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## SOCIAL COHESION AGAINST XENOPHOBIC TENSION: A CASE STUDY OF YEOVILLE, JOHANNESBURG

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**ABSTRACT** Since 2008's xenophobic disturbances, living together has once again become an urgent agenda for South Africa, especially in sharply multi-ethnic urban milieus. Scholars and practitioners have attempted to identify both the causes of and possible preventative measures for these xenophobic outbreaks by discussing such topics as rising food and commodity prices, high unemployment rates, and lack of local leadership. However, these inquiries have been unable to identify what mechanism in areas with a heavy migrant presence may prevent a retreat into violent conflict. This paper focuses on the networks and activities of local civil societies of Yeoville, including migrant organisations, and explores what alternatives are functioning to mitigate and regulate lingering tension among locals. From observing the activities of "street-level mediators" without official power or status, particularly their indirect intervention into potential sites of conflict, this case study submits the following arguments within the theoretical context of the social cohesion debate that: 1) the concept of control may not befit attempts to counter exclusionist movements in sharply diverse situations, and 2) the catalytic actor can be effective in a context characterised by multiple centres of power.

**Key Words:** Social cohesion; Xenophobia; Mediation; Migrant; Johannesburg.

### INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that "living together" remains one of the most urgent social problems in South Africa. Dilip Menon's review article, "Living Together Separately in South Africa" (2013), examined the relationships between people in gated communities and the complex situation of this multicultural "*rainbow nation*." After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission whose primary goal was national reconciliation ended its process, the ideal of the rainbow nation gradually lost its hold on many South African citizens, replaced by the ironic rhetoric of the "*onion*." The skin represents the foreign migrants, the layers represent the politically peripheral ethnic groups who occasionally become victims of exclusionist attacks, and the core represents the politically strong ethnic groups (Worby et al., 2008: 6). Such rhetoric suggests both the rise of a new potential social hierarchy and a substantial "centre" or core that does not exist. As new social problems became more visible after the period of national reconciliation, the concept of social cohesion became prominent in public discussions demanding analysis. The scholars of the Forced Migration Study Programme (FMSP) at University of the Witwatersrand, who study current migration issues in South Africa, pointed out that trends in the usage of the term could also be identified in the discourses of the political elites

(Landau et al., 2011: 43). The comprehensive governmental assessment *Towards a Fifteen Year Review: Synthesis Report* repetitively appealed for social cohesion (South African Government, 2008). While a succinct definition of social cohesion was not provided in the report, it was described as the social competence to ameliorate various social problems such as disparity, tension in/among communities, crime, and discrimination towards migrants. A national social cohesion policy produced by South Africa's Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) focused on socioeconomic challenges ranging from unemployment, social exclusion, and black economic empowerment to poverty, access to healthcare, and inequality (DAC, 2011: 37–38). Following these same concerns, the Human Sciences Research Council's study, *From Bonds to Bridges: Towards a Social Cohesion Barometer for South Africa*, stressed the negative aspect of cohesion of the bonding type (promoting new forms of exclusion by insiders), and argued that it be replaced by the bridging type of cohesion (Struwig et al., 2011). This appeal indicates the existence of de-facto social groups who are in tension with each other, who deny the call to assimilate or to belong to an unified identity. The need for the bridging type of cohesion thus appears more acute in areas where migrants and South African residents maintain only a precarious balance in their interactions. What conditions create a balance among different social groups in a multinational area? Whilst this question applies to the broader context of current South African society as a whole, the localities where migrants and South African citizens face each other are more keenly in need of the answer.

## RETHINKING SOCIAL COHESION IN EXCLUSIONIST INSURGENCE

In discussing the concept of social cohesion, the authors acknowledge that it is an equivocal one (Friedkin, 2004). As Chan et al. (2006: 288) pointed out, “social cohesion is largely a ‘catchword’ for incorporating the most pressing social issues of the day: unemployment, poverty, discrimination, exclusion, disenchantment with politics, together with any problems that a policy maker sees fit.” It seems to refer to everything related to networked social existence, social comfort, and affluence, presented as an antidote to social disorganisation and social suffering (Kleinman, 1997, Venkatesh, 1997; Scheper-Hughes, 1998).

A wide range of applications of the term is commonly used in the academic field. Scholars such as Chipkin and Meny-Gibert (2013), Menon (2013), and Duca (2013) have explored the dynamics of living together in the context of burgeoning gated communities in Johannesburg. Some studies focus on social cohesion at the national level, investigating the yearning for “rainbowism” (Chidester et al., 2003), while other literature identify the family as the basic foundation for social cohesion, recommending a re-visitation to the much touted traditional African family in responding to the contemporary social breakdown in South Africa (Kwenda, 2003; Chipkin & Ngqulunga, 2008).

