

## Policy Brief 1

# DEFINING AND MEASURING SOCIAL COHESION IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Social cohesion is linked to more stable and participatory democracies, greater economic productivity and growth, inclusivity and tolerance, effective conflict management and resolution, and a generally better quality of life for people.<sup>1</sup>**

Addressing social cohesion is particularly critical in South Africa given the context of widening inequality, growing unemployment, and persistent racial inequalities. Without a consensus-based working definition that reflects both intellectual discourse as well as the lived experience of citizens, we cannot understand whether – and how much – social cohesion exists in South Africa today, and how its extent or deficit could be measured and tracked over time.

**Without measurement, potential key determinants that are most important among a large number of factors that influence social cohesion (inequality, poverty, violence, gender conflicts, mistrust, etc.) remain hidden, making it difficult to formulate policies that can be expected to materially improve social cohesion and achieve inclusive development.<sup>2</sup>**

The Poverty and inequality Initiative's (PII) research fills this knowledge gap by formulating a working definition of social cohesion that potentially overcomes the impasse of what is often an ungrounded development concept as well as an ineffective discourse that can mean everything and nothing at once. The result of applying this definition to available South African data is a simple, easily replicable Social Cohesion Index (SCI) which can function as a practical policy and socioeconomic development tool to actively measure, track, and ultimately improve levels of social cohesion.

**Preliminary results from the Social Cohesion Index research suggest:<sup>3</sup>**

- We can operationalise a definition of social cohesion and measure it using available national data.
- There is a large degree of consistency in trends in the index and its constituent components over time across four national data sets.
- Social cohesion in South Africa increased between 2008 and 2011, although the trend thereafter is less clear and a longer time series is required.
- Higher levels of per capita income and employment are positively associated with higher social cohesion.
- Poverty, unemployment, and service delivery protest are negatively correlated with social cohesion.
- Municipal policy and competence are closely associated with higher social cohesion.

## 1. A working definition of social cohesion:

**Social Cohesion is the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation.**

This definition, the work of Burns et al (2017), aims to minimize normative commitments or empirical hypothesis which can be subject to disagreement. It deviates from common usage in several ways. It is potentially less vulnerable to abuse within shifting political contexts and less susceptible to manipulation which would only serve powerful interests<sup>1</sup>. It is also distinct from international organization and governance body approaches which tend to highlight what a cohesive society would do, or which qualities would characterize a cohesive society, but do not actually define what constitutes social cohesion itself.

**Group boundaries and inter-group and intra-group interactions are central our concept of social cohesion. To be highly cohesive, a society whose members belong to several sub-groups must exhibit un-coerced, non-self-interested cooperativeness not only within but also across sub-groups.** This highlights the importance of belonging and identity (often conferred by particular group memberships), as well as robust social relations that emerge through interpersonal trust and social networks. The notion of being 'co-operative' in our definition is conceived concretely: help given to others as well as civic membership that has a directed purpose and is based on shared values and norms.

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<sup>1</sup> See Burns (2018:3). Here social cohesion is problematized in terms of authoritarianism, paternalism, coercion, and exclusionary practices regarding particular subgroups, particularly women, minority groups, and migrants.

## 2. The applied context of social cohesion in South Africa

A series of eleven focus groups conducted in 2016 and 2017 in four provinces give a nuanced understanding of how South Africans see divisions within and across group boundaries. Figure 1 shows perceptions of the main sources of division in the country today<sup>4</sup>. **Perceptions of division are rooted in four systemic and structural issues: economics, politics, race, and culture (Figure 1).**

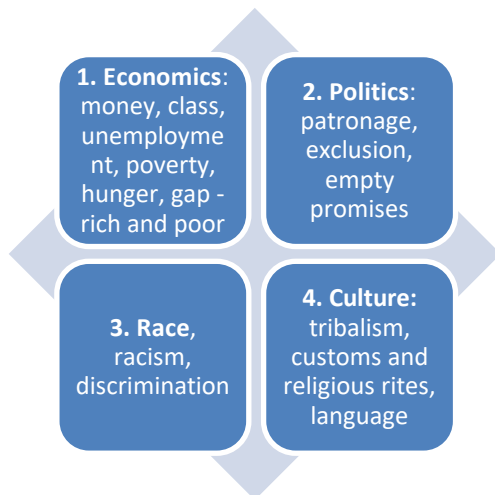


Figure 1: Perceived divisions focus on structural and systemic issues (Lefko-Everett, 2018)

The findings also demonstrate how people understand social cohesion and to what extent our working definition resonates with the lived experiences of South Africans. Respondents tend to identify with the ideas of Ubuntu or rainbow nation rather than the term social cohesion.

**Value-based attributes**, such as respect, tolerance and solidarity dominate how individuals think about social cohesion.

Racial division and economic inequality undermine the substance and meaning of the rainbow nation. White guilt and discomfort on race related subjects and socio-economic inequality leads to silence and avoidance.

