technocratic approach towards diaspora engagement. Policy makers focus on carnival-like events such as the Singapore Day celebrations or use smaller-scale dialogue sessions to engage Singaporean associations, international students,

professionals, business leaders and other creative specialists abroad. These initiatives are similar to what countries like India and China have done for diaspora engagement (Mani & Varadarajan, 2005; Zweig, 2006). But it is equally true that Singapore has not rushed to invent a new coterie of expensive and cumbersome institutions for diaspora strategizing. At times it has invested in costly and high-profile infrastructure and events, yet it refrains from creating an entirely new ministry of diaspora or dedicating resources for diaspora strategizing to the same extent as India or China. Nonetheless, Singapore's diaspora strategizing faces a different set of paradoxical challenges.

Interviews with informants suggest that although the OSU acts as a coordinating body for interagency activities related to the Singaporean diaspora (such as in foreign relations, business, education or cultural development), there are difficulties developing meaningful and sustainable cooperation amongst government partners who have different vested interests. Rather than mobilizing DKN fruitfully as set out in the intellectual vision of the political leadership, the policy makers have taken the less contentious path of directing their publicity efforts and resources at cultural activities. Yet, viewed from the outside, it appears that the state has been centralizing diaspora engagement, which impacts the autonomy exercised by diaspora groups external to the state and their sense of stakeholdership. International experience shows that state-led diaspora strategies benefit from enlisting external stakeholders that are part of the diaspora (e.g., hometown associations) and organizations that see the value of engaging with the diaspora for pecuniary (e.g., business and employment opportunities) or nonpecuniary reasons (e.g., cultivating a national community abroad).

Stakeholders in Singapore's case would be cultural communities, alumni networks and nonstate or NGOs that address diaspora interests. The state's approach has been to incorporate the activities of external organizations under its umbrella. For example, the OSU enlists Singaporean student societies and associations in its mission to engage with overseas Singaporeans. They receive funding from the OSU to carry out their social activities. The OSU also launched seed funding for independent groups of Singaporeans to spearhead events celebrating Singaporean culture, heritage and community (Overseas Singaporean Unit, 2014). A separate pot of money is disbursed from another government agency based in Singapore to target youths as stakeholders. However, these government agencies, societies and associations are criticized by some Singaporeans, within and outside of the country, for being too closely aligned with the agenda of the Singaporean political leadership (see Ho, 2009). The top-down governance style characteristic of the Singaporean political leadership and bureaucracy has resulted in ambivalent attitudes towards the extension of the state's presence extraterritorially. Enabling independent stakeholders to engage freely with the Singaporean diaspora could lend greater credibility to the diaspora strategies encouraged by the state.

As an example, we refer to nongovernmental<sup>3</sup> initiatives by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), which predated the establishment of the OSU. The SIF formerly organized annual summer camps for children of overseas Singaporeans returning for visits. The camps familiarized the children with Singaporean history, culture and school life through a buddy programme with local students. The SIF also published an online magazine for overseas Singaporeans. However the summer camps have ceased since 2009, and the magazine has changed its focus to expatriates communities in Singapore instead. As an NGO, the SIF has significant credibility with overseas Singaporeans that prefer to distance themselves from the state. Informant interviews suggest that as the Singaporean state became more interested in its diaspora, the activities of NGOs reaching out to the diaspora gradually became directly or indirectly curtailed (e.g., through

funding constraints or advice to restructure their activities to minimize overlapping agenda with the state). This stifles the potential for recalibrating perceptions of regimentation in Singaporean governance and society that could have contributed to emigration decisions in the first place (Ho, 2009).

The visible centralization and technocratic efficiency of Singapore's diaspora engagement policy sideline other social actors and constrains, instead of nurturing productive homeland-diaspora relationships. Here, lessons may be extracted from Ireland's approach towards diaspora engagement, which lightly incubates existing networks rather than create new institutions to govern the diaspora. The Irish government recognizes that the most sustainable diaspora-homeland ties are those that emerge organically, and that state-led initiatives often fizzle out after a period of initial jubilation. The role of the state is to seed, incubate and energize diaspora engagement schemes launched by other stakeholders (Boyle & Kitchin, 2008). Ireland's approach is also supported by Meyer's (2011) study of diaspora engagement in India and China where a larger number of heterogeneous actors interacting with one another results in more effective diaspora networks than in the case of Colombia and South Africa. These international examples show that involving plural stakeholders can effect more productive diaspora engagement. Following from that, cultivating meaningful stakeholdership also means respecting the various interests represented within the diaspora and nurturing wider social inclusion, which we discuss next.

