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## **Transnational Dynamics of Return and the Potential Role of the Kurdish Diaspora in Developing the Kurdistan Region**

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# **Transnational Dynamics of Return and the Potential Role of the Kurdish Diaspora in Developing the Kurdistan Region**

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## **Executive Summary**

This study explores the advantages and challenges in engaging the Kurdish diaspora in the development process of the Kurdistan Region. In recent years, the constructive role of diasporas in building peace and democracy and nurturing economic development in countries of origin has been increasingly highlighted in policy analyses. Since 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Northern Iraq (KRG) has been striving to expand its efforts towards a future where rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights are principles fully absorbed into everyday life and cultivated by economic development, investment, job opportunities and educational reforms. People in the diaspora have been contributing to these ongoing regional developments.

Whilst the experiences of other countries and their relationship with their diasporas are crucial points of reference, the diversity of diasporas and countries of origin must also be taken into consideration. Based on fifty-six in-depth interviews that took place in autumn/winter 2005/2006 with Kurds (mainly from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) holding Swedish citizenship, the first part of this study analyses the complex negotiations within Kurdish refugee families in Sweden regarding whether or not, how and why to return, commute or stay abroad. The second part examines the advantages of involving people in the diaspora through knowledge and skills transfer while at the same time analysing needs during the return process and bringing into focus the challenges implied by impatience, recruitment issues and the complexities of social reintegration. The intention is to show ways to create and improve tandem co-operation models by synthesizing intellectual and material resources of both regional actors and Kurds in the diaspora. The conclusion suggests perspectives, policies and practical incentives to overcome the challenges of engaging the Kurdish diaspora in the development of the Kurdistan Region and achieve sustainable results. These recommendations are grouped into reform-related measures and specific personal and work-related requirements of Kurds in the diaspora imposed by the 'return' process. The results should be relevant to the study of other diasporas in analogous circumstance.

In all countries, constructive engagement by diasporas works in synergy with political, economic and social conditions on the ground. As in other national cases, many Kurds in the diaspora are reluctant to risk their material welfare, professional status and rights abroad. Diaspora policies are complements to – not substitutes for – general reform policies. The KRG needs to continue with its development direction in order to safeguard the diaspora's confidence in the politics and future of the Kurdistan Region by:

- taking resolute steps in order to deepen the process of democratisation
- building stronger institutional structures and procedures (such as the development of standard criteria with regard to the assessment of educational and professional qualifications, job descriptions and relationships at places of work)
- working to secure the rights of women and children in all spheres of society
- continuing to improve the infrastructure (e.g. in terms of flight connections, traffic planning and electricity facilities)
- enhancing the educational system (in terms of facilities and communication between teachers and pupils) and the healthcare sector.

In order to tackle the paradox of diaspora involvement and stimulate increased involvement of the diaspora, the government also needs to consider the needs of this group separately. This is necessary in order to benefit from its knowledge, expertise and experience at this early stage without ending up with costly failures and re-migration issues. Diaspora policies need to consider that:

- diasporas are highly heterogeneous populations in regard to gender, age, social background, education, political affiliation, networks and political, economic and social integration in the country of settlement which influence if, how and why people are able or willing to return or in other ways contribute to the development process
- 'return' is usually not a one-way issue but rather a transnational process where social and material needs are evaluated and negotiated with family members
- family members may choose for shorter or longer periods of time to live in different countries.

With regard to return or commuting considerations, people in the diaspora will require information mechanisms and assistance in order to cope with the local housing, labour or business markets, as they may lack informal networks. The following ideas would meet present and future needs of people in the diaspora and simultaneously help to build administrative systems and functions valuable for the local population and the development of the Kurdistan Region. Some of these ideas have been implemented by other countries with large diasporas:

- formalising the handling of 'diaspora issues' at KRG Representations abroad
- establishing special local offices or regional functions at ministerial level to handle 'diaspora issues'
- establishing a web-based skills bank collecting information about expertise and skills of Kurdistanis worldwide and administrative functions to match CVs with job opportunities in the region
- continuing to establish institutions such as the Kurdistan Academy of Science to develop facilities for the transfer and exchange of professional knowledge and expertise from abroad to the Kurdistan Region, including student exchange programmes.

Other ways to benefit from the knowledge and expertise available in the diaspora suggested by some of the interviewees would be to:

- establish 'professional reference groups' able to support and advise specific ministries in crucial issues of concern
- involve teachers from the diaspora in educational planning and teacher training to share experiences of standards at schools and universities
- employ teachers from the diaspora in 'model schools' to promote democracy and gender equality in the region and alleviate integration difficulties among returnee children

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- develop the idea of peripatetic Kurdistanis doctors from abroad to the Kurdistan Region to ensure both their involvement and the transfer of state-of-the-art knowledge in special medical fields.

Poor living conditions, especially if affecting the well-being of school children and teenagers, represent a crucial concern for many families in the diaspora and the government needs to consider ensuring a reasonable standard of living for returnees and commuters by:

- establishing agreed principles which define standard remuneration levels (e.g. reasonable salaries to cover resettlement costs, reimbursement of travel and accommodation expenses)
- considering international salary and service packages for those with special professional competencies made available for a given period of time
- noting that if the offers and incentives of the government are not competitive, the region may fail to attract an experienced multilingual labour force that is able to bridge the gaps between local and foreign workers
- noting that agreed principles of rewards should be related to priorities in relation to the short-, middle- and long-term needs of specific knowledge and skills to achieve various regional developmental goals
- establishing introduction courses for children of returnees since their situation may determine the outcome of the reintegration process.

Moreover, the government could work to safeguard the diaspora's ties with the Kurdistan Region and confidence in the future in a general way. Experience with North African diasporas in France has shown that constructive ties encourage people in the diaspora to support their home countries or regions. Such ties will also decrease the risk of unfounded rumours developing into counterproductive actions that may be taken by others remote from the complexities and difficulties on the ground. Specific recommendations in this context include:

- maintaining elective franchise and the right to hold dual citizenship
- securing the continuous flow of reliable information from the region
- participating in the exchange of ideas at joint seminars with the diaspora
- supporting important cultural events arranged by the diaspora
- encouraging the diaspora to help inform the world public on the political visions and complexities of the Kurdistan Region
- encouraging the diaspora to build transnational bridges for investments, humanitarian assistance and professional exchange and seeking partners among government officials and activists in the countries of settlement.

Whilst the government needs to establish structures and create incentives to safeguard the diaspora's confidence in the future of the region, a stable process of democratisation and economic development also requires sensible and responsible actors in the diaspora. People must be realistic and honest in terms of their own level of knowledge and ability to implement projects and keep expectations at a reasonable level. The achievements of the Kurdistan Region must be compared with other similar regions and not with Western European countries. It is necessary to encourage mutual understanding and a synthesis where the diaspora and regional actors can work in tandem. This case study helps to establish some general principles that may be applied to other diasporas, and also provides concrete examples of what can (or should not) be done to enable diasporas to play a positive role, both for the parent country and in their new host countries.

## Preface

The issue of national diasporas is a most important, but frequently overlooked, element of international security in today's complex world. The issue can take on many aspects, singularly or in combination. A diaspora can carry with it when it leaves the homeland a large proportion of the high quality intellectual and economic capital of the country, having an impoverishing effect. A diaspora can channel wealth which it earns abroad back to its parent country, making a significant contribution to the economy. A diaspora can also carry the flame of national consciousness, to keep it burning in exile. A diaspora can form a microcosm of the parent country's social system in a foreign land, hindering its integration into its new host country, or a diaspora can act to improve relations between host and parent country. A diaspora can also develop very different attitudes in its host country from those evolving in the parent country, which can create tensions when members of the diaspora return 'home'.

These are just a few aspects of the diaspora issue – there are many more. But these make it clear how diasporas can have either a positive or negative influence on the international security scene, depending on circumstances and, in particular, depending on how the qualities they embody are exploited, for better or for worse. For example, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the return of diasporas from the USA to Armenia had a most unsettling and negative effect on the local political situation, contributing to a significant increase in local tensions in this very sensitive area of the Caucasus. Russians leaving their homeland during the decade of the USSR's demise took with them a significant proportion of the country's wealth, and now have a very large impact on the European states in which they settled. The North African diasporas in France and the diasporas in the UK coming from the Indian subcontinent now form cohesive ethnic communities in their host countries which are frequently separated from mainstream society a fact which complicates the societal development of the host countries, at times even posing a potential security challenge.

Given the widespread and large scale nature of the global social phenomenon, and the impact it has on modern national and international security, it is amazing that so little attention has been devoted to it. The potential for harnessing the economic power, skills and goodwill of diasporas, either to rebuild a homeland shattered by war, or to develop economic and political ties between human-and-host-country, is enormous. Equally, the negative effects of a coherent diaspora which imports into the host country the problems, prejudices and social pathologies of the parent country also have a huge potential to cause major problems.

These considerations, therefore, make this study a contribution to understanding the nature of a diaspora and how to exploit diasporas for positive benefit to aid post-conflict reconstruction. The author uses the Kurdistan Region of Northern Iraq as her case study, but many of the conclusions drawn and recommendations made are applicable to a great many other countries and regions. This work would make an excellent starting point for a wider exploration of the diaspora issue in all its complexity. It is of particular relevance to Foreign Ministries and agencies for international development, as well as for the defence establishment tasked with overseeing security and reconstruction in post-conflict societies.

**PART I****"Shall we return, stay or circulate?" Political changes in  
Kurdistan and transnational dynamics in Kurdish refugee  
families in Sweden****1. Introduction**

The termination of the political institutions of Baathist Iraq in spring 2003 filled most Kurds with new hope for democratic processes in the aftermath of human rights violations and war. The political and economic limbo, imposed on the Kurdistan Region in 1991, has also finally been broken. As far as the Kurdish diaspora is concerned, these changes have refreshed the dream of returning for many Iraqi Kurds. Following the establishment of Kurdish *de facto* self-rule in 1991, many Kurds returned to socialise with families and friends, get married or engage in the reconstruction process. Expectations for a secure and stable future in Kurdistan were high, but many hopes were scattered as a consequence of the deteriorating situation in the middle of the decade, triggering internal strife, increasing refugee movements, 'import marriages'<sup>1</sup> and chain migration of relatives. Although many Iraqi Kurds in the diaspora again took a sceptical position with regard to real political changes in the Middle East and continued to strive towards social and economic integration in their host countries, they kept alive renewed contacts with the homeland, cultivated the Kurdish language and culture as well as the dream to return (cf. Wahlbeck 1999:106-109,186-190; Berruti 2002:56-57; Alinia 2004:329).

Increased understanding in the field of international migration research of how migrants maintain and develop relations, livelihood strategies and identities across boundaries of nation states has laid the ground for a transnational perspective that highlights earlier dichotomies and linear simplifications of the lives of migrating people. Within the rationality of nation states, the imagined and ideal scenario for migrants could be summarised as 'feet become roots'. However, the fact that immigrant businessmen in the US are often also American citizens is only one example of how regular contact with countries of origin does not stand in a diametrical relationship to the process of integration (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1011). Levitt and Glick Schiller, anthropologists who initiated the transnational perspective in the beginning of the 1990s, conclude that the way of life of migrants will be understood as a pivot between a new country and transnational incorporation. The median point is not full incorporation but simultaneity of connection. The challenge for researchers is to understand the variation in the way that migrants manage that pivot in relation to political, economic and social changes (ibid:1011-1013).

Similarly, researchers focusing on refugees question the conventional political perspective in which integration and return are treated as distinct phenomena (van Hear 2003:1-4). Whilst it is true that the dream to return is linked to political changes in the homeland, refugees may still prefer not to return for ever. The issue of return may not be regarded as 'natural', problem-free or viable. Simultaneously, however, the interest and possibility among refugees to develop regular but temporary contacts and exchange with relatives and others in their homeland may increase (cf. Black and Koser 1999; Koser and van Hear 2003; Black et al 2006). Research shows that for example Bosnian refugees in Sweden return to Bosnia on a temporary basis or at least spend their holidays in Bosnia regularly to reconcile

their needs which could not exclusively be satisfied by either one of the places. Life in Bosnia and Sweden complement each other. The concept of return must therefore be broadened and considered as a transnational process rather than a one-way occasion (Eastmond 2006:17). Diaspora Eritreans who have been broadly engaged in Eritrea's economic development since its independence without the intention to return permanently (Newland 2004:10) are another example.

Within the framework of the combined policy of 'return and reconstruction', the view that return, in the aftermath of conflicts and war, is regarded as a precondition for participation in democratisation, reconciliation and reconstruction has also been challenged (Levitt and Nyberg Sørensen 2004; Eastmond 2006). Yet policy makers could acknowledge the transfer of financial support and knowledge by refugees to countries of origin. Whilst such transferences already make important contributions to the survival of many families and relatives back home, different mechanisms could be created that would improve the use of these resources in the development process of countries of origin (Newland 2004; van Hear et al. 2004). From a refugee policy approach, an interesting question is whether the potential of the refugees' contribution to development would increase if they remained transnational rather than returning on a permanent basis.

The purpose of this study on Kurdish refugees in Sweden is to highlight transnational dynamics within the exceptional pivot occurring when long-anticipated dreams of political change in the homeland finally come about. The dream of returning may turn upside-down and the transnational life may appear as a more viable alternative. This study focuses on thoughts, considerations and negotiations in Kurdish nuclear families in Sweden after the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003. The aspects evolving around the questions if, how and when families return, stay or circulate are analysed within the context of given relationships to other family members and relatives in Sweden and Kurdistan together with other factors in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the varied but central role of transnational relationships in the 1990s between family members and relatives in Sweden and Kurdistan will be discussed. The 'refugee zone' established in 1991 has created a heterogenic Kurdish population in Europe. Paradoxically, this has brought about a more 'migrant-like' situation for Iraqi Kurds both inside and outside the zone.

## **2. Background: From exile to transnational relations**

Between 1975 and 1991, the movement of refugees from Kurdistan in Iraq to Europe mostly consisted of relatively well-educated, politically active young men. They borrowed money from relatives and sought asylum in Europe due to persecution and the Iran-Iraq War. If they were married, their wives and children came along. Given the nature of the Iraqi regime the condition of exile marked their lives in Europe. Their contacts with the country of origin were rare in order to avoid persecution and punishment of relatives by the regime. Only after the establishment of Kurdish *de facto* self-rule in 1991 did it become possible to visit family and friends back home. Many had big expectations for the future. They got married, engaged in the reconstruction process and considered returning to Kurdistan on a permanent basis. Newzad, civil engineer and about 30 years old at that time, described the situation many Kurdish men experienced in the first half of the 1990s as follows:

*In the beginning, it was only my brother and me who were in Sweden. We had fled from the war between Iran and Iraq and the political situation in the country. In 1991 we were able to return for the first time. Our sisters and*



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*parents wanted to come with us to Sweden, but we told them that the situation in Kurdistan would improve now. We even told them that we would soon return permanently. I got married and helped at the University of Suleymania, but in 1996 the situation became increasingly worse so we helped our relatives to get to Sweden. My wife also came along.*

Due to political instability and turmoil, occasional visits and plans to return among Kurds in the diaspora were replaced by 'import marriages', chain migration of relatives and by a rise in the number of Kurdish asylum seekers in Europe and the United States (Emanuelsson 2005:84). In the case of Newzad, he and his brother helped their parents and sisters to come to Sweden, whilst his wife's family stayed in Kurdistan. In other cases, it was the parents and siblings of the woman who sought asylum in Sweden or another European country. This was the case for Hewar, whose experience illustrates a typical situation for many of the young women who married expatriate Kurds. It also shows the emotions involved in leaving behind family and life in Kurdistan as well as the dependence these women initially experience in relation to their husbands:

*I experienced many and big changes in my life when I married and followed my husband to Sweden. I was only nineteen and pregnant. In the beginning I felt very bad and could not sleep. After a year my parents and siblings arrived. They supported me and I got a chance to plan for the future. In the end, life has turned out fine for me - even though my husband had to help me with everything in the beginning. I have supplemented my education and advanced at my place of work.*

Some of these marriages have ended in divorce. Dilsha described her failed marriage as follows: "There was nothing wrong with my husband, but I was not in love with him. My dad forced me to get married, perhaps in order to guarantee one ticket to Europe." This illustrates the patriarchal society in Kurdistan, but also shows how efforts aimed at improving family security and livelihood through migration has the potential to create further complexities in Kurdistan's ongoing development processes. Researchers describe the position of women in Kurdistan as contradictory (Alinia 2004:271-284). On the one hand, Kurdish society could be characterised as male-dominated, on the other hand, individual women have for generations been able to study and reach high positions. Their involvement in Kurdish political parties has also increased both quantitatively and qualitatively in the past decades.

