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## **Urban displacement and peacebuilding: an analysis of South African social cohesion interventions**

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## Introduction

More than half of the world's refugees are found in urban environments (UNHCR 2009). In addition to the urbanisation of refugees, other forms of migration (forced and voluntary), civil wars, and conflict dynamics increasingly affect urban spaces. Understanding urban dynamics is crucial, and yet extremely challenging for organisations. The urban displaced are often highly mobile and difficult to access, targeted by other residents as outsiders, and with insecure housing and livelihood options (Landau 2004).

As a consequence of targeted discrimination and violence by host 'communities', many displaced persons choose to become "invisible" and deny their foreigner identity (Davies and Jacobsen 2010, 13; Montemurro and Walicki 2001, 11; Landau 2004; Pavanello, Elhawary, and Pantuliano 2010; Zetter and Deikun 2010). Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding organisations, accustomed to the more straightforward delineation between host and refugee in a camp setting, have a difficult time grappling with urban realities, and how the urban displaced navigate their cities (Refstie, Dolan and Okello 2010, 33; Vearey 2009). The context of urban South Africa is highlighted by these key characteristics of urban displacement: diversity, mobility, insecurity, and invisibility.

Meanwhile, the international peacebuilding culture<sup>1</sup> was not designed with urban spaces in mind, even though conflict dynamics routinely affect urban space and peacebuilding toolkits will increasingly be deployed to these spaces. Momentum has steadily grown since the 1990s to promote peacebuilding actors' sensitivity to conflict dynamics in their interventions (Meharg 2009; International Alert et al. 2004; Chigas and Woodrow 2008). However, the conflict-sensitive theories and tools used for peacebuilding interventions are similarly devoted to international interventions in a civil war or political crisis.

Efforts to better understand conflict nonetheless will be difficult to translate to an urban context. In this paper I explore whether the body of literature on peacebuilding—in both operational tools and theoretical research—is appropriate for a context of urban displacement<sup>2</sup>. I particularly focus on community and participation as critical constructs that are affected by the urban characteristics of invisibility, mobility, diversity, and insecurity described above. I explore this intersection between urban displacement and peacebuilding through field research with a series of social cohesion<sup>3</sup> interventions in urban South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> The international peacebuilding culture, described in depth further in this paper, is most helpfully described in Autesserre 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Urban displacement is defined as: refugees and other forced migrants who are displaced into urban areas.

<sup>3</sup> Social cohesion has become a staple of peacebuilding and development practice since the 1995 Copenhagen Declaration<sup>3</sup> (King and Samii 2009, 5). King and Samii summarize the range of definitions that typify social cohesion: "the 'affective bonds between citizens' (Chipkin and Ngqulunga 2008), 'local patterns of cooperation' (Fearon et al. 2009) and 'the glue that bonds society together, promoting harmony, a sense of community, and a degree of commitment to promoting the common good' (Colletta et al. 2001)" (King and Samii 2009, 2). The founder of the concept of social cohesion, sociologist Emile Durkheim, defined it as "the ties that bind people to one another" (Durkheim 1958). For Forrest and Kearns, the most basic aspect of social cohesion is if groups in a given area can come together to promote a common interest (Forrest and Kearns 2000, 8). The Nelson Mandela Foundation, a participating institution in this thesis, defines social cohesion as, "that which galvanizes a collective or a group of people around a common set of values, based on mutual respect, tolerance, freedom from fear, social solidarity and respect for human dignity" (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2010, 4). Each definition varies in

## *Rationale*

This paper addresses a crucial gap in the literature on peacebuilding. Literature and case studies in this field almost exclusively focus on international organisations entering a host country experiencing, or susceptible to, large-scale violent conflict. The dominant discourse on peacebuilding interventions has revolved around the dynamic of internationals entering a developing country and operating in a relatively immobile environment, in which the displaced often lives in camps or rural villages. In this context, peacebuilding literature includes a series of implicit and explicit assumptions about the nature of local actors, community, and participation in peacebuilding interventions.

This study particularly calls into question these assumptions around issues of community and participation that are frequently used in peacebuilding rhetoric, and analyses the extent to which these assumptions apply in urban displacement contexts. Many peacebuilding organisations claim to promote participation and community cohesion, even though these processes might look very different in diverse and mobile urban spaces than they do in an IDP camp or rural village. As a result, critical research is needed to address the underlying assumptions of peacebuilding approaches and their relevance to a context of urban displacement. Research on these assumptions can shed light on how to carry out more effective interventions in the future, and how the norms of peacebuilding should be re-evaluated for a context of urban displacement.

Finally, theories and tools that address the challenges of peacebuilding in urban space will only become more necessary in an increasingly urbanised world. Attention has been drawn to this need more broadly through emerging literature on “critical peace research” to address peacebuilding practice (Fischer 2009). Miall claims that peacebuilding lacks dynamic theories that adequately capture the nature of conflict, including the formation of new actors and new issues (Miall 2004, 17). Riemann further argues that most assumed realities in peacebuilding theory and practice are imposed by an implicit theoretical framework of conflict that has not been exposed or interrogated (Riemann 2004, 14).

In response to these gaps, Fischer calls for “critical peace research” to carefully reflect on peacebuilding practice, suggesting that action-oriented research should accompany participatory evaluation processes to “accumulate knowledge and enhance understanding” (Fischer 2009, 93). This study thus responds to these calls for more critical peace research by interrogating notions of community and participation in urban contexts. It aims to develop an understanding of how these constructs function in urban South African social cohesion interventions, and, as a result, how these constructs take on different meanings and realities in practice.

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interpretation and prerequisites for cohesion, but the core concept revolves around the strength of social ties and peaceful coexistence between groups. In the ACMS social cohesion study on which this paper’s fieldwork is based, the team defines a community with a minimum threshold of social cohesion as: “the ability to function peacefully in the presence of numerous social sub-groups, free from debilitating chronic tensions or acute, violent conflicts” (Monson 2010, 7).

This paper is divided into two major sections: The first section of this paper summarizes relevant peacebuilding and urban displacement literature. This includes a section that questions the assumptions embedded in concepts of community and participation, by focusing on both the discourse of operational tools and theoretical literature in peacebuilding. The second section focuses on my fieldwork with social cohesion intervention staff, and how concepts of community and participation manifest themselves in these interventions. These findings ultimately demonstrate the complexity of operating in a context of urban displacement, and how the urban displaced create new, awkward realities that do not fit into traditional peacebuilding categories.