#### *Cultural exclusion or inclusion*

Thus far Singapore's diaspora strategies emphasize knowledge mobilization to generate scientific and technological innovations, trade and investments; this approach privileges certain globally mobile knowledge communities over others (Coe & Bunnell, 2003). Current knowledge mobilization initiatives focus narrowly on business leaders, professionals and international students, but they can be expanded to include other expatriate groups. For example, ethnographic and interview-based fieldwork conducted with overseas Singaporeans in London suggest that transient professionals pursue career development and benefit most from the professional networking platforms organized by the Singaporean associations. However, Singaporean families (where one or both spouses have Singaporean citizenship) who plan to settle abroad, or have transnational sojourning plans, are more keen to engage Singaporean policy makers in reconsidering the dual citizenship restriction and national service requirement that dissuades them from retaining Singaporean citizenship or passing it to their children (Ho, 2008). These legal restrictions associated with Singaporean citizenship exist in tension with the programmes extended by the state to connect with the Singaporean diaspora. Set into international context, Singapore is an anomaly (the other exception is China) compared to countries that are engaging actively with their diasporas and now have recognized dual citizenship (e.g., Scotland, Ireland and Canada) or implemented dual nationality<sup>4</sup> (e.g., India).

Another axis defining cultural exclusion or inclusion pertains to the foreign-local divide prominent in Singaporean society today (compare with Koh, 2015 in this issue, concerning the *bumiputra* ethnic privilege connoted in Malaysia's diaspora strategy). Singaporeans regard immigrants sceptically, even when these 'foreign talents' represent Singapore at international events. Such Singaporeans believe that foreigners who apply for permanent residency or citizenship status in the country, especially those from the Asia region, are using Singapore as a stepping stone and they intend to remigrate to other countries like the United States, Canada or Europe where it may be harder to do

so on a Chinese or Indian passport. Immigration tensions are becoming more prominent in Singapore (Liu, 2014). Yet immigrants can be potentially considered part of a wider Singaporean diaspora even after they remigrate from Singapore. The limited size of the Singaporean diaspora coupled with the nature of geographical dispersal means that compared to countries with populous diasporas such as Ireland, India and China, Singapore lacks a critical mass of actors to incubate its DKN prominently and develop synergy with complementary knowledge industries. The professional and business ties of foreigners who claim legal or social attachments to Singapore represent a potential resource to the country, but this constituency known as the affinity diaspora (Ancien *et al.*, 2009) or elective diaspora (Jöns *et al.*, 2014) has been neglected thus far in policy debates, perhaps because it is considered an issue too sensitive to raise in view of popular contestations towards the Singaporean state's pro-immigration stance.

In comparison, Japan's diaspora engagement policy recognizes that foreigners who have lived in the country can play an ambassadorial role even after they leave. While Japan's immigration barriers deter foreign nationals from long-term settlement (D'Costa, 2008), cultural initiatives like the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Programme, which is coadministered by several government departments and organizations, brings foreigners to Japan for international exchange and cultivates affinity ties. Yamashiro (2012) argues that the JET Programme encourages former JET participants to direct their experiences towards enhancing relations between their home countries and Japan. Meanwhile Scotland's diaspora strategy is even more inclusive. It comprises 'returning Scots' who have come back to Scotland; 'new Scots' who are about to leave Scotland; 'live diaspora' comprising individuals who were born in Scotland or have worked or studied in Scotland and are now living outside of Scotland; 'ancestral diaspora' which refers to individuals of Scottish descent; and 'affinity diaspora' incorporating individuals with a direct or indirect connection to Scotland but with no genealogical link to the country (Ancien *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, in a report written for the Asia Pacific Foundation concerning Canada's emerging diaspora strategy, Boyle and Kitchin (2011) recommend that former immigrants and overseas students are a potential diaspora resource for the country (also see Ho & Ley, 2014). Like these countries, Singapore experiences considerable immigration but the definition of the Singaporean diaspora limits cultural inclusion to those that consider it their natal country or who have legal status as permanent residents or citizens.