On the other hand, as briefly mentioned in the introductory section, Struwig et al. (2011) proposed a different line of argument on social cohesion, not emphasizing the promised bonding function that could be shared among social constitu-

ents. Scholars who conceptualise social cohesion in terms of its functions tend to understand it as a state with people bound together in relationships of trust, solidarity, cooperation and help (Chan et al., 2006).

Distinguishing between bonding and bridging types of cohesion, and recognizing the potentially negative implications of the former, reflect the contemporary debates on social capital. Although the authors consider the “social cohesion as a bond” approach useful in analysing durable and stable societies, it falters when confronted with neighbourhoods in constant flux where migrants constitute the core element of the local social order. Putnam and Goss (2002: 11–12) defined bonding social capital as that which “brings together people who are like one another in important respects (ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and so on), whereas bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another.” Other scholars ambiguously conceptualise social capital as a precondition for promoting or diminishing social cohesion (Colletta & Cullen, 2002), as it brings potential problems for “civic engagement, social connectedness, and interpersonal trust and reciprocity” (Stolle et al., 2008: 57). In other words, the bonding type of social cohesion has come under suspicion in the context of social diversity. Putnam pointed out as follows: “Social capital is often most easily created in opposition to something or someone else” (Putnam, 2000: 361). Struwig et al.’s (2011) theoretical orientation surely incorporates the current South African social trend of using demarcated we/them categories in analysis in this vein.

The riots in May 2008 stand in South Africa as a tragic example of how the bonding type of social cohesion could not simply be assumed. The violence left 62 people dead and roughly 670 people wounded, urgently demanding from social science scholars an analysis of the immediate reasons behind the eruption and the causes operating at the micro and macro levels, as well as how the people of and in South Africa generally experienced the incidents (Kupe et al., 2008).

In unpacking the causes of xenophobic violence, many studies have so far pointed to the macro factors behind the violence, including rising food and commodity prices, high unemployment rates, and governmental inefficiency in dealing with migration.<sup>(1)</sup> These issues are certainly relevant to a prognosis of the possibility of social stability in South Africa. However, Misago et al. (2009: 2) argued that mainstream analyses of the exclusionist problem do not really address the vital question of “why violence occurred in some places and not others,” only suggesting that “the factors may have contributed to generalised tensions.” Some sociologists also take this position, warning: “It is important to note that these structural explanations do not address the causes of the violent outbursts themselves....” (Bekker et al., 2008: 26). Assuming functional social bonding is not necessarily justifiable. The concept of social bonds basically assumes that the people’s sense of trust and collective identity will arise through spontaneous engagement. When such social bonds do not exist, there is no prescription to prevent outbreaks of violence.

The report by Misago et al. (2009) is worthy of note as it offers a prescription applicable at the local level to prevent recurrences of violence. The

prescriptions submitted in the report are as follows: avoiding perpetuation of self-appointed leadership, promoting political unity among African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha Freedom Party supporters, establishing trustful, prompt, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms that do not lead to vigilantism and mob justice, and changing a culture of impunity (Misago et al., 2009: 46, 51). The question of “why violence occurred in some places and not others” is answered as follows: “In almost all cases where violence occurred, it was organised and led by local groups and individuals in an effort to claim or consolidate the authority and power needed to further their political and economic interests” (Misago et al., 2009: 2).

This explanation differs from the view that mass violence is an undisciplined expression of local people’s discontent. Rather, Misago et al. (2009) purports that local leadership mobilises and controls such violence. The same analysis can be equally applied to the reverse situation, where mass violence was restrained and where the local leadership took measures to prevent it. They describe such a case in Setswetla in Alexandra of Johannesburg, where foreigners were not attacked, despite their proximity within walking distance to the most affected area, Sector II of Alexandra. Setswetla has more foreign nationals and the condition of social service is worse than the latter. The authors concluded that the community leaders and authority were assertive and acted positively to suppress violence in the former area, which made the difference (Misago et al., 2009: 45–46). Landau et al. (2011: 55) similarly addressed the role of “strong and consistent [local] leadership” witnessed in the case of Gqebera Trust in Nelson Mandela Bay, which worked to protect Zimbabweans by collecting information and investigating criminal acts with the local police. Thus, FMSP scholars characterise incidents of (non-) violence as collective acts and movements with a predetermined goal and direction, and proceed to analyse who mobilised whom and under what social/political conditions.

The merit of this analysis is in the way it explains violence: it is not something accidental. Therefore, it’s useful in developing ways to prevent violence, by identifying specific actors or situations that played key roles in restraining xenophobia. Such actors include governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in the development of specific programmes for a particular area. Thus, a study of local violence must identify specific micro- and local causes, rather than seeking abstract and ambiguous causes such as “the system” or “government.” With this approach, incidents of mass violence are collective acts with predetermined goals to be restrained through specific measures, regardless of broad policy efficacy, for example, border surveillance, or changes in the quality of life. This approach leads to better appreciation, without excessive admiration, of the role of community leaders in assessing the imminent possibility of violence. Such appreciation is not possible if only the general factors behind xenophobic violence are considered. Another merit of this analysis in the argument for social cohesion is its claim that cohesive status is created and maintained through continuous movement. In other words, social cohesion appears as action.

