Regional integration and social cohesion: Perspectives from the developing world

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This book is a significant contribution to the relatively unexplored relationship between social cohesion and regional integration in the developing world. Candice Moore, the editor, bemoans the woeful underrepresentation in the academy of the African Union's (AU) social development programme. Instead, scholars focus on a single aspect of that programme: the AU's role in conflict resolution (p. 27). By contrast, a broad body of literature exists on social cohesion and European integration (see, e.g., Jeannote, 2000; Héritier, 2001; Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003; Boucher, 2013). Substantively, the European Community (EC), through the 1986 *Single European Act*, extended its competence in, among other areas, social cohesion (Dinan, 2005). The 1989 EC Social Charter and the Social Policy of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, among others, further significantly augmented Europe's competence in social policy (Whelan & Maître, 2005). Consequently, the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU) emphasise social cohesion in the formulation of public policy, and the EU even prioritises the EU Social Cohesion Funds in its budget (Jeannotte, 2000).

The book under review is a collection of chapters that examine the conception of social cohesion, its prevalence at regional and national levels in Africa and Latin America, and how it operates at domestic level in African and Southeast Asian countries. Accordingly, following the two introductory chapters it comprises nine chapters divided into three parts that examine the conceptual aspects of social cohesion at a regional level, the challenges and prospects of social cohesion in, respectively, African and Latin American regional integration, and the construction of social cohesion in South Africa and Vietnam.

Moore states her argument clearly in the introduction to the book, with illustrations from three major African regional economic communities (RECs): as a continent, Africa through the AU has instituted sufficient policy initiatives of a global standard to adequately address the social aspects of Africa's regeneration. Moore points out that some of the challenges accompanying globalisation (such as rising income inequalities) are best handled regionally or globally. Further, the plausibility of social cohesion at the regional level should be explored, and its nature and form together with the types of social and economic claims that can be made on regional organisations, must be considered. This is an appropriate recommendation for regions in the developing world, especially because '[s]ocial cohesion as a component of regional integration underlines the complexities and challenges, as

well as potential advantages, of combining separate entities – rendered separate because of nationality or state boundaries – into a functioning whole' (p. 32).

Part I of the book examines social cohesion at the regional level in two chapters. Given variations in definition across world regions (Koff, 2009), this part should have included a chapter exploring social cohesion in Latin America, to complement Robert Mattes' empirical depiction of social cohesion as a multi-tiered concept that is manifest at individual, societal and national levels in Africa (pp. 73–89). In attempting to make the conceptualisation of social cohesion useful for empirical research and avoid 'conceptual overload', Mattes approaches social cohesion from a 'minimalist' perspective. Hence, Mattes initially separately addresses the potential measures of each component term in the compound, social cohesion, and then measures the minimalist conditions thus derived across Africa using empirical data from Afrobarometer.[1] Harlan Koff (pp. 41–72), on the other hand, gives a rounded overview and operational tool against which can be assessed a region's level of social cohesion. The tool presents specific outcomes or indicators of cohesion at three levels, which progressively grow from 'association' to 'belonging' to 'change'. This is significant considering the difficulties, limitations and challenges concerning the conceptual confusion around definitions and levels of analysis to which social cohesion can be applied (which the editor acknowledges too in the introduction to the book [p. 33]). Koff's conclusions regarding the essential characteristics of social cohesion are based on an actual examination of, among other things, policy documents of the 16 regional organisations studied across the world. The extent to which regional organisations commit to and institutionalise norms reflects the degree of progress in their cohesiveness.

Part II discusses social cohesion at the regional level in Africa and Latin America. In the introduction to the book Moore expresses reservations over the skewed focus on conflict against Africa's other social development programmes in the AU's continental agenda. That assessment of Africa's record of regional integration as a failure, especially considering the prevalence of conflict or low intra-regional trade, threads across all three chapters on African integration in Part II. The same view of Africa tallies the running commentary in the popular media and, indeed, the academy in general: a conflict-ridden and poor continent. Thus, according to Bach (pp. 93–106), the new wave of regionalism that swept across Africa in the 1990s 'took an asymptomatic course in so far as it retrospectively appears to have meant the endorsement of ambitious projects towards a constitutionalisation of integration and the mutualisation of sovereignties' (p. 96). Bach clearly argues that the 'complex institutional blueprints' on which Africa's regional organisations operate, constrain region building (p. 93). Schoeman's (pp. 107–129) assessment of intra-Africa interactions and the impact of efforts to regionalise in Africa's 'spaghetti bowl' of

