

Theme: Social Cohesion

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1. The major issues helping to explain structural poverty and persistent, deep inequalities in the context of social cohesion

Social cohesion is both a cause and a consequence of structural poverty and persistent inequalities.

Social cohesion is perhaps one of the most difficult yet fundamental challenges facing South African society. Social cohesion speaks to the glue that binds us together, forging a common sense of identity and sense of belonging. It speaks to a willingness to extend trust to outsiders, to respect fellow citizens and uphold their dignity, and to be moved to action in the face of persistent inequality on behalf of those who are marginalised. A lack of social cohesion may be both a cause and a consequence of structural poverty and persistent inequalities. For example, when citizens share a common identity and sense of belonging, this goes a long way to promoting trust, invigorating economic exchange across group boundaries and reducing conflict, in turn, reducing poverty and inequality. Conversely, lack of trust (both within and across group boundaries), may affect both the economic success of society as a whole, as well as relative economic outcomes for different groups within that society, thereby perpetuating inequalities.

2. The main reasons for the persistence of poverty and inequality

A lack of definitional consensus and the resulting failure to measure and track social cohesion over time in South Africa obscures the interdependence between social cohesion and poverty and inequality.

About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

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There has been little consensus about what constitutes an appropriate definition of social cohesion in a South African context, or about the kinds of policies required to effectively promote a more cohesive society. Without definition, it becomes difficult to assess whether social cohesion has improved or worsened. Without measurement, potential key determinants that are most important among a large number of factors that influence social cohesion (e.g., inequality, poverty, violence, gender conflicts, mistrust, and others) remain obscured, making it difficult to formulate policies that can be expected to materially improve social cohesion and achieve inclusive development.

3. Recommendations at a macro policy/strategic level

(a) Reach definitional clarity and consistency on social cohesion in policy discourse

Having surveyed an extensive international and local literature, we propose to define social cohesion as: *the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation*². This definition avoids abuse of the term by refraining from covertly writing into the understanding of “social cohesion” specific normative commitments or empirical hypotheses on which there can be reasonable disagreement. It acknowledges that the question of which other values a society should strive to realise together with cohesion, and the question of which conceivable forms of social cohesion are actually realisable given human constraints, are both different from the question of what social cohesion is, and both require independent investigation.

(b) Monitor and track social cohesion regularly at the national, provincial and local level using StatsSA surveys to gather data

The construction of a social cohesion index would put social cohesion firmly at the centre of all key policy debates, as an objective to be prioritised and pursued in the same way as economic growth, job creation and other welfare outcomes. It would also allow policy makers to assess whether particular policy initiatives and programmes improve or worsen social cohesion. Research demonstrates that the development of a simple, easily replicable social cohesion index for South Africa is feasible and need not require a specialised survey (albeit that would be ideal), so long as a module could be added to an existing survey (such as the Victims of Crime Survey). However, planning data collection so that an index could be representative beyond just the national level, but at the provincial or even municipal level as well would add significant power to evaluate local economic development policies and their impact on social cohesion.

(c) Use the social cohesion index to inform evidence-based policy

Since building social cohesion is a key National Development Plan imperative, it is important to measure and track progress in this domain over time for that purpose alone. However, such activity would also allow policy makers to credibly assess, in a consistent manner, whether other

² This definition is broad enough to encapsulate the ideas of social capital and social inclusion which, we argue, are constituent parts of social cohesion.

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policy initiatives have not only been successful in terms of their own objectives (e.g. job creation) but the extent to which they have improved social cohesion as well. Together, this would allow for evidenced-based policy making that takes the promotion of social cohesion seriously.