While the authors accept the analytical approach toward social cohesion by Misago et al.’s (2009) analytical approach toward social cohesion, we will try to

contribute to this topic from another angle through empirical data. The authors will ask the additional question: Why did violence not erupt in areas where assertive leadership did not exist? The authors observed that the local actors operating under the auspices of multiple civic collectivities helped generate local peace indirectly through facilitation. This paper studies the civic collectives in Yeoville, an inner-city neighbourhood located in the eastern part of Johannesburg Central Business District.

Yeoville has not recorded any violent incidents of a xenophobic nature either prior to or since May 2008. However, this stability is not simply attributable to the local authorities or informal leadership. In Yeoville, political leaders such as councillors and leaders of local political party structures are not always overbearing in setting the local socio-political agenda. In fact, they may instead appeal to a very small fraction of the ethnationally diverse population. Where populations of non-South Africans without a vote in government elections are huge, a councillor or majority party representative does not have much political legitimacy. Given the complex contestation among stakeholders, the model of formal/informal leaders controlling local and collective action is not necessarily applicable. More internal reasons for the continuity of a collective orientation towards local order in Yeoville seemed to be at work, and the analytical toolset needs an upgrade.

The authors follow Struwig et al. (2011), and look into the bridging type of cohesion where interaction between several social groups exist within a socio-physical space in which annihilation or assimilation of other groups does not occur. In this paper, the authors understand social cohesion not only as static, simply a state of shared norms and values, relationships of trust, or wilful cooperation, but also as a long term phenomenon arising from generations of attitudes of inter-ethnonational recognition and toleration (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Building on the analysis by FMSP scholars that the eruption of violence is controlled by local leadership, the authors incorporate the additional concept of the local leader/facilitator, who are the community mediators or street-level mediators (Benit-Gbaffou & Katsaura, 2014). These informal actors are dissimilar to street-level politicians holding official positions such as local councillors, such as those in Gujarat discussed by Berenschot (2010). Community mediators hold no official position in government or a municipal council, yet still function in the realm of community management, mostly without a direct formal mandate from the state (or whatever powers that be).

The following sections explore whether seemingly passive leadership and collective control can co-exist with other types of undertakings by these community mediators, to mitigate tension among residents, to mediate them indirectly, and to promote social cohesion in a unique manner.

## MEDIATION IN YEOVILLE

### I. The Making of Ethnonationally Diverse Yeoville

Yeoville<sup>(2)</sup> is one of the oldest suburbs in Johannesburg (Smithers, 2013). It was established as a whites-only area. Yeoville evolved into an area of mixed residency accommodating both whites and blacks towards the end of apartheid. Population shifts accelerated since the 1990s. While 85% of the people living in the area were white in 1990 according to the 2011 census figures, 90% of its residents were black by 1998 (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 15, April 2011). According to the 2011 census, only 2% of the Yeoville Bellevue population was white (Smithers, 2013: 18). Given the likely number of people who do not want to be officially counted, the presence of white residents may have further diminished. Yeoville hosts a huge complement of African immigrants from other African countries, becoming one of the most pan-African neighbourhoods in South Africa alongside Hillbrow and other parts of inner-city Johannesburg. Figures from the 2011 census place Yeoville's population at 38,965, 48% of which were South Africans and 52% were immigrants (Smithers, 2013: 18).<sup>(3)</sup>

The rapid change in Yeoville's socio-economic profile approaching township status has been observed in the following manner: "The area was always multi-class, ranging in the apartheid era from lower to upper middle class with some white working class. However, the population today includes large numbers of people who are unemployed, underemployed or self-employed in the informal sector. According to the 2011 census, 71% of people with an income earn between R1 and R6,400 per month, while 47.5% get less than R3,200, and 12.9% have no income at all. This has impacted dramatically on the spatial form of the area as more and more people use residential space for income-generating activities... and the neighbourhood shows increasingly visible signs of neglect" (Smithers, 2013: 18).

A heavy presence of newly settled African migrants has caused tension between them and the South African locals. Given the salience of ethnonationality in the ordinary understanding of local challenges in Yeoville, it is not surprising that immigrants are sometimes accused of causing urban decay, and generally perceived as spatial assailants who degrade public spaces in South African cities. The authors provide a general stereotype: "Nigerians are known for drug dealing. Zimbabweans are known for committing robberies. I was once mugged whilst coming from a meeting with other women.... I lost my ring of 31 years of marriage.... The guys who robbed us were Zimbabweans."<sup>(4)</sup> An executive member of YCF once told us: "I will be open with you. Zimbabweans and Nigerians are the ones that are hijacking [illegally occupying] houses here. I won't be shy about that."<sup>(5)</sup>

Emerging from these narratives is a Yeoville that struggles with mediating the diversity of its residents. However, there is nothing peculiar about the cosmopolitan failures of Yeoville when we consider the challenges to social order in the banlieues of Paris (Body-Gendrot, 2000) and the ghettos of the USA (Wacquant, 2008a; 2008b). In this context, Yeoville seems to be maintaining tension at moderate levels.



