EDITORS’ NOTE

Regional integration
and development as
the RISC Consortium
celebrates its tenth anniversary

The Consortium for Comparative Research on Regional Integration and Social Cohesion (RISC) was born in 2007 following a conference on Social Cohesion in Europe at the Americas. (Koff, 2009) The rich discussions addressed numerous social cohesion issues in the aforementioned continents, such as human rights, social vulnerability, risk and welfare, environmental challenges and social cohesion, the relationship between borders, states and regions and urban violence. While the relevance of each of these issues to social cohesion was clear from the outset of our discussions, understanding their contributions to the conceptualization of social cohesion was far more difficult. In fact, these debates raised numerous questions that underlie social cohesion debates: What relationships exist between rights, responsibilities and cohesion? For what protections and services are governments responsible vis-à-vis their citizens under social cohesion policies? What relationships exist between social cohesion, risk and vulnerability? How does natural resource management affect social cohesion? How is social cohesion affected by territorial scales? And how can social cohesion address urban marginalization and violence?

Following three days of debates, the RISC Consortium identified three key elements of social cohesion, defined as a collective sense of belonging, on which to construct a research agenda: power, time and space. The element of power recognizes the inequalities that exist in our world. The notion of time addresses historical traditions and their effects on our sense of belonging and our identities. Space indicates the territorial limits of cohesion. Cohesion, according to this agenda, is to be discussed by examining the interaction of these factors.

Another key issue that was raised during this first conference regarded regional integration. Was RISC to focus narrowly on regional organizations and policy-making in relation to formal region-building processes, or was RISC to examine grassroots region-building or so-called regional-
ization processes that identified regions as socially constructed territories at the sub-national, transnational and supranational levels? In the end, the conference participants and member institute representatives chose (correctly, in our opinion) to examine both approaches to regional integration, how they interact, and how they affect social cohesion through shifting power frameworks, the establishment and development of regional histories and the reconfiguration of territories. These queries have been further developed over the last ten years, in international conferences and seminars as well as books and articles published in *Regions and Cohesion*, and other journals where RISC has disseminated research, such as *Globalizations, Journal of Borderlands Studies, Nature + Culture, Estudios Políticos* and *Revista de Paz y Conflictos*. RISC has also fostered cohesion among scholars from different continents and diverse disciplines through mobility grants, faculty exchange grants, doctoral and postdoctoral training, writers’ workshops and the sponsorship of a doctoral dissertation prize.

The consortium represents more than a network. It is a community of like-minded scholars who critically analyze regional integration processes and their human and environmental impacts. This community includes people from five different continents committed to a worldview based on dialogue, mutual respect and solidarity. These values are best exemplified by RISC’s World Family Portrait initiative, carried out in association with *Regions and Cohesion*, which publishes photos and essays on the different faces of humanity as well as our interactions with each other and the world in which we live.

This volume recognizes the RISC Consortium’s worldview as it celebrates its tenth anniversary in November 2017. We thank the international community of scholars and practitioners that has contributed to the multilingual, interdisciplinary and cross-regional (cultural) dialogue promoted by the consortium. In doing so, it returns to the roots of the consortium’s research agenda by publishing contributions that discuss the original themes examined by RISC: regional integration and social cohesion within the framework of development processes.

The first academic article, written by RISC’s founding president, Harlan Koff, compares European Union and United States use of development aid to externalize borders and securitize migration in the Mediterranean and Africa as well as the Americas. The article recognizes how regional integration through development cooperation can be utilized by regional hegemons to exert power over other states in their so-called spheres of influence. In response, the article contends that regional human rights courts, as political references within supranational systems of governance, can help establish normative policy coherence for development. In doing so, the article addresses the interaction of power, time and space through
the analysis of the relationship between realist security politics in the field of migration and emerging regional human rights norms.

The second academic contribution to this issue, from RISC’s present executive director, Lauri Siitonen, continues our discussion on regional development aid. This article compares the Europeanization of development cooperation with sub-regional traditions amongst the Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg) and the Nordic states (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). The article demonstrates how sub-regional political economic models influence state performance in the arena of development cooperation.

The third academic article presented here integrates a different vision of region-building in relation to social cohesion. In this contribution, María del Pilar Jiménez Márquez and Lucila Zárraga Cano examine how the migration of entrepreneurs to Cancún has contributed to the social construction and economic development of this territory. The article shows how such mobility has affected the territory over time and how this has shaped the overlapping contemporary geographic, economic and social spaces.

In this issue’s Leadership Forum, we are honored to have contributions from two of the original participants in RISC’s academic initiatives. During the aforementioned 2007 conference where RISC was established, Kate A. Berry argued that environmental risk was not part of the social cohesion tradition in North America, especially in the United States. Her contribution to this issue reflects on these issues ten years later. Specifically, the article is framed by discussions of “culture wars” in the United States, defined as increases in volatility, expansion of polarization, and obvious conflicts between world visions. Berry’s analysis identifies the retraction of the United States from region-building processes into nationalist positions that are further marginalizing environmental sustainability. Berry calls for environmental leadership from different types of organizations, as environmental risk seems to actually have receded further in US discussions on social cohesion.

The second contribution to the Leadership Forum comes from Gilberto Conde who edited one of Regions and Cohesion’s first special issues on the 2010 Arab Spring movements. Conde reflects on these analyses of the democratization movements that were published in 2011 and revisits them in relation to the various human tragedies that are presently characterizing former Arab Spring states, such as Syria and Libya. Now that six years have passed since this special issue was published, the editors recognize the accuracy of the analyses presented in Conde’s special issue. Specifically, unlike most scholars of these movements, Conde highlighted an initial pessimism for the Arab Spring mobilizations in terms of short-term gains but long-term optimism in that they might offer a path to
democratization. He expressed his concern in 2011 that domestic social
movements would be usurped by international political actors. This has
both occurred and contributed to human tragedies, such as the bombing
of Aleppo. In this case, regional integration, defined as the international-
ization of domestic conflicts, has had disastrous impacts on various local
communities.

As RISC celebrates its tenth anniversary, Regions and Cohesion is
pleased to contribute to this collective agenda combining academic anal-
ysis with the promotion of values, such as mutual respect and social
solidarity. Starting in 2017, the journal now presents the World Family
Portrait as a special autonomous section aimed at promoting these shared
values. In this issue, Regina Franco contributes photos on the deaf com-
munity, thus continuing a discussion that began in issue 7(1) with Itzel
Moreno Vite and María del Pilar Fernández Viader’s article on the human
rights and education of deaf people in Europe and Latin America. These
contributions and the World Family Portrait in general, illustrate, above
all, RISC’s commitment to the protection of human dignity.

The Editors