Op-ed

MANAGING SOCIAL COHESION IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES
Can South Africa draw lessons from Singapore?
By Daryl Swanepoel

Despite celebrating 30 years of the new South African dispensation this year, evidence suggests that social cohesion in the country is backsliding. In fact, the trends are deeply disturbing. While on paper structures and mechanisms now exist to promote social cohesion, the lived reality tells a different story.

In the extensive *2023 GovDem Survey* – undertaken annually by the Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) – it was revealed that less than half (48%) of South Africans believed a united nation could be forged out of all the population groups in the country. Even more disquieting was the finding that only 39% of South Africans believed reconciliation in the country is moving in the right direction.

Levels of trust, another dimension of social cohesion, among the various race, religious, linguistic and nationality groups also showed troubling results in the poll. For example, only 40% of white South Africans trusted their black compatriots, and similarly, only 41% of black South Africans trusted their white compatriots.

Another highly concerning statistic was that 11% of the high income earners and those with tertiary qualifications were seriously considering emigration. There were two main reasons driving the sentiment: a lack of confidence in the economy to deliver jobs, and a sense that South Africa was failing. With its critical skills shortage, South Africa losing more skills and taxpayers would be quite tragic.

Social cohesion in a country is by no means a nice-to-have. It is necessary for creating economic growth and jobs; and it is necessary to ensure a peaceful and stable environment. It nurtures a sense of belonging and hope for all citizens. This builds trust and patriotism among the various communities, who then work together to build prosperity and a shared future.

Public policymakers can no longer sit by idly and allow social cohesion to slip any further. The stakes for the nation are simply too high.

To this end the ISI has commissioned a study on *Managing Social Cohesion in Diverse Communities.* The study explores how other nations with diverse populations – notably Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Finland – are dealing with and building social cohesion. The end goal is a smorgasbord of options for policymakers to ponder.

The first in the series is the Singaporean case study. Both Singapore and South Africa emerged from a colonial past. So too, both jurisdictions have a multiracial demography, with a majority and a number of minority communities. However, unlike in South Africa, the *Attitudes, actions and aspirations: Key*

findings from the CAN-IPS survey on race relations, 2021, suggests that measures taken to ensure social cohesion in Singapore are bearing fruit.

For example, most Singaporeans believe that meritocracy in the country is not contingent on race, with more than 80% believing that everyone can be successful. Most also expected intercultural knowledge and willingness to accommodate differences to stay the same or even improve. And only a very small minority believed levels of national unity would worsen.

Another difference is in how they define the individual's identity. In Singapore, group identity (ethnicity) is accepted and coded into law – individuals identify as Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Malay, etc. Whereas, in the 'new' South Africa the "question constantly arises about what it means to be a South African … and whether you're a South African first and then 'black/white/coloured/Indian' or vice versa". Answering this question will have a profound impact on how policymakers can and should approach the design of public policy.

The perception of exclusion is being exacerbated through the inclusion of racial coding into South African law. The noble and constitutional intentions of these laws are often overlooked when wrongly interpreted and implemented, which in turn builds distrust within minority communities, and feeds their perception, rightly or wrongly, of alienation.

In the Singaporean case, racial quotas are a feature of legislation and policy. Singaporeans have embraced the notion to the extent that in the 2022 survey mentioned, the majority indicated that they were not supportive of racially blind policies, nor did they experience the quota system as threatening of their rights.

The trust deficit between races, religious groups, indeed across all facets of South African society, suggests that pro-active mechanisms need to be put in place. Some argue that it should start in the political sphere, where minority communities often (rightly or wrongly) feel that their interests are being marginalised by the majority.

The introduction of mechanisms in South Africa such as those embodied in the work of Singapore's Presidential Council on Minority Rights (PCMR), whose primary function it is to scrutinize bills that are before Parliament to ensure that it does not discriminate against any ethnic or religious community, and Presidential Council on Religious Harmony (PCRH), who considers and reports to the Minister on matters that affect the maintenance of religious harmony, may prove a differentiating feature capable of building trust legitimacy.

However, a cautionary note. Singapore's PCMR and PCRH are adequately resourced and are composed of individuals with gravitas. In South Africa, great care will have to be taken in selecting the right calibre of individuals to be appointed to oversee the work, lest trust be further imploded.

Now that South Africa's electoral system is under review, it may be wise to consider some elements of Singapore's Group Representative constituency system, which guarantees minority representation at the constituency level. The various demographic groups in South Africa will be better represented in a Multi-Member Constituency (MMC) system compared to a straight-winner-takes-all single-seat constituency model, which could marginalise opposition parties and those from the minority communities at the expense of social integration and cohesiveness.

Custodianship of South Africa's social cohesion programme should be reallocated to the Presidency, and properly and sufficiently resourced. Social cohesion is far more than a cultural imperative. It

affects all aspects of societal life. It requires a multidisciplinary, inter-departmental approach, best coordinated in the centrality of the Presidency.

The Singaporean case study has also highlighted the importance of securing broad public support for social cohesion engineering, the nature of which can sometimes be very sensitive. Public policymakers need to accurately understand the public mood and sentiments, necessitating an empirical measurement tool, such as an extensive independent but publicly funded annual social cohesion survey.

Social cohesion trends are currently heading in the wrong direction. But it is not all doom and gloom. Whilst it is true that only around a third of South Africans believe a united South Africa is achievable, nearly 70% of them want a united nation. What is lacking is the political will, policies and tools to build the cohesion.

The Singaporean case study suggests that by deploying the right policy instruments and driving those policies with the necessary vigour and priority, a united and socially cohesive multiracial South Africa is possible.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute and a Research Fellow at the School for Public Leadership at Stellenbosch University. This article draws on the content of the soon to be released occasional paper on 'Managing Diverse Communities – Can South Africa draw lessons from Singapore.