(d) Prioritise policies and initiatives that promote social cohesion and address poverty and inequality

There are a vast array of policy possibilities that might be marshalled in the fight to reduce persistent poverty and address structural inequality. Measuring and tracking social cohesion seriously would provide a disciplining rule to help in the prioritisation of these possibilities. A critical need is for government programmes to be *designed* and *evaluated* according to their impact on social cohesion. Research suggests a number of powerful policy possibilities that are able to impact poverty and inequality whilst simultaneously building social cohesion. These include:

- 1. Significant support to strengthen families:** A family is the first site of belonging for most individuals – an institution that potentially supports secure attachment and positive self-identity. However, with high rates of orphanhood and physically absent parents, especially fathers (due to the migrant labour system), many young people may experience a lack of belonging in their formative years. The disruption of family care, especially at a young age, has important psycho-social effects. For example, children (boys in particular) without secure attachment are more prone to behavioural problems, learning difficulties, poor language development and weak decision-making abilities, and are less resilient to poverty, all of which affect prospects for social mobility later on. The disruption of family care also undermines the role that traditional rituals (such as circumcision) and other family-based events (holidays, religious events, birthdays) might play in healthy identity formation, which in turn, affect the ability of individuals to integrate into and participate fully and meaningfully in community activities, as opposed to remaining marginalised. Active community participation is a key aspect of social cohesion but may be undone by insecure attachment, induced by the impact of poverty and inequality on family formation, in early childhood.

The nature of family formation (due to both the migrant labour system and absentee fathers) contributes significantly to persistent poverty among women and children, and to persistent inequalities between women and men. Both the primary physical care and the financial support of children are most often provided by women. Moreover, in the context of very low marriage rates, gender differences in unequal labour market outcomes are not offset in the household through the sharing (even if unequally) of resources between women and men. As such, families are sites where economic disadvantage is reproduced and where attachment is first formed. Intervening with effective wraparound policy support to strengthen and support family care, especially that provided by women who bear the burden of care as well as work, is critical in mitigating inequality and poverty, and in supporting healthy psychosocial development of children which in turn, holds implications for their ability to integrate into

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broader society and for their social mobility subsequently. Important lessons can be learned from the Hantam Community Education Trust in this regard. The Hantam centre provides support and education, from the stage of pregnant mothers, through the entire youth education spectrum, and even after-school training in cuisine and tourism. They have found that, with an effective parenting programme, pregnant women and communities generally begin to act more responsibly, because they have more knowledge about managing their bodies, their babies, and their family members. Remarkably, the Hantam Community Education Trust has been able to break the cycle of poverty within one generation. They are also supported by their post-school alumni, who have become skilled and effective in various livelihoods, and can plough those resources back into their families.

2. **The expansion of the Community Works Programme (CWP):** Unemployment impacts on the social marginalisation of those affected. This further deepens their economic vulnerability beyond just the lack of direct income. The CWP, through the provision of paid part-time opportunities that provide vital economic relief for the beneficiaries as well as important services to local communities (e.g. cleaning, elderly care, child care, safety and other services), provides opportunities for community engagement that have numerous social, psychological and economic benefits. The targeting of marginalised groups in particular, (e.g., ex-offenders, domestic violence victims and indigent households) has expanded the boundaries of inclusion. The programme has also had positive gendered outcomes, increasing income opportunities for women (thereby supporting families) and elderly people, who make up the majority of CWP participants. The stated intention of CWP to expand to reach 1 000 000 participants is a feasible and potentially highly beneficial and cost-effective manner of combining social grants, community development and cohesion promotion. Of course, these local level programmes work primarily to build cohesion within a community, a key aspect of social cohesion, but to the extent that it raises the economic welfare of participants and beneficiary communities over time, it will narrow inequalities between communities too. The institutional capacity and political will to fund and push this roll-out is however presently lacking.
3. **Deliver quality basic services:** The more citizens stress and suffer when they encounter inadequate (and often highly dysfunctional) government services, the more it breaks down their family resilience and engenders resentment towards others, both individually and institutionally. When services *are* delivered well, then it builds social cohesion within groups, and, by reducing inequalities, between groups. The delivery of nutrition programmes for mothers and children along with quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes is a key basic service that further helps to build resilient families.