#### *Development for whom?*

Finally, more work remains to be done to map the development outcomes of diaspora-centred development for different social groups in Singapore. While significant attention has been paid in the media and political rhetoric to the nation-building benefits of engaging the diaspora, the tangible socio-economic and other impacts of diaspora strategies for Singapore's development have yet to be studied systematically. A common theme observed by scholars who study the proceedings of diaspora conferences, such as Mani and Varadarajan (2005) for India or Mullings (2011) for Jamaica, indicate that issues pertaining to finance, business and investment are given prominence over those concerning welfare and social justice. While the Singaporean state emphasizes nationhood and national unity at the signature Singapore Day celebrations, its interest in the diaspora is still framed around creating professional and business opportunities for the knowledge-based economy rather than addressing concretely the concerns of members of the diaspora about the educational pressure on young children or the rising costs of healthcare in Singapore, which might have precipitated

emigration decisions in the first place or are contributing to intentions to remain overseas. These social reproduction issues are shared by Singaporeans living in the city-state as well and if considered jointly with the concerns of the Singaporean diaspora, could direct attention towards a set of priorities different from economic development.

Notwithstanding the opportunities presented by the diaspora for redirecting the nature of development, we must also acknowledge the potential tensions brought up by engaging with the diaspora. Given the extent of state revenue and resources invested in the Singaporean diaspora, has engaging the diaspora resulted in a talent pool to fill senior leadership positions for Singaporean industries? Which are the industries that have benefited from the links made with overseas Singaporeans through diaspora strategies? How have these industries and links created opportunities for those who remain in Singapore? The answers to these questions are not easily derived from the nascent knowledge base available about the Singaporean diaspora and the effects of diaspora engagement. More generally, as with the case of diaspora engagement in other countries (Seguin *et al.*, 2006; Meyer, 2011), the impacts of policies are neither easily traceable nor quantifiable given the geographical dispersal of the subjects of study (i.e., diaspora populations); the multiple actors involved (e.g., government agencies, private corporations and formal and informal expatriate associations); the heterogeneous industries implicated in diaspora strategizing; and the intangible quality of knowledge sharing and networking spin-offs.

More apparent now are concerns over how the return of overseas Singaporeans is perceived as competition for locally educated Singaporeans that lack international work experience. A special feature in the national broadsheet in 2008 interviewed several returnees who shared the difficulties they faced reintegrating into Singaporean society. Amongst them, one said, '[I was] confronted with hostility . . . people felt threatened by my overseas experience', while another felt that 'you have to learn how to deal with people all over again. It is very easy to rub people the wrong way' (*The Straits Times*, 2008). The state's attention directed now at attracting the return of overseas Singaporeans to take up or groom them for senior leadership roles exacts another pressure point on local Singaporeans that aspire towards such positions at the workplace but feel doubly marginalized by the 'foreign talent' and 'returning Singaporean talent'. Whether at the personal, industry or national levels, what needs to be asked is whether diaspora centred development is doing more than simply consolidating socio-economic inequalities (Pellerin & Mullings, 2013).

The four areas of concern discussed above inform one another during the policy materialization of diaspora strategizing. But more importantly, they enable us to build up an argument excavating the development logics and outcomes of Singapore's diaspora strategies by highlighting the tensions and contradictions arising. In the concluding section, we elaborate on this and draw out the wider lessons derived from our analyses.

## Conclusion

By examining Singapore's diaspora strategies and comparing them with international examples, this paper has shown that, on the one hand, the Singaporean case is undergirded by development logics similar to other economically advanced economies (especially in regard to its prioritization of diaspora knowledge networks). On the other hand, it has favoured a technocratic and narrow approach towards diaspora strategizing that

may run counter to the intellectual vision of mobilizing diaspora knowledge networks. Set against the international literature debating the intellectual bases, ethics and approaches of diaspora strategies (Meyer, 2001; Bauder, 2003; McGregor, 2008; Mullings, 2011), the Singaporean case highlights the dissonances undermining the anticipated benefits from hefty investments in diaspora strategizing. The paper demonstrates how the Singaporean political leadership has repackaged development agenda to emphasize diaspora-centred development for achieving competitive advantage in the global knowledge-based economy. This approach is distinct from but linked to past policies that pursued foreign direct investment and export-oriented trade. Diaspora communities are being convened and mobilized to serve Singapore's development trajectory and entry to the global knowledge economy.

