Identities and the Southern African Region in History

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It is not by design that two of the articles in this issue deal with the issue of xenophobia. This is not a special issue. But the fact that these two articles were submitted to *Southern African Peace and Security Studies* at around the same time gives us an opportunity to consider this important topic. Both of the articles deal with the issue of xenophobia in South Africa, with a particular focus on the xenophobic violence that that country faced in 2008. The first, by Hussein Solomon and Hitomi Kosaska, looks at the situation on the ground in South Africa, while the second, by Harvey Chidoba Banda, views the situation from the perspective of migrant workers from Malawi. Several years after the events in question, in the present, both of these contributions see the underlying causes of that violence unresolved – something that should certainly be viewed with concern.

Xenophobia is the product of ignorance, manifesting itself as a fear of something that is perceived as being 'different' and unknown. It also represents a failure to distinguish individual human beings from the groups to which they 'belong'. But individuals carry multiple group identities, from a family or professional level, to allegiances to sports teams, and to ethnic, religious, national and racial identities. In many cases, these identities are socially constructed at a macro-level, far beyond the control of those perceived to be 'members'. Some identities are held dear by these members, while in other cases the identities are simply assigned to them, perhaps by accident of birth, and may carry little weight for them.

The dynamics of identity in southern Africa, particularly in terms of state, ethnicity and race, require careful consideration. For much of the twentieth century, the region was ruled by European colonial powers – the United Kingdom, Portugal, France and Belgium (including Germany until the end of World War I) – under which racial and national identities determined one's place in society. Portugal's late acceptance of the independence of its colonies, the resistance to majority rule by Zimbabwe's white settlers, and of course the apartheid policies implemented in South Africa and Namibia, saw this system continue in some countries almost until the end of that century. But elsewhere in the region, independence was achieved, and it was now national and ethnic identities that were left to determine how political, economic and social structures would evolve. This evolution proceeded more smoothly in some countries than it did in others, and the evolution continues to this day, sometimes resulting in tensions, and even outbursts of violence.

But the very existence of the apartheid and other states that resisted majority rule, together with the emergence of freshly independent and vibrant countries that were no longer ruled from Europe, had created a new identity – a southern African identity. This was, of course, primarily a political identity, but to a degree it carried over into social identities among the general population. The mood of solidarity that accompanied the Frontline States (FLS) and their support in the struggle for majority rule in region, was shared at many levels in society, at least until apartheid was overturned and its objectives were achieved. With majority rule realized in the region, the FLS was no longer needed, and the 1990s instead saw the establishment of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which had evolved from the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) set up a decade earlier.

While SADC, as a vehicle for policy, has certainly continued to grow in scope and in scale since its inception, it has not been matched with a growth in regional identities. Conversely, the removal of the common threat of apartheid appears to have led to a diminishing sense of regional solidarity, and the perceived need for a common southern African identity. It would not be an overstatement to characterize the levels of knowledge and awareness among the public in the region of SADC and its activities as negligible.

Xenophobia in the region cannot be put down to national and ethnic attachments and divisions alone. Socioeconomic status and perceptions about it affects people's daily lives clearly also plays a major role. This can be viewed in terms of the gap between countries that are relatively well-off and those that are not, with South Africa as the economic powerhouse attracting cheap labour from its less fortunate neighbours. It can also be viewed in terms of the gap between the haves and have-nots within the countries in question. The fact that Namibia and South Africa are ranked as having the most unequal income distributions in the world should not be forgotten. Such socioeconomic inequalities, if left unchecked, will no doubt continue to undermine the struggle against xenophobia in the region. This factor is, of course, not at all unique to southern Africa. Tension in society related to the movement of people in search of better conditions of living or refuge, is indeed a very common phenomenon throughout the world. And with the gap between the haves and have-nots continuing to worsen at a global level, such a phenomenon can only be expected to grow

Assuming that there is indeed an ongoing struggle against xenophobia, how should it be pursued? If xenophobia is the product of ignorance, then the provision of credible, balanced and digestible information should be a part of the solution, primarily in the form of education programming and media coverage. Education and the media are critical aspects in the formation and maintenance of identities. But there would appear to be little progress being made in this regard. From the perspective of the media, for example, coverage of the region beyond the borders of one's own state remains severely limited. Unlike east Africa, where regional media corporations have emerged, southern Africa's media corporations remain predominantly concerned with national issues. In many cases, they may even provide their audiences with more information about distant countries that are considered 'important' by those in positions of power, such as the USA, Europe and the Middle East, than those within their own region. This certainly

does not help to foster regionally regional solidarity or even understanding.

The final two articles in this issue both deal with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), one, by Philippe Tunamsifu Shirambere, focuses on the issue of transitional justice, and the other, by Judith Victoria Mwandumba, concentrates on the issue of child soldiers. The DRC is emblematic of the challenges facing attempts to enhance regionalism in southern Africa. This is partly because of the country's sheer size, crumbling infrastructure and the fact that geographically (and in many ways politically), it is considered to belong to central Africa more than it does to southern Africa. But there also remain many historical, political and linguistic barriers to a strengthened sense of common interest and solidarity.

These challenges notwithstanding, the DRC is a member of SADC, and the enormous difficulties it continues to face in terms of peace and security, will continue to affect its southern neighbours, necessitating continued engagement at various levels. The issues of transitional justice and child soldiers, both of which remain relatively neglected, are a reflection of a host of other related political and societal issues that also warrant our attention.

Like most forms of identity, a sense of being 'southern African' is not something that will occur naturally. It is inevitably something that must be created and fostered by those with an interest in doing so. It would appear that such identities could serve to help overcome the various challenges the region faces. But whether or not the will and the means to work towards (re)creating such an identity can be found is another matter.