**Very low trust levels (inter-personal and institutional)** related to high levels of crime and violence, dishonesty and the absence of good governance undermine social cohesion.

**Sources of cohesion** are events or causes linked to a common goal, usually with some material benefit, or arise in response to the failure of the state to fulfil its mandate. There is a willingness to co-operate – but only in the right circumstances and with the right people. Taking the measurement of social cohesion seriously allows policy makers to target these key problem areas that currently reduce cohesion and promote those dimensions that bring people together.

### 3. From definition to measurement: constructing the Social Cohesion Index (SCI)

We use four national data sets to construct the SCI: Afrobarometer, South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS), South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), and the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS). The data allow us to triangulate points related to the concepts of solidarity and co-operation, within and across group boundaries. The calculations are based on five dimensions of social cohesion and are derived from primary research conducted through focus groups as well as core literature.<sup>5</sup>

Five Dimensions of Social Cohesion	
<b>Inclusion</b>	Refers primarily to access and participation in economic and social life, and includes quality of life indicators
<b>Belonging</b>	Refers to identity, shared norms and values, and feelings of acceptance and belonging in society
<b>Social relationship</b>	Refers to social networks, trust, and the acceptance and value placed on diversity in a society
<b>Participation</b>	Refers to active involvement in political life
<b>Legitimacy</b>	Refers to trust in institutions and feelings of representation

Figure 2: Five Dimensions of Social Cohesion used to triangulate data from Afrobarometer, SASAS, SARB, and NIDS (Burns et al: 2017)

Using SASAS data from 2008-2014 Figures 3 and 4 below demonstrate how the SCI measures and tracks social cohesion<sup>2</sup>. We also find consistency across data sets. For example, data analysis shows that measures related to identity are consistently high over time, and measures of co-operation tend to be lower on average. Measures of institutional trust also tend to display a decline over time. This suggests the SCI tool provides considerable consistency and reliability for measuring and tracking social cohesion over time.

<sup>2</sup> The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) is a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional survey that has been conducted annually by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) since 2003. Much like the Afrobarometer, SASAS collects demographic, socio-economic and attitudinal behaviour of South African citizens concerning the country's political and economic institutions.

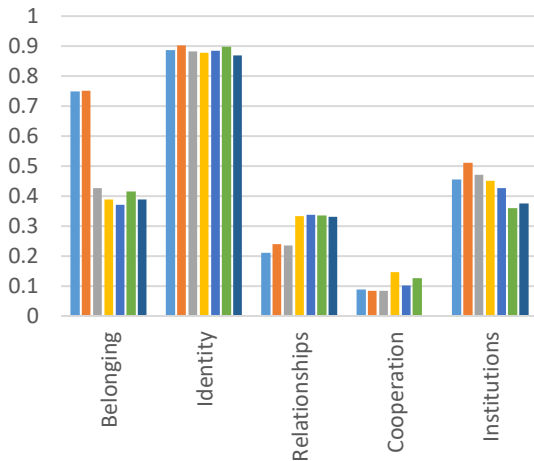


Figure 3: SASAS Social Cohesion Dimensions 2008-2014

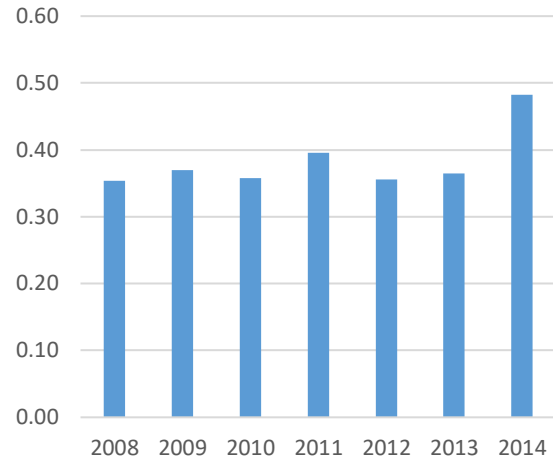


Figure 4: Changes in Social Cohesion 2008-2014, SASAS Data Set

#### 4. Utilising the Social Cohesion Index as a policy tool

The SCI can provide a strong and necessary framework for making important policy choices; it helps us to understand the interplay between persistent inequality, structural poverty, and social cohesion. We can use it to:

- Adopt a clear, concise, and shared definition of social cohesion in order to make it possible to monitor and track social cohesion regularly through the use of available national data.
- Inform evidence-based policy to prioritise policies and initiatives that promote social cohesion and address poverty and inequality.
- Operationalise in practical ways.
  - o Modify existing StatsSA surveys (such as the Victims of Crime Survey) to include more targeted, specific questions related to social cohesion in order to refine the index, and ensure sustainable measurement and replication of the index over time.
  - o Include it as a core M&E indicator and objective in programme evaluation in order to implement policies that actively promote inclusive development and build a more cohesive South Africa.

## 4. References

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