Yeoville can be understood as an example of a locality that is successfully mediating urban diversity. In a public speech, a South African who was a Yeoville resident highlighted the significance of Yeoville as a multinational neighbourhood:

Yeoville is a special place in Johannesburg.... In spite of this [decay], Yeoville has something to offer.... Even though there are some tensions related to... diversity, Yeoville has generally kept violence at bay.... The difference between Yeoville and Hillbrow,<sup>(6)</sup> for instance, is that it has got organisations... that make a difference (Community Workshop at Witwatersrand University, 13 February 2014).

This statement points to the existence of local mediatory actors among diverse residents that are resisting the transformation of tension into violence. In witnessing these seemingly contradictory tendencies towards both tension and mediation, Yeoville can be placed at the crossroad of Afropolitan potential and decay (Nuttall & Mbembe, 2007).

## II. Civic Organisations in Action

Our narrative revolves around five significant civic organisations in Yeoville, namely: the African Diaspora Forum (ADF), the Yeoville Bellevue Community Development Trust (YBCDT), the Yeoville Community Policing Forum (YCPF), the Yeoville Stakeholders Forum (YSF), and the Yeoville Community Forum (YCF). The reason for focusing on these five groups is that each group represents a particular sociopolitical standpoint influencing local ethnonationalist politics that essentially cause tension among multinational residents.

### *African Diaspora Forum (ADF)*

The ADF was formed to respond to the xenophobic violence that rocked South Africa in May 2008. ADF claims to have about 23 migrant organisations affiliated with it.<sup>(7)</sup> Its main base is in Johannesburg, with offices in Yeoville. Since its inception, the ADF has initiated education programmes and awareness campaigns to improve tolerance and co-living between South Africans and non-South Africans. The ADF has a broad mandate to inform the public about violence as well as address violence as symbolic and cultural manifestations of xenophobia (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 15, April 2011).

### *Yeoville Bellevue Community Development Trust (YBCDT)*

YBCDT is a local non-governmental organisation working on issues of socio-economic development in Yeoville and Bellevue. Its activities range from communication, capacity building, and information and advice provision, to networking, lobbying, and advocacy. Initiatives that they have focused on over the years include the Africa Week Festival, sports ground management, promotion of discussions on informal trading with the City of Johannesburg and liquor licence issues with the YCPF, tourism promotion with Gauteng Tourism Author-



ity, and advocacy for local infrastructure development (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 15, April 2011). When local elections were held, YBCDT organised a debate among candidates for the local voters (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 18, May 2011). YBCDT also runs a local newsletter called *Yeovue News*, which reports on various community issues, including security and local events, contributing to local debates.

#### *Yeoville Community Policing Forum (YCPF)/Community Policing Forum (CPF)*

The YCPF is a partnership between elected community members and the South African Police Service. Community policing is roughly defined as a local initiative with two basic obligations: local residents become active stakeholders in local policing, and the police maintains positive and trusting relationship with local residents.<sup>(8)</sup>

The YCPF holds monthly meetings with members of the police service to discuss the local crime challenges in Yeoville. It also holds occasional public meetings as and when necessary. Its particular focus is crime reduction and governance, and the members have keen awareness about issues of local (in)security. By virtue of its mandate of security provision and crime prevention, the YCPF is an important player in the management of xenophobia at the local level.

#### *Yeoville Stakeholders Forum (YSF)*

The YSF has 22 community organisations affiliated in Yeoville, operating as an umbrella body of these organisations. It was formed in 2004 at the behest of the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) as a contact community organisation during the period when JDA was implementing an infrastructural development programme in Yeoville's Rokeby-Raleigh Streets. The YSF conducts monthly meetings that bring together representatives of community organisations and other stakeholders in Yeoville.

#### *Yeoville Community Forum (YCF)*

The YCF is an organisation created by a group of South Africans living in Yeoville to respond to the housing situation in Yeoville; it lobbies the municipality and government to address the challenges of lack of housing and high rentals, as well as the issue of hijacked buildings. In 2010, during the early days of its inception, the YCF threatened militancy and violence in response to the issue of hijacked houses. The YCF claims possession of street knowledge about the housing challenges faced by poorer South Africans and about the location of hijacked buildings and the dynamics of building hijacking, which along with other social problems in Yeoville are blamed on the presence of African immigrants.

To phenomenologically understand the spatio-political significance of the presence of these community organisations (or agents), the authors conceptualise them as “actors in places” and “actors in situations” after Murdoch and Marsden (1995). Because they bear witness to both the unfolding of everyday life and spectacular events, these organisations have the unique opportunity to respond astutely to local challenges, thereby becoming repositories of local histories and garnering the legit-

imacy to influence the future.