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1   Afrobarometer is a regular independent, nonpartisan cross-national survey of 35 African countries that measures the continent's social, political and economic atmosphere through citizens' attitudes about, among other things, markets, democracy, etc. See http://www.afrobarometer.org/ (accessed 31 July 2014).

regions questions whether Africa is really a region or a player in the global political economy. The 'litmus test' lies in Africa's ability to be a political actor as regards member states and third parties (p. 113). Except for its 'geographical expression', Africa fails the test on all counts, according to Schoeman. For example, progress in inter-state cooperation or continental cooperation and integration through trade and infrastructure development is dismal. Consequently, Africa, the '"cohesive and consolidated" unit' existing as the AU, has minimal impact at the global level because it is rather imagined than a reality. The continent's focus on promoting economic integration at the expense of social cohesion exacerbates this reality, according to Akokpari (pp. 131–153): 'Both at national and regional levels, social cohesion has been the exception and never a rule' in Africa (p. 148).

To Akokpari's argument can further be added the insistence in Africa that economic integration follow a linear progression in its evolution, à la the European Economic Community (EEC) experience, whose main objective at the time was economic growth by freeing the movement of factors of production among member states. Further, the assessment tools for that growth, such as the gross domestic product (GDP), point to the poor performance of many developing countries despite their participation in regional schemes. Closely examining those developing economies that are exhibiting robust growth in GDP, however, reveals inadequacies in the tool as an assessor of an economy's health (see, e.g., Fioramonti, 2013; 2014). The EC, for one, recognises the limitations of GDP as a measure of essential socioeconomic goals and now includes 'GDP and beyond' in its parlance, in a quest for alternative concepts to measure such goals and for policy making (EC, 2013). The tool needs revision or alternative ones should be developed.

Across the Atlantic from Africa, on the other hand, Latin American youths are mobilising and, therefore, preparing for future integration, according to Hugo Fazio Vengoa (pp. 155–174). Similarly, Rober Duran's (pp. 175–188) examination of Latin American integration between 1990 and 2010 suggests a process that differs in character from previous efforts. New societal actors that are significant to processes of Latin American integration are emerging, and they are mainly focusing on pragmatic rather than ideological needs and considerations. However this occurrence should not mask the underlying characteristics of Latin American society, Vengoa observes, such as the reluctance by states and regional politicians to address pressing social needs that translate into observable inequalities, the disintegrating social fabric leading to the neglect of collective action, etc.

Part III draws lessons on social cohesion from South Africa and Vietnam. Vanessa Barolsky (pp. 191–219) notes that South Africa can only meaningfully achieve social cohesion through 'democratic engagement' and inclusive democratic citizenship. Part III would have been richer had it included more African countries (chosen on the basis of some predetermined criteria such as a regional hegemon of each of the spaghetti-bowl-forming African regions [see Schoeman]). This, especially considering Mattes' (pp. 73–89) demonstration from empirical data collected from African countries, that social cohesion in Africa occurs at the individual, societal and national levels. Moreover, the regional discussions in Part II provide a platform

from which the book should have included domestic lessons on social cohesion in Latin American countries. Contrariwise, Part III includes a Southeast Asian country. Here the book fails to provide a rich comparative study, given variations in definitions of social cohesion across regions. For example, Vietnam, the Southeast Asian country that illustrates social cohesion at the national level in the book, is embedded in a regional organisation – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – that prefers consensus, signifying unity in the organisation, and approaches regional decision-making with caution. Still, Vietnam and the lessons it provides on the structure of social cohesion is the last chapter of the book. Doung and Hong (pp. 219–232) show how traditional values, culture and identity, among other variables, provided the 'glue' (Kumalo, pp. 13–25) that held Vietnam together before it reformed. An ill-managed economic transition threatens social cohesion and prospects for Vietnam's nation building and development going forward, as the rapid deterioration of social cohesion in all of the country's sectors has recently demonstrated.

Overall, the book valuably promises to take discussions and considerations of social policy (especially in Africa) beyond the traditional view that confines such policy to the domestic and the national level. For one, Africa's ambitions for continental integration and the reality of migration within its multiple regional schemes necessitate serious consideration of policies that cater to the needs of the millions of people who sojourn the continent. Academicians, policy makers, NGOs and development workers will benefit from reading this book.

About the reviewer

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