Moreover, migration usually affects the relationship between men and women to the advantage of the latter. Compared to before, the women have more rights and are more optimistic about the new society than many men. The men often feel discriminated against and therefore create a 'home' among compatriots (ibid). If, however, chances to return were to come, this situation would bear the potential risk of increased conflict between Kurdish spouses (cf. Darvishpour 2004:113-117). Because women also experience discrimination in countries of settlement, it is important to highlight the complexity of their situation and not let dichotomies, such as Sweden/Kurdistan, modernity/tradition and development/ stagnation one-sidedly determine the analysis of gender relations. In addition, the women's experiences differ in relation to age, class, education, social background and ideology (Alinia 2004).

For refugee families with children, the political changes in 1991 meant that many children were offered a chance to meet grandparents and cousins for the first time.

This is how Dilan, a twenty-year-old university student, remembered his first encounter with life in Kurdistan:

*I was six years old when I met my grandparents for the first time. We crossed the border between Turkey and Iraq with an old bus. The bridge we had to cross was made of tree trunks. Actually, it was very dangerous. The Turkish military also searched our entire luggage. Everything was very strange. It was like a film. I also saw many weapons. All my relatives had weapons. It was fun to meet them, but the children played differently. We were used to playing computer games, but they threw stones and played dangerously.*

Curiosity and happiness to meet relatives has become gradually more complicated due to new experiences appearing to be different and dangerous. So far, research has only focused on 'honour killings', 'generational conflicts' and 'mother/daughter relationships' (cf. Wikan 2003; Darvishpour 2004; Ekervalld 2004; Ask 2006). However, children's experiences of life in Kurdistan are also relevant when parents discuss the pros and cons regarding the issue of return. Another interesting point in this context is the differences between the first and 'second' generation of Kurds in terms of ethnic identity (cf. Alinia 2004:334).

Despite the fact that contacts between Kurds in the diaspora and the homeland again decreased in the middle of the 90s as a result of the internal war, there was always someone within the circle of family and friends in Europe travelling to Kurdistan who could deliver letters, medication and money for shelter, phoning and the like. Before the oil-for-food arrangements came into effect in 1998, the income of most Kurds declined considerably due to the obstruction of aid deliveries and double sanctions (Emanuelsson 1995). Many of the interviewees described how they helped their relatives financially, but how they sometimes had been forced to choose between improving the welfare of their family in Sweden and supporting relatives (primarily parents and siblings) in Kurdistan. Evin described how, instead of completing their education, she and her husband work in order to send money to Kurdistan. Nebez described a situation that is probably even more common:

*I have helped my relatives in Kurdistan with money and medication. So has everyone in the diaspora. There was a time when I also printed posters and demonstrated to influence politics. Today, I have to work and support my family.*

The amount of support provided is also influenced by how expatriate Kurds themselves view the change in their relatives' needs and living conditions. Even if Dilber's statement is to some extent ironic, there are probably others in the diaspora who would agree with her position: "In the 90s we sent money to them, but now they have such a good economic situation, they soon will be the ones to send us some money". On the other hand, many express a willingness to contribute with skills and knowledge to the reconstruction process in Kurdistan. The atmosphere among many Kurds in the years after the fall of the Iraqi regime can be characterised as a mixture of happiness, worry and impatience. Today most of them feel that the overall situation is much more positive than it used to be; however, at the same time they worry about developments in other parts of Iraq. Moreover, they are impatient about the Kurdish development policy and its implementation by Kurdish political actors - feelings and opinions that are blended with shattered hopes in the mid-90s due to the internal war (Emanuelsson 2007). At the same time, the issue of return is central to their thoughts and discussions but much more complex in reality than imagined.

### 3. Families with children: relatives vs welfare

Like other Kurds in Sweden, families with children travel to Kurdistan to visit relatives and experience the atmosphere of the country. According to many of the interviewees, parents need to decide whether to stay or return before their children grow up. They argued that it would be easier for young children to leave Sweden and adapt to life in Kurdistan. During their holidays, therefore, parents often enquire about housing and labour possibilities. Nebez, an academic who is now self-employed, illustrated some thoughts, considerations and activities central to families with children:

*My wife and I would like to move back to Kurdistan before our children get older. Small children more easily adapt to life there. It is easier for us than for those who have teenagers. The best would be if we could relocate temporarily first. We have lived in Sweden for many years and got used to many things here. At the moment, I am trying to establish a firm in Kurdistan, but for economic reasons I have to work in Sweden simultaneously. It is difficult to be in two places, but we need to have something there before we can return. In order to settle, we must earn our living and afford to pay for accommodation - and houses are expensive in Kurdistan. I am sure our children will do fine even if the educational and medical standards are not as good as in Sweden.*

Obviously, earning money in order to pay for accommodation (after having lived some time with relatives) and meet material needs represents the most important aspect for families.<sup>2</sup> The possibility to return to Sweden if life does not turn out as planned or if one misses the high living standards achieved in Sweden is also crucial. Even if the wife can contribute useful skills to the development process in Kurdistan, families often base their economic calculations on the role of the husband as 'main breadwinner'. In many cases, the wife eventually starts working after life has normalized and childcare has been arranged (often through relatives). Naturally, therefore, the man lays the ground by starting to commute between Sweden and Kurdistan. Kemal, a fully employed civil engineer, highlighted additional aspects:

*I submitted applications and was offered a job in Kurdistan last year, but the salary was too low. I have to consider the financial situation with regard to my family. I have a permanent position and will not take any risks. I hope the companies in Kurdistan will soon realize that they have to pay for competence and I will continue seeking new opportunities. We would like to live close to our families in Kurdistan, but we must make sure we can meet our needs, and my work is important. We have decided that I will commute and my wife and children will join me after initial arrangements are made. Thanks to good flight connections this is possible.*

The animating spirit behind the considerations and plans to (try to) return is the desire to live closer to relatives and obtain a broader network and better social life. Consequently, considerations and discussions among parents concern weighing up the economic and material needs of the family and social needs, which many believe can be more fully met in Kurdistan. For well-educated men with a job in Sweden it is also important that their knowledge and status are confirmed with a reasonable salary. Soren, who has returned to Sweden again, pointed out some important work-related and social factors which are balanced against increased proximity to relatives:

*We returned to Kurdistan in 2004 and stayed there for one and a half years. This had been my dream since 1984. My wife wanted to live close to her family. We took the chance when I was offered a job and a flat. However, while it was good there, I missed Sweden. My mistake was that I was comparing all the time. Some say one should cut all ties with Sweden, but I am happy we had the opportunity to come back. I was only on leave from my job in Sweden and we had kept our flat. It was the traffic chaos, defective refuse collection and electricity cuts that irritated me most. They have resources, but there is so much bureaucracy and they are not used to working efficiently. I understand that development takes time, but many people also lack necessary knowledge and openness. At my place of work, I had to do everything myself which I was not used to doing in Sweden. I became irritated and started complaining. I told others to do this and that and finally I went too far. One never knows if moving back to Kurdistan may become an option again, but I do not hope so because I did not feel well there.*

On the one hand, men are generally positive and comprehend Kurdistan's development as a process. On the other hand, they often compare the conditions in Kurdistan with those in Sweden; they tend to shift to an 'us-and-them' perspective, especially if they have experienced a lack of confidence and appreciation from co-workers. Some prefer to stay in Sweden but to visit relatives in Kurdistan as often as possible. Newzad, who has also returned to Sweden, mentioned further issues:

*My wife still wants to return to Kurdistan. She misses her family and we believe our children will have a good life in Kurdistan. My failures at work, however, made me realize that I have got used to the Swedish system. I want to make plans for my career and life. My wife is also aware of the problems when she stays in Kurdistan for a longer time, nevertheless she wants to return. At the moment she travels regularly instead of us moving there. However, I presume we will try again, but first I hope they will become more organised and open in Kurdistan.*

While parents with younger children have the opportunity to be flexible, it is important for parents with school children to decide firmly whether to stay or return. They are concerned about their economic and working conditions and about their relatives, but the situation of their children has become increasingly important. Perwin and her husband miss social life in Kurdistan and plan to return permanently as soon as they are sure to meet the material and leisure needs of their children. Moreover, they are not willing to try out transnational alternatives due to the children's need for both parents. Perwin described her family's reasoning as follows:

*My husband and I would like to return because we will have a better social life in Kurdistan among our relatives and friends. I have lived here for thirteen years, but it was only last year that we got to know a Swedish family. My husband has a Swedish friend, but I enjoy socialising with other families. I miss that a lot. In addition, I have my whole family in Kurdistan. If we had jobs there, we would move immediately. We could stay at my parents' place in the beginning, but we need to support ourselves. We know a family that came back to Sweden and their children missed two years at school. It is important to plan carefully and not only to follow one's immediate feelings for the homeland. It is not good for children to move back and forth and I want mine to grow up with both of their parents.*

In those cases where the closest relatives live in Sweden, the family's considerations are quite the opposite. Gulshen cast more light on this issue and the fact that the children's age strongly influences the parents' considerations:

*It was strange to visit Kurdistan. I have no family left there and stayed in a hotel. When I think about returning, a job and a house are most important for me. But I am not prepared to return to a situation where my daughter might be treated as 'Swedish' by other children. Moreover, she likes her life here and I do not think she would like to move to Kurdistan.*

Whilst some of the interviewees chose to highlight the positive facets of living close to relatives, others indicate that relatives can be a source of problems. First and foremost, this has to do with the way relatives interfere and limit the freedom of the women and the private life of the nuclear family. Although these aspects are more often referred to by women with older children it does not automatically imply that the prospect of trying to return is rejected. Some wives want to return because their husbands are unhappy in Sweden; they are determined to tackle expected difficulties in Kurdistan. Transnational life and circulation also present possible alternatives for these women.

#### **4. Families with adolescents: transnational family life takes form**

Kurdistan families with teenagers and unmarried young adults, who have lived in Sweden for more than eight years, consider the possibility or necessity to set up some sort of transnational organisation of the nuclear family. The parents point to the fact that their elder children feel 'Swedish' in a different way than they do, as they prioritise their personal activities and relationships in Sweden and would like to decide for themselves when to visit Kurdistan. The parents are also involved in their children's education and reckon that they would face difficulties following teaching instructions in Kurdish. Sirwe, who came to Sweden in 1996, portrayed the situation as follows:

*I often go to Kurdistan. My whole family lives there. My husband's family lives in Sweden, but it is not possible to socialise a lot because everyone is working. Even if conditions are better for us in Kurdistan, we cannot return now because we have no house there and the salaries are low. We think a lot about returning, but our children think differently. They want to go to university here and get a good education. Perhaps they can consider working in Kurdistan after their studies - at least my daughter who likes Kurdistan. My son, on the other hand, does not have any feelings for my country. He wants to stay in Sweden and does not even want to go to Kurdistan on holiday. He says that he does not have anything in common with the people there anymore.*

Even if Sirwe and her husband presently content themselves with merely visiting Kurdistan from time to time, their hope is to return and settle down permanently one day. Sirwe is, however, clear about the fact that their children may not join them and that a transnational organisation of the family is perhaps the only alternative. Whilst men who arrived in Sweden just before the new millennium most often returned quickly after 2003, Sirwe's husband belongs to the group of men who preferred to wait; they often have negative experiences from the internal war and/or have recently learnt Swedish and begun to work there. Those who have been in Sweden since 1980s and have not succeeded in their working life wish to return quickly in order to set up a firm or take on an administrative job. Sherko, for

instance, expressed how he is “tired of Sweden and seeks a new start for his [working]-life in Kurdistan”. Women in the same category, who feel happy about the new opportunities in Kurdistan, feel at the same time quite comfortable about life in Sweden. Often they struggle to compromise between their husband’s and children’s wishes and priorities. Mehabad, who has lived in Sweden for more than twenty years, illustrated a common situation in Kurdish families with teenagers and young unmarried adults:

*My son has explained to me that if he moves to Kurdistan he will miss Sweden in the same way as we miss Kurdistan. My husband and I have dreamt of returning since 1984 but now, being possible, I have realised that it will not be easy. My daughter has a few friends in Kurdistan, but I have begun to think about what sort of life she will have there. Apparently, while my husband sticks to our dream, I have begun to realise that he may have to return alone and that I may perhaps join him for four months each year. Yet I am considering all options in search of a solution.*

For Sazan who has also lived in Sweden for more than twenty years, the transnational organisation of the family has already become reality. Whilst she lives in Kurdistan together with her husband and two youngest children, their two eldest live in Sweden. She described the common processes some families go through and the transnational organisation which emerges as a result:

*We returned to Kurdistan two years ago. My husband was eager to move back because he had not been able to work in Sweden for a long time. It was easier for me in Sweden because I worked and had colleagues, but I also missed my country and wanted to participate in the reconstruction process. Our oldest daughter did not join us because she was studying. Our second son only managed to stay one year before he moved back to Sweden to study. Life was difficult for him in Kurdistan, but this summer he may come to work with us. My youngest children have new friends at school in Kurdistan. The returnees from Europe support each other, but sometimes they are anxious and believe they are missing a lot of information. I have not lived in Kurdistan for 24 years so it is difficult for me too, but I like my husband and could not cope with his frustration in Sweden any longer. I know many women in the same situation. The husband is unhappy, the children do not want to move and the wife does not know what to do. I also know mothers who are alone with teenagers in Sweden; they are also struggling. Why did the father bring his children to Sweden and now that Kurdistan is free, he has returned and left them behind? Would the father just stay in Sweden and let the time pass? I do not know. There is no choice. But it is most difficult for the mother, as she is the one who has to answer the children’s questions.*

Tavge, another woman in her forties, has decided to accompany her children, leaving behind her husband in Kurdistan:

*We sold everything and returned. Now I am back, but my husband has stayed in Kurdistan. Our children have been brought up in Sweden and are used to certain standards. Their classmates and teachers in Kurdistan viewed them as ‘Swedish’ and our children asked me: “We are immigrants here and we are immigrants in Sweden, who are we actually?” As a mum, that makes you so sad. Many also believe that returnees are snobbish, but my children could not go to a common school due to their language deficiencies. I also had to struggle with the housework and new routines. There are not so many supermarkets and one must wait for water and electricity. Today I am uncertain what to do; maybe I will try again.*

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Like other women, Tavge tried to find a solution which would satisfy both the needs of her husband and children. In her case, her husband had found a suitable job in his field in Sweden, but after some years in Kurdistan he was not prepared to give up his social well-being in Kurdistan. Tavge will probably try to return again. Even if it is a difficult step for most of the women to leave their grown-up children in Sweden, some reason as Nazdar:

*I am going to return to Kurdistan in few years time. Of course, I would prefer if a couple of my children would like to study or work there, at least temporarily. But they all will soon be adults and manage without me. Compared to me, they feel totally Swedish.*

Even if Rêzin (a young man who has lived in Sweden for about seven years) refers to a family he knows that “has moved back to Kurdistan because the father does not want his daughters to be like Swedish girls” and this indicates severe limitations on some young (unmarried) girls outside the family sphere, this study does not confirm such a trend. One of Sazan’s daughters, for instance, already lives and studies in another Swedish city and one of Tavge’s daughters is about to start her first year at college in the US.

Obviously, relationships between family members change with time, often in relation to life cycle changes. Some of the interviewees explained how their old family members stay in Kurdistan for longer periods of time in order to escape their loneliness in Europe. In Sweden their children are busy working, but in Kurdistan there are others to socialise with. By weighing up the less reliable healthcare system in Kurdistan and the loneliness in Europe, many try to find a reasonable solution to their situation. In some cases the older family members are too sick to return, which influences the possibilities of the children; in others the relatives in Kurdistan are not prepared to take over the responsibilities. Women with smaller children are generally more positive about returning than women with teenagers, as it would allow them to live close to their relatives. The latter category does not firmly express such a need even if they experience limited social life in Sweden. Sazan’s considerations also reflect this position:

*I returned because I wanted to live with my husband and contribute to Kurdistan’s development. My relatives were not important at all. They are not the same as they were when I left 24 years ago. My mum and dad are dead and my siblings live in different places. Rather the opposite, I believe relatives cause a lot of problems for Kurdish women. They talk too much. In the beginning, they gossiped about me too, but I am determined. I live as I did in Sweden and they have to accept that. I do not have time to visit all of them or receive guests every day.*

As opposed to the interviewed women with smaller children, Sazan does not need the emotional and practical support from relatives. Like Sazan, others also described how they are irritated by relatives who interfere or pay visits without previous notification. The fact that relatives can simultaneously be a source of comfort and support in life and a source of trouble and conflicts was a theme repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees.