In the following pages, the authors will now explore the relationships among these five organisations in Yeoville, showing their stakes in the mitigation of exclusionist tension in the area.

## COMMUNITY MEDIATION IN PRACTICE

### I. Setting a Space for Unintended Interaction among Conflicting Parties

The mediation of ethnonational diversity requires a measure of cooperation and coalition between various civic organisations in Yeoville. However, attempts to directly persuade or instruct the conflicting stakeholders may have some unintended effects. In such cases, organisations with funding and intellectual capital but softer and more indirect means of persuasion may have greater influence on the direction and content of local discourse and the perception regarding exclusionist expression. In light of this, the authors found the significant example of the role of YBCDT in generating an environment conducive to the cooperation of civic organisations.

The YBCDT was able to obtain financial support from the Development Bank of Southern Africa, with support from the City of Johannesburg. In 2011 and 2012, the YBCDT provided shared office space with internet services to multiple organisations that might have otherwise operated in salient or concealed conflict with each other.

Shared office space on the main street of Yeoville was provided for the ADF, championing the rights of immigrants, and for the YCPF, blaming the presence of immigrants for crime, illegalities and violence. The YBCDT could not predict the possible outcomes of this experimental encounter of two contrasting organisations. It was the first time the leaders of the ADF and YCPF met regularly in person without any special agenda. In an interview, the YBCDT director claimed:

By having people in the same office, they begin to think about how to work together. I actually wanted to have an office where all organisations can book for tables from where they can work.<sup>(9)</sup>

Highlighting his influence on the YCPF since 2010 and giving the organisation office space, the YBCDT director recounted:

The chairperson didn't see himself as a leader, but now he is behaving like one. They now have an office and a computer and there is a major change in their own self-perception.<sup>(10)</sup>

Office space for a civic organisation therefore has the symbolic value of locally legitimating the organisation, giving credibility to its community initiatives. Shared office space also provides a physical space in which warring organisations can negotiate and rethink their relationship. During the period when the ADF and the

YCPF shared office space, the ADF chairperson indicated:

The CPF is asking us to have an ADF representative in their meetings. So from now on, we will have our member attending CPF meetings and participating in CPF initiatives as the voice of migrants (ADF executive meeting, 20 January, 2012).

Thus, the sharing of office space between the ADF and the YCPF generated an accidental bridge among them, making the YCPF think twice before engaging in xenophobic activities. Similarly, it caused the ADF to no longer view the YCPF as a xenophobic platform, but instead as one with which they could negotiate, or even contribute to. In bringing these community organisations together, the YBCDT director therefore operated as a catalytic actor in the mediation of latent hostility.

Their mutual influence on each other allowed the ADF and the YCPF to work together in organising what they referred to as the Africa Week Festival, which was held in 2010 and 2011 with the aim of showcasing various African cultural heritages through music and art. The title of the Africa Week Festival for 2010 was “Unity in Diversity.” The goal of this festival was to promote a spirit of tolerance and co-existence among the nationally and ethnically varied residents of Yeoville and surrounding areas, with the hope of enhancing co-learning about each other’s cultures and reducing xenophobia. The organisation of the festival included many local organisations in Yeoville. While the YBCDT, ADF, and YSF were co-organisers of this event, members of the YCPF provided manpower during the festival, working as security and cleaning personnel. The fact that this festival brought together the four organisations, especially given previous animosity between the YCPF and ADF, is significant with YBCDT contributing to a catalytic mediation of ethnonational diversity.

## II. Publishing Local Media to Facilitate Exchanges of Sensitive Ideas in Public

Apart from holding periodic community meetings, Yeoville published a newsletter edited by the YBCDT director, both a source of information and a forum for community dialogue. *Yeovue News*, as the newsletter was called, distributed about 10,000 copies every month to households in Yeoville, as well as through local grocery shops such as Super Saver and Shoprite, and public spaces such as Yeoville Recreation Centre and the local police station. An electronic version of the newsletter was also disseminated to the email addresses of registered readers (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 15 April, 2011). Thus, the newsletter was generally wide reaching. *Yeovue News* was a medium where information on local events, local organisations, and local problems was shared—a space where ideas and information were exchanged. In an article in the newsletter, it was noted:

*Yeovue News* is there for you. The more you use it, the bigger and better it will become. The bigger and better it becomes, the more communication we will have in our area. The more communication we have, the stronger our community will be. The stronger our community, the more we will be

able to make Yeoville Bellevue a better place to live and work in. It's up to us! (*Yeovue News*, vol. 1, no. 4, November 2008)

*Yeovue News* adopted the position that Yeoville's ethnic diversity arose in the near past since the end of apartheid, viewing most residents, whether South Africans or foreign migrants, as newcomers to the area:

It is important to remember that Yeoville Bellevue has gone through huge changes since 1990. A white-only area in 1990, it is now 2008, populated mainly by black migrants. Some of these migrants are South Africans who have moved here from townships around the province or from other towns and rural areas in the country. Others are migrants that have come here from all over Africa. Is Yeoville Bellevue a home for all of these migrants or is it just a convenient stopping-point on the way to somewhere else? (*Yeovue News*, vol. 1, no. 7, December 2008)

Through this conceptual historicisation of the area, the newsletter attempts to put aside the persistent question about who should be the area's legitimate owner. The article does not use the terms, "citizenship" and "entitlement," but simply provides the historical facts of the area. This manner illustrates an indirect but clear orientation of this media that tries to affect the sense of membership, or identity, of readers.