Indeed, a particularly important initiative is the **consolidation and strengthening of the role of community (health) workers** who are able to deliver basic services and ensure the most marginalised in communities are supported in an inclusive way. There are two key points here: the first is a focus on basic service provision. In the health field, research suggests that relatively large

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gains could be made through the provision of health practitioners who specialises in occupational therapy, audiology, optometry and physiotherapy as opposed to a continued focus on the training of more specialised nurses and doctors. In particular, the lack of support structures and counselling services to help individuals deal with the psychological traumas of daily life in South Africa (be it exposure to crime, lack of employment and inability to provide for one's family, etc.) is a key issue to be dealt with if individuals are to be able to fully integrate into their communities and make positive contributions. The absence of services that help individuals and communities communicate effectively, and engage in constructive problem solving undermines the goal of building a cohesive society, leaving psychologically wounded individuals feeling dislocated from their families and marginalised within their communities. This may be exacerbated in situations where some individuals are perceived to have benefited from economic shifts whilst others have not; e.g. the stark example of increased domestic violence against women in the context of growing employment opportunities for women as opposed to men. The dearth of skilled professionals in this sector as well as general inaccessibility of these kinds of services is a key constraint that needs to be addressed to facilitate the societal process of healing.

4. The **prioritisation of infrastructure programmes that link communities physically and socially** such as electrification, roads and libraries. For example, a solar street light project in the town of Deben in the Northern Cape has had a remarkable impact on community dynamics. People from different communities, which remain racially segregated, can now visit one other, attend meetings, or children can play in the streets at night. New micro enterprises are flourishing near the street lights. It has led to racial integration, because white people from nearby towns are now willing to visit the community at night to undertake projects. Furthermore, the local company trained local people to install and maintain the street lights, so that young people have a sense of their own skill and importance (Amansure, 2016).

Research shows that libraries as place makers and sites for social interaction are well-positioned to build human capital and deliver on social cohesion, given that they provide access to resources and expertise in a neutral space that offers undifferentiated services to all community members. Urban development policy also needs to recognise more explicitly the importance of housing in urban areas to accommodate not only migrants but also their families, and the role of the physical home environment for the well-being of children.

However, a key challenge is that infrastructural development is seldom matched by a commensurate degree of social development. Infrastructure projects are typically driven by engineers, who have little understanding of the social dimensions of development. Consequently, infrastructure projects do not contribute to the development of social cohesion, and need to be explicitly reformulated to do so from the outset. Possible tools such as the Local Economic Development *Maturity Assessment Tool* (Nothnagel, 2016) could be used here to structure discussions with senior municipal staff, councilors and the private sector to identify where the key bottlenecks are, and to promote multi-sector engagement, and thereby promote social cohesion,

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in local economic development initiatives.

- 6. Calling the corporate sector to play a larger role in building social cohesion (executive pay, tax reform):** It is curious that the promotion of social cohesion is typically posed as the responsibility of the state and civil society, neglecting the important and powerful role that businesses can play. This misses an important opportunity. Changing the mindset of business, which provide daily opportunities for South Africans to interact across racial and cultural divides in the workplace whilst providing economic opportunities, to take seriously and value their responsibility in building a more cohesive society (as opposed to just generating profits) is a hitherto under-utilised policy lever. Creating appropriate incentives for corporates to build social cohesion in the workplace should be adopted. Research suggests that more socially responsible companies are more tax aggressive. This suggests that companies do not regard the payment of tax as part of their social responsibility and optimise for profitability by creating tax aggressive business structures, yet optimise for company image by engaging in corporate social responsibility activity. This highlights the need to include fair tax payment as a relevant consideration in the view of good corporate citizenship in South Africa.
- 7. Expand initiatives to celebrate heritage:** Whilst government has undertaken a number of initiatives to promote a strong South African identity, and to celebrate South Africa's diverse heritage, these should be broadened and strengthened, with an emphasis on activating civil society and unleashing bottom-up initiatives. Two good examples already in existence that could be scaled include the Ulwazi programme, an initiative set up by the eThekweni Municipal Library's Libraries and Heritage Department, which aims to record and make available, in both English and Zulu, local histories, memories and culture originating from communities in the greater Durban area. The programme does this by using the existing library infrastructure and freely available social technologies to create a wiki, much like Wikipedia, but localised for the eThekweni Municipality, that is widely accessible, and editable by those with user accounts. The Ulwazi Programme thus functions as a collaborative, online archive of local knowledge, memories and histories that are contributed by municipal residents and volunteer fieldworkers. A second example includes an initiative (developed by Boudina McConnachie at Rhodes University) to integrate African music into the school government curriculum in a way that promotes indigenous music alongside numeracy and literacy. This curriculum builds both social cohesion and human capital simultaneously, but its successful implementation will require some specific teacher training.
- 8. Promoting racial healing and inter-racial dialogue and contact:** Dealing with the deep pain of South Africa's past is a vital part of the nation-building process, and in rebuilding inter-racial trust. This basic psychological burden, borne by all South Africans to different degrees, obstructs effective social cohesion. A great deal of honest talking and reflection are needed, often in separate groups first, before launching onto inter-group discussions ("bridging social capital"). This has not happened on a sufficient nor sustainable scale to date in South Africa.