Just as among fathers with smaller children, there are also well-educated and employed men in this group who want to (try to) work in Kurdistan, contribute to the development and gain new experiences. However, they have the possibility to wait for favourable conditions to keep or even improve the status and financial

situation of their family. Men in this category more often consider circulating whilst maintaining Sweden as their base with regard to the needs of their children, be it in regard to their identity, language difficulties, educational plans or friends. Kawe described the situation as follows:

*I believe I can contribute to the development in Kurdistan because of my education and working experiences in Sweden. Although I would like to return, I am not free to take such a decision with regard to my family situation. My children were born and brought up in Sweden and they need me, too. My dream is to live and work in Kurdistan by contributing for perhaps two years and to return to my family in Sweden after that. I have many ideas, but I do not know how to put them into practise. My wife knows about my hopes, but we have not yet discussed the situation seriously.*

On a different level some men have skills especially suited for transnational arrangements (for example businessmen, researchers and specialists). Thus, they can plan for the future together with their wife and children and maybe have a summer house in Kurdistan until their children have completed their studies, and perhaps later in Sweden. In those cases where the wives are not put under pressure by the fact that their husbands feel unhappy in Sweden, they bring forth their own emotional, social and cultural ties to Sweden as arguments in favour of holidays and transnational arrangements instead of permanent return. Goran's considerations illustrate some factors that have been discussed and weighed in these families:

*In fact, I would like to move back to Kurdistan but my wife and children do not. My wife says that she has more freedom in Sweden and the children have their friends here. In addition, their Kurdish is not good enough to achieve good results at school. Well, I have been thinking about commuting, which could be a way to rebuild something there. But there are also other problems. I am not sure we would manage financially. The salaries in Kurdistan are low. We have not kept a house there and we are used to certain standards. Moreover, I am well-educated and have struggled hard in Sweden – I do not want to lose my dignity by starting all over again.*

In a situation where the process of modern institution building and developing administrative standards has only just begun, it could be difficult for someone without contacts to get started and settle in. Goran was not sure whether he would be able to maintain the status he has gained in Sweden due to his education and work. He points out that “you do not become rich in Sweden”, as both purchasing a house of his own and establishing a company were not easy for him. In contrast, one of the interviewees without formal education but with contacts was convinced that a relatively fast re-establishment in Kurdistan is possible. Put differently, the position someone has reached in Sweden through education and work is not always valued equally in Kurdistan.

## **5. Women's dilemma: individual freedom vs family life in Kurdistan**

The view that Kurdish women do not want to return to the same extent as their spouses or do not want to return at all is confirmed in this study. A shift several women refer to is the fact that they have developed into more independent individuals in Sweden detached from their relatives' control of clothing and behaviour. Intimate relations in the nuclear family have been strengthened in the new situation. The women's attitude towards returning has certainly been influenced by the fact that returning could imply being forced to conform and relate



to their relatives' opinions in areas they believe only concern themselves or the nuclear family. Dilber, who has been living in Sweden since the beginning of the 80s, illustrated the situation as follows:

*I do not believe that any Kurdish woman would like to move back to Kurdistan. In Sweden, we can live and dress as we please without anybody interfering. The men, on the other hand, want to return because they believe they will regain contact with old friends and have a better social life. In Sweden, they socialise more with their wife and children – and I like that. Of course, I also get bored by watching TV every evening, but I prefer that to a situation in which men and women live separate lives. And, of course, the women in Sweden are exposed to a lot of stress with both family and work, but I do not want to stay at home. I know my sister likes her life in Kurdistan, but I am used to something else now.*

Although Dilber misses a broader social life and feels that everyday life in Sweden is stressful for women, she would not want to exchange the quality of the relationship to her husband for a broader family life in Kurdistan. Neither would she prefer a calmer life as a housewife in Kurdistan to what she considers to be her individual freedom in Sweden. For Hewar with school-aged children, women-issues were also of considerable importance:

*After ten years in Sweden, I missed Kurdistan - but when I was there, I felt like a stranger and missed Sweden. The extended family and the neighbours interfered in all private matters. On the one hand it is nice because you know that they care about you. On the other hand I felt like I was in a prison. I have developed my personality in Sweden. In Kurdistan, a woman lives through her husband. Many men want to return but their wives do not. I have told my husband that I would consider returning if I knew that I could live there like I do in Sweden - perhaps this is possible in Suleymania. It also has to do with how educated or traditional the family is, but the men may change in Kurdistan. They meet friends in the evenings and are not together with their wives and children. I feel more at home in Sweden, but I hope I will feel better next time we visit Kurdistan. Some Kurds say that I have become too Swedish, but I do not understand what they mean. I am a Kurd, but I also have Swedish friends. Those who criticise me do not have any Swedish friends. I feel neither 100 per cent Kurdish nor Swedish, but I entered adulthood in Sweden and that has shaped me into the person that I am. To return is a major decision and the issue constantly occupies my mind. I keep comparing Kurdistan with Sweden all the time. It will take a long time for me to decide what to do. The best would be if my parents returned so we could visit them often.*

Several male interviewees acknowledged that relatives dominate family life in Kurdistan and that many women experience greater individual freedom in Sweden. Whilst some pointed out that women who have always lived in Kurdistan cope well others acknowledged that they also enjoy the closeness to their wife and children they have developed in Sweden. Helmet expressed this as follows:

*In Kurdistan we belong to social networks in which people look after and feel for each other. But here we have learned to live differently. You do not appreciate people just showing up at your place. You are tired after work and want to spend time with your wife and children. I do not think I would change these habits if I moved back to Kurdistan. I would perhaps meet my friends, but I would also continue to socialise with my wife. There are many new*

*restaurants and parks for families. Kurdistan has been isolated for such a long time, but now people have begun to receive inputs, knowledge and information from the outside. The development will take time, but the progress is already visible.*

Both the female and the male interviewees referred to the positive changes in Kurdistan in terms of more rights and freedom for women and unmarried young people who can move more freely in certain cities; there are new places to go to and activities to do. Many Kurdish women work and some have reached high positions. In addition, the number of women's organisations and help centres is increasing. Simultaneously, many refer to the paradoxes in the women's lives. On the one hand women have had the possibility to study and work for many years; on the other hand they are still subordinated to their husbands and sometimes confined to a women-dominated sphere on private occasions. In some cases young girls are absorbed by the family sphere before and after their studies, whereas during their studies – which *per se* are highly valued – they enjoy the freedom to live on campus in other cities – a situation which leads to the assumption of double standards (cf. Ekervald 2004:92-93; Ask 2006:215-219).

Undoubtedly modernisation yields new hopes and expectations. The interviews show, however, that modernisation itself is not a straightforward notion. It is a complex process which takes shape in 'democratic' meetings between people in different places and positions. Many of the interviewees agreed that this process requires fuelling from the outside. At the same time they emphasised that returnees should not ask for the impossible and be reasonable with regard to achievable time frames for the transformation process. On the other hand they believed that returnees have the right to express their views and be respected. Like Nishtiman, some women have seen small but crucial processes taking shape within the family during their stays in Kurdistan:

*The women in my husband's family were curious about life in Sweden. They asked, for instance, if Kurdish women abroad have changed in the sense that no-fault divorce filings have increased. I wanted to know where they had the information from. No doubt, ill-treated or assaulted women should get divorced. Anyway, they showed big interest and asked more questions. They also wondered how come my children were so nice – they had heard that all children in Europe lack respect for their parents, use drugs and only run after girls. I explained how we communicate with our children. The women were eager to learn new things. Therefore I believe that returnee women should not totally adapt when it comes to clothing and behaviour. Of course one should show respect and not exaggerate. But we must also signal when we feel excluded or are treated badly.*

Whilst most of the women appreciate opportunities to influence the changes, they are not sure whether they will be strong enough in the long run to deal with superstitions and being considered as a threat by male relatives and others. To some extent they worry that their husbands may fall into previous behaviour patterns if they returned and that other returnee women may not be strong enough to stand up against the male-dominated structure. Even if their reasoning sometimes shifts to a 'we-and-them perspective' where Sweden represents 'the good' and Kurdistan 'the bad', their overall understanding shows variations and complexity. Whilst some take up a more moderate position, others point out that Sweden is basically also a patriarchy. Consequently, the women's reflections on the issue of return touch many different dimensions and aspects. It would be a more profound change and challenge for them than for their husbands.

**6. Young girls and boys: Time and place priorities and considerations**

The young girls and boys interviewed were happy that Kurdistan has become more accessible and has embarked on its modernisation process.<sup>3</sup> Preoccupied by their studies and life in Sweden and unlike their parents, they do not express worries or restlessness with regard to the development process in Kurdistan. As to future perspectives, their attitudes and plans depend on whether they left Kurdistan at the end of the 90s or have grown up in Sweden. Among those who have grown up in Kurdistan, as Soma, many plan to return after completion of their studies:

*The situation in Kurdistan is fine. My dad has already returned and has a good job. First, I have to think about my education, but later I will return to Kurdistan. At the moment, I have many friends here and like my life, but later it will be fun to live there, because I come from Kurdistan and all my relatives live there. Presently only my mum, my siblings and I still live in Sweden. My mum was so sad when dad moved away. Now she is complaining all the time. She says: "I am here because of your education" and "if I return everything will be good for me". I know that she has a difficult time, but she could return – we can manage on our own because we are all grown-up. And I know she will return soon even if she misses us all the time. Due to the fact that I had already reached a certain age by the time I arrived in Sweden it will be easy for me to return, but for my sister who came here when she was 9 years old it will perhaps be more difficult. The language is a problem for her. She also behaves 'Swedish' when she discusses things and she has no contact with other Kurds. On the other hand, she was very happy about her visit to Kurdistan last year. She appreciated the fact that all our relatives were nice and looked after her. She also had the impression that life in Kurdistan seems to be less demanding than life in Sweden.*

Most girls emphasised that while there are cultural restrictions and social control in Kurdistan (and among Kurds in Sweden), the situation for girls mostly depends on how their parents communicate with their children (cf. Ekerwald 2004). Soma was convinced that she and her siblings would be able to manage on their own if their mother joined their father in Kurdistan, but the family is of central importance to her and she perceives their transnational arrangement as a temporary solution. Shênê emphasised similar aspects:

*Currently, Kurdistan is developing in several respects, especially Suleymania which has always been in the lead. Girls do not usually wear tight clothes as we do here, but some shops sell them and I saw some women wearing such clothes. On the other hand, you ought to be careful and it is not fun to hear degrading comments. There are also many new women's organisations and everyone has become equal before the law. Of course, there are still shortcomings. For example, there is a lack of swimming pools and other activities for women, but I believe the organisations will achieve good results through their work. Moreover, the situation of the women depends on the family. Last summer my friend and I were out until nine, but it is alright if you are careful. If the parents trust their daughters and sons, there won't be any big problems. However, it might be easier for me to return than for those who have lived in Sweden their whole life. I know how people think and I am probably more sensible. But not everything is about culture; many parents are worried because of the lack of security.*

Although these girls enjoy their lives in Sweden and live as most adolescents do (i.e. study, go to cafés and the cinema, go shopping and socialise with friends), they also feel at home in Kurdistan due to their experiences and social relations. From a distance and during holidays they have been exposed to the development process in Kurdistan. They show great consciousness about the development process and have confidence that the situation of women in terms of clothing, rights and relations will continue to progress despite differences between cities and between urban and rural areas.

The girls interviewed, especially those who are already married and plan to have children, are more sceptical than the boys about the idea of permanent transnationalisation of the family. Like the women with small children, Leylan prefers to live close to her parents and is planning to return. She was weighing up the emotional, social and practical advantages of living close to her parents and the welfare and women's freedoms in Sweden. As in other cases her story shows how she, both woman and mother, tries to balance the ongoing process of change of Kurdistan's patriarchal power and the family structure:

*I enjoy life in Sweden in many ways, but I would like to live close to my family. We have bought some land and will try to return when we have our first child. My mother will look after the children when I will be working, so everything will be easier than in Sweden. It is also important for me that my children have more people around than just their parents. Boys and girls are still treated differently and educational standards in Kurdistan are lower, but the children do not have any relatives in Sweden. I will pass on some experiences gained in Sweden. For example, I believe that one should always follow one's heart when it comes to love and marriage. But because of the control by relatives it will not be possible for my daughter to take a walk at night with a boy without supervision. It has become better, but it also depends on the family. I have always been close to my dad and he trusted that I would not cross the boundaries. The only thing I will have problem with is that I like to wear short skirts, but things have improved there as well.*

Yet, in a similar way to parents with smaller children, it is important for Leylan that her husband has a better job in Kurdistan than he used to have in Sweden and that they are able to keep the door to Sweden open. Thus, even if these young adults prefer a temporary transnational organisation of their (first) family, new circumstances related to life-cycle changes are liable to be more important than living close to parents.

In Dalia's case, another young woman who has lived in Sweden since the mid-90s, her husband neither wants to return to Kurdistan nor does he prioritise Kurdistan as a holiday destination. They enjoy the living standards, their working life and friends in Sweden. Both for Leylan and Dalia it is important where their parents and siblings live. Dalia did not like the idea that her mother was considering returning to Kurdistan and was pleased to find out that her mother has begun to realise that going to Kurdistan on holiday to visit relatives is sufficient. In a future scenario, however, one cannot exclude transnationalisation of the family. This was Dalia's view of her situation:

*I have not visited Kurdistan yet because I have my whole family in Sweden. Sometimes I miss the atmosphere and hearing the language, but to live there does not suit me. It will not be like Sweden for another 50 years. My mum missed Kurdistan and went there last summer. It was nice for her to meet all her relatives, but nothing else was functioning so I hope she has given up her idea of returning. My dad has negative political memories of Kurdistan. My*

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*husband and I would like to visit Kurdistan, but I do not know when. My father-in-law is building a house which we can use when we visit. He has been depressed, but my mother-in-law prefers to live here so they will travel back and forth in the coming years.*

The young male interviewees tended to disregard their parents' intentions when making plans for their own future. Rêzin considered returning regardless of his parents' decision. Due to the fact that he feels connected both to Sweden and Kurdistan he was considering different transnational alternatives:

*In one year I will finish my studies. Either I will go directly to Kurdistan or first to Britain to enhance my English. I have not decided yet. My dad is already in Kurdistan. He felt lonely in Sweden. My mum of course cares about my younger siblings and will stay until she finds a good educational setting for them in Kurdistan. I would like to work in Kurdistan in the future. It is the culture and my background which are important. I also want to contribute to the country's development. Maybe I will come back to Sweden again someday. It is alright to have one foot in each place.*

The differences between men and women in the parents' generation regarding return issues also become apparent in the children's statements. Whilst the adolescents who have grown up in Sweden described the situation of their parents in a similar way, their own situation differs from those who have grown up in Kurdistan. They have heard their parents talk about Kurdistan and have visited relatives, but they have no social relations they consider to be their own and their experiences are limited to holidays and specific events. Despite the fact that it is difficult for them to imagine living in Kurdistan on a permanent basis, they are open for temporary employment opportunities in the future. This is how Serbast summarises his experiences while visiting Kurdistan last summer for the first time in 14 years:

*It was exiting and our relatives took good care of us, but I did not know anyone. Many say that social life is so different, but I liked it. My relatives and everyone else looked like me. Of course, if they did not understand they said: "You are so Swedish" and here I am viewed as an immigrant. But it was fun to be out at night with all my relatives. Of course, there is a lack of places for young people to go to and there were mainly men outside. The society has not developed further in 30 years, but now it is opening up. I do not think the social 'we-culture' is such a big problem. In Sweden we have an 'I-culture' and of course it is different when you meet a girl. In Kurdistan there are always two families which agree and make arrangements, whereas here only two individuals are involved. I have been marked by Swedish society, but I have been brought up by Kurdish parents. I know the advantages and disadvantages of both cultures. Thus, I am trying to find a balance between the two. After all, people are individuals in Kurdistan too. My first impression of Kurdistan was good, but I must find out much more about the life and labour market before I settle there. In addition, I am currently preoccupied by my educational plans and I do not know what will open up for me in the future.*

For Serbast and other young men experiences connected with Kurdistan serve as a point of reference in their identity process, i.e. in the attempt to find a balance between life in Sweden and their Kurdish background. Dilan, who is also positive

towards temporary work in Kurdistan, irrespective of where his parents decide to settle, elucidated the issue from his perspective:

*Most people in my generation do not want to return. The educational system in Sweden is of better quality and has a higher reputation everywhere. In the future I might have a summer cottage in Kurdistan. Perhaps I would also engage in development work. It could also be a career opportunity that shows up. I would like to leave all doors open, irrespective of what my parents decide to do. My dad says he would like to return, but I do not think he could cope with the mentality in the long run. I know that I have my roots in Kurdistan, but I am not Kurdish in the same sense as my parents. In Sweden I feel Kurdish, but in Kurdistan I feel Swedish. The problem is that people in Sweden consider me as Kurdish, even if I speak more properly than many Swedes. I also feel Swedish when I meet young Kurds who have moved here recently. They remind me of the young people I met in Kurdistan.*

Rêbwar, another young man, expressed his feelings in a more dramatic way: “The only thing that is better in Kurdistan is that one is not considered as an immigrant”. For Serbest and Dilan the double identity is part of them as individuals, but they dislike being classified by others in either way.

