

Transnational Migrant Philanthropy:

The Commitment of Tamils in Germany and the United Kingdom in Reconstructing the Health Care System in Post-War Sri Lanka since 2009

Dr. Sascha Krannich,
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During the civil war in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, many Tamil migrants abroad supported the militant organization Tamil Tigers (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)), which was fighting against the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lankan government, for an independent Tamil state in north and east Sri Lanka. After the civil war, many Tamil migrant organizations did not stop their engagement in Sri Lanka, but continue to focus on the needs of Tamils and on the reconstruction of Tamil regions in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Former studies analyzed primarily political, economic, and partially cultural and religious activities of the Tamil diaspora during and after the civil war in Sri Lanka. Philanthropic engagement of diasporic Tamils after 2009 is only little investigated, particularly health-related diaspora activities. However, health remains a crucial issue in Sri Lanka. Many Tamil doctors and medical students left the country before and during the civil war, half of the posts in Tamil health institutions became vacant, and numerous hospitals got destroyed during the war. The health structures are not fully recovered in Tamil regions yet, although health plays a major role in the well-being of people and is fundamental for the development of a country.

Therefore, many Tamil migrant organizations recognized that it is important to focus not only on political issues or economic development of Tamil regions in Sri Lanka, but also on philanthropic improvements like health. They found larger health umbrella organizations in Western countries, including the Tamils Health Organization (THO) and the Hospital Development Association (HDA), which unite Tamil doctors across different countries to collect money to offer health services that the Sri Lankan state does not offer in Tamil regions. Several thousand Tamil doctors live in the United Kingdom as well as in Germany, especially in the Greater London area or in larger cities of North Rhine-Westphalia (explorative interviews with Tamil doctors in Bielefeld, April 15, 2019). Their engagement in the health care system in Sri Lanka should not be underestimated. They organize in many smaller health-based organizations to transfer their medical know-how to Sri Lanka, or go back individually to disadvantaged communities to rebuild hospitals, offer important medical services, or to train local doctors or nursing staff (explorative interviews with Tamil doctors in Essen and Hamm, April 15, 2019).

This raises the question of what role does the Tamil diaspora actually play in the process of rebuilding the health care system in Tamil regions of Sri Lanka after the war since 2009? That implies further considerations: How look these transnational health-related activities in

detail, and do they really improve health care in Tamil regions in Sri Lanka? Furthermore: How integrated, organized, and well-funded are Tamil doctors and other on health focused migrants in the diaspora? And are there differences between them in Germany and the United Kingdom regarding organizations, networking, professions, strategies, health emphases, and activities? How does that affect their work in Sri Lanka? First explorative inquiries give the impression that British Tamil doctors are better organized in larger transnational health networks (such as the THO), whereas German Tamil doctors operate either on the individual level, or through smaller doctor organizations or broad cultural and religious organizations. And what roles play the governments of the involved countries – Germany and the United Kingdom as well as Sri Lanka – in these processes?

The study is based on qualitative research of a total length of two years from December 2020 to December 2022 by applying the method design of the Comparative Immigration Organizations Project (CIOP) (developed by the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University). The CIOP method design was developed to compare transnational migrant organizations and their activities in different countries by applying methods in a transnational cross-sectional study (Portes 2015). This includes the realization of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with leaders and members of Tamil migrant organizations that work on health-related issues in Sri Lanka, and in-depth interviews with other relevant stakeholders of state institutions and other organizations in the United Kingdom as well as Germany. Complementary, in-depth interviews with returned Tamil migrants that are involved in the health care system (particularly physicians) as well as health-related institutions and organizations, and observations at relevant institutions (primarily in clinics and hospitals) in the Tamil regions of northern Sri Lanka.