However, existing everyday tension between South Africans and foreign migrants is undeniable, and *Yeovue News* is not at all in a secured position to unilaterally send out an enlightening message. At some point a series of exchanges on issues relating to African immigrants was published, sparking a debate on local multinational diversity. The debate started with one immigrant's pan-Africanist note:

... most of the boundaries of modern "African nation states" that we have are fictitious and created by colonialists for administrative purposes and have never really existed in the pre-colonial African cosmology (mindset). So these boundaries and the crossing thereof should not be a source of hatred of one another as Africans.... I therefore plead with all residents in and of Yeoville-Bellevue to demonstrate oneness by embracing each other and taking collective actions to deal with community problems in the area. (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 9, March 2011)

The following week, a South African reader submitted a response:

Government has shouldered financial burdens running to billions of rands because of fraudulent pensions and grants activities committed by immigrants (as demonstrated in newspaper reports)... I have observed that migrants usually only attend [community meetings] when there are rumours of xenophobia. For more than a decade, Yeoville Bellevue has called for the involvement of the migrant community in vain. (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 10, March 2011)

This negative comment drove the editor of *Yeovue News* to publish an editorial response indicating:

The difficulty I faced was whether I should publish Thembi's words and, if so, how much I should edit them. The problem is that we do not want *Yeovue News* to be called xenophobic or irresponsible, but we also do not want to be scared of allowing people to express themselves, even if we and others might disagree with what they have to say. (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 10, March 2011)

The ADF then responded to the comments by the above-cited South African writer:

As ADF, it is our view that the Us and Them attitude dominating the article in question, as well as the very common misperceptions concerning migrants contained in it, do not profit the South African community.... One of the most sensitive issues raised in the article is that migrants are not participating in community initiatives.... While they may not be there in great numbers, migrants are almost always represented in public meetings and forums such as the YSF and in community policing forum and sector meetings. Secondly, if migrants do not attend in large numbers, do we understand why? For instance are the commonly-used means of inviting people to the meetings effective in reaching people. (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 15, April 2011)

The above exchange may not be a prime example of a peaceful interaction through mutual understanding between migrants and South African locals. Yet the authors acknowledge that there are few other public spaces for such communications. In this case, even though some readers who take positions similar to Thembi's may disagree with Pan-Africanist ideas, they can also recognise that some migrants can discuss a possible Yeoville-identity through rational means. Such directly agonistic exchanges, where the people are assumed to be democratic subjects (Norval, 2007: 200),<sup>(11)</sup> can function to prepare for further communication. Tension can be managed, tamed, and utilised for sustainable interactions.

### III. Framing Local Agenda through Light Banter

Community organisations play a very significant role in framing the local socio-political discourses. In one instance, the YBCDT director was able to dissuade an organisation with xenophobic inclinations from promoting xenophobic agendas. The xenophobic organisation in question was the YCPF, which had plans to engage in policing activities based on stereotypical criminalisation of African immigrants. The YCPF had planned for the year 2010 to support the mandate for citizenship verification and policing the hijacked buildings, which largely meant targeting foreign nationals. The executive director of the YBCDT, who was incorporated into the YCPF in 2010 as the treasurer, managed to gradually tone down this approach

and prevented the YCPF from openly expressing xenophobic sentiments. One YCPF executive confessed:

Maurice [YBCDT director] has helped us to re-orient our focus. Most members of our executive have begun to see that the reason for our existence is to make peace. When we assumed office, we were mostly focusing on the wrong things, resulting in us being labelled xenophobic.<sup>(12)</sup>

The authors argue that an environment with a multiplicity of organisations creates the possibility for these organisations to monitor one another: in the above case, one organisation countered the xenophobic sentiments in the ranks of another. The YCF once focused on the issue of hijacked buildings, blaming non-South Africans in Yeoville. Further, they used mainly isiZulu, which was not a generally shared language, made it very difficult for people from other ethnic groups and nationalities to participate in and contribute to open dialogue and association. Therefore, the YCF was appealing mainly to a South African constituency of disgruntled citizens. The YCF called for government action against hijacked houses, and threatened that if the government did not deliver, they would take matters into their own hands.

