



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

HOW COHESIVE IS SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY According to the South African Social Cohesion Index, so-so

By Daryl Swanepoel

Social cohesion has many definitions. Some define it as the extent to which people are cooperative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation; others say it is the interplay of three salient aspects: perceived inequalities, trust and identity. In the simplest of terms, it stands for the ability of societies to work and stick together.

South Africa has debated social cohesion ever since the end of apartheid, and the conceptualisation of the Rainbow Nation idea. Scholars even identified an overlap between social cohesion and ubuntu, arguing that the two have become synonymous regarding nation-building and efforts to close South African society's cultural and racial divides.

What is clear is that high levels of social cohesion, in South Africa and indeed anywhere in the world, lead to a more positive outlook on life among a country's citizens, with optimism and subjective well-being being considerably higher. Sadly, these happiness indicators in South Africa have been slipping, with the sentiment that the self-declared Rainbow Nation is drifting apart rather than growing together and becoming stronger. There is no doubt that we need political action to improve South Africa's level of social cohesion to, quite literally, bring the country together.

According to the South Africa Social Cohesive Index (SASCI), developed by the Inclusive Society Institute, which provides a comprehensive assessment of social cohesion in South Africa over the past three years, the strength of social cohesion in South Africa can be qualified as moderate – neither high nor low.

In 2023, the overall social cohesion index for South Africa was 51.7 out of 100, down 1.2 points from 2021's score of 53.5. The biggest drops in cohesion were seen in the dimensions of trust in institutions (down by 4.1 points) and respect for social rules (down 7.3 points). On the plus side, there were increases in South Africans' trust in people (up by 1.6 points) and civic participation (up by 1 point).

Interestingly, the index shows that social cohesion is perceived as lower among intense Internet users. Cohesion is high where many Whites and Coloureds live and low where many Indians and Blacks live. As one would expect, low percentages of singles in a geopolitical entity and high numbers of married people are related to high social cohesion. The index also contains some surprises. Although studies elsewhere have yielded that geopolitical entities that enjoy higher levels of per capita GDP also exhibit higher social cohesion, Scandinavia being the most prominent example, in South Africa poorer regions of the country exhibit higher levels of cohesion.

The study furthermore found conflicting results on South African poverty and inequality. Social cohesion is lower in provinces where more households view themselves as poor but higher in those

where more people objectively live in poverty. A negative link with median age (the younger people are in an area, the higher the social cohesion) and a positive correlation with ethnic and linguistic fractionalisation were also discovered, which appear counterintuitive at first glance.

A shining beacon in the index is the statistics pointing to the fact that all South Africans are highly identified with their country, which seems to be the decisive glue of our society. The index tested four classes of South Africans and found that identification with the country of South Africa is not a variable that differentiates the classes. The classes included Class 1 (Critics), which is characterised by low tolerance levels and little respect for social rules; Class 2 (Integrated Sceptics), which is characterised by well-knit social networks, high levels of general trust and tolerance; Class 3 (Middle South Africa), which is characterised by an exceptionally high level of loyalty to the country and below-average acceptance of otherness; and Class 4 (Cohesive Communities), which is characterised by a strongly felt social cohesion in their typically rural life context.

Identification aside, the prevailing trend of all the other indicators is still downward, and it is cause for concern. Were it not for the high identification score, the overall score would have dipped below the 50 point mark. For the Rainbow Nation to build on the foundation laid by 30 years of democracy, a feeling of togetherness among all its citizens is a non-negotiable. It is true that we are stronger together. Aspects such as social networks, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perception of fairness and respect for social rules are not only measurements of happiness, but they are also the building blocks of a thriving economy and a functional civic society.

The downward trend of cohesion in South Africa is not unique. According to the index, it compares with that of Germany, for example. Despite their identical overall levels of social cohesion in 2023, South Africa and Germany do not have the same starting positions. While the decline in the overall index for South Africa amounts to only 1.8 points, the decline observed for Germany within the same three-year period is alarming: The strength of social cohesion declined from a stable value of 61 in 2017 and 2020 by 10 points in 2023. Cohesion in Germany slid from a high down to a moderate level. Moreover, between 2020 and 2023, every dimension of cohesion in Germany weakened considerably.

So, we are not alone, but that does not mean we can relax. Pulling away from each other due to forces beyond our control – the economic situation, demographics, poverty and modernisation – or those within – discrimination on the basis of race, religion or sexual preference – will only make us weaker as a nation. The slide towards solitude and a divided country can, and must, be slowed by the powers that be. Political attention must be paid to the perception of fairness and respect for social rules, as those can spark turmoil. Trust in institutions and acceptance of diversity also need to be strengthened.

But the levers of power can only take us so far. Social cohesion is the togetherness of people. The feeling of unity at community level. As noted earlier, it is the ability of societies to stick together. And what are societies if not individuals working together towards the greater good. It is up to each of us to reach out to our fellow South Africans to bring the decline in social cohesion to a halt and, perhaps more importantly, reverse the trend.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI). This article draws on the ISI's recently launched South Africa Social Cohesion Index: Measuring the well-being of a society, which collaborative research with Constructor University, Bremen, Germany, was enabled by Telkom.