

Editorial

Dear reader,

The world, it seems, is becoming increasingly polarized. We used to think of ‘the haves’ and ‘the have nots’, mainly in terms of the global south, or highly fragmented countries such as Brazil, South Africa or the United States. Nowadays, Europe has also become bipolar – or so we are meant to believe. It has become a society in which people are set apart from each other on the basis of religion or their status as insiders or outsiders. The terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 have made this a critical issue: the old continent has become a place of fear, intolerance and despair. Many feel that Europe is being invaded by refugees and Muslim fundamentalists – and often these groups are lumped together for the sake of convenience; many people feel threatened and they are frightened.

To a certain extent this fear is justified as the questions surrounding poor social cohesion have no readily available answers. How do we solve the problem of pauperized and radicalized youngsters raised in the European cities? How do we address their feelings of exclusion and marginalization? What path might lead to ending brutal conflicts and dictatorships in the Middle East and Africa, and so stem the seemingly endless flow of refugees? These are some of the questions that are omnipresent in present-day European public discourse (debates, panel discussions and socio-political analyses) . Two short comments, however. We Europeans, tend to look at the world from a solely European perspective. We are shocked by the attacks in Paris, and rightly so, but we should also be scandalized by attacks of Boko Haram in Nigeria, by raids on citizens and tourists in Syria, Lebanon and Mali, and by bomb attacks in Kurdistan. And as Westerners, we only seem to look at events through thick eurocentric lenses. Little attention is paid to the broader picture and to our own responsibility in many of these conflicts. Where do these rebel groups buy their weapons? What role have our geopolitical partnerships in the Middle East played? Who do we chose as political allies in the global south?

Above all, we should remain hopeful and optimistic. Over the last few months, large-scale campaigns have been set up to help refugees arriving in Europe. Politicians and businessmen stood up to proclaim the economic assets of these newcomers, as some of them are highly skilled and well educated. All over the globe, (young) people are leading demonstrations and marches to support the values of democracy and human rights, and to convince the world that they firmly believe in freedom and equality. All of these initiatives seem to indicate that this perceived polarization is not a reality for all segments of the population.

Let us remain positive as well about developments in the global south, and specifically in Africa and Asia. As an academic, one tends to have a different perspective on the

world and on the effects of globalisation. Every year four hundred or so Africans study at Ghent University, mainly at MA and PhD level. The majority of these students come from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria. They are mostly dedicated students, who prefer to return home after their studies. Some of them also stay in Belgium, learn the language, start a family and find a job. Once settled in Belgium, they sometimes become active in one of the many African associations in Belgium, thus actively contributing to social cohesion in Belgian society. Integration and emancipation are not really an issue for many of them. Ghent University also works together with a number of well-established and high-quality universities in Africa, such as Jimma University in Ethiopia, Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Researchers from these universities collaborate with Ghent University academics to publish scientific articles and write joint PhDs. Who would have guessed in the '80s that an Ethiopian university would become one of the central research partners for Ghent University?

We must also be positive with regard to Africans, Asians and South Americans who are arriving in Belgium with the aim of settling here. The majority are looking for work in Belgium on the basis of qualifications gained in their home countries; many of them want their degrees to be formally recognized in Belgium, in order to find a high-quality job; and a lot of them also want to pursue further education in order to make themselves useful in Belgian society. And finally, researchers from Syria and Iran are also highly valued at our university, which may at first sound surprising to those outside of the academy. Such researchers are usually well trained and contribute significantly to our research groups. Globalization comes with challenges, but the majority of people tend to forget that with regard to research, innovation and development, globalization offers many more advantages than disadvantages.

There is one final positive element I want to mention, albeit with some qualification, and that relates to youngsters in Africa. Let us turn to South Africa, once more. In recent weeks student protests against increases in tuition fees have taken place in universities throughout the country. The students (rightly) claim that South Africa should be investing much more in higher education, and not only in primary and secondary education which are relatively well funded in South Africa. In contrast to European students, who are very difficult to mobilize, South African students seem to be socially engaged and genuinely concerned about the future of the education system in their country. Concern for education and social engagement are hopeful signs in a country that is still wrestling with huge social inequalities. Later on, these demonstrations touched upon different topics, such as the language policy at some South African universities, neo-colonialism, unemployment and general feelings of social discontent. All of this is still to be interpreted positively. However, the protests then degenerated into violence which eventually became a major problem at those universities, as the students had to start writing exams before the summer break. Moreover, the aims of the protesting students were appropriated by various political parties.

We want to remain positive and hopeful, with regard to collaboration with Africa, with regard to social movements and progress in Africa, with regard to scientific research

in Africa, and also with regard to our own endeavors to stimulate this kind of collaboration and research. Therefore, we would like to present to you the new website of Afrika Focus and the new automated peer-reviewing process. From January 1st 2016 Afrika Focus's new website will be launched: <http://ojs.ugent.be/AF>. Through this site online submission of articles will be facilitated and the peer-reviewing process will be largely automated. We are convinced that this move will add to the professionalization of our journal, both with regard to the submission of manuscripts and the evaluation of those manuscripts. We are always looking for high-quality articles on Africa, preferably from young scholars, so we hope that this new website will make the journal more attractive to academics around the globe – and lead to an increase in the number of article submissions. Needless to say, our journal is internationally accredited, for instance by being listed in the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS). So please, may we ask you to spread the word and make some publicity for our journal and for our continuing efforts to maintain high standards.

We hope that the articles published in this edition of Afrika Focus will deepen and broaden your knowledge on Africa. They also seem to exude a sense of positivism about Africa, be it on the level of ritual violence and their significance to society, improved health care services, reforms on the level of government administration, or the use of indigenous plants and trees for food security. We hope you will enjoy these articles, reminding us once more that Africa (and the global south in general) has a lot to offer.

Annelies Verdoolaege
Editor-in-Chief