The young women who have been brought up in Sweden do not perceive their personal or ascribed identity in terms of belonging to ethnic, national or immigrant groups. Like their mothers they feel fairly comfortable in Sweden, whereas their fathers would prefer to stay in Kurdistan over longer periods of time. These young women also have their ongoing education in focus, however with less emphasis on their own decision-making. Such differences could be explained by different roles and manoeuvre possibilities of men and women within their families. Sivan reasoned as follows:

*I was in Kurdistan last summer to visit relatives. I must admit that I was not eager to go, but mum persuaded me. But I enjoyed everything and I am pleased that I have the possibility to be part of everything there. If it had not been for my education, I would have joined a project in Kurdistan next summer. But to move there – that is something that has to develop gradually depending on who I will marry. I would prefer to marry a Kurd because then we will be in a better position to visit the country and show our children where we come from. My dad used to travel to Kurdistan fairly often. Sometimes he is very positive, but sometimes he is very sceptical. My parents have also lived in Sweden for quite some time, so the decision to return has to develop gradually for them too.*

The choice of partner also influences where and how they may live in the future. Sivan hoped to get to know her relatives better and perhaps contribute to the development of Kurdistan and argued that this would be easier to accomplish if she married a Kurd. However, she did not exclude the possibility of marrying someone outside the Kurdish group. This is an ongoing discussion in Kurdish families and some (but not all) parents would prefer their children to marry someone within the group. Contrary to Sivan, Rizgar considered both the practical and the ‘national/cultural’ dimensions of this discussion:

*I visited Kurdistan in 2000 with the idea of marriage in mind and, in fact, I got married. I was thinking about returning to Kurdistan on a permanent basis and thought that Swedish women would not like to live in Kurdistan. I have no prejudices against Swedish people, I have many Swedish friends, but when it comes to having children I think differently.*

Regarding the situation of women in Kurdistan, the young people who have been brought up in Sweden also consider development as a gradual process. Like Serbest, Sivan described the situation as better than expected and believes that it is gradually improving. However, they have experienced situations that made them think more about the status of women in Kurdistan. These are Sivan's considerations:

*The most obvious cultural clash became apparent between my mum and our relatives in Kurdistan. Mum thought that her brother-in-law did not show her sister respect. I suppose I should have been more alert to such things, but mum expected more of the people in Kurdistan than I did. I did not expect anything particular and was instead positively surprised by all the women centres and I do not think my girl-cousins' student life differs so much from my own. They are independent and have the freedom to develop self-esteem.*

Indeed, in contrast to the 'honour-killing stereotype', some young men have a more negative view than women of the same age. In their position as men they are similarly affected by their relatives' control function. Dilan's observations serve to further illustrate this:

*It is good that girls in Kurdistan have the possibility to study and pursue their career, but they must also keep in mind their reputation. A friend of mine who returned a couple of years ago with his parents is frustrated because he cannot date a girl in the same way as here. If you have been brought up in Sweden, boys and girls alike, you are used to have your own responsibilities and feel strange if relatives control you. I think it would be difficult for me to live there now. Maybe the situation was the same in Sweden in the 50s; it is a cultural aspect that will gradually change.*

In this context Rêbwar mentioned that he is "ashamed of Kurdish men who treat women as though they were not worth as much as men". The situation of women and young people in Kurdistan is something that both young men and women are concerned about. Most of them are open to change and variations are only marginal. However, there is a need for more profound studies in order to understand the position of young people in the family and in relation to the issues of return and transnationalisation.

## **7. Step-by-step return, separation or transnationalisation?**

The issue of return has turned into a real aspect of the lives of Kurdish refugees from Iraq. The issue has, however, turned out to be much more complicated and diverse than anticipated. Since 2003 many Kurds have been travelling to Kurdistan frequently on holiday to see their relatives and friends. During these visits they evaluate their experiences with regard to their social environment and their practical and material needs, as well as in comparison with their life in Sweden. At the level of the nuclear family individual members have been considering and negotiating their material and social needs in terms of a continuous process. The possibility to earn a living, acquire a stable financial situation, buy a house and satisfy material and welfare needs (such as schools and infrastructure) is balanced against the expectation of a warmer and broader social network among relatives and friends in Kurdistan. However, in cases where most of the close relatives live in Sweden or outside Kurdistan families do not plan to return in the near future and are sometimes even opposed to regular visits.

Thus, close relatives constitute a significant factor with regard to the issue of return. However, different stages of the family life cycle determine how important the relatives are in relation to other need-related factors, and influence the decision whether the whole or only part of the family will return, stay or circulate. As earlier research has illustrated, the needs of children of different ages turn out to be a crucial factor in the families' considerations and negotiations (cf. Bryceson and Vuorela 2002:17-18; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1016-18). Many Kurdish parents interviewed believed that it would be relatively easy to settle and work in Kurdistan as long as their children are small. In addition, the women would benefit from emotional and practical support from relatives if the decision were taken in favour of return. Some of the interviewees stated that if the plan was to stay on a permanent basis, it would be important to be able to return to Sweden permanently or on holiday if life in Kurdistan did not turn out as planned or if a family member missed living in Sweden. Since they are all holders of Swedish citizenship it would always be possible for them to return.

As the children grow older, several factors such as school, educational options, friends, material needs, leisure activities, language skills and identity have to be taken into account. The family considerations predominantly concern the decision to stay or return (so that the children do not have to relocate several times) and how to organise continued circulation in terms of holidays in Kurdistan or Sweden. As the children mature into adulthood and eventually get married, more transnational alternatives become both necessary and apparent. Either the father starts to commute or relocate beforehand or both parents (try to) settle in Kurdistan while the children continue to study or pursue their own family lives in Sweden. Young adults who have lived in Sweden over a period of less than eight years often plan to return after finishing their education. Although those who have lived in Sweden for a longer time feel more at home there, they are not totally ignorant about Kurdistan - a phenomenon often assumed to be present among 'the second generation' (ibid). According to their statements many of these young adults are positive towards developing relationships with their relatives and travelling to Kurdistan for holidays or for temporary jobs.

The different roles and opportunities of men and women are other crucial aspects influencing the families' considerations and negotiations. The men who feel isolated and excluded from the Swedish labour market often want to return to Kurdistan and start over again in order to improve their emotional and financial situation. An interest in circulating and perhaps moving back to Kurdistan step-by-step is, however, also apparent amongst men who have completed their education and worked in their own profession. This clearly indicates that it is possible to be integrated into Swedish society and to be transnational at the same time. Whilst these men want to contribute to the reconstruction of Kurdistan and simultaneously gain new experiences in their field, they are not prepared to risk the economic welfare of their family or their own professional status. In other words, they are keen to get a reasonable salary but also some sort of formal recognition or structural support that would strengthen them in a hierarchical system which they consider to be based more on informal networks than on qualifications and efficiency.

Even though the women mostly share the men's enthusiasm about the political changes and opportunities in Kurdistan, they tend to be more satisfied with their lives in Sweden than the men. The women interviewed, who experience and value greater freedom in Sweden, know that their children regard Sweden as their 'home'. Whilst the women with younger children sometimes miss the support from older relatives, others with older children emphasise that relatives also create problems for them as they interfere and limit the decision-making of the women and the



nuclear family. The task of the women in the ongoing family negotiations is, therefore, to find a transnational solution to meet the needs of both the men and children and to some extent their own. An important conclusion in this context is that the women's considerations are more complex than the gender dichotomisation suggests in terms of modern lifestyle versus tradition. Settling in Kurdistan is, however, a greater challenge for the women than for their husbands.

Earlier studies of Kurdish refugees have emphasised the dream of returning and suggested that some would probably stay and some would return if the political situation improved. Interestingly the present study shows that a transnational perspective of return, as advocated by many of the interviewees, paves the way for a broader understanding of the processes and complexities involved. In other words, a better understanding of migrating people is provided by focusing on circulation and transnationality, transcending dualistic simplifications implicit in the strict notions of nation states (stay *contra* return). In a similar way to Bosnians in Sweden, Kurdish refugees do not commit themselves straight away to a one-way route of return; nor do they opt to remain in their host country. The transnational dynamics of their lives both in theory and practice are intensive in the immediate years after the long-anticipated regime change has finally come about. In the coming years, their transnational connection will ebb and flow as a result of political, economic and social changes in Kurdistan and Sweden.

The question whether 'return' should be considered as a process in the sense that increased transnational relations and circulation are the beginning of a situation in which many in the Kurdish diaspora are resettling in Kurdistan step-by-step will be exposed longitudinally. Although the ongoing process indicates that over time the men tend to extend their presence in Kurdistan whilst the women and children stay behind, it is too early to judge whether this will lead to increased family conflicts and eventually divorces between Kurdish spouses. Yet, some studies argue that transnationalisation of the family does not necessarily lead to its dissolution (cf. Nyberg Sörensen 2005); migrant households that are constituted transnationally across generations often adopt this as a norm (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1017; Åkesson 2004). In due consideration of variations and nuances, many Kurdish families may in the future consist of individuals in a continuous state of circulation, maintaining numerous transnational relations and holding multiple citizenships. Despite the early stage, an interesting question that arises is whether or not this process will further loosen traditional loyalties in Kurdistan by 'relativizing' family membership (cf. van Bruinessen 1992; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002:14).

In terms of improving our understanding of the role of diasporas in contributing to the development of the country of origin and influencing supporting policies and mechanisms which are increasingly on the agenda of governments of origin, settlement and international agencies, this study particularly highlights that the transnational aspects of the lives and need-related concerns of Kurdish refugees have to be taken seriously. In order to encourage the transfer of knowledge and expertise to Kurdistan, approaches must be flexible and not limited to earlier assumptions of a desire to return on a permanent basis. Whilst such a change of perspective includes legal, financial and economic security arrangements in both places as well as reliable travelling opportunities, contributions to improved institutional structures and procedures in Kurdistan in terms of democratisation and effectiveness are of particular importance. Last but not least, meeting the needs of women and adolescents must be given high priority in order to support constructive negotiations within families and encourage them to further explore the potential of Kurdistan.

## PART II

### **Engaging the diaspora in the development of the Kurdistan Region: Challenges and opportunities for policy makers**

#### **1. Introduction**

Four years after the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 and the historical opportunity for the Kurds to improve their situation within a legal framework, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region has restated his vision of a future where rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights are principles fully absorbed into everyday life. In view of the complexities involved in this process of change, he emphasised that the government was striving to create a sustainable environment in which people can build their own future and pointed out how crucial it is to understand that this process is only in its early stages. The government is endeavouring to address the diversities and challenges by creating job and business opportunities for Kurdistanis and facilitating international knowledge transfer. This forward-looking approach also implies reforming the educational and vocational system, providing more schools, supporting international exchange and attracting skilled labour from abroad (Barzani 2007).

The Prime Minister's vision statement is clearly supportive of diaspora engagement in home country development. Over the past decades Kurdish diaspora organisations have helped to conscientise the world public on the Kurdish issue by means of publications, demonstrations, political lobbying and cultural events (Emanuelsson 2005). However, most plans to return and engage in the reconstruction process of Iraqi Kurdistan were shelved because political instability regained weight in the mid-1990s, triggering chain migration of relatives and increasing the number of Kurdish asylum seekers. Since 2003 Kurds in the diaspora have again become increasingly involved in bridging their country of settlement and the Kurdistan Region by transferring capital, knowledge, skills and contacts, and passing on concepts and values to the formerly isolated and undersupplied Kurdistan Region. At the same time the issue of return has turned out to be much more complicated and diverse in reality than anticipated, involving complex negotiations within Kurdish refugee families regarding whether, how and why to return, stay or circulate (Emanuelsson 2007). During repeated visits to the Kurdistan Region, the refugees evaluate their experiences with regard to their social environment and their practical and material needs, as well as in comparison to their lives in Sweden. Poor living conditions, especially if affecting the well-being of school children and teenagers, are crucial aspects of concern. Whilst Kurdish men who have left their country only recently or suffer from long-term isolation abroad are particularly confident about returning, men who have a career abroad are concerned about their professional status and they often prefer the idea of working in the Kurdistan Region while maintaining their permanent residence and family in Sweden with the aim of planning their return gradually. Similarly, Kurdish women and the young generation of Kurds often find the idea of transnational 'return' or circulation a more attractive alternative than returning on a permanent basis.

The actual and potential constructive role of diasporas in building peace and democracy and nurturing economic development in countries of origin has been increasingly highlighted in the policy analyses of recent years (cf. van Hear et al. 2004; Newland 2004; *UN Diaspora Conference 2006*; *From Brain Drain to...*2006; Ionescu 2006). However, one needs to challenge conventional views and be realistic about difficulties and paradoxes in order to reach an acceptable and sustainable outcome for all involved (cf. Agunias 2006; Agunias and Newland 2007). As the

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situation of the Kurds indicates, diasporas are highly heterogeneous populations in regard to gender, age, social background, education, political affiliation, networks and political, economic and social integration in the host country, which influences if, how and why people are able or willing to return or in other ways contribute to the development process. In this context it is important to mention that it is difficult to determine whether 'returnees' in general are among the most successful migrants abroad (Ionescu 2006). Within these heterogeneous diasporas different tendencies may also range from the wish to return on a permanent basis to the wish to visit the country of origin on holidays or specific events only.

Contrary to the conventional view, 'return' is usually not a one-way course but rather a transnational process where social and material needs are evaluated (cf. *UN Diaspora Conference 2006:10-13*; Eastmond 2007). Many governments of less developed countries have failed to attract people in the diaspora to return on a permanent basis. The Taiwanese government, one of the few successful examples in this context, has offered competitive salaries, excellent working conditions, Western-style houses and upgraded schools in order to promote return migration of highly skilled Taiwanese in the diaspora (Newland 2004:31; Kuznetsov 2005). Some people may find return too risky and expensive in terms of material welfare needs and social status. There is always a risk for re-migration when the living conditions of returnees on the ground turn out to be unsustainable or unsuccessful in comparison with the living conditions in the countries of settlement (Black and Gent 2004:12-16; Agunias and Newland 2007:2). Diasporas may not have a firm understanding of political, economic and social conditions in the country of origin and returnees have left governments with expensive failures and populations in just the same poor situation as before (Agunias 2006:34-36). Moreover, returnees may influence the process of sustainable development on the ground negatively by competing for jobs and scarce resources with the local population (Black and Gent 2004:12-16). Indeed, social differences may create tensions and conflicts between people in the diaspora and the local population (Agunias 2006:40-41). Some diasporas have even fuelled social violence by providing local people with romanticised ideas removed from the political reality and everyday compromises. Individuals in diasporas may take on extremist views and violent strategies because their own experiences are limited to short visits during holidays and other specific events (cf. van Hear et al. 2004:23; Naqshbandi 2006:19).

From a government perspective it is important to weigh up the developmental need for professional impetus and state-of-the-art knowledge including the costs and risks of diaspora policies on the one hand and the value of local knowledge and conventional development programmes on the other hand. Two issues seem especially relevant in this context. Firstly, constructive engagement through diasporas works in synergy with the political, economic and social conditions on the ground. Diaspora policies are complements to - not substitutes for - reform policies. For example, political conflicts and economic stagnation have made many Africans in the diaspora reluctant to get involved in their countries of origin and professionals from refugee producing countries such as Iran and Vietnam do not engage in their country of origin in the same way as highly skilled Taiwanese, Indians and Chinese. Moreover, corruption and bureaucracy have held back Indians in the diaspora from extending their engagement; and socio-political distance from the government in Armenia has restrained further involvement by the Armenian diaspora (cf. Minoian and Freinkman 2002; Newland 2004; Saxenian 2005:22; Agunias 2006). Secondly, the experience of countries (e.g. Israel, Taiwan, China and India) that benefit from their diasporas thanks to important resources (such as money, knowledge transfer and contacts) and the special mechanisms that

facilitate transnational flow (such as diaspora offices, business networks and skills banks) are exemplary (cf. Ionescu 2006: 27-37). At the same time, the diversity of diasporas and countries must be kept in mind.