### *Methodology*

This case study draws on research undertaken by Oxfam and the African Centre for Migration and Society's social cohesion project. As a researcher for the team beginning in May 2010, I co-designed research instruments for residents, local leadership, and institutions addressing social cohesion in six Gauteng province case study locations (all locations were part of the cities of Johannesburg or Pretoria). These methods were designed to probe the relevance and effectiveness of social cohesion interventions that responded to South Africa's May 2008, and ongoing, xenophobic attacks.

A secondary goal of the project was to understand the mechanisms, both systemic and short-term, that people used to address xenophobic violence outside the bounds of formal interventions. The team jointly developed the research framework and background literature, and then researched institutions carrying out social cohesion activities. These social cohesion interventions all began in response to the 2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa.

From this initial list, I carried out twenty-five in-depth, qualitative and semi-structured interviews with twelve institutions between August and November 2010.<sup>4</sup> I ensured that the participating institutions reflected a range of organisational structures, histories in South Africa, and approaches to xenophobic violence. I also collected documents from each of the organisations I interviewed, and attended organisation events and reviewed their advocacy material when available. The compiled documents include, but were not limited to, public relations material, event literature, monitoring and evaluation documents, website information, and other internal documents, as available. I ultimately triangulated the interviews and secondary documents, and responses from participants for this paper.

### **Reviewing urban displacement and peacebuilding**

In this section I first briefly argue that diversity, insecurity, invisibility, and mobility are defining features of the urban displacement context that are fundamentally different from the contexts envisioned in many peacebuilding approaches. I then describe these features in the South African context, and explain the 2008 xenophobic attacks that catalysed social cohesion interventions in the country. I conclude the first part of this paper by situating these interventions in the broader

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<sup>4</sup> A summary of each participating institution can be found in the appendix to this paper.

peacebuilding field and literature, with its associated understandings of community and participation.

### *Urban displacement*

Urban displacement is an emerging context that is increasingly relevant for the international peacebuilding field. I consider mobility, diversity, invisibility, and insecurity to be the dominant characteristics of urban space. I describe these particular characteristics because they stray from the conventional peacebuilding environment and will have implications for the dominant peacebuilding culture's toolkits and approaches to conflict. I argue that an urban environment is especially problematic for conventional peacebuilding understandings of community and participation in social cohesion interventions. Peacebuilding interventions will increasingly confront urban contexts.

A new discourse has emerged on the "urban battlespace", "failed cities" and "military urbanism", in which cities are seen as the future frontier of armed violence (Muggah 2012). Understanding urban dynamics in relation to conflict and displacement is crucial, and yet extremely challenging for organisations. Refstie, Dolan and Okello refer to this as 'institutional convenience syndrome', in which UNHCR and other humanitarian actors remain focused on the camps where they have historically provided assistance (Refstie, Dolan and Okello 2010, 33).

The insecure nature of the urban displaced's livelihoods often leads to strategies of 'invisibility'. Xenophobic attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers can lead to discrimination, harassment, hostility, detention, and eviction (Pavanello, Elhawary, and Pantuliano 2010, 27; Zetter and Deikun 2010, 7). Several studies have highlighted the necessity of invisibility for urban refugees as a security strategy against these threats (Davies and Jacobsen 2010, 13; Montemurro and Walicki 2001, 11; Landau 2007, 14; Pavanello, Elhawary, and Pantuliano 2010; Zetter and Deikun 2010).

Invisibility can manifest as an attempt to hide from state and local governance structures, other non-migrant residents, the police, or all of the above (Vearey 2009; Landau 2006). Refugees and asylum seekers often prefer to remain 'hidden', which has implications for how they engage with the state and South African citizens, and certainly their willingness to participate in peacebuilding interventions.

The mobility of refugees also means that few refugees regard the city they live in as a "home" (Landau 2007, 11). According to Landau, "In many instances, residents do not stay put long enough to develop, articulate, and respond to some form of collective imagination and aspiration" (Landau 2007, 11). Vearey argues that Johannesburg is, "a fluid concept, where spaces can be converted and recycled to suit the needs of different urban residents" (Vearey 2010, 44). Landau describes this fluid space as "nowhereville" for those, "permanently passing through the city" (Landau 2006, 125). Asylum seekers and refugees thus have a limited sense of community, which is often the idealized starting point for peacebuilding and social cohesion interventions.

These characteristics are relevant to a range of urban and other emerging peacebuilding contexts. The ‘invisibility’ of refugees and asylum seekers renders conventional peacebuilding targeting practices and ideas about participation inappropriate. Their mobility similarly restricts how refugees’ understand the urban community they live in – which is more like a “community of convenience” than the romanticized rural community envisioned in peacebuilding toolkits (Landau 2011).

Meanwhile, urban diversity is characterized by a range of different ethnic groups, nationalities, and languages. The ability to even speak to a group of forced migrants and South Africans with collective understanding demands considerable effort. These urban characteristics are a helpful backdrop for understanding the xenophobic violence that unfolded in May 2008, as well as potential dilemmas with peacebuilding responses to these attacks.

### *The South African case*

Johannesburg, South Africa alone is home to a half million urban refugees and asylum seekers (Kraus-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011). Following years of simmering resentment and isolated attacks, Alexandra township erupted in violence against refugees and asylum seekers on 11 May 2008. From Alex, the violence soon spread throughout Gauteng province, and then across South Africa. Within two weeks, South Africans murdered 60 people, wounded hundreds more, and displaced over one hundred thousand people from their homes (Polzer and Igglesden 2009). Perpetrators destroyed thousands of homes and stole from countless refugees and asylum seekers.

Xenophobia in South Africa is often discussed in the past tense, as something that happened in May of 2008 and then stopped altogether. However, in reality attacks have persisted on a regular basis both before May 2008, and ever since. Since the 2008 attacks, dozens have been murdered under the cloud of xenophobia, largely unnoticed by the South African public (CoRMSA 2009). Moreover, the police, employers, and neighbours routinely harass foreign nationals. Shops are looted, people injured, and others flee their homes in fear of attack (Landau 2011, 20).

These attacks, initially incomprehensible to the South African public, appear to have taken place deliberately, and upon further reflection and research, not surprisingly. Misago highlights how the May violence was often purposeful and orchestrated by local elites for personal gain (Misago in Landau 2010). Misago focuses on the micro-politics of the attacks and argues the key triggers for the May 2008 violence were: “political and leadership vacuums, lack of conflict resolution mechanism, and a culture of impunity” (Misago in Landau 2010, 108).

Such realities are particularly important for social cohesion interventions in urban South Africa. A lack of legitimate institutions and the weakness of local leadership, rather than xenophobic attitudes writ large, feature as the most prominent reasons why violence took place when and where it did. It is against this backdrop that a range of international and domestic institutions felt ‘compelled to act’ in the aftermath of the May attacks.