In a Yeoville Stakeholders Forum (YSF) meeting, the YSF chairperson had this to say about the YCF:

There is a meeting that is held every Sunday under the tree in the park... Those convening this meeting are claiming that they want to give people houses. How can you get a house from an organisation that operates from under the tree, an organisation that cannot even house itself? (YSF General Meeting, 19 August, 2010)

From the day this remark was made, it became the habit of members of the YSF, the YBCDT, and later the YCPF to refer to the YCF as an “under-the-tree organisation.” What can be observed here is a politics of naming and framing, in which no direct reference was made to the xenophobic orientation of the YCF, but that still discredited it as untrustworthy and illegitimate. This framing differed from actively “fighting against xenophobia,” cautiously avoiding involvement in the escalation of disputes. The usually confrontational YCF in the local political landscape thus lost an opportunity to pull the established rival organisations into mudslinging. Consequently, as the YCPF detached from YCF initiatives, it also lost the support from the YCPF leadership, which it had enjoyed in early 2010,

The “under-the-tree meeting” label imposed on the YCF also shows the symbolic importance of office space and other resources in legitimising or delegitimising an organisation. Over time, the YCF rebranded as the Yeoville Housing and Development Forum. Along with the change of name, they registered with the Department of Community Development in the hopes to use their new name and status to attract funding. This, however, had not been realized during the time of our field research.

## VI. Catalytic Mediation

The episodes described in this paper emphasise the significance of catalytic action, not political control, in governing tensions in an environment characterised by the imminence of xenophobia. The location inevitably invites the question: What is the reason for relative peace in Yeoville compared to other areas where xenophobic violence flared? Some scholars have pointed out the role of local leadership in calming down or inflaming xenophobia. However, in Yeoville, there was no outstanding sanctioned leadership to directly control or inflame the scourge of xenophobia. Rather, Yeoville has a network of civic organisations acting catalytically to govern tension through isolated, spontaneous, and sometimes collective action, practices, or discourses, despite the fact that these organisations have not always shared a common ground on issues pertaining to xenophobia.

The authors note that the role of civic actors described above is not one of controlling locals by virtue of some sort of sanctioned authority or power—whether formal or informal. Their role is facilitative, i.e., not associated with coercive power. The authors deem the term, catalyst, appropriate for describing the role of the YBCDT. The conditions that support this catalyst role are an office space with internet service, funds from external agencies,<sup>(13)</sup> and the local media, which provides the forum and space for disseminating political messages and information or discourse on migrant issues. These actors manoeuvre through local and sensitive discourses in an indirect but tactical manner that even employs light banter. At this moment, such arrangements seem to have contributed to mitigating the tension in Yeoville over migration and citizenship issues.

The background of the community/street-level mediator who could deploy catalytic intervention is surely different from local leadership with power to control. This YBCDT representative is a white South African with a past career in the anti-apartheid movement as a member of the ANC. This means that, on the one hand, he is a minority in the white community. On the other hand, he does not belong to the ANC mainstream, which has been inclining towards South African Black Nationalism as both a formal and informal policy. His situation is of course unique among the foreign nationals living in Yeoville. Although he is not a member of the majority, neither is he an outsider in South African society. Such a marginal character was able to act as a bridge between several actors, including locals and immigrants, based on his commitment to the principle and practice of deliberative democracy rooted in the activities of the anti-apartheid movement. Unlike a ward councillor or a police officer, he has no coercive power over residents.<sup>(14)</sup> Thus, his role involves the use of persuasion that shifts resident attitudes toward moderation.<sup>(15)</sup>

When the authors designate the local actors in Yeoville as catalysts, we do not emphasize the actors' motivation, but the extent to which they affect locals. The actors, as catalysts, assist in steering public communication in a certain positive (or sometimes negative) direction. Over the long term, the negative tension among the local stakeholders and residents may dissipate through the influence of these actors. As is appropriate to their role as catalysts, the actors are never authorised to implement this role by any authority, official institution, or political power.



Therefore if monetary support from outside funders vanishes, the long-term influence of the catalyst will also seem to diminish. Funding matters, which partly explains why other areas with pervasively exclusionist feelings among the locals have not followed Yeoville. However, the catalyst role, by its very nature, does not require an enormous budget. The catalytic or facilitative mechanism does not demand a strong and rigid power hierarchy for the people involved. It is construed as a suitable means of avoiding violent tensions in a social space where several social groups contest one another in the absence of an overbearing leadership or political structure.

## CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCAL CATALYTIC INTERVENTION

This article began with the following question: How does a multinational neighbourhood lacking preconditionally shared social norms and local structures of political control manage to develop social cohesion? This question is essential in settings characterised by super-diversity, as most of urban South Africa. The authors explored the question in Yeoville, an inner-city neighbourhood that has gained both notoriety and fame as a destination and residence for African immigrants—with challenges to social cohesion in the South African context where xenophobia has become almost embedded in public culture (Nyamnjoh, 2010).

