



## Theme: Social Cohesion

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### 1. The importance of social capital

Social capital is the *sine qua non* of any kind of effective development. Unless development (in any sector) builds and sustains social capital, it will probably fail, in the short or long term.

Social capital is simultaneously a “private good” (it helps individuals), and a “public good” (it helps societies). It facilitates problem-solving, it reduces transaction costs, and it promotes tolerance. It promotes education and child development, and underpins the notion that “it takes a village to raise a child”. It also teaches children skills. It makes neighbourhoods safe; it reduces self-destructive behaviours and gang formation. It promotes economic networking, employment, trusting employers and employees. It promotes social caring, reduces stress, and even promotes physical health. It promotes democratic participation, deliberation, development efforts. It reduces the need for heavy-handed policing. It reduces free-riding and opportunism (Putnam 2000: 299-351). Social connections create rules of conduct, mutual obligations, trustworthiness, norms of reciprocity.

Social capital has positive impacts on investment and livelihoods. Trusting communities have a significant economic advantage, because “transaction costs” are reduced, and people experience less stress and more productivity. The touchstone of social capital is the principle of *generalized reciprocity*: “I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without knowing you, confident that

### 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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down the road, you or someone else will return the favour” (Putnam 2000:134). This is a combination of *short-term altruism* and *long-term self-interest*.

## 2. The curious and schizophrenic nature of South African social capital

If one observes South Africa’s media reports, there is a general sense that the country has lapsed into a Hobbesian “each one for himself” mode of social life. Time after time, the public interest is betrayed by government agencies, the private sector, and even public-good non-governmental organisations (NGOs). There is an atmosphere of cynicism, self-interest, rampant competition for resources, and distrust. In order to restrain corruption, government agencies have installed multiple layers of bureaucracy, financial controls and governance requirements on almost all organisations, which often have the effect of further crushing local initiatives.

Yet there is also another dimension to South African society. The eNCA series of television programmes called *South African Heroes* has documented numerous projects and local schemes that are born out of commitment, concern, and community engagement. Furthermore, many kinds of social interaction and mutual support never reach the media, because they are implicit in day-to-day friendly relationships.

In fact, one can assert that it is astonishing how little crime, violence, and corruption there is, if one considers the almost total lack of moral leadership from the current South African political elite. Clearly, there must be forms of social cohesion that work, on a day-to-day basis, in innumerable communities in South Africa. Despite ongoing racial cleavages (which are reinforced by spatial, gender and class inequalities), there do appear to be networks of mutual support which develop and function spontaneously. One should not exaggerate this social cohesion – it varies from place to place, from person to person, and from one issue to another. But there must be some level of generalised goodwill for South African society to be able to “hang together” as well as it has managed – given the dire quality of political leadership.

So what can we learn from this apparent contradiction between a cynical public sphere and an enduring (albeit fragile and informal) social cohesion?

## 3. Artificially-induced and spontaneous social capital

In the analysis below, we need to distinguish between:

- (a) Government projects, which are *deliberately* designed, funded, and implemented, by sectoral departments and/or municipalities.
- (b) Civil society or private sector projects, which are *deliberately* designed, funded and implemented.
- (c) *Spontaneous* inter-personal and informal social cohesion, within communities; this can refer to relationships between families, between individuals of the same or different racial groups, between employers and workers, within churches, and so forth.

Ultimately, *the third level* (point (c) is the level where the effectiveness of social cohesion must be measured. In contrast, deliberate projects always have an air of artificiality, and are constrained by specific individuals’ leadership abilities, energy, commitment and integrity. Deliberate projects can play a role in stimulating informal social cohesion, but they may not be successful (even though “hard” infrastructure may be built, and may give an illusion of success). In fact, there is a very unfortunate



track record of deliberate projects (often very well-meant) actually destroying social cohesion, by setting in motion cycles of envy, rivalry, and distrust.

There is a systemic gap in our thinking about the relationship between “deliberate” projects and spontaneous social cohesion.

#### **4. The major issues identified about the manifestations of structural poverty and persistent, deep inequalities with regard to social cohesion**

##### **4.1 The level of development projects**

In light of the assertion above, we find that South African development programmes have achieved some tangible goals (taps, toilets, houses, roads). However, their impact on social cohesion can be debated (and *must* be debated). Note that the limited impact on social cohesion is not only a South African phenomenon; it probably partakes of the nature of government programmes and projects across the world:

4.1.1 In South Africa, development programmes have tended to be very top-down, achieving specific and concrete deliverables. But very little thought has been given to bottom-up forms of change; in fact, politicians often do not encourage this because it creates dynamics that they cannot control. Government officials are not geared to engage and encourage communities to build networks, because their projects are limited by narrow deliverables and *pro-forma* monitoring and evaluation (“ticking boxes”).

4.1.2 When projects are initiated (by government or NGOs), such projects are often confronted by a lack of local social cohesion within the host community. Many councillors do not come to meetings. There is a real problem of institutional paralysis. Some municipal officials fear political retribution if they become too involved in the project. This weakens the “social cohesion-building potential” of projects.

4.1.3 Government departments seldom collaborate with one another, either in the design or implementation of projects. Often, NGOs also jostle for influence (and revenue).

4.1.4 Poorly designed government projects can totally destroy social capital, as in the case of some restitution projects, where beneficiaries are promised a huge amount of money. Community members lapse into a cycle of passivity, hope, frustration and despair. When such projects fail to materialise, or take place belatedly, the community is riven by conflicts about the allocation of benefits.

A critical need is for government programmes to be *designed* and *evaluated* according to their impact on social cohesion. This is a major challenge – intellectually, as well as in terms of monitoring and evaluation practice. It is very easy for researchers to be seduced by “hard infrastructure delivery”, or even by apparent capacity-building initiatives. To assess the actual impact on social cohesion will require a much more in-depth analysis of local social practices *before, during and after social projects* are implemented.