## *Peacebuilding and social cohesion*

In this paper I argue that a dominant international peacebuilding culture<sup>5</sup> informed NGO social cohesion interventions in South Africa. I suggest that the current practices of the peacebuilding<sup>6</sup> community have been sculpted over time. A longer trajectory of peacebuilding practice, as well as the more recent bureaucratization of the sector, has conditioned and ultimately hardwired operational behaviour to build peace in certain kinds of ways and in certain kinds of conflicts.

Past ways of building peace have defined the assumptions, rules and practices that govern peacebuilding today. Autesserre refers to this as the “dominant peacebuilding culture”, which shapes understandings of both why conflict occurs and how an intervener should act (Autesserre 2010, 23). Autesserre argues that this culture has generated, “both an intellectual and a material toolkit” and operates at the level of the ‘field’<sup>7</sup> – transcending and encompassing individual organizations (Autesserre 2010, 24).

South Africa does not represent a typical case study for peacebuilding. In fact, peacebuilding originally and most commonly refers to outside interveners rebuilding a state in the aftermath of civil war. And yet, other peacebuilding definitions reflect a broader understanding of the term: OECD-DAC and others define peacebuilding as ending or preventing violent conflict and supporting sustainable peace (OECD-DAC 2010; Mial 2004; International Alert et al. 2004). Organizations with peacebuilding mandates increasingly respond to violent conflict amidst state fragility in contexts other than the aftermath of civil war. South Africa’s xenophobic attacks have been understood in this way:

When state institutions evidently failed to deliver on their promises to protect and promote a politically entitled but materially deprived citizenry, the population (or parts of it) took on the obligation to alienate and exclude those standing in its way (Landau 2011, 10).

Violence and relative state weakness have led to peacebuilding interventions in other, similar contexts as well, including post-election violence in Kenya, religious and ethnic violence in Jos, Nigeria, and the “new military urbanism” of Rio de Janeiro (Muggah 2012). The international peacebuilding toolkit, and the peacebuilding culture underpinning it, is increasingly deployed to unconventional contexts. What remains unclear is how the international peacebuilding culture holds up in this new peacebuilding terrain.

Based on my fieldwork in South Africa, I argue that the dominant peacebuilding culture markedly influenced the ways in which interveners crafted solutions to the problem of xenophobic violence. As Autesserre describes, culture affects what peacebuilders consider to be appropriate action (Autesserre 2010, 29). Peacebuilders have been cultured to treat xenophobia as a problem that should be solved by a change in attitude and through awareness-raising. As a

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<sup>5</sup> Autesserre defines the dominant peacebuilding culture as a social object that determines understandings of both why conflict occurs and how an intervener should act.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I define peacebuilding broadly as end to violent conflict and the process of building sustainable peace (OECD DAC 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Autesserre defines a field as an increasingly structured set of organizations that “in aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (Dimaggio and Powell 1983, 148 in Autesserre 2010).

result, an attitudes-based approach to change was authorized and justified by the international peacebuilding culture, with implicit, particular ideas about who should participate and what the community looks like in these interventions.

In light of this problem diagnosis, certain kinds of interventions were legitimated: these interventions included poster campaigns, workshops, and dialogue sessions where, ideally, refugees and residents alike would come together, share their grievances, and build social cohesion. The dominant peacebuilding culture upholds a demanding vision of peace and social cohesion that, in light of the fractured urban landscape in South Africa, was perhaps doomed for failure.

I suggest that this demanding vision of peace is rooted in assumptions about a static, rural village or camp community and an ease to participation that was unhelpful and likely harmful for urban peacebuilding. In the following section I address peacebuilding literature, and the assumptions in this literature, about the nature of community and participation that underpinned efforts to promote social cohesion in South Africa.

### **Peacebuilding, community and participation**

In this section I first explain the growth of the peacebuilding field and the dual growth in conflict-sensitivity literature. I then explain how conflict-sensitivity literature, best equipped to help practitioners understand urban displacement dynamics, similarly uses ideas of community and participation without clarity or caveats.<sup>8</sup> I then evaluate of constructs of community and participation in the peacebuilding field, often drawing from development scholars for critical perspectives on community and participation.

Since the end of the cold war the peacebuilding field has grown rapidly and “traditional” humanitarian and development organisations increasingly adopted peacebuilding mandates in their work. Within this peacebuilding culture, a dual movement of conflict-sensitivity entered development, aid, and peacebuilding circles. I focus on conflict-sensitivity because it is the part of the dominant peacebuilding culture best equipped to address the realities of urban displacement. And yet, this literature is not operationalized in a way to account for urban displacement dynamics.

Mary Anderson initiated the aid dialogue on how international interventions need to be more sensitive to conflict dynamics. Since the 1990s many international organisations have adopted the *Do No Harm* framework for conflict analysis, while others have adapted and modified the approach into their institutional culture (IFRC 1998; O’Brien 2001). *Do No Harm* was then followed by a movement of “Peace and Conflict Impact Assessments” (PCIA), which evaluate project effects on the structures and processes that promote sustainable peace (Bush 1998, 7). Conflict-sensitivity is the concept adopted by many peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian actors to elaborate on, and mainstream, the theories behind PCIA and *Do No Harm*

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<sup>8</sup> While certainly not a fault of the conflict-sensitivity literature, the use of term does not help practitioners confronted with urban displacement dynamics either.

(International Alert et al. 2004).<sup>9</sup> Similar to PCIA, the process is relevant to all types of programs, sectors, and stages of conflict (International Alert et al. 2004; Chigas and Woodrow 2009). However, instead of a specific tool, conflict-sensitivity is a process to be mainstreamed into existing programs and institutions, and a theory of how institutions can avoid unintended consequences (Chigas and Woodrow 2009). International Alert et al.'s resource pack on conflict sensitivity is widely adopted in the international peacebuilding culture and argues for local ownership, participatory processes, and partnerships as, among other values, key for conflict sensitive practice (International Alert et al. 2004, 3).

However, the Resource Pack does not elaborate further on the scope of these goals or how to achieve them. *Do No Harm*, PCIA, and conflict-sensitivity seek to address root causes, carefully assess context, and promote sustainable peace in their approaches to interventions. This literature within the dominant peacebuilding culture provides practical guidance on how to design and assess interventions, as well as academic literature theorizing why conflict and change occur.<sup>10</sup> However, many underlying assumptions in this field still have not been interrogated.

The critical and academic literature behind operational tools and resources often use policy terms and categories, even though: “the role of academic research should be to reflect critically on the taken-for-granted assumptions of policy makers rather than simply confirming or legitimizing them: to make them visible and open to inspection” (Bakewell 2008, 437-438). I now seek to “inspect” some of the key assumptions in peacebuilding literature, and analyse how these assumptions relate to a context of urban displacement.