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There are a few examples of local level initiatives that aim to unite citizens in racially segregated towns, providing opportunities for inter-racial contact alongside a focus on social development and community upliftment. Examples include the the Carnarvon Reconstruction Forum, which involves the police, municipality, schools, churches, and Department of Social Development, all focused on building a cohesive community and delivering inclusive development. In Eastern Bloemfontein, the Dutch Reformed Church has played a similarly important role in promoting social cohesion in a community comprising many low-income families, unemployed individuals and homeless, many of whom are white, and reliant on rental accommodation from black property owners. Within this context, the Dutch Reformed Church has committed itself to accept all people unconditionally; asks no questions about people's background; and to do all it can to build relationships, and create new networks and resources to help people to become resilient. Through a shared religious identity, individuals in this community have experienced inter-racial reconciliation. The Worcester Hope and Reconciliation Process originated from the difficult history in the town after the 1996 bombing in Worcester. In 2010, a process of reconciliation between victims and the perpetrators was initiated in the NG Moederskerk, involving community and religious leaders. A group of change agents was established, to deal with five key issues: Education, employment, substance abuse, housing and social cohesion. After a five-day workshop, various strategies were identified, including ECD, and they secured funding to get an additional mathematics teacher for the secondary school. The Ministers Fraternal created local networks whereby the victims of the 1996 bomb attack could express their feelings and seek some kind of closure. One approach has been "Koinonia meals", when people from different cultural groups come together to share meals. Significantly, these networks helped to calm social relations during the local government election.

Whilst such processes are valuable and a critical part of racial reconciliation, a key question is how to replicate these resource-intensive, delicate processes at scale? As noted earlier, strengthening the role of community health workers and health practitioners who specialise in trauma and counselling may be an important first step, but policy makers should also consider how these skills might be incorporated into the training of teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors, and the police. However, there is also some evidence that merely facilitating inter-racial contact may go a long way to improving outcomes. Evidence from University campuses indicates that residential housing policy that randomly allocates incoming first year students to roommates, thereby ensuring some degree of racial mixing, reduces negative stereotypes and promotes inter-racial friendships. These interactions also affect academic outcomes positively for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are allocated a roommate from a different ethnic group. Such policy initiatives are easily implemented at low cost. They also provide cause to be optimistic about the possibilities of inter-racial contact and reconciliation provided through proposed mixed-income housing developments, and reinforce the importance of highlighting the responsibility of the corporate sector, which provides daily opportunities for South Africans to interact across racial, class and cultural divides in the workplace, to actively seek ways to promote social cohesion.

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4. Potential impact of the recommendations will be on eliminating structural poverty and reducing inequality

Understanding the interplay between persistent inequality and structural poverty and social cohesion provides a strong, and necessary, disciplining framework within which to make important policy choices. Taking the measurement of social cohesion seriously, and including it as a core monitoring and evaluation indicator and objective in programme evaluation will lead to a policy regime that actively promotes inclusive development and builds a more cohesive South Africa.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative:

