

UNESCO

**EXPERTS MEETING ON PRODUCTION OF MATERIAL ON NATIONAL LIBERATION
MOVEMENTS IN THE SADC REGION – REGIONAL DIMENSIONS AND LINKAGES
PANEL DISCUSSION**

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24 April 2018

STRENGTHENING REGIONAL IDENTITY

I was requested to cover the issue of forging a regional identity to combat discrimination and xenophobia. I intend to approach the issue more from a positive perspective: regional identity not as a force against something; but as a catalyst for the attainment of regional ideals.

National liberation struggles in our region were aimed at achieving the best in human civilisation: advancing productive forces, political freedom and the liberties that attach to it, as well as environmental, gender, communication and other rights. It is in the context both of the historical ideals, and the post-liberation efforts to attain them, that a common southern African identity can be forged.

The question should of course be posed: if identity refers to superstructural phenomena, i.e. non-material dynamics in human society, should regional identity be pursued as an autonomous force? Most of us in the liberation movement would have learnt, that material factors underpin social consciousness; but with qualifications. To quote Friedrich Engels:

“According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. [However] if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — ... political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.” (Friedrich Engels, Letter to J. Bloch in Königsberg, <http://www.marxists.org/... 1890/letters...>)

In other words, non-material issues, of which identity is a critical element, do have an autonomous existence.

I would therefore argue that, changing the material conditions in southern Africa as a whole is fundamental to the shaping of a regional identity. This applies to processes to realise the various generations of human rights referred to above. At a regional level, this pertains to the regional commonality as well national variations in our pursuit of the liberation ideal.

When these material conditions are absent, books, lectures and the arts may tantalise and mesmerise; but their impact will be like morning dew. Revisionist narratives will be propagated and find resonance in both established and social media; and the appreciation of the real history of the region will dissipate with passing generations. Perspectives from other parts of the world will continue to define Africa and Africans.

And so, my central hypothesis is that the material conditions and issues of social consciousness are each a necessary condition; but neither is sufficient for the attainment of social cohesion in southern Africa.

How then can a regional identity be strengthened? This needs to be underpinned by regional integration at economic, political and other levels, as we seek collectively to improve the human condition. In that way, we will address the push and pull factors that create stateless people, involuntarily migrating hither and dither, in search of economic and political environments that are conducive to an improved and improving quality of life.

Creating a new identity of course should have as a critical foundation knowledge of history and appreciation of its relevance to the present. The Keynote Address and other inputs in the earlier sessions adequately elaborated on the historical underpinning to our relationship in southern Africa.

Among the issues that we need to address are matters of content of educational curricula from pre-school to tertiary levels. This should include:

- firstly, education about the civilisations such as Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Sofala (in Mozambique) and Kilwa (in Tanzania) that existed in southern Africa long before colonialists set foot in the region, without the current artificial colonial borders and with fusion and fission among communities that was not linked to a narrow national identity
- secondly, an approach to history that does not equivocate about right and wrong in relation to colonialism and the fight against it
- thirdly, clear post-colonial content of curricula in terms of sociology, economics, law, politics, the natural sciences and so on.

How many of our government pay attention to this? Especially at tertiary levels, we embrace autonomy in an artificial way; and at the same time the corps of liberation cadres abandon institutions of higher education to pursue a hallowed material existence in government and the private sector.

We also need to pay keen attention to creative expressions in terms of the content of the arts – from music, to theatre, the film industry and other forms of expression. In this way, as other nations and regions do – for instance, in relation to the holocaust, Asian and Latin American liberation struggles, the American War of Independence and so on – we will be able to impact on social consciousness also in indirect and more impactful ways. Needless to say, in the modern era, sufficient attention has to be paid to social media.

In addition, I would also argue that southern Africa is not paying sufficient attention to its think industry. Whilst entities such as CODESRIA and others have been doing their best at a continental level, the question needs to be posed, whether we have a sufficient number of such progressive think tanks in our countries, and whether these adequately interact with one another! What about interaction among universities and especially institutes of humanities and social sciences? With regard to think tanks, we should also examine the extent to which the emergent business elites have embraced the culture of giving and adopted causes that promote regional social cohesion. As such, our think tanks would not have to rely largely on support from the developed world.

Of course, we need to accept that attaining a regional identity will not be happen in a year, a decade or even two decades. A sense of vision, therefore, becomes fundamental to inspiring young and old, men and women, people of various religious beliefs, rich and poor... as an organising framework that gives our societies a regional sense of purpose. Vision 2063 of the African Union is a great initiative: it needs to find concrete expression in the region, both at material level and in relation to social consciousness. One can refer to regional infrastructure programmes and division of labour in the manufacturing of supplies; and how collectively we can become part of global value chains. This requires standardisation and other prerequisites – including the free movement of goods and people across the region – all as a critical contribution to the forging of a regional consciousness and a regional identity.

In this way, we will eliminate the persisting trend of southern Africa being defined by islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty within and across borders. We will be able, more systemically, to eradicate the objective causes of discrimination and 'xenophobia', as the poor compete among one another for crumbs from the tables of the elites. At root, it is the competition for meagre resources that leads to tensions among our communities. People then invoke all manner of rationalisations to justify this; and the blame game becomes the stock-in-trade.

The solidarity of the past was forged by common threats, common privations in exile and within our countries, common ideals and shared dreams. Similarly, it is the concrete work we do today to improve the human condition, the regional vision we pursue and the progressive narratives that we cultivate which will be critical in forging a regional identity.

To recapitulate: a regional identity will not emerge of its own accord. It has to be consciously cultivated!