## **Oblique research**

In this paper I use Bakewell's concept of ‘oblique research’ to critique current assumptions in the peacebuilding field about the nature of community and participation. I suggest that these uncontested assumptions exist because peacebuilding language and discourse is adopted from policy and practice frameworks, “with limited reflection on any ‘deeper academic meaning or explanatory power’” (Bakewell 2008, 437).

As it currently stands, operational tools do not question these assumptions because academic peacebuilding literature has not done so either: academic literature does not complicate these constructs and instead adopts operational language in the quest for ‘policy/practical relevance’. Bakewell suggests that research, “designed without regard to policy relevance may offer a more powerful critique and ironically help to bring about more profound changes than many studies that focus on policy issues from the outset” (Bakewell 2008, 433). Peacebuilding literature demands policy irrelevant research in order to critique existing categories and assumptions, or

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<sup>9</sup> International Alert et al. define conflict sensitivity as: “the ability of your organisation to: understand the context in which you operate; understand the interaction between your intervention and the context; and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts” (International Alert et al. 2004, 1).

<sup>10</sup> There is academic literature, often in the field of “conflict transformation”, or simply peacebuilding writ large that seeks to understand why conflict and change occur. Conflict transformation is: “a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses, and very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict” (Miall 2004, 4).

else it will, as Fischer fears, “revert to technical peacebuilding” (Fischer 2009, 93). I seek to step outside these categories and highlight the friction between traditional approaches to peacebuilding and the realities of urban displacement. While exposing broad assumptions in the field, I also include peacebuilding and (more often) development scholars who have also critically engaged with concepts of community and participation.

### *Community*

This section summarizes the broad generalizations in the peacebuilding field around the idea of community. It then presents a range of scholarly critiques to the use of ‘community’, and describes how these generalizations manifest in the urban South Africa context.

There is a particular context narrative that international peacebuilding actors operate within: this narrative is about international organisations entering a conflict-affected host country to carry out work within refugee camps or rural village communities. Peacebuilding scholars similarly follow this narrative, and ‘community’ has slowly become less meaningful as both academic and operational literature ascribe ‘community’ to any given space marked on a map. The wide and indiscriminate use of the term community means that it is unclear what this might look like in cosmopolitan Johannesburg and other cities.

The peacebuilding literature often constructs a monolithic ‘local’ landscape, and an image of homogenous, self-enclosed ‘communities’ within which interventions take place. Peacebuilding literature consistently refers to the community, and carries out interventions at the community-level (Chigas and Woodrow 2009; Anderson 2005; Bush 2004; Dziedzic, Sotirin, and Agoglia 2008). Peacebuilding scholars similarly use community without a clear explanation of what the features of this community are: who is in it, what are its bounds, and what kinds of legitimacy does it have?

The discourses around community’ in peacebuilding literature demonstrate a range of assumptions. For instance, existing peacebuilding literature frequently discusses segregated communities and divided societies (Church and Rogers 2006). The underlying assumption is that a single community is currently split into two (or more) pieces. It is assumed that there is a community with which to engage, and the nature of this community is relatively monolithic. The discourse on divided societies and segregated communities is not necessarily helpful given the realities of urban displacement: the nature of diversity in South Africa’s urban displacement context demonstrates this unhelpfulness clearly.

Development scholars have acknowledged how a romanticized and relatively monolithic interpretation of local contexts is often embraced by practitioners, instead of recognizing that, “traditional or local knowledge systems suffer, too, from. . . inhibitive prejudices”(Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 122). Others have identified that communities are often considered homogeneous, regardless of the social and political realities on the ground (Guijt and Shah 1998 in Harrison 2002, 588). Golooba-Mutebi describes this as “social homogeneity”, and describes the often false assumption that a population “has the ‘structured capacity’ to cooperate with those designing and implementing a project” (Eyben and Ladbury 1995, 194 in Golooba-Mutebi 2005)

Leonhardt also debunks the idea of a ‘community’ perspective by acknowledging that communities are diverse, with many different stakeholders and interest groups.

In the urban South African context, such romanticized views of the community can easily prioritize certain voices over others (most likely, not forced migrant voices) as the ‘community’ perspective. Bakewell suggests, “Holding too closely to policy categories not only makes some outside the category invisible, but it also tends to privilege category membership as an explanatory variable for differences between people (Bakewell 2008, 439). As a result, language that describes communities in urban South Africa might miss the actual ways in which people interact and relate with one another, in a space where resident’s themselves do not perceive a “sense of community” (Harrison 2002).

Concepts of community in existing literature are also construed as relatively static, which does not account for the dynamic and fluid nature of city space in South Africa. Many programs and assessments do not expect the people, communities, and general demographics of the space they operate in to change very much, and accordingly create linear tools for nonlinear dynamics and movements (Meharg 2009). Bakewell suggests that this is similarly a consequence of policy blinders: “policy categories are likely be fairly invariant over time (they mean the same today as yesterday)... If they are subject to constant revision, it is likely to cause confusion and potentially the collapse of the policy” (Bakewell 2008, 436-437). As a result, invariant categories are often perpetuated even when their relevance is not clear.

To summarize, the key assumptions in current peacebuilding literature are that: there is a community with which to engage; the community is relatively monolithic; and the community will not change drastically over time. It is unclear what ‘community’ means in a city like Johannesburg: people, both migrants and South Africans, often in “hidden spaces” do a variety of things that fall outside the view of a community-based approach to analysis and intervention.

Furthermore, they often function like this purposefully, as Landau describes: the displaced in urban South Africa are, “an uprooted people determined to avoid establishing sustained connections with the new terrain” (Landau 2006, 138). Displaced persons are highly diverse, with a wide range of lived experiences, backgrounds and daily realities. They are constantly shifting and redefining their space, sometimes visibly, and other times not. Each of these realities has practical implications on the international construct of community as understood and operationalized by peacebuilding, and in particular, social cohesion interventions.

#### *Participation: by whom and how?*

Mirroring the previous section on community, this section summarizes the broad generalizations in the peacebuilding field around notions of participation. It then presents a range of scholarly critiques on participation, and describes how these generalizations manifest in the urban South Africa context.

