

Why Social Solidarity in Times of Crisis Offers Hope for Africa

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Figure 1: African Studies Collection after the fire incident on 18 April 2021. Photo source: <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2021-04-23-ucts-historic-jagger-reading-room-lost-to-fire>

As we celebrate Africa Month and Africa Day this year, the continent continues to suffer from crises ranging from social, cultural, economic, political, and religious. While some of these are not new, recent crises such as the coronavirus pandemic and the fire disaster at the University of Cape Town (UCT) have once again reminded us of the importance of social solidarity among Africans and the world in times of crisis.

Social solidarity was one of the core objectives of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at its inception on 25 May 1963. While the OAU has metamorphosed into the African Union (AU), social solidarity remains one of its guiding principles. This is clearly spelt out in Article 30 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union and Article 3 of the Protocol to amend the Constitutive Act. As spelt out in the aforementioned article, one of the objectives of the AU is to “achieve greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and the peoples of Africa.” This means coming together to support each other, especially in times of crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic and the fire incident at UCT. This notion was echoed by the UCT Vice-Chancellor, Prof Mamokgethi Phakeng, her staff, as well as students and the academic public as one way of dealing with the disaster that erased the African Studies Collection on 18 April 2021. Commenting in the aftermath of the fire, Prof Phakeng said: “Many of us will feel the devastation of the loss of this significant institutional asset, but we will walk the road to rebuild our facilities together.”

Social Solidarity in Times of Crisis

Research suggests that social solidarity is the cohesion between individuals in a society that ensures social order and stability. It underlines the interdependence between people in society, which makes them feel that they can improve the lives of others. Social solidarity not only involves collective responsibility for the promotion of the group and community at large, but also emphasises taking care of the needs and interest of the underprivileged members of the group.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the AU has repeatedly underscored the need for solidarity and cooperation in dealing with the pandemic. Moreover, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has, and continue to encourage countries to implement basic public health measures, since there is no 'silver bullet' to end the pandemic soon. Additionally, the South African government has instituted a series of 'lockdowns' aimed at mitigating the spread and impact of the virus. This can also be applied to the issue of solidarity in knowledge production following the fire incident that ravaged the African Studies Collection at UCT in April this year.

Coming at a time when UCT and lovers of African Studies least expected it, the fire incident invites Africanist scholars, both on the continent and in the African diaspora, to ask themselves the critical question, 'how can we stand in solidarity with UCT to refurbish and replace the damaged collections of the African Studies Centre?'

The UCT African Studies Collection Fire Incident

Created in 1953 as part of many other collections, the UCT African Studies Collection housed journals, manuscripts, film and video, maps, and rare antiquarian books. It included the JW Jagger Library, built in the 1930s. The centre served as the main library for a time, before becoming a short-loan centre. From 2000 to 2011, it was the reading room of the UCT African Studies Library. On 18 April 2021, a blaze believed to have been caused unintentionally by a neglected fire set by someone spending the night on Devil's Peak, spread rapidly before sweeping onto the UCT campus and forcing university officials to evacuate close to 4 000 students. Responding to the loss, political analyst, Prof Samadoda Fikeni, noted that the loss is "beyond any imagination." "I can simply say that an African continent which has suffered several series of conquests has been struggling to reconstruct its own history and particularly that which is documented," Prof Fikeni said. "Therefore, any special collection which is frail, which is no longer available, which is not reprinted very often, tends to be priceless in terms of its heritage value, in terms of the knowledge project."

Following the devastation caused by the blaze, Prof Fikeni noted that "there are lessons to be learned from the devastation about building out access to special collections so that they are widely available". "For as long as these materials tend to be kept in a basement with signs saying, 'do not touch', they are vulnerable to water, and fire, as well as ignorance."



Figure 2: African Studies Collection after the fire incident on 18 April 2021. Photo Source: <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2021-04-23-ucts-historic-jagger-reading-room-lost-to-fire>

The Way Forward

In response to the devastation, the African Studies Association (ASA) noted that they will work with the Africana Librarians Council (ALC) and ASA affiliates, coordinating organisations and their partner organisations in Africa, such as the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), to support UCT in the important rebuilding of the collection. ASAA also encourages members to make contributions as they are able, especially to share any materials they may have in either their personal or university or individual research collection that could help to rebuild the African Studies Collection at UCT.

As one of the umbrella organisations preserving and promoting solidarity in knowledge production on African Studies, UCT can embrace and push ASA's call to all corners of the world as they work towards rebuilding and replacing all the precious documents destroyed by the fire. But this needs concerted effort, not only from ASA/UCT, but also from Africans both on the continent and in the African diaspora. However, at the moment the call seems to have come only from ASA, with headquarters in the West, rather than from local bodies and tertiary institutions across the continent. This is not surprising, given the influence that ASA has on African-based centres of African Studies. However, the influence, no matter how important it may be, can only be successful if African-based tertiary institutions, especially those in South Africa, and Africans recognise the role of African Studies and stand in solidarity with UCT to rebuild the lost collections.