This study explores the advantages and challenges involved in the engagement of the Kurdish diaspora in the development of the Kurdistan Region and analyses possible tandem co-operation models by synthesizing intellectual and material resources of both regional actors and Kurds in the diaspora. Specific questions that will be addressed are: What are the potentials of knowledge, skills, experiences and contact transfer in the diaspora? What political, economic and social conditions have Kurds in the diaspora grown accustomed to abroad? What are their individual 'return' and engagement plans? What are the necessary policies to be implemented by the KRG in order to benefit from the diaspora?

## **2. From a small group to a large heterogeneous diaspora**

The number of Kurds in Europe before the 1980s, when they increased to approximately 500,000, was rather limited (Emanuelsson 2005:82). Many of the Kurds from Iraq (and from Iran and Syria) who arrived in Europe at an early stage were relatively well-educated and politically active young men from the middle and upper classes (Wahlbeck 2001). They established Kurdish organisations and arranged demonstrations and socio-cultural events which helped to conscientise the poorly informed European public on the Kurdish issue. Many of the refugees largely avoided contacts with political actors and others in their home country to avoid persecution and punishment of relatives by the regimes.

Various studies have revealed experiences of discrimination (Alinia 2004) and downward social mobility in the sense that many Kurds in Europe work in family businesses or businesses owned by fellow Kurds, often shops, restaurants and taxi firms (Wahlbeck 2001:85-89). Yet there are certain indications of improvement in economic welfare, employment and integration over time and generations among Kurds in Europe (cf. Berruti 2002:50-53; Emanuelsson 2005:93-97). In Sweden today Kurds work in many different sectors, for example as researchers, politicians, doctors, pharmacists, civil engineers, accountants, teachers, journalists, actors and interpreters (Alakom 2006:75-80).<sup>4</sup> The following account by Hiwa illustrates that time is an important factor in the context of escaping from one country and settling in another, even for individuals who experience successful integration on an educational or professional level:

*I finished my graduate studies in civil engineering in 1983, but, like other Kurds, I did not want to participate in Saddam's war, so I escaped to Iran and from there to Sweden. This took me about one year. Then I stayed in a refugee camp for another year; I attended language courses and had some minor jobs. In 1988/89 I applied to a university in Sweden because I wanted to obtain the necessary formalities to continue working in my profession. Since I hadn't brought my diploma with me and it was complicated to have it sent, I decided to start all over again, so as not to lose more time. As a matter of fact, I did my engineering studies over again which took me another four and a half years. When I finished in 1994 it was difficult to find a job. I worked as an interpreter and refugee assistant for two years before I found a job as a civil engineer.*

In addition, Hiwa interrupted his career by returning to Kurdistan several times for marital purposes. When the Kurdish 'safe haven' was created in the beginning of the 1990s many Kurdish men in the diaspora returned to see their families and get married. Many had high expectations for a safe and stable future in Kurdistan and

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considered returning permanently. Some started to participate in development efforts as politicians or activists. Kardo, a medical scientist who has combined humanitarian activities in Kurdistan with a professional career in Sweden, was able to rely on contacts in both Kurdistan and Sweden when he engaged in the reconstruction process of the medical sector in the 90s:

*I visited Kurdistan repeatedly throughout the 90s. I lectured at the local university and contributed academically to student enrichment with literature amongst other things. These were my own private initiatives. My old friends worked at the university, too. We also tried to set up an exchange network for scientists in Kurdistan and abroad. I was supported by my colleagues in Sweden, but due to political changes in the mid-90s I was not able to pursue my plans.*

This case illustrates the transnational potential residing in diasporas and the engagement of individuals in development activities. However, managing a transnational life may become a balancing act and involve some risk taking. In the case of Sherko, his involvement in the politically unstable Kurdistan Region conflicted with his career management in Sweden over and again:

*I finished my graduate studies in civil engineering in the early 80s. Instead of applying for a job I joined the peshmerga and after some years I sought asylum in Sweden. I thought about supplementing my education but had to abandon the idea due to language difficulties and got a job in a factory instead. At the end of the 80s I began to study but once again I abandoned my educational attempts and returned to Kurdistan to focus on my activities in Kurdish political organisations. In 1995 I returned to Sweden and have been working in marketing since, but I am tired of Sweden and am seeking a new start in Kurdistan.*

At the age of fifty and with nearly grown-up children, Sherko was seeking job opportunities in Kurdistan and hoped to succeed this time in reaching a balance between his political engagement and a professional career. Indeed, people have to try to reach a balance between the amount of time they spend on political and humanitarian work and their family and working life (Emanuelsson 2007). Kurdish refugees who arrived in Europe in the 80s were generally regarded as political activists at that time, although it is not clear how many Kurdish refugees actually took part in political and developmental activities then and still do today. Some of the older activists complain that most Kurds in the diaspora nowadays only show up at larger events such as *Newroz*.

With regard to personal and professional development four groups can be determined: those who prefer to supplement their education from Kurdistan (successful or not), those who prefer to complete a new education in Sweden, those who find jobs shortly after settling in Sweden (sometimes in their field although usually on a lower level) and prefer to settle down quickly, assure a livelihood and avoid debts, and finally those who are self-employed or successfully integrated in businesses according to their qualifications (Alakom 2006:75-80). In the integration discourse, self-employed immigrants are sometimes viewed as unsuccessful, but from a transnational perspective these groups are considered as key resources, alongside professionals and skilled workers, due to their potential for investing in the country of origin and establishing trade links (cf. Agunias 2006; Kuznetsov 2006). Consequently, certain fields of work may be more suitable for transnational arrangements than others.

The Kurdish refugees who arrived in Europe and the US in the 90s are characterised as a less educated and a more heterogeneous group than those who arrived in the 80s (Wahlbeck 2001:81). The reason is to be found in the deterioration of the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan in the mid-80s, which is likely to have affected the educational possibilities for the young generation of that period. Furthermore, many of the arrivals in Europe in the 90s were newly married wives. Similar to those Kurdish women who had fled Kurdistan together with their husbands in the 80s, many of these female refugees did not have the opportunity to finish their education or gain work experience in Kurdistan before they joined their husbands abroad. Perwin summarises her experience as follows:

*I was studying to become a teacher when I met my husband. I did not finish my studies because I decided to join him in Sweden. My plan was to continue studying here, but I decided to learn the language first. I also thought that it would be too demanding to have children and start all over again with my education at the same time. I had some temporary posts as a teacher, but later I decided to become a pre-school teacher instead. I enjoy working with small children which I have been doing for several years now.*

Several of the Kurdish women interviewed worked as pre-school or native language teachers irrespective of their year of arrival or educational background from home. Here too, diversity and time are important aspects to consider, as is the case for the men. A couple of women, for instance, work in economic branches, although on a lower level than their university education from home suggests. Others have supplemented their higher education, for example in teacher training, or have recently graduated in new fields of study such as social work or pharmacology. At the same time they have managed to learn Swedish and raise children. Despite many important changes in her life Vian was able to manage it successfully:

*Just after I received my university degree in chemistry in 1991, I got married and moved to Sweden. Here I started to learn the language. My husband was a good teacher, so it took me only about eight months to complete the courses and start working in a shop. I began to study in 1994 and after one year I received a Swedish degree in chemical engineering and got a job immediately. When I came to Sweden my husband was working a lot, but when we had our second child he decided to spend more time at home and that has been good for my career.*

Whilst many Kurdish women primarily focus on the needs of their husbands and children, new rights and opportunities have opened up for them in Sweden and to some extent they feel more at home in Sweden than their husbands (Alinia 2004; Emanuelsson 2007). The position of women in Kurdistan and abroad is described by researchers as contradictory. On the one hand, the Kurdish community could be characterised as male-dominated. On the other hand, individual women have for a long time been able to study and reach high positions (Alinia 2004:271-274). Nevertheless, this has made women more reluctant than men to return to Kurdistan on a permanent basis (Emanuelsson 2007).

Moreover, chain migration of relatives characterises the arrival of Kurdish refugees to Europe in the 90s. Many newly married couples were joined by their elderly parents and unskilled young siblings; others were joined by their well-educated siblings with spouses and children. Depending on whether they arrived in the first or second half of the 90s, they have reached different levels of integration today. Similarly to Vian, some managed to supplement their Kurdish education, whilst others are still in the process of doing so. Yet others have graduated in a new branch of study in higher education, as Diar's case illustrates:

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*I came to Sweden in 1993 and waited two years for my permit of residence. Before my arrival I had studied at a technical college for two years but in Sweden I decided to reorient myself and study medicine. First I completed an intensive course in Swedish and then I attended upper secondary school for adults for one and a half years. Every day I studied from eight o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock in the evening. Since I had to start all over again these study years were very intensive which also helped to learn Swedish quickly. In 1998 I began to study at an institute for medicine and five and a half years later I passed my exam. Today I work in different hospitals and health centres which is compulsory for medical practitioners in Sweden.*

Similar to the earlier arrivals, many the 90s refugees have become employees, manual workers or self-employed or have recently finished vocational programmes qualifying them for better jobs. Rizgar, who was twenty years old when he joined his siblings in Sweden in 1995, also acknowledges that integration is a long-term process that involves both constraints and opportunities at different levels:

*When you come to a new country you must settle down, otherwise you can't get your new life organised. It's true that life always has its ups and downs, and I struggled hard to make my way. It took me ten years – which is a long time – but I have managed to learn Swedish, I have undergone surgery and recovered and now I am finally about to finish a vocational programme.*

The children, teenagers and young adults (whether they arrived in the 80s or 90s or were born in Sweden) also add to today's heterogeneity of the Kurdish diaspora. Like their parents the majority values education highly and educational insecurity in Kurdistan is often among the strongest arguments against returning. Whilst some of the young interviewees were already studying at Swedish universities (e.g. civil engineering, economics and dental medicine), others had carefully chosen specific courses at upper secondary schools (e.g. computer courses, language training or economics) which qualify them for specific jobs or higher education. Half of the young people interviewed were, moreover, active members of Kurdish political and humanitarian organisations.

### **3. Highlighted areas of potential contributions by the diaspora**

Most of the interviewees believed that Kurds in the diaspora have both formal knowledge and informal experiences which could be valuable contributions to the development process in Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup> Specifically those living in Sweden or other European countries could contribute to improving democratic standards in schools and universities in Kurdistan. A major point of concern is the improvement of teacher-pupil/student relationships. In this context Gulshen mentioned the Swedish-Kurdish minister who recently banned corporal punishment of children in Kurdistan schools and added that a lot more can be done. Mehabad, another teacher who has been working in Sweden since the 80s, pointed out that change within the educational system in the Kurdistan Region will nurture the overall process of democratisation:

*The important role of teachers in the process of democratisation must be highlighted in the education plan and in teacher training. The fact that many students in Kurdistan only chose to become teachers as their third alternative following engineering and medical studies is a problem. The students must learn to reason and think independently, discuss literature critically, write essays and present their own mindset to others. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century students*

*should no longer have to learn by recitation! The last time I visited Kurdistan, I had the opportunity to give lectures at different schools. I explained both to the students and teachers that books are important, but that free opinion forming is by no means less important in shaping democracy. The outmoded belief that the teacher is omniscient is still a big problem in Kurdistan. In fact, many students told me that they use Internet to search for information and enhance their knowledge. They also believe that their teachers must change their attitude.*

The Kurdish teachers pointed out that their expertise is predominantly required at the level of planning and in teacher training. If they worked as ordinary teachers they would be likely to fail because of hierarchical orders or informal relations between the school and the administration. Sazan, for example, had resigned from her teaching job in Kurdistan. Her efforts to discuss the authoritarian treatment of the children at her school and present new ideas were simply ignored by the headmaster and administrative staff. Local networks in Kurdistan on the other hand increase the opportunities for Kurds in the diaspora to contribute to the development process. Unlike Sazan's single-handed attempt, Mehabad and Shna have been supported by their sisters who both work as headmasters in Kurdistan. Mehabad has held a number of lectures in Kurdistan and Shna has presented modern Maths books from Sweden and discussed the possibility of using them for teaching purposes in Kurdistan. 'Model schools' may be another way of successively handling such failures or communication problems and promote democracy and gender equality in Kurdistan. In addition, such schools will have the potential to simultaneously promote and deepen contacts between returnees and locals and alleviate integration difficulties among children of returnees. Here is Fatima's suggestion of 'model schools':

*The rights of children and women must become an integral part of the education plan, teacher training and school practice. All children must learn to respect each other independent of gender, otherwise democratisation in Kurdistan and respect for human rights are doomed to fail. I also believe that separate international schools for children of returnees will limit the positive spill-over effect and create social distance between returnees and locals. However, children from Europe cannot be taught by ordinary Kurdish teachers who advocate different values and ideologies. Therefore the government*

*should establish 'model schools' integrating both locals and children of returnees, primarily monitored by Kurdish teachers from Europe. In addition to a proper educational background and work experience, these teachers must have knowledge about children's rights and special communicative skills in order to deal with children from different backgrounds. These 'model schools' should continuously interact with the ordinary schools in order to successively democratise the educational system on a large scale.*

The Kurds in Sweden and their colleagues can also assist in improving the schools' material facilities. Several of the interviewees referred to the lack of new literature. Rêzin, for instance, who was twelve years old when he arrived in Sweden eight years earlier, remembered that they only read Arabic history at his school. Rêbwar, another young adult, mentioned that, as opposed to the curriculum in Sweden, religious education focuses on Islam, excluding other world religions. In this context, Jamal urged all humanitarian organisations in Sweden to get people in the diaspora involved in new development projects because "such cooperation between countries will also support peace and stability in the world and in Iraq". Indeed, diasporas from other countries have encouraged colleagues and employers in their countries of settlement to build transnational bridges for development assistance (cf. *UN Diaspora Conference 2006*). In the case of Kurdistan and Iraq, however, and



according to Gulshen's experiences, political and security issues were still holding back broader scale cooperation:

*I visited Kurdistan in 2003 together with some colleagues. We explored possible support opportunities for our municipality in Sweden. The standards in many schools are fairly poor, especially in the rural areas. Nothing seems to have improved in the last thirty years. There are more than fifty pupils in each classroom; hygiene is insufficient and the ventilation facilities are out of order; a lot of pupils have to share desks and the books are outdated. Moreover, the pupils are not offered any practical tasks; the curriculum only covers subjects on a theoretical level and the teachers do not communicate intelligently with their pupils. Unfortunately, after this fact-finding mission our employer has not requested us to continue - probably because of the political situation in Iraq. However, I will try to apply for more funds.*

Several of the interviewees were enthusiastic about how they have learned to work professionally with small children in Sweden and they considered opening 'Swedish' nurseries or kindergartens in Kurdistan. Other interviewees saw the urgent need for social welfare workers in Kurdistan to deal primarily with daily problems and traumatic experiences of children whose parents died under the repression and ongoing wars of the former Iraqi regime. Sarah, who was educated at a department for social work in Sweden, described the situation as follows:

*There are still no specific jobs for social workers in Kurdistan. But we need social workers in many places, especially in schools since it is important that we learn to understand and communicate with children. They are our future. We are also skilled to help children who have lost their parents.*

The health sector is another area where many diaspora Kurds see potential to contribute. In particular those working in the Swedish health sector recognise that their knowledge and skills are much needed in Kurdistan. Most interviewees were aware that this sector has been under steady decline for many years due to sanctions and war and some stressed the responsibility of the KRG to allocate more financial means to all hospitals. The main areas of concern included the lack of

equipment, medication and knowledge resulting from the lack of medical literature, research opportunities and international contacts. Moreover, the interviewees stressed the need for medical certification systems, improved communication between doctors and patients, a broader scope of services and information about preventive health care through pharmacies as well as higher salaries. Diar, who works at a hospital in Sweden, described the situation as follows:

*The health sector in Kurdistan is not good at all. I visited a hospital and some clinics the last time I was there. They lack modern equipment and medication, or the available medication has expired. Whilst some doctors are certainly competent, their knowledge is often obsolete. Obviously, the health sector has not developed for a long time. Kurdistan also needs a medical certification system where all patient details are collected. The possibility to hold doctors responsible for the treatment of their patients is also necessary - in Sweden I would lose my licence if I were negligent. In Kurdistan doctors are often overtired because they work dayshifts in public hospitals and nightshifts in their own private clinics without any breaks. Another problem is that patients in Kurdistan are not provided with sufficient preventive advice.*