Peacebuilding tools and literature often reference the importance of participation hand in hand with community (Lederach 2003; Lederach 2007; Neufeldt and Culbertson 2007; Bush 2004; Church and Rogers 2006; International Alert et al. 2004). However, similar to the discussion of

community, few attempts have been made to problematize participation and describe the challenges to a participatory peacebuilding process. The rhetoric of “local ownership”, an element of participation, has gained considerable attention in the international donor community as well. And yet, paralleling the discourse on participation and community, peacebuilding actors frequently reference ownership without elaborating on the concept (Reich 2006; Campbell 2008; Chigas and Woodrow 2009; Fischer and Wils 2003; Gsanger and Feyen 2003).

Debates on what participation can and should be pre-date the peacebuilding field. Since Robert Chambers introduced “participatory rural appraisals” (PRA) in the 1970s, the development field has pioneered the study of participation in program interventions. Donor governments have widely adopted participatory approaches, although Rahnema argues that they often pay lip services to the idea of participation (Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 120). PRA theorists suggest that participation is the only way to save development from “degenerating into a bureaucratic, top-down and dependency-creating institution” (Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 12).

However, participation is a slippery term that can look like many different things (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004). Rahnema describes the importance of differentiating between what she terms “teleguided” participation and spontaneous participation: “More often than not, people are asked or dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them, in the very name of participation (Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 116). The development discourse often focuses on the extent to which participatory processes are manipulated or not: “There is a big difference between the ideals of participation and the proliferation of a development orthodoxy” (Harrison 2002, 588; see also Stirrat, 1997; Tsing 2006; Chambers 1997; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Chambers’ *Whose Reality Counts?* discusses the ways in which urban (and rural) people are analytical and articulate about the diverse and complicated realities of the places in which they live, the realities of which are often at odds with the theories behind development programming. Rahnema expands on this idea and claims that development interpretations of participation needs can actually “disvalue traditional and vernacular forms of power” (Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 123). Thus, participatory interventions can still be packaged in a top-down manner, and altogether miss the function of such approaches.

In South Africa’s cities, teleguided participation is common. Bakewell suggests that through such teleguided approaches, “we immediately cast into the shadows the agency of the individuals and households who have no easily observable institutional form” (Bakewell 2008, 441). In this environment, the targeted project participants are often simply the most convenient for attendance numbers (Anderson 2003). Participation can only be understood within the context of who is participating, and how these different participants relate with one another (Golooba-Mutebi 2005, 955).

This question is particularly relevant for South Africa, whose urban social cohesion interventions often focus on ward councillors and other weak government forums for mobilization. The discussion of participation focuses on empowering intervention participants through participatory methods, but who is participating and the nature of participation remains under-addressed.

Donais outlines several of the key dilemmas with operationalizing local ownership: “Local ownership offers little concrete guidance in determining whose voices should be prioritized among the cacophony of local owners or in how to address situations in which the priorities of significant local actors run counter to the interests of the broader post-conflict society” (Donais 2009, 12). Donais argues that in order to give the term meaning, ‘outsiders’ must address the meanings of ‘ownership’ and the characteristics of the ‘locals’ (Donais 2009, 11).

This is particularly complex amidst the nature of community, the diversity of actors, and the characteristics of conflict in a context like Johannesburg. For instance, Landau suggests that, “rather than claiming ownership, many foreigners are claiming usufruct rights” (Landau 2006, 136). Groups can use their agency to *not* own their piece of the local landscape, and are instead content with their state of “permanent mobility” (Landau 2006).

To summarize, the key assumptions participation assumptions are: the necessary participants can be targeted; once targeted, they will attend in a meaningful way; and that the overarching project of their participation – to build a sense of community with South Africans – is something forced migrants want. The reality of these constructs in a context of urban displacement is a messier version of the peacebuilding ideal. In fact, in any context where traditional peacebuilding tools and ideas are used, there will be friction between the model and how it is put into practice.

Urban displacement is not necessarily exceptional in and of itself: The elements of invisibility, insecurity, diversity, and mobility that characterize urban displacement could appear in a variety of other post-conflict settings as well. However, the extent to which a context of urban displacement deviates from the traditional peacebuilding narrative is significant. The aim of this paper is to examine these divergences through field research with a range of peacebuilding practitioners operating around Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Through these practitioners, this study examines how these institutions address social cohesion, how their programs were conceived and designed, and how they approach issues of community and participation. Through these interviews, this study will analyse the space between social cohesion ideas and practice, and think critically about how interventions most successfully negotiate the challenges of an urban context.

### **Community in social cohesion interventions**

In the second part to this paper I seek to explain how understandings of community and participation manifested in Gauteng province social cohesion interventions in the aftermath of the May 2008 xenophobic attacks. I focus on the process of how interventions attempt to create social cohesion, and their appropriateness given the contextual features of urban displacement (insecurity, mobility, invisibility, and diversity).

Since most of the participating interventions are ongoing, or did not undergo formal evaluation processes, this thesis cannot speak to other dimensions of their success. The OECD-DAC criteria, widely adopted by international peacebuilders, for assessing peacebuilding interventions

focuses on *relevance*, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, coherence, and efficiency as the key dimensions from which intervention success should be determined (OECD-DAC 2008).<sup>11</sup> This paper is only concerned with relevance, and the processes by which interventions understand and engage with the context they operate within.

The social cohesion interventions included in this study represent a wide range of approaches to address the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, and subsequent xenophobic attacks and attitudes. Some institutions are international peacebuilding or multi-mandated agencies, such as the International Organisation for Migration, Jesuit Refugee Service, Caritas International, StreetNet International and the UN Refugee Agency. Others represent domestic civil society and political organisations (Anti-Privatisation Forum; Afuraka; Displaced and Migrant Persons Support Programme; CoSATU; Scalabrini; Nelson Mandela Foundation) or local government programs (Migrant Help Desk). In the following section I chose to highlight one or two of the interventions for each major theme.

The invisibility, insecurity, mobility, and diversity of urban displacement in South Africa emerged into two key community themes in the fieldwork for this paper. First, the contested and fractured nature of community greatly affected all of the interventions that applied ‘business as usual’ approaches to social cohesion. Second, in light of the contested nature of community, the specificity of ‘community’ knowledge needed to understand, and work within, a given area was undervalued by institutions.

Organisations often applied ‘business as usual’ approaches to social cohesion based on past programming, amidst the fractured and contested communities of urban South Africa. Social cohesion interventions ultimately tried to enlist foreigners’ involvement in a procedural manner, without fully acknowledging the fractured community, the agency of outsiders to maintain their exclusion, and the anger of insiders. Several organisations (MHD; UNHCR; IOM; DMPSP) lamented the challenge of foreign nationals that have no interest in being involved in dialogues and interventions.