But the diaspora strategies materialized by the emigrant state infrastructure signal a mixed sense of direction, as the muscular Singaporean state seeks to balance economic decentralization associated with neoliberal forms of global competition against the paternalistic governance style to which it is more accustomed. Accompanying the top-down approach adopted towards diaspora strategizing have been efforts to incorporate formerly plural stakeholder groups within Singapore and abroad under the umbrella of the Singaporean emigrant state infrastructure. This has jeopardized the appeal and legitimacy of diaspora strategies, as the paternalism of the state is reinforced to Singaporeans abroad who may desire greater autonomy. The wider lesson here is the importance of considering the compatibility of political and societal culture with messages of decentralization and autonomy normally associated with diaspora knowledge networks. In other words, the context specificity of place and culture deserves more careful treatment in both the study and application of diaspora strategies internationally.

Through the case of Singapore, we also observed that diaspora knowledge mobilization tends to prioritize economic development agenda over other socio-political issues important to overseas Singaporeans, such as the dual citizenship restriction, the national service requirement, escalating healthcare costs in Singapore or the educational pressure placed on young children and parents. However, researching diaspora strategies and informing diaspora engagement with the appropriate conceptual tools can contribute towards reconceptualizing development agenda and extant notions of diaspora belonging. By examining the Singaporean experience through critiques of migration as development and critical diaspora studies, we suggest that diaspora populations can facilitate a more progressive social development agenda by demanding policy responses to social reproduction concerns shared by the resident population as well.

Further, diaspora engagement presents an opportunity to reconceptualize narrow definitions of nation, community and belonging (Mani & Varadarajan, 2005; Mohan, 2006). Against a backdrop of growing anti-immigration sentiments in Singaporean society, the option of engaging overseas Singaporeans and fostering return migration has proven to be politically palatable. The paper highlighted however the limited sustainability of diaspora strategizing if it is restricted to Singaporeans that consider the country their natal home. Instead we introduce the notion and value of an affinity diaspora (Ancien *et al.*, 2009) whose members, despite the absence of natal roots, claim biographical ties with a country and decide to be part of its diaspora and networks (Jöns *et al.*, 2014). This intervention troubles claims to diaspora belonging that are premised on primordial attachments or ethnonationalism, thus extending the possibility for a more inclusive approach towards not only diaspora strategizing but also wider debates on immigrant belonging.

By examining the case of Singapore, this paper contributes to a growing literature critically examining the logics, efficacy and sustainability of diaspora strategizing. It is in view of these deliberations that we remain cautious of celebrating the merits of diaspora strategizing. As discussed here, systematic analyses of the benefits and spin-offs derived from diaspora strategies in the long run are still needed to ascertain the economic, social and political implications of diaspora-centred development. Inasmuch as diaspora strategies and DKN may promise development outcomes, interrogating the logics, assumptions and approaches of diaspora strategies is necessary to weigh up carefully what is increasingly becoming a policy mantra for both emerging and economically advanced economies.

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### Endnotes

- 1 These include the World Bank through its 'Knowledge for Development Programme'; the International Diaspora Engagement Alliance (IDEA) established by Hilary Clinton via the Secretary of State's Office of the Global Partnership Initiative (GPI), in collaboration with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI); the joint European Union (EU) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Migrant for Development (M4D) programme; and the advocacy work undertaken by among others the MPI, Economist Magazine, MacArthur Foundation, the Inter-American Bank and Diaspora Matters Consultancy.
- 2 Past events have taken place in places like New York (2007), Melbourne (2008), London (2009) and Shanghai (2011) where there are substantive numbers of overseas Singaporeans.
- 3 Although some observers argue that the SIF started as a government-organized NGO (GONGO), the SIF has managed to tread the fine line of maintaining separation from the state (Krishna & Khondker, 2004).
- 4 Dual nationality confers a more limited set of rights than dual citizenship. For example, the Overseas Citizenship of India scheme does not allow the bearer to vote or stand for political office. There are also limited land rights.

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