This, in turn, will require clear methodologies – and for those methodologies to be constantly evaluated and critiqued, as all methodologies have blind spots and unexamined assumptions. Furthermore, projects have implications in the short, medium and long term.

We can probably hazard the following generalisation: That government projects build some social capital, and may inhibit or reduce other social capital. The real challenge is to identify the ways in which development projects *can* build/improve social capital, without having too many unrealistic expectations of what it can do.

## **4.2 The level of spontaneous social capital**

So the next challenge will be to understand, and assist, the development of *spontaneous* social capital. On this score, government can do two major things:

### **4.2.1 Basic service delivery**

At the most basic level, improve ordinary government services – health, education, social work, and municipal 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 and even hatred of government officials – and humanity as a whole. (The Life Esidimeni disaster being an extreme case.) For children to have caring teachers, sick people to have caring nurses, broken families to have sympathetic and reliable social workers, and local residents to be treated fairly when houses are allocated by municipalities, will do wonders to strengthen social cohesion. Of course, where those services *are* delivered well (and often they are!), then it builds social cohesion. That is often the difference between “successful schools” and “failed schools”.

Government absolutely *has* to get the basic services right – and it has to inculcate an ethic of care and sympathy on the part of its officials. That, in turn, requires systems to work, so that its officials are not crushed in their daily workload: School principals must be able to manage schools; hospital top management must be competent to do their job. For that to happen, government officials in the various sectors must create sympathetic and supportive environments for institutional chiefs to do *their* job. In this chain of governance, the opportunities for dysfunction are numerous. Hence people get frustrated; the good people leave; the incompetent and corrupt officials remain; and the clients/patients/families/ children suffer.

And this breaks down the fragile network of social cohesion.

### **4.2.2 Create appropriate incentives for building social cohesion**

One can almost generalise that current government policy, since 1994, seldom focuses on creating incentives for constructive behaviour. Typically, government works either by (a) exhortations (e.g. *Batho Pele*), (b) threats (e.g. labour legislation), or (c) providing financial resources (e.g. land reform projects).

There is a whole world of possibilities by creating incentives for building social cohesion. For example, government can administer programmes which “reward” social initiatives: Church choirs, sports teams and school clubs can apply to government for funding to rent buses so that they can perform

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in other towns; employers can apply to government programmes to host team-building exercises with their staff; hospitals can apply for government funding to pay transport stipends for students to enrich the lives of child patients, and so forth. Examples can be multiplied endlessly. Creches can apply for a little fund to provide enrichment classes for new mothers (to pay for books, materials and toys); and chambers of commerce can apply for a small fund to establish Youth Chambers of Commerce (which will also bridge racial and generational gaps). One of our speakers referred to the extensive social cohesion amongst waste pickers on dump sites – can they not be assisted by means of storage facilities and wheelbarrows?

Very often, those financial mechanisms would be small, and would not involve fees – so it would help to reduce the incentive for corruption.

Furthermore, the incentives would not even have to be financial: By establishing a League of Church Choirs, for example, with some branding and hiring of venues, choirs from different churches (and different race groups) can have shared events.

Such initiatives would be possible in almost every single government department or sector, administered creatively and effectively.

At present, the “tenderpreneur” philosophy involves paying fees – so consultants of different types have an incentive to make a living off government tenders (some do so honestly, and others corruptly). There will always be a need for consultants to do specialised work for government. My proposal is different: That social cohesion very often already exists, but it is not supported to make a maximum impact.

Such small grants would require a lean organisational infrastructure, funded at least partially by private sector or foundation funding.

## **Conclusion**

Government policies and programmes have followed certain pathways since 1994:

1. Government infrastructure roll-out, typically with communities as passive recipients (for example, contrast other countries, where people build their *own* houses with government money; or where social grant recipients have to prove that their children are immunised or are in school).
2. Government tenders, which have become abused as a revenue stream for opportunists.
3. Strict and oppressive regulation, e.g. in the labour market.
4. Highly constrained government regulations and programmes, with tight definition of deliverables (“ticking boxes”), with little regard for ultimate outcomes and impacts.
5. Ineffective appeals to principles such as *batho pele* and *ubuntu*.

These approaches have yielded some fruit, but they have also created destructive behavioural patterns, viz passivity, “a culture of entitlement”, nepotism, corruption, evasion of

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regulations, narrow project focus, red tape, and some schizophrenia between ostensible government norms and real social practices.

Note that *all* social interventions have positive and negative impacts – so this is not meant as a criticism of all government policies or programmes. Government interventions should be a judicious *mix* of different kinds of interventions, with a good understanding of what different interventions *can* do, *cannot* do, and what their unintended (good or bad) impacts may be.

The real cause for concern is that government programmes and policies have followed a certain *format and philosophy*, which combines elements of a “nanny state”, an unresponsive and rigid bureaucracy; and rule-based social interventions that are focused on penalising wrong-doers. None of this builds social capital.

Building social cohesion simply cannot be done by the mechanisms currently employed. We need a much more flexible, rapid, responsive and creative support mechanism – which may include funding, but may also include many other kinds of support (branding, technical assistance, celebrating successes, and creating social networks amongst community leaders, for example).

We need to create incentives and support mechanisms for constructive social behaviour. In the process, we will probably find that government can achieve many more impacts than with its current *modus operandi*. By unlocking and assisting spontaneous social energies, government can do much more. Perhaps we need to learn that government cannot do *everything* – it needs communities to take responsibility, and that requires innovative and flexible support mechanisms.

**For more information on the Mandela Initiative:**