A dangerous cycle ensues in which foreigners continue their invisibility in fear of harassment and violence and insiders become increasingly frustrated. For instance, at a recent Jesuit Refugee Service workshop, “The first question the facilitator asked was: are there any people from other countries in this workshop? No one acknowledged. It seemed that people were too scared to disclose their identity” (JRS 2010c, 2). Either no forced migrants were present, or they were unwilling to disclose their identity to the group. Institutions are increasingly aware of the contested communities they operated within, and the difficulties of engaging with foreigners and other ‘outsiders’ as members of the community.

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<sup>11</sup> The OECD-DAC criteria, created in 2008, looks at *effectiveness* (the extent to which a program fulfills the objectives it stated it would fulfill), *impact* (the effects on participants and their environment, as understood through various evaluation processes, informal and formal), *sustainability* (the likelihood that the impacts will carry into the future, and any created structures can continue without external support), *coherence* (the extent to which efforts are coordinated with, and synchronize with, the efforts of other actors), and *efficiency* (the ratio of funds and effort expended for the impact of the intervention).

Despite this awareness, social cohesion interventions are often based on state structures, boundaries and actors— even though official forums for migrants are absent in all of these structure. Furthermore, government leadership often seek to mobilize support by blaming foreigners for ‘community’ problems. The role of the state, and in particular local governance, affects how ‘community’ knowledge is understood and who is perceived as a legitimate actor; it also affects the boundaries of ‘communities’, and perpetuates a convenience syndrome when interventions use these boundaries and local structures without questioning them.

This leads to the second key theme: the specificity of ‘community’ knowledge needed to understand, and work within, a given area was undervalued by institutions. Several organisations, as discussed above, initially underestimated the fragmented nature of urban areas (IOM; Afuraka; MHD; NMF; APF; JRS). This fragmentation particularly calls into question ideas about ‘community’ legitimacy.

For instance, a Migrant Help Desk (MHD) officer was unpleasantly surprised when mobilization was left to the last minute for a public event in Alexandria: the officer, a ‘local’ from Alexandria, still could not mobilize residents quickly, and the event turnout was weak (Maimela 2010). She said: “I know the dynamics, the attacks, I experienced them indirectly from where I live”(Maimela 2010). And yet, a local resident is not necessarily an insider in fractured, contested urban communities. The officer explains some of the challenges and dynamics in her work:

I work in the whole of Alex. Beirut has issues of their own. Beirut women, they rebel when you talk about migrants. You got to have a tactic when you go there. The Ndunas will explain your proposal to the people, they’ll listen to them. Being a resident of Alex makes it easier. It matters who you sell the idea to. Business people use migrants. When you go to your early childhood development centre, the migrants are the employees. Certain stakeholders have migrants’ back. In River Park, elders don’t want them there. The work we do is confusing, interesting, frustrating. As much as I want to leave, I know it’s where I’m from.

Her thoughts call into question the legitimacy behind ideas of community, and the benefits to having a ‘community-level’ staff person. While a ‘community’ member might contribute meaningfully to an intervention, their relevance will most likely change temporally and contextually, given the type, scale, and nature of an intervention. As a result, prizing localness and community residency must be done cautiously, and as the officer explained in her interview, a deep understanding of area legitimacy becomes most important. The networking and legitimacy needed to garner support in these fragmented spaces, and the difficulty of capturing this support as an outside institution, is where many institutions hit a stumbling block (NMF; MHD; Afuraka).

Official structures, and institutions addressing xenophobia, often rely on local government demarcations of ‘community’ that often miss the ways in which power structures actually operate in a local area. Fittingly, these parallel power structures typically exist due to the lack of effective formal mechanisms. For instance, Afuraka and the Migrant Help Desk’s activities’ are

based on regional areas determined by the city of Johannesburg, and these boundaries are used for ward committees and councillors, as well as the placement of field offices and program funding. Other institutions go through local government structures to reach the community, often with an initially vague understanding of the informal and formal local leadership dynamics in that space. In IOM's new phase of the One Movement campaign, 100 community focal points will be established through local government, community police forums, ward councillors (Ali 2010).

When asked about the relevance of local government leaders in relation to who holds power in an area, Ms. Lifongo of IOM responded: "It depends, some definitely trust their leaders. . . .When we go to the community, it is tricky. There's a lack of trust between government and community, when you go there, they're kind of scared. It's still a very sensitive subject, you can tell when they start talking" (Lifongo 2010). The Nelson Mandela Foundation similarly found a lack of trust in local leadership structures, which inhibited their effectiveness and ability to mobilize properly (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2010, 22). Without an in-depth knowledge of local power dynamics, certain institutions were increasingly frustrated by their ability to meaningfully engage with the 'community' (NMF; MHD; APF).

Despite these challenges to understanding 'community' effectively, some organizations successfully navigated the realities of contested urban communities. The Displaced and Migrant Persons Support Program<sup>12</sup> (DMPSP) particularly demonstrated a thoughtful approach to negotiating the fractured communities of urban South Africa, and has thought about how to break the cycle of foreigner invisibility.

According to their program coordinator, "People always say, 'we don't know who they are [the foreigners]'. Well, make them take responsibility... You're going to accept them, and then get them involved. In the short-term we have this exclusion, and we need inclusion. Better give them a system they can work within." (De Costa 2010). He acknowledges that the current system does not work, and seeks an approach in which both foreigners and South Africans can have agency in changing how they relate with one another. The coordinator seeks the transformation of local government policing structures, and envisions the community police forums (CPFs) as an essential community-level structure with which to engage foreigners:

We talk about how to motivate the CPFs, how to get the street committees involved, how to make everything more local . . . .The power is in your hands to exclude/include, we say. It gives people motivation. They feel helpless at the moment. This provides them with control in their little space. . . .It makes them feel confident, like they can manage the situation themselves (De Costa 2010).

He emphasizes the need for highly local structures—on a street by street basis—as opposed to other structures that are too unwieldy to allow for meaningful engagement with foreign nationals. In this context, more 'local' means more specific: By making action more local, it is also more likely that foreigners will become involved, and can meaningfully engage in community forums.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on DMPSP, see Appendix A.

Each social cohesion intervention had to confront ‘community’ as it really exists in urban South Africa. Engaging with the contested ‘community’ is difficult, and it makes sense for interventions, almost all of which sought to respond rapidly in the aftermath of the 2008 xenophobic violence, to apply familiar approaches to the challenge of promoting social cohesion in urban South Africa.