In the 90s Diar tried to supply hospitals in Kurdistan with medical equipment. Unfortunately his mission failed because he lacked local contacts. Alan (who is a specialist in computer-based certification systems for hospitals) offered his experience and know-how to relevant authorities in Kurdistan. Six months later he was still waiting for their reply. Kardo has been providing useful support to the health sector through his position and valuable university contacts:

*So far I have enabled one medical student from Kurdistan to complete his PhD studies in Sweden. I am happy that Kurdistan is positive about providing scholarships to Kurdish students. I have the possibility to take in another thirty students in my department. I am also involved in the selection procedure at the university in Kurdistan and I see that we need to build appropriate structures to increase continuity and efficiency.*

Pharmacology and dental medicine seem to be popular professional choices among young adults in the Kurdish diaspora. Even though many of them are hesitant on the issue of permanent return, they consider increased exchange between young people in Kurdistan and the diaspora to be a positive step and seriously consider the idea of working in Kurdistan on a temporary basis. Nefal, for example, was thinking about opening a pharmacy in Kurdistan. Niaz, who was about to finish her studies in dental medicine, stated:

*I would like to work in the rural region of Kurdistan on a temporary basis. I would like to teach children how to take care of their teeth. I would also like help set up a new system for dental services in schools comparable with the Swedish system. I regard myself as privileged and now I would like to help others. I believe that many young Kurds in the diaspora are interested in studying or working in Kurdistan on a temporary basis.*

Professionals in the health sector prefer to commute between Sweden and Kurdistan. Goran believed this may be a way to gradually return for good. Diar explained that many Swedish doctors commute between Sweden and Norway and argued that commuting is necessary for Kurdish doctors to keep up-to-date in their fields. In this context Nishtiman (who is married to a peripatetic doctor) states that “the company my husband works for will probably be interested in cooperation projects when Kurdistan has become a safer place”. Yet, for such arrangements to become operative, well-functioning systems of responsibility and trust must come

into effect. Diar pointed out that a constructive engagement of Kurdish doctors from the diaspora synergises with a range of improvements achieved in different hospitals in Kurdistan:

*In order to do a good job it is indispensable that medical staff make the necessary pre-arrangements comparable with the Swedish organisational system for doctors who commute between Sweden and Norway. If I were to go into hospitals in Kurdistan for one week each time to carry out surgeries, it would be necessary to have the patients prepared accordingly and to assure the availability of the relevant medical equipment - otherwise we would lose precious time. Since the nurses, physiotherapists and work therapists are in charge of the patient's rehabilitation, it is also necessary that the doctor has confidence in their work. Of course I would worry about the soundness of their medical knowledge since I would be the one to resume the overall responsibility for the recovery of my patients. However, with an efficient system in place a temporary flat and a reasonable salary I believe that many doctors from the diaspora would be willing to contribute noticeably. Moreover, if these doctors kept up-to-date by working partly in Sweden everybody would benefit.*

A number of interviewees were civil engineers or were matriculated with technical branches of study in Sweden. They represent a third group which is often referred to as knowledge and contact carriers that will contribute significantly to the development process in Kurdistan. Hiwa's ideas reflect the intentions of many Kurdish civil engineers in Sweden:

*I can contribute by introducing new building technologies and materials which can help develop the infrastructure in Kurdistan. This would not only be a personal tribute, but also a tribute to Kurdistan. I also have contacts here - I could hire Swedish engineers to educate the Kurds. I have asked my employer in Sweden if they would consider investing in Kurdistan, but unfortunately they still believe the level of security is insufficient.*

Powered by their own plans to equip Kurdistan with special knowledge and latest insights into technologies in the field of computing, two young interviewees were attending special IT-courses offered by a Swedish upper secondary school. These are Shêne's plans and visions for the future:

*There are only four parabolic channels in Kurdistan and I believe they will need specialists in this field in the coming years. They have a good knowledge of basic computing too, but I am studying a special combination of IT and media sciences which hasn't been taught there yet. Only in recent years have computers been introduced in schools in Kurdistan. This is a very positive trend, but still they do not have everyday access to computers and Internet as we have in Sweden.*

These young adults are also engaged in an IT-project on humanitarian grounds in Kurdistan through their organisation. Besides contributions to the formal sectors of the labour market, many interviewees referred to areas in which they (and others in the diaspora) have gained valuable informal experience. Mentioned most frequently in this context is the increasingly important issue of women's equality in Kurdistan. The interviewees were aware that any attempt at change would require a reasonable time frame. Yet, many women in the diaspora believe they can help improve the social position of women in Kurdish society by setting positive examples in terms of

introducing more liberal views on social conduct among relatives and friends with regard to clothing, behaviour and relationships. Others see the need to sensitize women in Kurdistan for healthier life styles. Other informal experience regards safe and predictive traffic behaviour and environmental sensitisation. Last but not least, many diaspora Kurds can share their experiences in efficient workplace organisation on the basis of well-functioning structures and human resource management. However, most of the interviewees are well aware that the modernisation process and establishment of international standards in Kurdistan require patience and time. It is also clear that the complexities involved in surmounting the implied difficulties carry the potential for conflicts and tensions.

#### **4. 'Historical happiness', political compromises and impatience**

Most Kurds regard the termination of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 as a historical event which paved the way for new 'national' opportunities and improvements for the Kurdish people after many years of human rights violations and war. Well aware of the delicate situation of the Kurds, most of the interviewees tamed their inherent worry that the Kurdistan Region might once again be afflicted by the threat residing in potential political reversals in the rest of Iraq with true

confidence in the political compromises achieved by the Kurdish political leaders. The following account by Nazdar, who is planning to return in the coming years, reflects this position:

*I am very happy that Saddam's regime was overthrown, but it is not easy to transform a suppressive society into a democratic one. Especially, I do not trust the Arab leaders to transform into real democrats. What will happen when the new Iraqi army grows stronger? Maybe we will see a new Anfal. Several of my brothers and cousins are dead and we all suffered hardships and retaliations under Saddam's regime. I am definitely a realist and I give the new constitution a chance, but we cannot only give to the Arabs – we must also get something back.*

From a Kurdish perspective, the biggest concession has already been made by refraining from demanding Kurdish independence – which is currently not considered to be a realistic goal or of immediate interest. However, some of the interviewees suspected that the Kurds would have to be very patient and perhaps even concede other points in order to keep the political process alive while some certainly believed that a more radical and less pragmatic approach by Kurdish politicians is indicated.

The interviews showed that most of the respondents had confidence in the security arrangements of the KRG. However, the sceptics voiced their impatience with regard to the political, economic and social situation in Kurdistan and the reform policies implemented so far by the government although they understand that accomplishing change is a continuing process requiring long-term involvement and that a straight comparison to Swedish standards is not sensible. Interestingly, the more patient among those questioned acknowledge that the government had only had seven or nine years so far to initiate reforms,<sup>6</sup> whereas the sceptics and critics referred to the full period from 1991 to 2005. In regard to the political sphere many diaspora Kurds worry that internal disagreements between the two major parties will again scatter their hopes for a peaceful future. Generally the interviewees were impressed with the large number of media and non-governmental organisations in Kurdistan but are to some extent uncertain how serious all the initiatives are. Kawe, a social worker who would like to start to commute between Kurdistan and Sweden, was sceptical towards the ongoing process of democratisation:

*Kurds involved in party politics believe that democracy is sufficiently well served by the electoral system. But we need to establish democratic structures and procedures in our administrations. Moreover, non-governmental organisations need to be part of the democratisation process. They say we enjoy freedom of the press, but I am not so sure. It undoubtedly takes time to attain democracy, but we have this unique opportunity and people are enthusiastic. The leaders should take that as a sign to speed up their efforts and incentives. I do not want to sound negative. I do observe progress, but much more could be done.*

Many diaspora Kurds repeatedly point out the importance of establishing more reliable institutional structures and procedures in Kurdistan to strengthen the process of democratisation and enhance the efficiency of administrations and other public workplaces such as schools and hospitals. Kurdistan will only succeed in becoming a modern and democratic welfare society if qualifications and skills become the determining factors for the selection of high-ranking staff. Such changes are necessary to establish the principle of equal rights and opportunities in the Kurdish society and to attract returnees or commuters who lack informal networks. In this context many interviewees voiced their disappointment with regard to the government's insufficient attempts to provide better infrastructure,

health care and a reformed school system throughout the region. These sceptics also share Niaz's view that the former *peshmergas* should receive compensation in terms of land or money, though to a limited extent:

*What irritates me most is the fact that certain families are granted privileges because they are party members. I believe that clean water, electricity and healthcare are basic rights for all citizens, not just for the elite. I agree that the former peshmergas should be compensated for their suffering, but there is no reason why their sons should automatically hold high positions regardless of their qualification.*

Individual interviewees were very critical about the government's performance. They argued that inequalities in Kurdistan have increased and that the elite have unduly enriched themselves financially because they hold high administrative positions and own newly established companies and non-governmental organisations. They accused the elite of trying to maintain power by advocating democracy and human rights under false pretences. Farhad is one of these critics and analysed the situation as follows:

*The Kurdish parties have distanced themselves from the people. They only focus on their own economic interests because they know they will lose power in a democratic system. I asked them: "You have money, why don't you purchase medical supplies in Sweden? Why do you buy low-quality medication from Syria and Iran? Why don't you build proper houses for the people?" It is good that they managed to convince Turkey and Greece to open up their airspace to air traffic from and into the Kurdistan Region, but I criticise the lack of transparency during the construction of the new airports. Is it possible that some pre-selected people earned a lot of money, while others were not even given the chance to submit bids or participate?*

In contrast to this position other interviewees were happy with the government's work and efforts which they believe is making the best of the hopeful yet difficult situation. They urged individual sceptics such as Kawe and Niaz to be patient since the development process has only just begun and encourage constructive initiative

instead of destructive criticism. Soma, a young and politically active woman, agreed with some points of criticism but she acknowledged at the same time the complexities involved in transforming Kurdistan into a more modern society:

*I am positive towards Kurdistan's development, but not all young Kurds in Sweden are, because they are influenced by their parents. They complain and say that those who rule the country only have their private well-being in mind, including many returnees. Of course, there is some truth in this, but their perspective is too one-sided and simple. Development takes time and you cannot evaluate the progress from a Swedish perspective as they do. It took time to build both democracy and economic welfare in Sweden too and Kurdistan has just embarked on this journey. In addition, it is not so easy for those who rule; they are also in the process of learning new tasks.*

Similarly, other patient people in the diaspora mention the important but challenging effort of implementing modern structures and practices for all countries in a similar situation as the Kurdistan Region. Sivan argued that "both the Kurds themselves and the international community demand too much – which is especially striking in comparison with all the support and understanding the

Palestinians have received for many years”. The following account by Kardo further reflects the arguments voiced by many Kurds in the diaspora:

*The development in Kurdistan is positive. The leaders have a lot of visions, but we have problems with their implementation. We are not an isolated case; many countries in our situation have similar problems. We need to slowly build systems and structures. We should not criticise too much - we should encourage new initiatives. If all of us think in this way, the situation will change for the better. I used to tell fellow Kurds in the diaspora: “Of course, I also have hundreds of ideas, but if only one were to be implemented I would be happy”. Everyone has good ideas at different levels and for various sectors, but it is a different matter to put them into practice. Some diaspora Kurds who have tried to return have had too high expectations of themselves and of Kurdistan. We need to be patient!*

Besides impatience and destructive criticism the government has to deal with Kurds in the diaspora who are dishonest about their qualifications and resources when they present themselves in Kurdistan. This is what Helmet has experienced:

*Some Kurds in the diaspora contact the universities and administration in Kurdistan because they really want to contribute to the development of the region. Others, however, just walk around making appointments in different places suggesting in their know-it-all demeanour what the government and administration should do to improve this and that. But they only want to impress! Back in Europe or the US, they do not succeed in putting any of their ideas into practice – perhaps because they do not actually work in the field. It is very difficult for the people in Kurdistan to judge the credibility of such individuals.*

Obviously, there are a number of challenges that need to be understood and dealt with both by the people in the diaspora who would like to ‘return’ and contribute to the development process and by those in the Kurdistan Region who would like to benefit from potential developmental resources in the diaspora. However, the difficulty of maintaining a reasonable standard of living and re-establishing social relations will add further important aspects that need to be considered by policy makers.

## **5. The complexity of maintaining a reasonable standard of living**

For the purpose of decision making, many Kurds consider spending their holidays in Kurdistan to experience the regional atmosphere and reality before returning ultimately - making ‘return’ a transnational process. Those who favour returning on a permanent basis or commuting between Sweden and Kurdistan need to find jobs with reasonable salaries or establish their own businesses to eventually be able to afford home ownership and continue to meet the material and welfare needs of their family members. These issues range among the predominant ‘return’ considerations of many Kurdistan families in Sweden. Compared to other circumstances affecting the standard of living, such as the state of the health sector (preoccupying families with chronic diseases or elderly parents) and the infrastructure (preoccupying families who have settled in Sweden on a permanent basis or re-migrated due to inadequate public utilities), the chief concern evolves around the children’s future and their material needs and educational standards and opportunities. Anwer, who has a positive opinion about the Kurdish parties and their development efforts, would like to return, but his financial situation makes him hesitate:

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*The parties have done a good job. They have built a lot of new houses and opened many nice parks. It makes me so happy to see how Kurdistan is recovering. It has changed remarkably since 1999. The roads, schools and hospitals are also in a better condition and now there are internet cafés, public swimming pools and even a gym. They are doing a lot for the women, too. If one considers that the government has had thirteen years at its disposal minus four years of internal war, they have done a good job. We see important improvements, but unfortunately everything is expensive which makes it very difficult for us to return.*

Whereas the returnees need to consider buying a house in order to settle down properly (after having been accommodated by their relatives for some time), the commuters need to consider renting a flat in Kurdistan while continuing to pay for accommodation in Sweden. Prices on the Kurdistan market, including rental charges, have increased considerably in the past few years, making it difficult for many Kurds in the diaspora to finance their plans. Regarding job search many face the same problem Dilber does: “We do not have a network in Kurdistan. This will put us in a difficult situation, especially since we are well-educated and have clear ambitions.” The process of modern institution building including the development of functioning administrative structures has only just begun. For qualified people like Dilber it may therefore be difficult to get started and settle down without contacts. On the other hand this situation may pave the way for less qualified people with better networks. People like Perwin, however, are concerned about their lack of information regarding the labour market:

*We never stay long enough in Kurdistan to get a proper idea about realistic job opportunities. We only hear vague reports or get second-hand information. Some say it is difficult to find a job, others say it is easy. One of my friends found a job immediately, but another one seems to have difficulties – both of them are teachers.*

Speaking for transnational entrepreneurs, Nebez stressed how difficult it is to establish a business in Kurdistan whilst providing for the family in Sweden. Kemal, too, is aware of the complexity and financial consequences of a transnational family life. In order to support his family in Sweden sufficiently he would have to earn at

least as much in Kurdistan as he does now in Sweden because his wife only works part-time. On similar lines, some of the interviewees mentioned that they would have to continue to pay back their bank and student loans in Sweden, even if they worked in Kurdistan and had lower living costs there. Accordingly, Nebez thought it would be useful if the KRG supported returnees:

*The government gives loans to its co-workers and land to former peshmergas. I think it would be good if they supported returnees in general. Of course, we would have to be able to provide for ourselves – but to get started we would need manageable support. I believe there is room for everybody. I also believe that everybody can contribute in some way. However, I do not ask the Swedish government for anything – we have already received sufficient help to settle down here.*

In this context, Anwer referred to “everybody’s right to return” and emphasised that the exiles have contributed to make the Kurdish issue known to the world. Interestingly, the well-educated among the Kurds in Sweden who work in their profession believe that the government should provide for appropriate living and

working conditions because their competency is much needed in the development process. Fatima illustrates this view as follows:

*The government cannot just hope that, for example, Kurdish doctors from Europe will help without asking for reasonable remuneration and being given sufficient authority in their fields. These people are educated and have experience - and knowledge is money! And knowledge is what Kurdistan needs most! The return of talented and skilled people is a process in itself and their families may join them later.*

This group of people suggests that the KRG should establish special contracts and make specific arrangements for professional Kurds in the diaspora which should include agreements on reasonable remuneration, refund of travelling and accommodation expenses and the freedom for returnees to influence the development process in their field. They are not willing to risk their professional status or the standard of living and working in Sweden they have struggled hard to achieve through education and work. Jamal, who has a doctoral degree, supports these lines of argument too:

*I was offered a job at the technical university in Kurdistan last time I was there, but the salary was too low. If they really want an expert in my field, I think it is necessary that they realise that qualification has its price. I think they should offer us a package including a salary based on the international standards for engineers under foreign contract, as well as the reimbursement of travelling and accommodation expenses. When our families eventually follow us to Kurdistan we do not need any special treatment - but in the beginning it will be necessary in order to get started. This would also be a way to encourage Kurds abroad with special competencies to return and contribute to the development process.*

Marjam, who works as an accountant in Sweden, does not believe the government should be burdened with funding individual returnee plans and stressed the importance of individual initiative coupled with qualification both in the diaspora and in the Kurdistan Region:

*I can't say if the Kurds in the diaspora are actually more qualified than their fellow Kurds at home. Maybe the government needs to acquire medical specialists from abroad in order to improve the health sector, but I think there are qualified domestic specialists in Kurdistan, too. I believe it is up to every individual or family to fend for themselves if they would like to return. It is not correct to go back and demand support from the government. But of course I hope our help is needed.*

It is important from a government perspective to balance the value of professional knowledge and modern values and the costs and risks of diaspora policies on the one hand against the value of locally based knowledge and conventional development programmes on the other (Agunias 2006:34-42). According to Marjam the needs of the local population come first and the returnees should not demand special support. Social reintegration has proved to be a complex issue also in regard to other countries in similar situations, creating competition for resources and influencing social differences or 'us-and-them' behaviour patterns between people from the diaspora and the local population. This situation has to some extent already become visible in the Kurdistan Region. These issues need to be further examined in order to be understood and acted upon in a way that promotes positive encounters and minimizes the risk of tension and serious conflicts.