The authors therefore sought to understand what enables people to live together in this context of ethnonational diversity, which defy the generation of lasting social bonds. In our conceptual schema for neighbourhoods characterised by sharp ethnonational diversity, we proposed considering the mediating approach to social cohesion. Rather than having overriding political figures with direct influence to the local population and events, multinational neighbourhoods call for an alternative approach to social cohesion not based on the principle of authority or control, but on generation and maintenance of attitudes of inter-ethnonational and inter-cultural recognition and toleration. A bridging approach to social cohesion deepens the concept of the term, social cohesion in this paper. The presence of catalytic agents without coercive power who (in)directly act as community/street-level mediators seems to befit the multinational context.

The authors thus submit an empirical suggestion on how local actors can strategically promote mediation that in turn promotes social cohesion. This paper's findings are arranged according to the three means of indirect mediation, namely: (1) a space for unplanned interaction among conflicting parties, (2) local media to facilitate the exchange of sensitive ideas in public, and (3) framing of contentious agenda through light banter.

These three regulatory means can be referred to as catalytic because they are facilitative and not associated with coercive power. The actors have no sanction from the higher powers of the state or any other official power-granting institution to play mediatory roles. There have been several answers suggested to the question about mitigation of exclusionist tension: macro policies such as lowering the commodity prices and increasing employment, promoting institutional efficacy

in border control, prohibiting the politicians from continuously engaging in xenophobic discourse, reforming the police to prevent omissions and abuse, and establishing strong community leadership, including informal leadership. Catalytic mediation with indirect engagement that the authors described in the study is good to add to the above in a context where macro and institutional prescriptions are hard to secure. Although the authors do not consider catalytic mediation as a panacea for the problems of multinational diversity, we recommend further consideration of its efficacy in academic studies, policy research, and debates on social cohesion in South Africa and elsewhere.

Thus, the authors submit the following positive conclusions: (1) there is an alternative to the concept of control for attempts to counter exclusionist movements in sharply diverse situations without shared norms to facilitate preconditional social order, and (2) the catalytic actor can be effective in a context characterised by multiple centres of power.

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#### NOTES

- (1) F. Cronje, "Xenophobia: Causes of the Current Crisis" (<http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=89859&sn=Detail>, Accessed 3 September, 2015); I. Evans, "Mbeki Is to Blame for Xenophobic Attacks, Says Watchdog," (*The Independent*, 21 May, 2008).
- (2) Yeoville is a neighbourhood that one of the authors of this paper walked into, observed, conversed in, and resided over a period of more than five years, essentially becoming a resident ethnographer.
- (3) These figures may, however, not be reliable, as the counting process possibly omitted scores of people, given the general mobility and possible reluctance of people to have themselves counted in Yeoville (Smithers, 2013).
- (4) Interview with Noma, Ward Councillor: 16 August, 2010.
- (5) Conversation with Nomfundo: 8 August, 2010.
- (6) During the research on which this article is based, the authors could not gather any concrete data through which to compare Hillbrow and Yeoville's preventive activities against the eruption of xenophobic violence. Yet the authors heard rumours that South Africans in Hillbrow tried to attack foreign nationals in May 2008, did not succeed, thwarted by groups of armed foreign nationals, resulting in injuries and fatalities among members of the South African xenophobic group.
- (7) ADF web page ([www.adf.za.org](http://www.adf.za.org), Accessed 10 September, 2015)
- (8) In South Africa, Interim Constitution of 1993 (Act 200 of 1993) stipulates in Section 221 that all police stations be set up as CPFs, and the act has been implemented since 1994. The South African Police Service Act (No. 68 of 1995) defines the role of CPF as promoting the relationship between police and local residents, having local residents observe police actions, and mobilising the locals to tackle crime.
- (9) Interview with Maurice: 28 February, 2012.
- (10) Interview with Maurice: 28 February, 2012.

- (11) According to Schaap (2005: 4, 10, 22), the subject is not neat and discrete but acts in accordance with the Arendtian account of civil friendship, which entails passionate and potentially agonistic encounters with others, and treats, according to Chantal Mouffe, “the other as an adversary rather than an antagonist”; even this entails the risk that the adversary may remain an enemy.
- (12) Interview with Zweli: date missing, March 2011.
- (13) They receive domestic funds as well from the provincial government, the City of Johannesburg, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Gauteng Tourism Authority (*Yeovue News*, vol. 4, no. 35, September 2011).
- (14) The position of the YBCDT director as a kind of community mediator is expressed in the following comments of self-recognition: “I would rather think of myself as a facilitator, not a leader,” and “I’m not a trained architect, city planner or spatial designer. I’m also not a property developer, urban manager, or local government politician. I fell into this work in 1997 as a result of circumstance—I was between jobs and had the time to look at what was happening around me in my neighbourhood” (Smithers, 2013: 7).
- (15) Even though it is a relatively soft attitude to other stakeholders, the position is not totally safe and protected. For instance, the director of the YBCDT had a threatening SMS sent to his work in July 2012 by an anonymous sender. Trying to bring order and cooperation into the community is of course a matter on the normative level. However, it sometimes turns out to be a challenging task in contested social spaces.

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