One successful approach to addressing urban realities is to break down ‘communities’ into manageable pieces of people and groups who actually engage with one another on a regular basis. ‘Community’ might need to be defined more specifically in this context. For instance, the NMF focused on shopkeepers and churches and institutions like COSATU and StreetNet can easily mobilize their worker and street trader constituencies. Instead of trying to mobilize a highly fractured ‘community’, these micro-communities are relatively manageable, conceivable groups of people who can respond with tangible action within their group (as opposed to broad rhetoric to reconcile insiders with outsiders). Several practitioners (UNHCR; DMPSP) also mediated conflict among specific groups of people. For instance, such as a group of shopkeepers in a given space who have a common purpose and reason to engage with one another. Afuraka’s Buntu summarized this concept nicely:

It’s not about getting to know about Zimbabwe or Senegal. The level doesn’t have to be Senegalese, Zimbabwean, etc. The levels can be shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, and a cleaning service, mending our roads, things that we’re all concerned about. Maybe you find out the guy from Senegal has wonderful ideas. He is good at what he’s doing. If we can get more of those natural spaces, just engaging with each other (Buntu 2010).

The other option is to address systemic and structural factors that currently stand in the way of an effective community. This sort of work, as described by DMPSP and UNHCR, is about changing how outsiders and insiders interface, and where social structures such as community policing engage with them.

## **Participation in social cohesion interventions**

This chapter seeks to explain the nature of participation in social cohesion interventions following the May 2008 xenophobic attacks. Like the previous section, this chapter focuses on the process of how interventions attempt to create social cohesion, and their appropriateness given the contextual features of urban displacement (insecurity, mobility, invisibility, and diversity).

The invisibility, insecurity, mobility, and diversity of urban displacement in South Africa emerged into two key participation themes. First, interventions often target easy-to-reach people, instead of the ‘right’ people for the objective of their intervention. The second major theme was that interventions would not know how to get participants involved, even if they understood who the ‘right’ participants were. Relatedly, they struggled with how to make this a meaningful process where people are interested in participation.

Another casualty of ‘business as usual’ approaches, interventions often targeted easy-to-reach people, instead of the ‘right’ people for the objective of their intervention. One reason for this is that understandings of the root cause of conflict are often approximate and hasty, in light of the need to “do something” after the 2008 attacks. A second reason is that it is simply easier to following programming that resembles an institutions’ past work.

For instance, IOM’s *One Movement* often targeted youth, in light of their networks and past experiences working in schools, even though they recognized that the youth they worked with were not the perpetrators of violence. The MHD is supposed to help manage migrants in Johannesburg, and yet it often could not get migrants to participate in its events (Maimela 2010). According to a program officer for the MHD, “The director said to me, we need thousands of people. It becomes meaningless. It’s not about the depth of what we’re doing”(Dawood 2010). Hasty efforts to act often missed a careful identification of who should be targeted and for what purpose.

Institutions often target individuals and groups based on what they have previously done. For example, IOM, “has an emphasis on human trafficking, we do education in the schools, and we do it well. This is something we’ll learn from and adapt for the xenophobia activities. A lot of it will stay the same, those networks and connections that we’ve built. And there’s definitely a learning curve we’ve experienced from doing that work” (Ali 2010). This attitude reveals the ‘convenience syndrome’ Refstie et al. describe when institutions apply old solutions to the emerging challenges of urban displacement. IOM maintains a ‘business as usual’ approach to its programming. According to a program officer:

Our counter-trafficking work has been very helpful for this upcoming initiative. We are going to expand our capacity-building with this new program. We can use the counter-trafficking program and the way we engaged with children. We cannot just use the mainstream awareness raising work though. We need a message that’s specially designed for them. We will have to test the messages and find out what works (Ali 2010).

This approach, instead of looking at the friction between urban displacement characteristics and the ‘right people’ that should be targeted, continues with a next-best solution that relies on old procedures and peacebuilding ideas.

The second major theme was that interventions would not know *how* to get participants involved, even if they understand who the ‘right’ participants were. Relatedly, they struggled with how to make this a meaningful process where people want to participate. The concept of teleguided participation moves beyond who should be involved, and addresses how they should be involved. Teleguided participation was evident in the most common type of social cohesion intervention interviewed for this study (APF; MHD; NMF; Afuraka), which was some sort of ‘community’ dialogue or workshop to discuss xenophobia.

These interventions strived to gain community-wide participation and ownership, despite the inherent difficulties to doing this in such fragmented spaces. ‘Community’ members were told why and how they should participate in a top-down manner. For many dialogues (APF; NMF;

Afuraka; MHD), residents have complained that such institutions came in and out, and did not offer tangible next steps or ways to implement what was discussed, which is what they were truly interested in (JRS 2010c, 6). A UNHCR officer reflects on this dynamic: “We need to consult with the people. Getting in front and shouting “don’t do this!” doesn’t work. Don’t preach. Talk with, not to, people. People don’t want to be lectured to” (Munyaneza 2010).

These social cohesion interventions reveal the variations in content and form of participation, and the extent to which ‘teleguided’ participation enters urban interventions. The immediate, “do something” impulse seems to have allowed institutions to move forward with convenient methods and participant targets, but without genuine participation and engagement in ‘communities’.

The Nelson Mandela Foundation’s dialogue approach reflected a mixed response that, while it did not gain an ideal kind of participation, represents a reflective approach to understanding participation in urban areas. Their dialogues aimed to mobilize ‘community’ knowledge by bringing together as many stakeholders as possible. In order to do this, the NMF undertook a brief assessment of the dialogue sites for 2-4 days, speaking with stakeholders, local government, CPFs, police, community and political leaders (Abrahams 2010). The goal of doing so was to, “get buy-in in order to implement” (Abrahams 2010).

Despite an extensive mobilization process, a November 2009 community conversation in Atteridgeville included fewer than ten migrants of the fifty participants (Jinnah 2009, 1). Although the NMF consulted widely with migrants groups, this was not sufficient to gain their involvement, in light of such a long history of exclusion and harassment, and mistrust in formal institutions (Jinnah 2009, 1). The assumption that you can easily get the ‘right’ participants, even with a well-intentioned consultation phase in the ‘community’ is contested.

The NMF also aimed to create meaningful kinds of participation, not just the teleguided presence of migrants at its dialogues. According to NMF, “regardless of the level at which dialogue is exercised or the level of the participants, the participatory nature of the process is central to the method’s success” (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2010, 18). And yet, a meaningfully participatory process is difficult to achieve. At the Atteridgeville community conversation, the conversation centred on service delivery and the ‘community’ was uninterested in discussing migrants.

Furthermore, according to a participant, “the few migrants who did attend did not get a platform to speak to the group” (Jinnah 2009, 2). The conversation ultimately focused on service delivery and eclipsed migrant involvement, excluding them from the process (Jinnah 2009, 2). According to Jinnah, “NMF and other organizers clearly consulted widely to ensure a participative process but it will take time and trust to bring migrant groups into processes such as these” (Jinnah 2009, 2).