## 6. The complexity of social relations

The expectation of a warmer and broader social network among relatives and old friends is one of the most important factors in family negotiations concerning the pros and cons of visiting Kurdistan or returning. It is, however, difficult to obtain accurate information and access to social and political networks in Kurdistan after many years abroad, but these are substantial factors when it comes to settling down or to reorganising around commuting. Hamid, a teacher who has lived in Sweden for more than twenty years, illustrated the central importance of having access to both information and networks:

*People in Kurdistan may not always welcome us back, but good networks are crucial to success. Possibly a kind of 'us-and-them' attitude has developed within the local population out of fear that we might return with new ideas and simply take the lead in areas they have struggled hard to develop. I have not experienced this myself, but competition is everywhere. I also heard negative generalisations about expatriate Kurds last time I visited Kurdistan. Another explanation is that those who returned from Eastern Europe in the 90s today hold many important administrative offices without an adequate qualification. Understandably this has created both restrictions and frustration. Anyway, I only know this from hearsay. Personally, I do not really know what to think. It's second-hand information, but it's circulating. Basically, I am positive towards what is going on in Kurdistan.*

Obviously, various issues regarding the complexity of social relations and resettling are discussed and analysed among people in the diaspora and the Kurdistan Region - whether they are based on hearsay or own experiences. In this context, some of the interviewees referred to how they or their friends had to battle with red tape and unprofessional treatment. In a similar way, others described how administrative staff in Kurdistan neglected their matters and never contacted them again after they had gone to the trouble of presenting themselves and their concerns personally. This is what Hiwa experienced:

*Last time I visited Kurdistan, I explored the labour market for engineers and paid visits to ministries and employers. I have experience in housing*

*construction based on modern, clean and efficient concepts. However, starting up extended production requires large investments. I do not have the financial background myself, so I offered my technical know-how and leadership skills. I thought they would appreciate my offer, and although they seemed favourable about my approach, they told me to wait. They need engineers and have the financial means, but now they seem to be afraid of competition and new ideas. I have a good job in Sweden and a well-functioning life. I am not going to take any risks and even wish to further improve my situation. I need to be in a lead position because I do not trust in the competence of people in Kurdistan and do not want to be held responsible for wrong decisions. I am also used to communicating and exchanging views with my manager in Sweden and will certainly have difficulties in accepting the hierarchical structures in Kurdistan.*

Whilst blaming the local population for being afraid of competition and new ideas, people in the diaspora are afraid of losing their professional and welfare status. However, even if they slide towards an 'us-and-them' attitude, many simultaneously

try to find reasonable explanations and communication strategies to deal with this dilemma. Fatima, a professional woman, tries to establish trust through mutual respect:

*I was treated with respect by all the people I met in authorities and organisations. They were interested in what I had to say. They said I was welcome back because my experiences are valuable for them. I believe the combination of references and respect was helpful in my case. One of my colleagues in Sweden, who has a lot of contacts in Kurdistan, gave me a letter of reference which I presented everywhere. I also dressed in a normal way and showed people respect when I presented myself, my fields of interest and competencies. In fact, many helped me with transport, further contacts and other assistance. I will return soon to continue with my projects. However, I cannot lie to myself - my daughters and I cannot return on a permanent basis. They have grown up in Sweden. As to myself, I will never acclimatise one hundred per cent – neither here nor there. On the other hand, I feel that it is my responsibility to support the development process in Kurdistan.*

This was Fatima's first exploration of Kurdistan after many years abroad. Whether or not her attitude and strategy will be successful in the next phase of negotiating salaries and working conditions is another question. Moreover, being patient with regard to competition and negative generalisations about people in the diaspora may be easier for young people like Soma, whose career has just begun, than for people in their fifties, who have been longing for political change and perhaps a second chance in Kurdistan:

*My uncle and others who have returned are confronted with a lot of problems at their places of work. If, for instance, my uncle says to someone "Do like this and it will be much better," the response will usually be: "Do you think you know better because you have lived in Sweden?" However, I think that the returnees should try to ignore such reactions in the beginning. Everything is difficult in the present development stage. I believe the situation will improve in ten to twenty years time. Another problem may be that many returnees do not expect to be treated as 'outsiders' in Kurdistan, especially since many of them are not fully integrated in Sweden either - and of course they feel very bad about this!*

In fact, two of the interviewees found the working conditions in Kurdistan so unsatisfactory that they decided to re-migrate to Sweden. In a similar way to

Soma's uncle, they had to deal with ignorance and a lack of understanding when explaining certain work-related tasks to their colleagues or reorganising routines and structures. Newzad, who managed to be patient with the bureaucratic structures and inefficiency for one year, illustrated further points in focus:

*The simple attempt to share my experiences gained in Sweden with my colleagues in Kurdistan caused them to believe I was trying to take the lead! I did not succeed with my re-integration intentions in Kurdistan and I know others who have also failed for the same reason. Of course, some of my university colleagues also wanted to change the structures but the system is so indolent. I also believe that people in Kurdistan were more interested in us in the 90s. They wanted to plan for the future, but today money can be earned so quickly. My wife still wants to return to Kurdistan. [...] I presume we will try again, but first I hope they will become more organised and open in Kurdistan.*

Interestingly, Newzad and his wife have decided to stay in Sweden until certain developmental changes have taken place in Kurdistan and then try again to accomplish a successful return. As pointed out by Soren: "Before I returned to Kurdistan, I was not aware of the numerous things I had grown accustomed to in Sweden, one of them being the clear organisation of workplaces". Vian and her husband, on the other hand, belong to that group of diaspora Kurds which has decided to stay permanently in Sweden for similar reasons:

*Of course, we miss our country every evening when we watch beautiful images of Kurdistan on television. But during our last holiday we gave up the hope of returning and that was actually a relief. It is difficult to explain exactly what happened. Compared to Sweden, our children will lack opportunities in Kurdistan. My brother-in-law is commuting at the moment, but we want to live together in one place on a permanent basis. There is still chaos everywhere in Kurdistan - we had expected more improvements because the government has the necessary funds. Of course, it is also about finding jobs and accommodation. Somehow I also felt like an outsider and I do not know why. One time my friends, who work in a hospital, showed me new medical equipment for disinfection. It was still unpacked two month after delivery and nobody seemed to care. I am from Kurdistan myself and do not like to criticise my people, but some of them do not take their jobs seriously. I was so inclined to teach them how to establish routines and organise their work.*

Another strategy to deal with difficulties and frustrations in the process of re-integration is to treat the local people as individuals and not surrender to generalisations. Soren explained that there are two sides to this: On the one hand, there are those who have a positive attitude and tell you it is good that you have the possibility to return and build a new life in Kurdistan. On the other hand, there are those who ask why you have come back, now that the situation is improving. They wonder what your motives are and whether you may have serious trouble in Sweden. Rizgar was disappointed with the persons he supported financially in the 90s who now treat him as though he had betrayed them or their country. Nevertheless he was happy to realise that he still had some very good friends in Kurdistan who want to be his friends because they like him. Azad had gained similar experiences and added that "people in Kurdistan do not seem to have a general negative idea about the Kurds in the diaspora". Moreover, he accuses certain Kurds in the diaspora of creating problems and distance by "driving new cars just to impress and show off". Thus, in order to tap into the potential resources in the diaspora to support the development process in the Kurdistan Region and

minimize potential conflicts that would only harm this process, it is necessary to leave behind 'us-and-them' attitudes and behaviour and instead focus on new structuring and institution building. Moreover, agreed principles are required which define standard remuneration levels (such as salaries, travelling and accommodation expenses).

## **7. Establishing channels of information and other mechanisms**

Many Kurds in the diaspora feel they do not have sufficient access to information about ongoing and future government activities and the problems tackled in specific fields of development. They receive information about the Kurdistan Region from both their relatives and the Kurdistan television channels. Since second-hand or media information rarely conveys a holistic or an 'objective' perspective it is difficult

indeed for the outsider or occasional visitor to form an adequate judgement, so that unconstructive criticism and the circulation of unfounded rumours with regard to government officials and their activities may be the immediate result. Hamid saw the need for better channels of information between Kurdish diaspora organisations abroad and the government in order to eliminate scepticism and distrust among the Kurds abroad:

*The government must restore the confidence of the Kurds abroad. This could be done by supporting relevant seminars and cultural events. Our organisations could facilitate information flow between the government and the Kurds abroad and communicate political issues and job opportunities in the region. This is what other governments, such as the Turkish government, are doing. Presently, we are only seeing what is going on in the region through the eyes of our relatives at home but we urgently need direct channels of our own. Last year I went to a seminar held by a government representative in Sweden and unfortunately the audience was very disrespectful. On the one hand I felt awfully sorry for him; on the other hand it proved the need for proper communication strategies. The government must inform us about the central issues and current discussions concerning the Kurdistan Region and its development.*

For many Kurds in the diaspora it is important to feel that they are welcome to participate and eventually return. This group in particular will benefit from improved channels of information and communication. Supporting cultural events is one example of a strategy aimed at upholding ties with people in the diaspora also applied by the Philippines government (Newland 2004:12) among others. In order to deal professionally with return issues and provide relevant information to potential returnees some of the interviewees suggested the establishment of a coordination office either in the Kurdistan Region or abroad. The Philippines government, for example, has established resource centres abroad and Mexicans in the United States benefit from development programmes established corporately by their 'hometown associations' and local authorities in Mexico (ibid:11-14). The governments of Estonia and Morocco have established special agendas for action (Ionescu 2006:35). Chinese and Bangladeshis abroad have the possibility to voice their issues through a specially delegated representative at ministerial level in China and Bangladesh – a policy which officials in India, for example, are considering (Van Hear et al. 2004:22; Ionescu 2006: 36-37). Soma had several recommendations for the Kurdistan Regional Government:

*I think the KRG needs to establish an open policy for those who would like to return. It must facilitate procedures for people who would like to set up businesses of their own – there should be less rules and regulations. The*

*government needs to establish some sort of office where potential returnees can get informed about how to open businesses, trade or seek employment. This is necessary because not everyone has good contacts. People in Kurdistan have always used their own networks for such purposes. There are no such things as application forms and interviews, but now we need to develop these tools.*

Seemingly, special arrangements for returnees and people in the diaspora are needed alongside more modern institutions and administrative standards in order to go beyond the informal networks in Kurdistan (based on kin and party loyalty) and benefit from entrepreneurs and knowledgeable people in the diaspora. Indeed, such developments will also be of use to young students who are about to finish their education at regional universities. Kawe pointed out that so far most of the

returnees are political actors with their own networks, but that the government must plan to engage important civil servants and experts from different fields. Among those interviewed several had participated in establishing the Kurdistan Academy of Science (KAS) and started to trace all professional Kurdistanis in a worldwide network. Kardo described the aims and purposes of KAS as follows:

*Whilst most political decisions are right and the leaders have the firm intention to rebuild Kurdistan, there are problems with the implementation of decisions and a lot of money is wasted due to the lack of continuity. To solve such problems we need to build structures and systems. First, Kurdistan needs a system through which academics and experts from various fields can support the government and the development process. For this purpose some other scholars and I suggested establishing the Kurdistan Academy of Science and the government's response was positive. We will set up a network consisting of all professional Kurdistanis worldwide. When the ministries and authorities need specialists for consultation or employment purposes they will be able to refer to the KAS for individuals with specific qualifications. All organisations I have talked to advocate our project. We have also discussed the idea of temporary accommodation for this special workforce and the remuneration system is already functioning. So far there are no standard criteria for job descriptions and qualification assessments and other major organisational problems remain to be tackled, but as the KAS further develops it will be able to help establish these structures. KAS will strengthen the state structures of Kurdistan and smaller initiatives can always become part of an individual consultancy programme.*

Other functions of KAS described by its initiators include a system of overseas study opportunities for doctoral students and other academics who have been isolated due to many years of war and who need to qualify further. On similar lines, Fatima suggested a sort of reference group consisting of lawyers, medical doctors, teachers and other qualified people from the diaspora who could support the different ministries with constructive ideas before new projects are implemented. Regarding the translation of documentary proof and the evaluation of qualifications in Kurdistan, Tavge mentioned that her husband had difficulties getting his Swedish diploma and references correctly translated and assessed. She believed the situation is a lot easier for holders of British diplomas because the British educational system is well-known in Kurdistan for historical reasons. Another view in this context was that many returnees from Eastern European countries who hold various administrative positions in Kurdistan discriminate against job applicants from Western European countries. The implementation of standard criteria with regard to the assessment of educational and professional qualifications is a major

future task that will benefit both people in the diaspora and locals. Moreover, agreed principles are required which define standard remuneration levels.

## **8. Tandem development of the Kurdistan Region**

The majority of Kurds worldwide would agree that the federal status of the Kurdistan Region constitutes a unique opportunity for political leaders and citizens to utilise potential resources and build a democratic and prosperous society after decades of war, repression and exile. As emphasised by the Prime Minister, however, this process is only in its early stages and the challenges ahead are both complex and numerous. Many Kurds in the diaspora would agree with this

observation while others are impatient or sceptical with regard to the time frame or order of development initiatives. The concerns of the Kurds in the diaspora need to be taken seriously in the Kurdistan Region because their share of population and potential is significant. During the times of political unrest they were forced to leave their homeland or left because they wanted to seek a better future abroad. Although many of these Kurds may be transnationals today in the sense that they hold the citizenship of their host country and have developed diversified concepts of affiliation and loyalty, a part of their identity is still 'Kurdish', as reflected in participation in regional elections and interest in the future of the Kurdistan Region (cf. Alinia 2004).

Equally important, many Kurds abroad have acquired substantial knowledge, 'modern' ideas and informal experiences which are valuable for the process of democratisation and economic development and which they are willing to contribute, provided that a reasonable standard of living can be maintained. Their qualifications are diverse, ranging from well-educated technicians with high-tech civil engineering and computing experience and technical or mechanical skills obtained in modern work environments; to medical specialists and experienced chemists; to teachers or social workers with many years of experience in the field of children's rights and gender equality, which are integral parts of any policy of democratisation and respect for human rights. Others have trained their communication skills by assuming the role of 'democratic' parents and spouses in the framework of Swedish laws and regulations or have acquired management and accounting skills. Moreover, most Kurds in the diaspora have accumulated general experiences linked to living and working in a modern welfare state, including their rights and obligations as Swedish and EU citizens and the tax law. This vast background offers continued potential to connect people in various branches and build transnational bridges for investment, humanitarian assistance and professional exchange.

In order for the KRG to tap into this potential it is necessary to cultivate existing ties with the diaspora and to build confidence in the future of the Kurdistan Region. Establishing and maintaining sustainable and constructive relationships with people in the diaspora will reduce the circulation of vague and counterproductive rumours. The government should continue to uphold rights for people in the diaspora such as elective franchise and the right to hold dual citizenship in ways similar to those of other governments with large diasporas (cf. Van Hear et al. 2004:22). Loyalty among Kurds abroad is also maintained through financial support or exchange of ideas in the framework of seminars and cultural events and through a continuous flow of reliable information. The Kurdistan parties, on their part, need to find ways to tackle the negative experiences of their adherents and constituency in regard to their historical competition and strife and professionally communicate their short- and long-term goals and strategies (cf. Stansfield 2003).

