



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **DEVELOPING AN INSTRUMENT TO ASSESS LEVELS OF SOCIAL COHESION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

##### **A Social Cohesion Index for South Africa**

**By Klaus Boehnke and Daryl Swanepoel**

Since the French Revolution with its famous mottos ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité,’ discourse on the cohesion of geopolitical entities (countries/provinces/neighborhoods) has seen waves of greater and lesser intensity, but one thing is clear: A healthy social entity needs *fraternité* or, in modern terminology, ‘social cohesion’ among its members. Social cohesion stands for the ability of societies to stick together; it, thus, is, in a way, the glue of societies.

The level of social cohesion experienced in a given country is nothing else than an indicator of the country’s well-being: People act in the interest of the common good and do not evade social rules to pursue their personal interest; they identify with their country as a whole and its institutions and perceive themselves as treated fairly by the authorities; they accept other people’s lifestyles, treat them with initial trust, and integrate them into their immediate social networks. Formulated normatively, social cohesion is the pathway to happiness and optimism. It seems crucial for all of us to understand and address the issue of social cohesion in South Africa with increased vigor.

In recent years, when social cohesion has been discussed in South Africa, it has been with an increasingly critical undertone. The sentiment that the self-declared Rainbow Nation (Tutu, Mandela) is drifting apart rather than growing together has become stronger. Evidence reviewed by Caryn Abrahams from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory, a partnership between the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Johannesburg, and the Gauteng provincial government, seems to suggest that social cohesion is on a downslide or, at least, not on a trajectory of growth in South Africa.

However, as had been the case in the post-Cold-War **Western-Educated-Industrial-Rich-Democratic** world until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, little hard data is available to corroborate this feeling. Therefore, the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) commissioned a study by Constructor University Bremen to develop an instrument to measure social cohesion levels in South Africa’s provinces in line with the approach developed for the Bertelsmann Social Cohesion Radar. A measuring instrument such as this is crucially important for any nation, more so a nation emerging from a partitioned and divided past.

Based on face validity criteria, the Bremen research team has just collated 60 survey questions found in the Khayabus syndicated study of IPSOS South Africa - and in which the ISI participates in order to compile its *GovDem Poll* - seems adequate for this purpose. It is currently in the process of conducting the statistical analyses needed to test how far the selected items are to be applied to assess the nine dimensions of social cohesion as defined in the Bertelsmann concept, namely intact social networks, general trust, acceptance of diversity, identification with the country, trust in its institutions, perceived level of fairness, level of solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and a high degree of political participation, which the ISI has categorized as demographic integration, connectedness to the country and sense of community.

Upon reflection on the data contained in the ISI's *GovDem Poll*, it becomes abundantly clear that the development of the South African Social Cohesion Index (SASCI) is, in our opinion, overdue. Thirty years into the new dispensation, somewhat disturbing trends have emerged.

As they relate to *demographic integration*, downward trendlines have emerged to a point where only 40% of White South Africans completely or somewhat trusted their Black compatriots, and similarly only 41% of Black South Africans completely or somewhat trusted their White compatriots; only 48% of South Africans completely or somewhat trusted people from a different religion to their own; only 43% of South Africans completely or somewhat trusted people from different nationalities. Of particular concern was the finding that 68% of South Africans did not trust immigrants from other African countries, and some 66% did not trust immigrants from overseas. That said, there is reason for hope: 69% of respondents indicated that they wanted a united South Africa.

As they relate to *connectedness with the country*, here too, the position is not healthy. A high number of high income earners and those with tertiary education were considering to emigrate – 11% of the high income earners and those with tertiary qualifications were considering emigration. Whites and Indians were particularly vulnerable, with 15% and 14% respectively considering to do so.

On the positive side, a far healthier picture emerged in relation to South African's *sense of community*. 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it important to get involved in the community in which they lived, 47% agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to actively work for the welfare of their community, and 58% said that they actively looked for ways in which they could support people that were less fortunate than themselves.

The data therefore suggests that it is important that the public policymakers pay particular attention to fostering much higher levels of social cohesion in the country, more so given the rather precarious level of economic growth and development.

Social cohesion is far more than a cultural imperative. It affects all aspects of societal life. It is necessary for creating business and investment confidence, the prerequisite for economic growth and job-creation; and it is necessary to ensure a peaceful and stable environment. It nurtures a sense of belonging, and creates hope for the future for all citizens, who then see a place for themselves in the country. This builds trust and patriotism amongst the various communities of the country, who then work together to build prosperity and a shared future.

Thus the need for the development of an instrument for public policymakers to make data-driven assessments of social cohesion, which, we trust, a SASCI will aid.

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