



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Social Cohesion: Getting Symbolism, Action and Rhetoric Right

By Daryl Swanepoel

South Africa has emerged from a divisive past that has left the country with many psychological scars. Healing these wounds has focused on redress and forging a united nation through culture, sport, and so on, but with mixed results. Our national symbols have been promoted, including the constitutional values, to assist in forging a common national identity. Yet, how united do we feel as South Africans in 2023, after 28 years of democratic rule? To what degree have attitudes been shifted in a positive direction? Have the values enshrined in the Constitution found increasing expression in behavioural change in society at large?

A quick look at the *World Happiness Report 2022 points to a disquieting answer*. South Africa can be found way down the ranks of happiness – at position 91 out of 146, with a score of 5.19 – below the global average of 5.59 and well below the top-ranking Finland at 7.8. The ranking shows life evaluations in terms of current satisfaction with life for each country, averaged over 2019-2021.

These days, the well-being and happiness of countries are regarded as extremely important aspects, over and above economic progress, output and prosperity (wealth). There is now much more to consider than simply measuring GDP per capita in determining satisfaction with life. Social cohesion is deemed to be a critical ingredient for people to co-exist meaningfully and in harmony; it is also important for their social progress, well-being, happiness and overall development.

In South Africa, social cohesion is needed as part of the cure for the usual suspects: high levels of unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime, corruption, gender violence. The narrow definition of unemployment was recorded at 33.9 percent in Q3, 2022, and South Africa is the most unequal society in the world, according to a World Bank report. Millions of South Africans cannot live without credit. In fact, a whopping 95% of the surveyed low-income individuals engaged in debt financing to afford basic needs such as food, clothing, transport and bills. And over-indebtedness is coupled with high levels of crime, corruption, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Social cohesion is also seen as important in restoring trust between, especially, the prosperous and the poor, who are the majority. Trust is an essential element of social cohesion since it enhances economic exchange, improves the efficiency of public institutions and encourages civic participation, strengthening democratic processes, and reflecting a sense of belonging and solidarity in the pursuit of common goals. In South Africa, this is expressed through the concept of “ubuntu”, meaning “humanity to others”, which is reflected in our Constitution.

And yet, as we know, the country is not well governed and service delivery is abysmal. And trust in government, political parties and other institutions is at an all-time low. The latest Afrobarometer opinion poll has shown that trust in the country’s Parliament stands at 27%, while trust in the president comes in at a lowly 38%. And only 36% trusted the Electoral Commission of South Africa.

In fact, trust as a concept is problematic in South Africa. Findings from the extensive *GovDem Poll* commissioned by the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) in late 2021 showed that, except for high levels of trust within families, worrying trends endure across all other areas. Whilst South Africans have reasonable trust in their neighbours (62,27%), they highly distrust people they do not know. A mere 47,1% indicated that they trust people from other religious groups. And only around 50% from the minority communities trusted people from the black community. Then again, alarmingly, only 41% of black South Africans completely or somewhat trusted their white compatriots, which deepened to only 39% for their coloured compatriots and 35% for their fellow Indian South Africans.

What also emerged as an alarming trend, is the extreme lack of trust that South Africans have in foreigners – at just above 30% trust in immigrants from African and overseas countries alike. Within the political sphere, the majority of South Africans deeply distrust fellow compatriots who do not belong to the same party as their own.

Furthermore, education, as another key component of ensuring social cohesion, continues to deliver negative outcomes, despite South Africa having one of the highest per capita spends on the continent.

As the governing party loses its authority and the ability to maintain order, there is an increasing call for change, for a new value system. But unlike before, where the goal was to defeat apartheid and usher in democracy, today the call is for the competent and just execution of the state. This new system would see social cohesion as more than moral 'regeneration', or nostalgia for an idealistic past that never was. It would be inspired by the humane values of a caring society.

To achieve this, individualism and greed need to be rooted out. Too often, incentive systems are vastly inflated and distorted, and excessive displays of wealth are common. These are, unfortunately, the dominant values that permeate mediums like social media and imagery globally by persuasive and powerful influencers and personalities.

These must be countered to coincide with values like fairness, justice, respect for the rights of others, and the importance of solidarity and helping the less fortunate in life. The Covid-19 crisis showed us that this is possible. We need to build upon this, and the acts of kindness and solidarity displayed by most people on a daily basis.

Nelson Mandela embodied these values and inspired others to also become active citizens who live this transformation through their everyday actions. Indeed, to confront our contemporary crises, we cannot sit back and wait for another generation of leadership, we must act on the Constitutional values. Through the hard years, many have shown us that it is possible to be a united force without losing our individuality.

There is no single, universally accepted definition of social cohesion. In fact, a purview of the literature on the subject matter reveals that the term "social cohesion" holds numerous definitions across the globe, depending on the context and country, each with its unique challenges and responses to dealing with them.

However, a common thread runs through them all: the quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective – defined in geopolitical terms – that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviours of its members, giving individuals a sense of belonging to the same community. The capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation.

The National Development Plan 2030 situates social cohesion at the centre of South Africa's socio-economic transformation agenda to promote ubuntu, trust, tolerance, social interaction, inclusion and solidarity in communities and society at large. The country's motto speaks of "unity in diversity", a concept that seeks to harness this transformative energy and its character traits to improve relations between people, irrespective of background, status or colour.

The strength of any nation is its people and there is a recognition that South Africa's people and their ongoing goodwill and resilience in the face of much adversity shows promising potential, which must be mobilised and channelled for the collective good of the country, so that, together, we can produce higher levels of sustainable growth.

More mixed neighbourhoods closer to city centres and places of work must be created as part of growing a more inclusive nationhood. National unity is necessary for the achievement of equality, justice and development. Ethical leadership at all levels of society and in all organisations, together with improved governance and service delivery, is essential to restore faith in the affairs of the country. Trust levels in leadership and institutions must improve urgently to counter cynicism around the political process and to increase civic interest, participation, and accountability by all for the state of affairs in the country.

We still have a long way to traverse in rooting and deepening social cohesion in South Africa, but with the necessary willpower it can be achieved. There is an urgent need to have meaningful dialogue on many difficult issues. It is through this type of engagement, deliberation and civil action that leaders who recognise the needs of the people will emerge and a national voice will be born. Uniting in this goal and speaking with one voice should be every South African's holy grail.

This article draws on the content of the soon to be published Inclusive Society Institute paper under title of 'Promoting Social Cohesion: Getting Symbolism, Action and Rhetoric right'. Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute.

March 2022