Moreover, the KRG and the ruling parties must strive to implement the promised democratisation, infrastructural projects and social reforms to uphold trust within their electorate. In order to nurture sustainable development everyone, including potential returnees or commuters, needs to be given a fair chance and requires the basic prerequisites to achieve reasonable living and working standards. The more patient among the interviewees who trust in the regional actors' activities and endeavours were nevertheless aware of the implementation difficulties and highlighted the necessity to build formal structures and opportunities at various levels to create continuity, efficiency, transparency and accountability. Building stronger and more transparent institutional structures in Kurdistan will eventually transform the region into a modern democracy and will help to synergise with the

needs and competencies of the diaspora Kurds in the sense of creative co-operation. This group often lacks sufficient channels to find employment and overcome immediate difficulties related to resettlement, commuting or the transfer of resources in general. In this context, some countries have focused on building economic institutions, banking cultures and business networks, including attractive exchange rates, foreign currency accounts and specific investment accounts for financial transfers through their diasporas. Others have concentrated on establishing structures, networks and incentives that will promote the transfer of knowledge and skills by their diasporas whether they decide to return permanently, commute or in other ways contribute to the process of development (cf. Van Hear et.al 2004; Newland 2004; Ionescu 2006: 34-39 ).

One way of meeting a variety of today's and future needs of both the Kurdistan Region and the diaspora would be to formalise functions to handle 'diaspora issues' at the KRG Representations abroad and/or establish special local offices or regional functions at a ministerial level to handle 'diaspora issues'. Such ideas are suggested by some of the interviewees and are successfully implemented by other countries which could provide important role models for the Kurdistan Region (ibid). Collecting information about the skills, expertise and work experiences of Kurdistanis worldwide will, moreover, provide a valuable tool for the government in developing the Kurdistan Region both structurally and professionally. Taiwan, for instance, has already benefited significantly from such a database; South Africa and other African countries are exploring the utility of web-based skills banks and Albania is discussing this option (cf. *From Brain Drain...* 2006:18-24). Whilst skills banks basically serve to match individual profiles with job opportunities, intertwined administrative systems will create chain effects such as the development of standard criteria for the assessment of educational and professional qualifications, job descriptions and relationships at places of work. As highlighted by the representatives of KAS, such improvements are focal points of concern for many people in the diaspora. Thus, mechanisms for people in the diaspora will merge with general reform policies to the advantage of the local population, especially the younger generation since these functions establish the principles of equal rights and opportunities in Kurdish society beyond networks based on kin and party loyalty.

Concerning the needs of returnees or commuters, specific policies based on agreed principles are required which define standard remuneration levels and other aspects. Employable returnees and commuters require reasonable salaries to cover resettlement costs including travelling and accommodation expenses. 'Return' is liable to be a risky and expensive operation and many Kurds in the diaspora fear the loss of material welfare and the educational standards they have become acquainted with in their host country. This fear is especially apparent with regard to the well-being of their children. Modernisation of educational institutions to meet

the requirements of returnee children is a matter of general modernisation of the region and needs to be given high political priority. The local policy makers must understand that 'return' is a multistage process including complex family negotiations, reliable local policies, mobility plans and gender considerations. Gender equality and supportive policies should therefore be another point of concern with regard to both children and adults. In the case of individuals with special professional competencies made available for a given period of time, the government needs to consider international salary and service package standards according to the working field. On the one hand, if the offers and incentives of the government are not competitive, the Kurdistan Region may fail to attract an

experienced multilingual labour force that is able to bridge the gaps between local and foreign workers. On the other hand it is important in the long run for the KRG to define a sustainable and affordable salary framework and recruitment policy determining priorities with regard to short-, middle- and long-term developmental goals and the skills needed for their implementation.

Whilst the government needs to establish structures and create incentives to safeguard the diaspora's confidence in the future of the region, a stable process of democratisation and economic development also requires sensible and responsible actors in the diaspora. People in the diaspora must understand that political changes at home transfer the centrality of exile activities to actors on the ground (cf. Emanuelsson 2005:217). Self-expectations are often very high and it is necessary for returnee Kurds or commuters who want to (re)integrate successfully into the local work environment to handle their qualification with modesty and unpretentiousness *vis-à-vis* their fellow colleagues and pool their knowledge and expertise with that of the local staff, instead of imposing it. As pointed out by the interviewees the 'return' motives may differ from group to group. Whereas some families are guided by social motives, other negotiations focus on contributing to regional development, or both. Others again may only have quick profit in mind and even go as far as exaggerating qualifications to achieve their goals. Another big problem among the sceptics is that their expectations with regard to the Kurdistan Region are too high. Building democracy and economic welfare is a time-intensive and complex undertaking. The Kurdistan Region is not alone in struggling with basic developmental problems. However, going beyond one-sided and simple perspectives by highlighting the complexities involved will hopefully lay the ground for mutual understanding and lead to clear mission statements and strategies encouraging all parties interested in the development of the Kurdistan Region to join skills and work in tandem.



## **PART III**

### **Policy recommendations**

#### **1. Introduction**

The globalisation process coupled with a growing understanding of how migrants and refugees maintain and develop transnational relations has been encouraging governments worldwide to explore the factual and potentially constructive role of diasporas in building peace and democracy and nurturing economic development in countries of origin. Whilst the experiences of other countries that benefit from their diasporas thanks to important resources and incentives are crucial points of reference, successful diaspora policies must also consider country-specific needs and conditions and the diversities and dynamics of each diaspora's transnational relations.

#### **2. New realities – new policies**

The majority of Kurds worldwide would agree that the new federal status of the Kurdistan Region constitutes a unique opportunity for political leaders and citizens to utilise potential resources and build a democratic and prosperous society after decades of war, repression and exile. The Kurdish diaspora has contributed to the internationalisation of the Kurdish issue and many are interested in trying to 'return' or in other ways contribute to the development process. However, their development potential in terms of substantial knowledge, 'modern' ideas and informal experiences could be further stimulated by increased understanding of the complexities involved both for the individuals and for the government. On the one hand, diaspora policies have to consider the heterogeneity of people in the diaspora and be sensible in regard to the material and social complexities they may face. On the other hand, the government must weigh up the costs and risks of diaspora policies and the value of local knowledge and conventional development programmes. It is necessary to lay the foundations for mutual understanding and find a synthesis where people in the diaspora and regional actors can work in tandem for the development of the region.

#### **3. General reform policies**

Constructive engagement by diasporas works in synergy with the political, economic and social conditions on the ground. In a similar way to other diasporas, many Kurds with valuable knowledge and experiences are reluctant to risk their material welfare, professional status and rights abroad by getting involved in a situation regarded as uncertain or characterised by hardships, especially in comparison to life in their countries of settlement. Diaspora policies are complements to - not substitutes for - general reform policies. The government needs to continue with its development direction in order to safeguard the diaspora's confidence in the politics and future of the Kurdistan Region by:

- taking resolute steps in order to deepen the process of democratisation
- building stronger institutional structures and procedures (such as the development of standard criteria with regard to the assessment of

educational and professional qualifications, job descriptions and relationships at places of work

- insistently working to secure the rights of women and children in all spheres of society
- continuing to improve the infrastructure (e.g. in terms of flight connections, traffic planning and electricity facilities)
- enhancing the educational system (in terms of facilities and communication between teachers and pupils) and the healthcare sector.

Importantly, such reforms and improvements are already part of the government's vision and policy for the future of the Kurdistan population although there are problems and complexities regarding the implementation of decisions. In order to tackle the paradox of diaspora involvement and stimulate increased involvement of people in the diaspora the government also needs to consider the needs and requirements of this group separately. This is necessary in order to benefit from its inherent potential in terms of knowledge, expertise and experience without ending up with costly failures and re-migration issues.

#### **4. Instituting diaspora policies**

Earlier studies of Kurdish refugees have emphasised the dream of returning and suggested that some would probably stay and some would return if the political situation improved. Interestingly the present study shows that a transnational perspective of return paves the way for a broader understanding of the processes and complexities involved. On the whole, Kurdish refugees do not commit themselves straight away to a one-way route of return; nor do they opt to remain in their host countries. Yet the interest among Kurds in the diaspora to travel regularly to the Kurdistan Region and in various ways contribute to the process of development is noticeable. Diaspora policies of the KRG need to consider that:

- diasporas are highly heterogeneous populations in regard to gender, age, social background, education, political affiliation, networks and political, economic and social integration in the country of settlement; which influences if, how and why people are able or willing to return or in other ways contribute to the development process
- 'return' is usually not a one-way issue but rather a transnational process where social and material needs are evaluated and negotiated with family members
- family members may choose for shorter or longer periods of time to live in different countries.

With regard to return or commuting considerations people in the diaspora will require information mechanisms and assistance in order to cope with the local housing, labour and business markets, as they may lack sufficient informal networks. The following ideas would meet a variety of needs and simultaneously help to build administrative systems and functions valuable also for the local population and the development of the region into a modern society. Some of these ideas have been implemented by other countries with large diasporas and could prove to be important examples for the Kurdistan Region.

- formalising functions to handle 'diaspora issues' at the KRG Representations abroad
- establishing special local offices or regional functions at a ministerial level to handle 'diaspora issues'
- establishing a web-based skills bank, collecting information about expertise and skills of Kurdistanis worldwide and administrative functions to match CVs with job opportunities in the region

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- continuing to establish institutions such as the KAS responsible for the development of facilities for the transfer and exchange of professional knowledge and expertise from abroad to the Kurdistan Region, including student exchange programmes.

Other ways to benefit from the knowledge and expertise among people in the diaspora in specific branches suggested by some of the interviewees would be to:

- establish 'professional reference groups' able to support and advise specific ministries in crucial issues of concern
- involve teachers from the diaspora in educational planning and teacher training to share experiences of democratic standards at schools and universities
- employ teachers from the diaspora in 'model schools' in order to promote both democracy and gender equality in the region and alleviate integration difficulties among returnee children
- develop the idea of peripatetic Kurdistan doctors from abroad to the Kurdistan Region to ensure both their involvement and the transfer of state-of-the-art knowledge in special medical fields.

Poor living conditions, especially if affecting the well-being of school children and teenagers, represent a crucial concern for many families in the diaspora and the government needs to consider the complexity of maintaining a reasonable standard of living for returnees and commuters by:

- establishing agreed principles which define standard remuneration levels (e.g. reasonable salaries to cover resettlement costs, reimbursement of travel and accommodation expenses)
- considering international salary and service package standards in the case of individuals with special professional competencies made available for a given period of time
- noting that if the offers and incentives of the government are not competitive, the region may fail to attract an experienced multilingual labour force that is able to bridge the gaps between local and foreign workers
- noting that agreed principles of rewards should be related to priorities in relation to the short, middle and long term needs of specific knowledge and skills to achieve various regional developmental goals
- establishing mixed 'model schools' or some sort of introduction courses for children of returnees since their situation may determine the outcome of the reintegration process.

Finally, the government could work to safeguard the diaspora's ties with the Kurdistan Region and confidence in the future in a general way. Constructive ties will encourage people in the diaspora to support the Kurdistan Region in various ways. Such ties will also decrease the risk of unfounded rumours developing into counterproductive actions that may be taken by Kurds and others remote from the complexities and difficulties on the ground. Specific recommendations to the government in this context include:

- maintaining elective franchise and the right to hold dual citizenship for Kurds in the diaspora
- securing the continuous flow of reliable information from the region
- participating in the exchange of ideas at joint seminars with people in the diaspora
- supporting important cultural events arranged by the diaspora
- encouraging the diaspora to help inform the world public on the political visions and complexities of the Kurdistan Region

- encouraging the diaspora to build transnational bridges for investment, humanitarian assistance and professional exchange.

## **5. Possible broader transnational cooperation**

In recent years some governments in countries of settlement such as Britain and the Nordic countries have recognised the real and potential constructive role of diasporas in their countries of origin. This is also true for international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank (cf. van Hear et al. 2004; Newland 2004; Ionescu 2006). Whilst the focus has been on how to make it easier and cheaper for people in diasporas to transfer remittances and how to channel these into investments, the value of involving diasporas in the work of development agencies, in political fields such as migration and foreign affairs and in cooperative efforts with interested mainstream non-governmental organisations, university institutions, other diaspora organisations and various private actors has also been mentioned. This process is only in its early stages, but since globalisation and migration are challenging boundaries and open up space for rethinking in many different ways this should encourage the KRG and people in the diaspora to seek cooperative partners among European governments and organisations.

In terms of further research on diasporas and their actual and potential engagement in the development process, a transnational study project embracing the experiences of Kurds from other host countries and analysing future challenges and potentials on a greater scale will further increase our understanding in this field. However, a project of more immediate importance would be to follow-up on individual returnee and commuter histories and record their experiences as a substantial basis for future problem prevention. Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed in order to better understand the decision-making process. A follow-up of this type should also take into consideration the perspectives of the local population to improve the efficiency of tandem development and the evolution of gender policies.

**Appendix 1: List of interviewees**

Name	Sex	Born	Country of origin	Decade of arrival in Sweden	Education	Date of interview
Ahmed	Male	1960s	Iran	1980s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Alan	M	1960s	Iran	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Anwer	M	1960s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Oct 2005
Azad	M	1960s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Baran	M	1960s	Turkey	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Dalia	Female	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Diar	M	1960s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Dilan	M	1980s	Iraq	1980s	University	Nov 2005
Dilber	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Oct 2005
Dilsha	F	1970s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Evin	F	1950s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Farhad	M	1970s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Fatima	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Oct 2005
Galawesh	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Goran	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Gulshen	F	1960s	Iraq	1990s	University	Oct 2005
Hamid	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Nov 2005
Helmet	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Hero	F	1970s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Hewar	F	1970s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Hiwa	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Nov 2005
Jamal	M	1960	Iraq	1990s	University	Oct 2006
Kardo	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Kawe	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Kemal	M	1960s	Iraq	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Khaled	M	1960s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Leylan	F	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Marjam	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Mehabad	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Nov 2005
Nazdar	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Nebez	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Nefel	F	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Newzad	M	1960s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Niaz	F	1980s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Nishtiman	F	1960s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Perwin	F	1970s	Iraq	1990s	University	Oct 2005
Rêbwar	M	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Rêzin	M	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Reza	M	1960s	Iran	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Rizgar	M	1970s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Nov 2005
Salah	M	1950s	Iran	1970s	University	Oct 2005
Salam	M	1950s	Iraq	1990s	University	Oct 2005
Sarah	F	1970s	Iran	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Sazan	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Serbest	M	1980s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Shênê	F	1980s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006

Sherko	M	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Shirin	F	1960s	Iran	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Sirwe	F	1950s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005
Sivan	F	1980s	Iraq	1980s	University	Jan 2006
Sna	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	University	Nov 2005
Soma	F	1950s	Iraq	1990s	Gymnasium	Jan 2006
Soren	M	1960s	Iraq	1980s	University	Oct 2005
Taban	F	1960s	Iraq	1990s	University	Oct 2005
Tavge	F	1950s	Iraq	1980s	Gymnasium	Oct 2005
Vian	F	1960s	Iraq	1990s	University	Nov 2005

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Import-marriages' describe different types of matrimonial situations – from forced and arranged marriages where daughters (but also sons) marry someone in the country of origin to situations where men (both immigrants and Swedish) bring a wife from another country to Sweden (Darvishpour 2004:151-156). I use the notion initially to characterise an aspect of Kurdish escape which was non-existent in the 80s but highly visible in the 90s. From a transnational perspective such marriages are viewed as transnational practices among others; the notion becomes one-sided when transnational relations increase (cf. Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1018).

<sup>2</sup> Different countries present similar lists of welfare indicators such as standard of housing, level of income, employment, material level, education, infrastructure, free time, social relations and health (Vogel et.al 2002:10).

<sup>3</sup> This part is based on eleven interviews with young adults between 20 and 24 years old.

<sup>4</sup> In 2006 an article was published which discussed why so many Kurds have succeeded as actors, artists and journalists in Sweden. See *Dagens Nyheter*, 'På Stan' 27 April – 3 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Reference was also made to negative developments in Sweden which they would not support in Kurdistan (e.g. many pupils seem to have lost respect for their teachers; many parents leave their babies at nurseries). However, there is a need for further studies to understand the 'Kurdistani way' of modernisation.

<sup>6</sup> They either count the years before the internal war broke out in 1994 (1991-1993) plus the years after the war (1998-2005) or only the seven years after the war ended and the oil-for-food-agreement came into effect.

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking and policy either of Her Majesty's Government or of the Ministry of Defence.

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