



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIAL FABRIC IS FRAGILE, BUT IT MAY BE STARTING TO MEND

By Daryl Swanepoel

South Africans are often told two competing stories about their country.

One story says the country is falling apart. Trust is collapsing. Communities are polarising. Institutions are weakening. Social stability is slipping away.

The other story says the country is resilient. That despite economic hardship and political turmoil, South Africans continue to hold together as a society.

Which of these stories is true?

The honest answer is: both contain elements of truth.

This week the Inclusive Society Institute released the *2025 update of the South Africa Social Cohesion Index*, an instrument designed to measure something that is often discussed, but rarely quantified: the strength of the country's social fabric.

The results tell a nuanced story.

South Africa's overall social cohesion score now stands at 56 out of 100, placing the country in what researchers describe as the "moderate" category. In other words, the social glue holding the country together has not dissolved, but neither is it particularly strong.

Yet there is an important development hidden in the data.

For the first time since the Index was introduced, we are seeing two consecutive years of improvement. After several years of decline, the trajectory appears to have stabilised and begun a slow upward movement.

That does not mean South Africa has solved its cohesion problem. Far from it. But it does suggest that decline is not inevitable. The key lesson, however, lies deeper in the structure of the Index itself.

Social cohesion is not a single number. It is the product of multiple underlying conditions, trust between citizens, trust in institutions, perceptions of fairness, solidarity between communities, respect for rules, civic participation and a sense of shared identity.

Think of it as a house of cards.

From a distance the structure can appear stable: the cards stand together, forming something that looks solid enough, but the stability of that structure depends on the balance between the individual cards.

Remove one card, weaken one pillar and the entire structure becomes vulnerable.

This is precisely what the Index reveals.

Some elements of cohesion in South Africa remain relatively strong. The most striking is national identification. Despite political frustration and economic hardship, a large majority of citizens still feel strongly that they belong to the country. In fact, identification with South Africa is the strongest dimension measured in the Index. That matters enormously. A shared national identity is the emotional anchor that holds diverse societies together. Without it, political differences quickly become existential conflicts.

But other cards in the structure remain fragile.

Three areas stand out as particular risk points: acceptance of diversity, perceptions of fairness and respect for social rules.

None of these dimensions are catastrophic. But each sits below the level required for a truly stable society.

If citizens feel that the system is unfair, trust erodes. If respect for social rules weakens, lawfulness declines. If acceptance of diversity stagnates, identity politics begins to harden. Taken individually these may appear manageable. Taken together they represent structural stress in the social fabric.

And this is where the conversation about social cohesion often goes wrong.

Too many people treat cohesion as a “soft” topic, something for civil society conferences and academic seminars. Something that belongs in the realm of social values, rather than hard economics. That is a mistake.

Global research consistently shows that social cohesion and economic performance are closely linked. Cohesive societies tend to attract investment, sustain reform and manage diversity more effectively. Fragmented societies struggle to do any of these things.

Low cohesion leads to instability. Instability discourages investment. Weak investment slows growth. Slow growth erodes hope. And hopeless societies fragment.

In other words, social cohesion is not a luxury. It is a form of economic infrastructure.

Political leadership therefore carries a heavy responsibility. When political actors inflame divisions for short-term electoral gain, they may win applause in the moment, but they weaken the long-term stability of the Republic, because when slogans replace delivery, trust declines. When identity politics becomes a substitute for governance, social cohesion erodes.

The Constitution’s promise that South Africa belongs to all who live in it is not merely poetic language. It is a cohesion project.

But government alone cannot build cohesion. Business shapes fairness through economic opportunity; civil society builds trust through everyday engagement; communities nurture solidarity through how people treat one another; faith institutions cultivate shared values; and the media influences cohesion through the narratives it amplifies. In short, cohesion is built not only in Parliament, but also in workplaces, schools, churches, neighbourhoods and homes.

South Africa's latest data suggests the country may have reached the bottom of a difficult cycle and begun a slow recovery. That is encouraging, but the structure remains fragile. A house of cards can stand, but only if every card is carefully maintained.

Social cohesion is the invisible infrastructure of a nation. Strengthen it deliberately and it becomes the foundation of long-term stability and growth. Neglect it and the costs will not remain abstract and they will be economic, institutional and social.

The data now gives us clarity. What we do with that clarity is a matter of leadership.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws from a speech he made at the launch of the South African Social Cohesion Index: 2025 Update at the National Planning Commission's Social Cohesion Roundtable that was held in Pretoria on 3-4 March 2026 and the report itself.