



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIAL COHESION CRISIS

Launch of the South Africa Social Cohesion Index (SASCI) a tool to help foster social wellbeing

By Daryl Swanepoel

In the years following apartheid, South Africa's narrative was one of hope, reconciliation, and the ambitious vision of a "Rainbow Nation." Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela encapsulated this dream, emphasising unity in diversity and a collective journey toward healing. Three decades later, however, the reality tells a different story. Social cohesion in South Africa is not only at a precarious crossroads but is also facing a steady decline.

The Inclusive Society Institute (ISI), in collaboration with Constructor University in Bremen, Germany, has developed the South Africa Social Cohesion Index (SASCI). This Index measures the well-being of South African society on an annual basis. It was officially launched during a roundtable dialogue on social cohesion hosted by the National Planning Commission at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The findings present a stark assessment of where we stand as a nation.

Measuring social cohesion across nine dimensions, the study reveals an overall index score of 51.7 out of 100 in 2023—moderate, but far from satisfactory. Worryingly, this score has declined consistently over the past three years, highlighting cracks in the "glue" that holds our society together. If left unchecked, this deterioration could escalate into deepening polarisation and political instability.

Social cohesion is the degree to which individuals in a society cooperate, trust one another, and work collectively for the common good. It is often described as the "glue" that binds societies, enabling them to withstand challenges and thrive. The ISI study measures this across three domains: social relations, connectedness, and a focus on the common good. Each domain comprises dimensions such as trust in people and institutions, solidarity, acceptance of diversity, and respect for social rules.

While South Africa's overall cohesion score remains comparable to countries like Germany (52 in 2023), the underlying story is one of contrasts. The strongest dimensions include identification with the nation (71.2), social networks (58.8), and solidarity (59.1). However, the weakest aspects—perception of fairness (40.5) and respect for social rules (33)—paint a troubling picture of public dissatisfaction with justice, equality, and governance.

The study provides a granular look at social cohesion across South Africa's nine provinces, revealing wide disparities. Limpopo emerges as the most cohesive province, with a score of 58.3, while KwaZulu-Natal (46.1) ranks the lowest. Strikingly, the data shows that social cohesion tends to be stronger in rural areas and provinces with higher poverty levels. This counterintuitive finding suggests that urbanisation, economic disparity, and social fragmentation are eroding the bonds that foster unity.

High population density, urbanisation, and exposure to modern technology correlate negatively with social cohesion. This finding contradicts global trends, where digital connectivity often enhances societal ties. In South Africa, however, excessive internet use appears to isolate individuals,

exacerbating divisions. In urban areas, the fabric of social life is frayed, with reduced interpersonal trust, weaker solidarity, and heightened perceptions of unfairness.

Perhaps the most significant driver of declining social cohesion is inequality—a deep-rooted legacy of apartheid that persists despite constitutional and policy interventions. The study reveals a troubling paradox: while rural, impoverished provinces exhibit higher cohesion, regions with greater GDP and asset wealth suffer from weaker societal bonds. Gauteng, the country’s economic powerhouse, scores only 50.5, suggesting that economic prosperity alone cannot heal societal fractures.

This pattern underscores the importance of fairness in fostering social trust. When people perceive wealth distribution as unjust or institutions as corrupt, it fuels resentment, undermines solidarity, and heightens polarisation. South Africa’s Gini coefficient remains one of the highest in the world, and in tandem perceptions of fairness remain disturbingly low. Over 68% of respondents believe the government is failing to reduce income inequality.

One of the most alarming findings in the report is the decline in respect for social rules, which scored a mere 33 in 2023—a sharp drop from 40.3 in 2021. This dimension reflects citizens’ adherence to societal norms and their perception of law enforcement. When rules are flouted with impunity, it signals a breakdown of trust not only between citizens and institutions but also among citizens themselves.

South Africa’s struggles with high crime rates, political corruption, and social unrest are direct manifestations of this crisis. The July 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, which led to significant economic losses and tragic loss of life, serve as stark reminders of the fragility of social order. Without a renewed commitment to fairness and accountability, the decline in respect for social rules will continue to destabilise society.

The ISI report is not merely a diagnosis; it is a call to action. Political leaders, civil society, and citizens must collectively address the root causes of declining social cohesion. Here are four urgent priorities:

1. **Strengthening Institutions and Restoring Trust:** A lack of trust in institutions—parliament, law enforcement, and public services—drives much of the disillusionment. Transparent governance, accountability, and effective service delivery must be prioritised. The fight against corruption is central to this effort.
2. **Reducing Inequality:** Economic inequality remains a stubborn barrier to unity. Progressive policies aimed at wealth redistribution, job creation, and improving access to quality education and healthcare are critical. Empowering marginalised communities will help build a more inclusive society.
3. **Fostering Civic Participation:** South Africans must reclaim their civic spaces. By promoting active citizenship, dialogue, and community-driven initiatives, we can rebuild trust and solidarity from the ground up.
4. **Promoting Respect for Social Rules:** A culture of lawfulness must be cultivated, starting with visible enforcement of laws and ethical leadership. Schools, religious institutions, and media platforms must play an active role in instilling values of accountability, fairness, and cooperation.

Despite its challenges, South Africa retains a strong foundation for rebuilding social cohesion. The study highlights that identification with the nation remains exceptionally high—71.2% of respondents feel proud to be South African. This shared identity is a powerful resource, capable of uniting people across racial, economic, and geographic divides.

Moreover, examples of solidarity in rural communities and among marginalised groups demonstrate that ubuntu—our collective humanity—is still alive. These pockets of cohesion can serve as models for rebuilding trust and collaboration nationwide.

Social cohesion is not a luxury; it is the cornerstone of a peaceful and prosperous society. South Africa’s decline in social cohesion is both a warning and an opportunity. By addressing the root causes of division—inequality, institutional distrust, and societal fragmentation—we can begin to heal the fractures threatening our democracy.

The choice is ours: to allow division to deepen or to build a society rooted in fairness, trust, and cooperation. The vision of a truly united Rainbow Nation remains within reach, but it requires bold leadership, collective action, and unwavering commitment to justice.

The time to act is now. South Africa’s future depends on it.

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.