

Lessons for SA from Finland

OPINION

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In a world fraught with growing social divisions, economic disparities and racial tensions, nations that manage to foster social cohesion stand as beacons of hope.

The ability of diverse populations to live together peacefully and productively is essential for both political stability and economic growth.

Thirty years into South Africa's democracy, social cohesion remains what feels like an elusive goal. However, perhaps there are lessons to be learned from countries like Finland, which has managed to create a relatively harmonious society despite its own challenges with diversity.

The recently conducted GovDem survey paints a sobering picture of SA's social landscape. Less than half of the population believes that a united SA is possible. Trust among racial groups is low, with only 40% of white South Africans expressing trust in their black compatriots, and vice versa. This decline in social cohesion threatens not only the fabric of society but also the potential for economic growth. Without a foundation of trust, collaboration and unity, nations struggle to thrive.

Finland may seem like an unlikely

model for SA. The two countries differ in terms of history, economy and demographics. Yet Finland's success in fostering social cohesion offers insights for our policymakers.

Finland has a history of managing linguistic and cultural diversity. For centuries, it has balanced the interests of its Finnish and Swedish-speaking populations. Although Finland is predominantly Finnish-speaking, it has taken deliberate steps to promote the rights of its Swedish-speaking minority. This is achieved through comprehensive language policies, cultural rights and the promotion of social inclusion from an early age.

One of Finland's most powerful tools for promoting social cohesion is its education system, which ensures that pupils can learn in their mother tongue. It provides high-quality, free education in both Finnish and Swedish, allowing children to study in their native language with equal access to educational resources. This fosters a deep respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, ensuring that children from different language grounds thrive separately in their own language streams. Finland is committed to linguistic diversity and bilingualism at school all the way to professional development. These measures uphold the rights of both language groups and enable their contribute to a culturally inclusive society. In contrast, South Africa's education system struggles with vast inequalities and often falls short in providing resources and support for all official languages. By enhancing access to education in their own lan-

guages, South African pupils could not only improve their learning outcomes, but also gain a stronger sense of identity.

Finland's example shows that when children are given the chance to learn in their own language, the foundations of social cohesion are built, as each group can maintain its distinct identity while contributing to the nation as a whole. While the SA Constitution guarantees linguistic rights, in practice, many of the nation's indigenous languages are marginalised. More investment is needed to preserve and promote these languages.

Perhaps the most important lesson from Finland is the importance of sustained, long-term efforts to promote social cohesion. Finland's success did not happen overnight. It took decades of consistent investment in education, social policies and community engagement to achieve the level of unity it enjoys today.

South Africa, by contrast, has often relied on short-term initiatives and underfunded programmes to address its social cohesion challenges. Of course, SA has obstacles that Finland has never faced. However, the core principles of Finland's approach — respect for diversity, investment in education, and a long-term commitment to social inclusion — can and should be adapted to fit South Africa's context. — *Daily Maverick*.

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