Meanwhile, other organisations successfully navigated urban realities with considerably less effort. As described before, one way to target the ‘right people’ is to operate in a smaller, more specific group of people that includes foreigners (and other outsiders) and South Africans, as described in the previous chapter. For instance, Cosatu and StreetNet operate within their

membership base to speak with the shop stewards and union members, respectively. Cosatu holds meetings and workshops where members can air their grievances, and they also deliver messaging on a regular basis against xenophobia. The meetings are targeted at the provincial level and local structures to educate shop stewards, both foreigners and South Africans (Tseki 2010). Similarly, StreetNet focuses on issues of non-recognition, urban policies, and marginalization for street vendors, and included issues of xenophobia into its latest campaigns (Horn 2010).

Neither institution specifically establishes programming for social cohesion or xenophobia, but xenophobia is seen as a relevant and necessary issue to discuss that is in line with their own work. In this context, participation operates within “vernacular forms of power” that already exist, and command legitimacy for a given community (Rahnema in Sachs 1992, 123). These vernacular forms of power, as described earlier, operate amidst more manageable and tangible communities than the broad and complex “Alexandra” or “Atteridgeville”. By addressing xenophobia and social cohesion through existing structures, they are more likely to build bridging capital through the commonalities that develop from their workplace (Rahnema 1992).

Similarly, the DMPSP and UNHCR staff thought about participation both at the micro-level, but also in a transformational sense. DMPSP and UNHCR focus on maintaining non-violent responses to conflict through mediation, building relationships with police and developing monitoring structures. As discussed in the last section, these institutions are also more focused on transforming insider/outsider dynamics in communities through more localized street committees, community police forums, and local government structures that involve, and are responsive to, migrant needs (De Costa 2010).

However, on a day-to-day basis, this also means that these interventions do not mobilize participants in the same manner that traditional peacebuilding activities do. UNHCR and DMPSP seek participation in a larger, transformational sense that depends on the participation and involvement of police and local leadership rather than local residents. DMPSP in particular acknowledges that in order to get people to behave differently (in this case, not to commit xenophobic violence), structural changes might be the critical root problem to address.

The reasons that people are not cohesive and commit xenophobic violence might have more to do with a lack of legitimate institutions than xenophobic attitudes (Misago 2009). Efforts to create forums for migrant participation, and other transformational and structural changes that demand the participation of key figures, and eventually the ‘community’ as a whole, takes a careful look at the root causes of xenophobic violence and responds in a meaningful way.

Overall, it is difficult for organisations to determine how participation ties in with their program objectives, and what the nature of participation needs to be in order to promote social cohesion in urban space. This manifest through ‘teleguided’ participation, in which participants are often preached *to* instead of dialogued *with*. Several participants mentioned that dialogues and town meetings often do this, and then fail to provide tangible next steps for the community (APF; JRS; UNHCR).

Furthermore, there is often difficulty getting the “right” people involved in interventions. Certain foreigner groups will avoid public venues because they fear being harassed, which perpetuates insider frustration with them. This ultimately leads to ‘cheap’ participation in which interventions target the more convenient participants. Relevant forms of participation seek to promote ‘vernacular’ power structures, instead of creating what are often redundant structures for interventions that can misinterpret local power structures and dynamics. Also, transformational forms of participation, as seen with DMPSP and UNHCR, seek to create meaningful and sustainable forums for migrants and other outsiders to participate in their ‘communities’. Such efforts will (ideally) eventually become the ‘vernacular forms of power’ themselves, and thus ensure that the ‘right’ participants are involved.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to understand whether and how the body of literature on peacebuilding—in both operational tools and theoretical research— is appropriate for a context of urban displacement. It particularly focused on community and participation as critical constructs that are affected by the invisibility, mobility, diversity, and insecurity of urban space. This paper explored the intersection between urban displacement and peacebuilding through field research with a series of social cohesion interventions in urban South Africa. It ultimately shed light on major themes in how the characteristics of urban displacement challenge peacebuilding ideas of participation and community.

The dominant peacebuilding culture largely framed the approach to xenophobic violence in South Africa. As Auteserre describes, the dominant peacebuilding culture “authorizes, enables, and justifies specific practices and policies while precluding others.”(Auteserre 2010, 30). Meanwhile, several creative intervention ideas were identified in this paper. These interventions isolated the underlying root causes for xenophobic violence and targeted structure and behaviour instead of attitudes.

For instance, the Displaced and Migrants Person’s Support Programme (DMPSP) focused on the transformation of local institutions, such as building in refugee roles on the community police forums and neighbourhood street committees. Caritas promoted small-scale, collective initiatives between South Africans and refugees that have a common reason to engage with each other, such as shop owners. Instead of trying to mobilize an entire, fractured community, these small, conceivable groups were effectively and meaningfully brought together.

Other effective strategies included UNHCR’s mediation between local business people – those who would often mobilize others for broader attacks— before a particular conflict escalated. These approaches pinpoint those responsible for instigating violence, as well as the structures that made refugees more vulnerable to attacks.

Amidst these creative approaches, there were several key themes in how most interventions handled issues of community and participation. First, ‘business as usual’ approaches were often applied to interventions, even when organisations were confronted with the invisibility of foreigners, and the nature of the contested community in general. This is similar to the

convenience syndrome described earlier for international actors operating in contexts of urban displacement.

Second, organisations often undervalued the specificity of ‘community’ knowledge that an intervention in a contested community demands. Legitimacy must be separated from residency in an urban displacement context, as they are not as closely related. Third, interventions often target easy-to-reach people, instead of the ‘right’ people for the objective of their intervention. Interventions often pursue an approach to social cohesion that is familiar and easier to address than the root causes of xenophobic violence. Finally, participation was often teleguided. A meaningful kind of participation is needed that either operates within ‘vernacular’ power structures, or seeks to transformatively create new, inclusive structures.

The challenge today is to find creative ideas and approaches to the community and participation dilemmas discussed in this paper. The international peacebuilding culture presents certain kinds of responses to xenophobic violence that are implicitly based on a context largely irrelevant to urban displacement. There is therefore a range of assumptions about community and participation that were revealed in urban South Africa’s social cohesion interventions.

Confronted with an emerging, complex issue in such fragmented spaces, interventions have learned from these initial attempts at bringing cohesion to urban communities. Recognizing how community and participation actually exist in these spaces has already lead to interventions characterized by creativity and flexibility. These new kinds of responses can evolve into more specific concepts and theories on how urban interventions need to function. Ideally, exposing the assumptions in peacebuilding ideas about community and participation can provide more room for a reflexive peacebuilding practice that ties the difficulty of urban space with the possibilities of how to build peace.

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