

COMMENT**MPHO MCNAMEE**

Insights from the 2024 SA social cohesion index

THE latest South Africa Social Cohesion Index provides powerful insights for civil society, politicians and policy-makers, but also offers opportunities for reflection and learning among South Africa's corporate citizens.

The research underpinning the Index is important as South Africa begins its historic National Dialogue process shortly. It will have other benefits too, since understanding and improving cohesion in society is fundamental to our growth and prosperity.

Telkom is therefore proud to have sponsored this work by the Inclusive Society Institute in collaboration with Constructor University in Germany over several years.

The 2024 research findings confirm the broader trends that the Social Cohesion Index has tracked since 2021 but show an encouraging reversal in the downward score of social cohesion which had been shown at the end of 2023.

In 2024, the cohesion index rose to 53.3 points from 51.7 in 2023, moving South Africa away from the 50-point threshold which would signal a concerning weakening.

The 2024 improvement brings the index close to its 2021 level and suggests a strengthening of social bonds across the country.

Limpopo again emerged with the highest level of social cohesion at 56.5, while KwaZulu-Natal – having experienced significant political shifts and civic unrest in recent years – recorded the lowest at 49.6.

South Africa exhibits unique and often surprising social-cohesion characteristics, important for stakeholders, including corporate citizens like Telkom, to understand.

Among the many insights surfaced in the research is that cohesion in South Africa is lower in more affluent sections of society. This contrasts with other cohesion studies from Western and Asian contexts, which typically show a positive correlation between GDP and cohesion.

Additionally, the research suggests that racial and linguistic diversity in South Africa improve social cohesion, while religious diversity seems to weaken it.

Provinces with higher levels of education tend to show lower social cohesion, possibly reflecting frustration with the state of the economy.

Social cohesion is considerably higher in more rural regions than in urban areas. The study indicates that access to modern information technology appears to diminish social cohesion in South Africa, while contradicting other findings that suggest technology can bolster it.

A significant conclusion is that despite our downward-cohesion trend, South African national identification emerges as the strongest dimension of cohesion in the study scoring 72.2, reflecting the overwhelming support for the statement that "I am proud to be South African".

This remains true across groups and classes. Findings like these offer intriguing possibilities and raise interesting questions.

For Telkom, the role of technology in social cohesion is an obvious area for further investigation and understanding, particularly with our role as the backbone of South Africa's digital future. Our mission remains to connect South Africans to a better life.

This research implies the importance of digital-literacy programmes to underpin broadening digital inclusivity and stave off the negative impacts of social-media platforms and disinformation. Citizens must truly benefit from greater digital access.

Further, we must protect cohesive real-world social networks from being damaged by their digital equivalents. Telkom is active in this space, having invested over R210 million in digital-literacy projects over the years alongside our network efforts, which have seen us connect over 70000 township homes to the internet.

The insight that rural South Africa shows stronger cohesion compared to the more affluent and educated urban areas is a rich opportunity for the corporate community to explore.

As corporates, we can learn from rural community dynamics to strengthen urban connections.

MPHO McNamee is Telkom's chief corporate affairs officer.