

Foreword by the guest editors

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We welcome you to this special issue which focuses on Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Societies.

The invitation to have us guest edit an issue which engages with the 'notion' of social cohesion was in part promoted by our membership of a four-person team appointed by the premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Mr Senzo Mchunu, to investigate the obstacles and challenges to social cohesion in the province. The work of the committee has recently been concluded. This special issue does not focus on the report, however, nor are the articles carried herein limited to the region of KwaZulu-Natal or to South Africa.

Social cohesion has been a growing catchphrase in Africa because many countries, as they recover from traumatic and tragic pasts of violence and/or conflict, are grappling with projects of nation-building, reconciliation, social engineering and achieving justice for those who became victims of those traumatic and tragic pasts. Achieving justice in post-conflict societies becomes contested, as the journey to integrate and foster inclusivity between those viewed as having been victims of the past and those regarded as perpetrators of injustice requires more than finding a simple compromise.

In the course of pursuing justice and truth some pockets of society slide back to conflict, spoilers emerge and often political manoeuvring is used to derail progress by those who perceive their power as being threatened.

We thus publish this special issue aware of the competing interests in societies that are recovering from conflict. In this issue post-conflict societies refer to societies that are emerging from recent histories of violence and prejudiced conflict that had certain ‘groups’ (to put it simply) forcefully and without negotiation dominating ‘other’ groups within a society.

The term post-conflict should not be understood as an absence of conflict. Where asymmetric power relations exist and conspicuous material deprivation is evident within a society, conflict is bound to emerge. Human relations and the human psyche are set on a collision course when the Gini Coefficient increases. Even without high levels of inequality, lines of solidarity and antagonism are shaped and reshaped by prevailing material conditions. Therefore society is continuously in a state of conflict, albeit not always violent and necessarily undesirable.

As the authors in this journal point out, by way of immersing themselves in varied and different spaces of engagement, social cohesion is not an ‘automatic’ space or goal in societies deemed to be post-conflict.

The articles indicate, often tacitly, that a policy framework is the first step to the goal of social cohesion but if policies are not supported by interventions and political will, both at the macro and micro level, social cohesion will be nothing more than a theoretical concept. The pursuit of social cohesion can be seen as the transition from negative peace towards positive peace, whereby the absence of conflict alone is not enough. In such a transition, as advanced by Johan Galtung’s scholarship, positive peace requires implementing those measures and services that improve the state of life for all people and minimising the potential re-emergence of violence in a society.

We are also particularly aware of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which were founded on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While progress has been made on the MDGs we believe they fell short of their objectives. While the new SDGs no doubt go beyond the MDGs, it remains to be seen if countries underpinned by economic models which

are in contradiction to the fundamentals of the SDGs will deliver and contribute to social cohesion and the entrenchment of the goals of post-conflict societies.

The five articles in this journal, written by authors from diverse academic backgrounds, attest to the fact that the challenges to social cohesion go beyond what generally has been identified as obstacles to social cohesion. The articles make important contributions to areas where there has been a paucity of engagement both theoretically and in terms of appropriate interventions. The book review and the book itself are directly related and crucial to the achievement of social cohesion, peace and justice and overall the ending of inequity and poverty.

In preparing to write this foreword we returned to the forewords of previous editions of the journal and noted that they did not tend to provide, as is customary with many journals, a summary or overview of the articles in the journal but rather made some pertinent observations regarding the focus of the journal. The readers are thus encouraged (and dare we say enticed) to embark on the journey of reading the articles without any prior information on each article. We chose to follow the same route.

We are also very clear that the issue of social cohesion in post-conflict societies cannot be neatly tied up and a summary and concluding remarks made.

As members of the KwaZulu-Natal Social Cohesion Committee, after reading the articles in this journal and a number of other spaces where the issue of social cohesion has been on the agenda and debated, we have the distinct feeling that we are 'at the beginning' rather than 'at the end' of an engagement with social cohesion and post-conflict societies.

When we were preparing to write this foreword we were reminded of the relevance of the thinking of Amina Mama of two decades ago. She asked:

How does one end the beginning of something ... at the very heart of the approach advocated here is a feeling of perpetual change and movement... This in itself makes the idea of closure somewhat inappropriate.

This is not a neat story ending with all capillaries cauterized and stitched with surgical precision , but one which makes a small opening through which, it is hoped, many new ideas and arguments may flow (Mama 1995:159).*

We bring to you this special edition, hopeful that the knowledge produced by the authors will lead to fruitful and relevant reflections and interventions on social cohesion and especially commitment by governments and their leaders to honour various protocols. In achieving the latter, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals will be closer to being achieved and the ultimate goal of poverty eradication will become a reality. Only then will social cohesion become an achievement and not an ongoing goal.

We thank all who assisted us with this special edition and we both would like to recognise Lukhona Mnguni for his valuable assistance on a number of levels, including of course the many conversations on this special issue and those directly related to social cohesion. Working with Prof Jannie Malan and Dr Candice Moore has also been an enriching experience.

* Mama, Amina 1995. *Beyond the masks: Race, gender and subjectivity*. London and New York, Routledge.