



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE: IT CANNOT BE BUSINESS AS USUAL SOCIAL COHESION IS KEY TO SOUTH AFRICA'S ECONOMIC RENEWAL

By Daryl Swanepoel

South Africa stands at a defining crossroads. The country's persistent economic stagnation, rising inequality and growing social discontent signal that we cannot afford to continue down the same path and expect a different result. It cannot be business as usual.

The National Dialogue, currently underway, offers a much-needed platform for South Africans from all walks of life, government, civil society, labour, business and ordinary citizens, to come together and chart a new course. It is a space for reimagining our collective future. But this space will only be as meaningful as the ideas we bring into it.

The Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) is participating in the National Dialogue with a focused message: placing South Africa's economy on a stronger growth trajectory is not optional, it is essential. But growth on its own, if divorced from social cohesion and fairness, will only deepen the divisions already threatening to unravel our social fabric.

We must do both: grow the economy and build a socially cohesive society. One without the other is a recipe for instability.

Growth must be inclusive and just

Too often, economic growth strategies are developed in isolation from the lived realities of ordinary South Africans. While GDP figures may rise, inequality persists. Jobs remain scarce. Trust in institutions weakens. And resentment simmers beneath the surface.

We must pursue a **pro-growth economic agenda** that promotes entrepreneurship, that attracts investment and that enhances productivity and creates jobs, particularly for young people and historically marginalised communities.

But it is important to understand that growth alone is not enough, It must be **rooted in social justice**, ensuring that the benefits of development are more broadly and fairly shared. We therefore need a growth model that actively dismantles the systemic barriers to participation and that levels the playing field, that ensures access to opportunity and fair outcomes, not just for some, but for all.

Social cohesion: The invisible engine of economic prosperity

Social cohesion is often misunderstood as a "soft" issue, but in reality, it is a powerful economic driver, because a society that is cohesive, is more stable, more productive and more resilient and where there is trust, there is cooperation. Where there is inclusion, there is innovation and where there is fairness, there is peace.

That is why the ISI sees social cohesion not as a by-product of growth, but as a precondition for it, because addressing issues such as inequality, demographic and cultural fairness, representation and equitable access to services, is essential for national unity and long-term economic sustainability. South Africa's rich diversity should be considered a national asset, not a source of division. A truly inclusive economy must reflect this diversity, not only in policy rhetoric, but also in ownership, leadership and opportunity.

A break from the status quo

To achieve this vision, South Africa needs more than policy tweaks or short-term stimulus packages, it needs a new social compact based on honesty, empathy and collective responsibility.

Critically, this requires honest introspection and an acknowledgement that temporary financial sacrifices, especially by those who can afford them, may be necessary, but this should not be seen as a penance, but rather as a strategic investment in national stability. And reforming our tax system so that the super-rich and multinational corporations pay their fair share is not punitive; it's fair. It's rational. It's necessary.

Similarly, fostering a culture of giving, encouraging community service and elevating social responsibility, must become core elements of our national renewal if we want to thrive. These are not signs of weakness, but of solidarity, which is critically important from an economic perspective, because it creates the social and institutional foundations necessary for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Let us be clear and speak plainly: without such a shift, the inevitable outcome of an economy that continues to serve the few at the expense of the many is social rupture. Disillusionment deepens where there is injustice and stability cannot be sustained where the majority feel left behind.

A shared future requires shared commitment

The National Dialogue gives us an opportunity to choose a different future. The Inclusive Society Institute believes that the only viable path forward is one where economic renewal is underpinned by social cohesion. That means working together, not just in word, but in action, to build an economy and a society that is just, inclusive and sustainable.

This is not idealism. It is pragmatism. It is the work of rebuilding a fractured nation. And it is work worth doing.

We call on all social partners, business, government, labour, civil society and citizens, to engage boldly and honestly in the National Dialogue. Let us abandon the failed patterns of the past. Let us embrace a new model of shared growth, shared responsibility and shared hope.

Because if we are to thrive, we must first come together.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive of the Inclusive Society Institute