



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

MANAGING DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: LEARNING FROM THE UAE EXPERIENCE

By Daryl Swanepoel

South Africa is a country of profound diversity, in race, ethnicity, language, culture and religion. Its Constitution, one of the most progressive in the world, recognises and protects this diversity. It provides for human dignity, equality, non-racialism and non-sexism, as well as the right to freely practice one's culture and language. Institutions such as the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) exist precisely to protect these constitutional values.

Yet, despite these mechanisms, the country continues to face serious challenges in achieving genuine social cohesion, with high levels of poverty and inequality, largely still shaped along racial lines, contributing to tensions between communities. Historical divisions from apartheid continue to manifest in mistrust, exclusion and lack of cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, the lack of a comprehensive social cohesion strategy has meant that efforts to unify South Africa's people are sporadic, reactive, and often symbolic rather than systemic.

Even though initiatives such as the 2012 National Cohesion Summit and government frameworks like the National Development Plan (NDP) identify social cohesion as a priority, implementation has been weak. Social cohesion remains elusive not because the constitutional architecture is flawed, but because the country lacks a focused, strategic approach to operationalise it in daily governance, education and community life.

South Africa is in urgent need of a new, practical model that can guide it toward meaningful unity in diversity. For this, the experience of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offers valuable lessons.

The United Arab Emirates provides a striking example of how a society can consciously build mechanisms to manage diversity. With a population consisting of more than 200 nationalities and multiple religious and cultural groups, the UAE is one of the most diverse nations in the world. Unlike South Africa, the UAE did not emerge from a formalised system of racial oppression, yet, due to the diversity that comes with the range of nationalities now in the country, it faces immense challenges in integrating its multicultural population within a cohesive national framework.

To respond to this challenge, the UAE government adopted a deliberate, structured approach and in 2016, it established a Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, which is dedicated to promoting harmonious relationships among the country's various cultural, religious and ethnic groups. It is not a ceremonial office; it plays an active role in policymaking, education and public engagement to foster shared values and social understanding.

The UAE's approach is proactive and institutionalised. It goes beyond symbolism, embedding tolerance and intercultural respect into its national vision. One of its flagship initiatives was the Year

of Tolerance in 2019, during which numerous programmes, campaigns and interfaith events were held. A key outcome was the establishment of the Abrahamic Family House, a complex in Abu Dhabi housing a mosque, church and synagogue, a powerful physical symbol of religious co-existence.

Importantly, the UAE's model embraces both a unifying national identity and the preservation of individual cultural identities, rather than enforcing rigid assimilation. The state encourages diversity within a shared framework of mutual respect, which duality balances common civic values and cultural particularity.

The UAE also links social cohesion to national development. It understands that diversity, if managed well, is an asset that can strengthen innovation, global engagement and social stability. Hence, tolerance is not only treated as a social imperative, but also as a contributor to economic resilience and political continuity.

Recommendations for South Africa: From fragmentation to unity

Drawing from the lessons of the UAE and recognising South Africa's unique history and democratic values, several strategic recommendations emerge to strengthen social cohesion domestically:

- **Establish a dedicated social cohesion institution**

South Africa lacks a central agency mandated to coordinate social cohesion efforts across government, civil society and the private sector. A national structure, akin to the UAE's Ministry of Tolerance, should be established to drive strategic planning, monitor progress and champion inclusive values across all spheres of society.

- **Develop a national social cohesion strategy**

The current approach is fragmented. South Africa must adopt a comprehensive, well-resourced national social cohesion strategy aligned to the Constitution. This strategy should integrate the work of existing institutions, set measurable goals and be embedded within national and provincial governance plans. It should also prioritise conflict resolution, intercultural education and multilingual communication.

- **Reimagine civic education to promote unity in diversity**

Educational curricula must be transformed to teach young people the value of diversity, inclusion and active citizenship. Cultural literacy, empathy and human rights should be key components of schooling, alongside fostering pride in South Africa's rich cultural tapestry. As the UAE does, this education must not just reside in theory but be reinforced through national campaigns and visible leadership.

- **Institutionalise public symbols and dialogue platforms**

South Africa should follow the UAE's example by introducing national dialogue platforms and visible public initiatives to promote cross-cultural understanding. For example, hosting an annual National Year of Social Cohesion could mobilise schools, faith institutions and media around a shared theme of unity. Public art, festivals and symbols must reflect the country's collective history and future aspirations.

- **Strengthen the role of the CRL Rights Commission**

The CRL Rights Commission already exists to support cultural, religious and linguistic communities. However, its potential is underutilised. It should be capacitated further to lead local dialogue initiatives, mediate cultural disputes and advise government on inclusive policies. As with the UAE's tolerance ministry, the CRL must be a visible champion for unity.

- **Promote equitable access to services and opportunity**

At the root of many social tensions is economic exclusion. The state must accelerate efforts to redress inequalities in housing, education and employment. Spatial integration, equitable service delivery and inclusive urban design are essential to break historical divides and build shared spaces where cohesion can flourish.

- **Partner with religious and cultural leaders**

Faith-based and cultural institutions remain powerful influencers in South African society. A formal partnership model should be developed where government and these groups co-develop community programmes, especially in areas prone to conflict or marginalisation. The UAE's success is partly built on engaging religious leaders to promote peace and coexistence. Similarly, cultural leaders from across all groups should be consulted, engaged and involved in promoting social cohesion.

Conclusion: A Cohesion compact for a shared future

Social cohesion is not a luxury. It is the foundation of democratic stability, national development and collective dignity. South Africa has the legal frameworks, the civil society energy and the multicultural richness to become a global model of inclusion. What it lacks is coordination, leadership and strategic vision.

The UAE has shown that it is possible to intentionally build unity amidst diversity, not by flattening difference, but by nurturing respect and belonging. South Africa should not replicate its political system, but it must replicate the deliberateness of its social cohesion agenda.

By embedding inclusion into our institutions, education, public symbols and development priorities, we can transform our diversity from a source of tension into a wellspring of strength. The Constitution lights the path; it is now time to walk it, together.

Daryl Swanepoel is a research fellow at the School for Public Leadership Stellenbosch University and the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws its inspiration from the Institute's recently published report 'Managing Social Cohesion in diverse communities: Can South Africa draw lessons from United Arab Emirates'.