

From bonds to bridges: towards a social cohesion barometer for South Africa

How does one measure social cohesion – that elusive but highly desirable attribute of a nation referring to a sense of solidarity and a safer, caring, more equal and harmonious national society? The South African Social Cohesion Barometer project attempted to do just that by developing a measurement tool for social cohesion using data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). **JARÉ STRUWIG, BEN ROBERTS** and **YUL DEREK DAVIDS** explain the complexity of this task and summarise some findings.

The term 'social cohesion' has become common in South African development debates, government planning documents, academic panels, media debates and parliamentary hearings. South Africans are generally worried that the country's legacy of racial division remains unresolved and that class divisions, along with regional, ethnic and cultural divides and prejudices, simmer beneath the national surface and may re-erupt if the country's economic, political or demographic stresses worsen.

The term 'social cohesion' seems to group all these pressing issues into one overarching question: how can South African citizens be led to think and act in solidarity with each other, in the interests of everyone and the nation as a whole?

MEASURING SOCIAL COHESION

People seeking to translate social cohesion into empirical research or real-world policy have been hindered by uncertainty about what, exactly, is meant by the term. If social cohesion is defined as a distinct quality or condition of society, how is that quality identified and measured? And precisely how will South African public policy benefit from doing so?

The overall objective of this project – awarded to the HSRC by the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) in the South African Presidency – was to define and devise a method to measure social cohesion in South Africa. For this we had to rely on literature and expert opinions that incorporated the complexities associated with the concept whilst simultaneously

providing a platform which could be used as a measurement framework.

CONSTRUCTING A FRAMEWORK

The social cohesion conceptual framework included three domains: a sociocultural domain that touches on social issues such as social capital, social networks, civic participation, belonging, trust, tolerance and shared identities; an economic domain which touches on issues of economic development and fosters strategies to reduce wealth disparities; and a civic domain that incorporates issues relating to common values and a lively civic culture.

evident. The youngest age group, between 16 and 19 years old and often referred to as the 'born frees', is significantly different from other age groups. They are much more socioculturally cohesive, meaning that they are far more tolerant towards immigrants and gay people, have much more interracial contact, feel less discriminated against and are generally more satisfied with life.

Clearly this is a very encouraging sign and signifies hope for the future. This finding is, however, reversed when the civic domain is analysed. Here, the youngest age cohort is significantly less civically cohesive than older age groups. They are specifically less likely to participate in traditional forms of activities associated with active citizenship, such as voting.

In analysing the different race groups, the differences in value systems became apparent. In the economic domain, the coloured, Indian and white groups scored higher, indicating that they are more economically cohesive, as compared to black Africans, confirming the unequal economic divide among the race groups.

When analysing the sociocultural domain by race, it is interesting to note that the coloured population scored the highest, followed by black Africans, Indians and whites. Coloured people were therefore the most socioculturally cohesive and whites the least, indicating that whites are the least tolerant, feel most discriminated against and are more fearful of crime than all other race groups.

In the civic domain, coloured, Indians and whites are much less civically active; in other words they are less likely to vote, less likely



EMBRACING THE RAINBOW – SOME FINDINGS

In analysing the economic, sociocultural and civic domains, some distinct differences in sociodemographic characteristics became



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to have trust in institutions and less likely to be satisfied with the fruits of the South African democracy and with service delivery.

Almost unanimously, higher education (especially having a matric certificate or above) led to higher social cohesion scores in all the domains. People with a higher education were likely to be more supportive of economic redress and also more economically comfortable; they were more tolerant, more satisfied with life and felt less discriminated against. They were also more likely to be active participants in matters relating to civic and citizenship duties.

People with different living standards measurements (LSM) tended to hold different values. Generally, people in the highest LSM were more cohesive in the economic, socio-cultural and civic domains.

In terms of geography, it was clear that in the economic domain people from urban informal settlements, rural farm-worker households and rural traditional authority areas were more economically cohesive than people in urban formal settlements. For instance, respondents from these areas were all negative about redress of basic services compared to those in the urban formal areas.

In the sociocultural domain it was found that people living in traditional authority areas were significantly different from people in urban formal areas, being notably less cohesive and tolerant. People in traditional authority areas were generally more marginalised and felt discriminated against in terms of geography, language and income. They also tended to be very conservative in their views and therefore intolerant of 'other groups', such as homosexuals.

Analysing the domains by province, the Eastern Cape was found to be much less economically cohesive than other provinces. Communities in the Eastern Cape and North West provinces were the least socioculturally cohesive of all the provinces, meaning they are the least tolerant provinces.

In terms of the civic domain, the Northern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Limpopo were significantly different from the Eastern Cape in terms of civic values. People from Gauteng and the Northern Cape were more community oriented than people from the Eastern Cape, and therefore tended to have more confidence in political structures and be more active citizens. The opposite was true of KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo, where people were less active in terms of civic values. The rest of the provinces did not differ significantly.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This project has attempted to distil the international conceptual and operational material, as well as the South African policy discourse relating to social cohesion, and integrating it into a conceptual framework that can inform ongoing policy and measurement work on the topic.

The analytical results provide a mere glimpse into some salient aspects of economic, cultural and civic cohesion and emerging trajectories on some of the core indicators.

Across all domains, the importance of addressing social inequalities remains a recurring theme, speaking to the necessity of strong state leadership in driving and effectively implementing a developmental redress agenda and the importance of a social commitment among the public in support of such societal objectives.

It must be clearly stated at this juncture that the conceptual and empirical work discussed in this project represents the formative stages in a longer journey. The foundational part may be complete. However, substantive engagement with relevant government policy makers and other non-state actors is still required to ensure that the proposed indicators are debated. ◀ ◀

The full report *From Bonds to Bridges: Towards a Social Cohesion Barometer for South Africa* is available on www.hsrc.ac.za

Sources: SASAS 2009 for the economic and civic domains;
SASAS 2010 for the sociocultural domain.

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