

GOVERNANCE — THAT — UNITES

Rethinking Local Governance
for a Cohesive **South Africa**



Series Editors: Paul Kariuki, PhD & Gerrit Van Der Walddt, Prof.



Governance that Unites: Rethinking Local Governance for a Cohesive South Africa

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Paul Kariuki & Gerrit van der Waldt



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Book Summary

The advent of democracy saw the formation of several civil society foundations, including the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, the Helen Suzman Foundation and the Foundation for Human Rights. These foundations primarily aim to promote national unity and social cohesion through good governance praxis. In addition, social cohesion as a key national priority can be found in policy and strategic documents. These include the Social Cohesion and Social Justice in South Africa study (2004) conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council; the Presidency's Macro Social Report, *A nation in the making: Macrosocial trends in South Africa* (2006); the Presidency's Fifteen Year Review (2008); the National Planning Commission's Diagnostic Overview (2011); the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (2011); the Presidency's Twenty-Year Review (2014); and the Medium Term Development Plan 2024–29, which includes nation-building and social cohesion as Outcome 14. Outcome 14 identifies several key impact indicators related to nation-building and social cohesion, which relate to issues of gender representation, reducing instances of racism, active citizenship, and pride in South African identity.

The National Development Plan (NDP): Vision 2030 has afforded social cohesion an even more prominent role within the national policy framework. Social cohesion is identified as a long-term development goal and linked with a series of measurable outcomes, including the following:

- Sub-outcome 1: Promoting knowledge of the constitution and fostering constitutional values.
- Sub-outcome 2: Equalising opportunities, promoting inclusion and redress.
- Sub-outcome 3: Promoting social cohesion across society through increased interaction across race and class.
- Sub-outcome 4: Promoting active citizenry and broad-based leadership.
- Sub-outcome 5: Achieving a social compact that will lay the basis for equity, inclusion and prosperity for all.

In a 2018 study on social cohesion conducted by the Gauteng City-Region Observatory, several campaigns from community-based organisations (CBOs), non-government organisations (NGOs) and

research-based organisations, alongside programmes proposed by the City of Johannesburg (COJ), the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG) and the national Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) were analysed. Five streams of intervention methodologies were identified:

- Initiatives such as canvassing, media campaigns, civic education and legislative action aimed at changing the way people think and behave.
- Initiatives attempting to inculcate a sense of mutual identification and the proper recognition of marginalised groups, including national symbols, religion, sports and cultural events, forums for intergroup contact, and dialogues.
- Initiatives such as trauma counselling, liberation social psychology and therapeutic activities.
- Initiatives within arts-based practises, whether fine art, arts and crafts, art in public spaces or art as therapeutic techniques.
- Initiatives that use materialist methods such as building infrastructure, planning urban spaces and upgrading in a way that is mindful of the objective of social cohesion.

The report concludes that local, district and metropolitan municipalities should adhere to the constitutional principles of good developmental local governance by building social cohesion in communities that they serve. National unity and social cohesion should become embedded in municipal functions and operations by, for example, utilising service delivery projects as instruments to reduce inequality and to promote a sense of belonging. This implies a reimagining of the social cohesion agenda by city structures, and a revision of budgets and performance measurement mechanisms.

Current research in developing countries on the state of interventions to advance national unity and social cohesion appear to be mainly focused on participatory interventions. This signifies a gradual shift from the conventional “top-down” development approach towards a more hands-on or “bottom-up” approach based on the notion that an involved process contributes to the design of more inclusive policy frameworks and more substantiable local development. Such a shift could pose potential advantages for highly cohesive local communities, including:

- more stable local democracies and greater civic participation in local government affairs.
- greater productivity and growth, and resistance to the consequences of economic shocks.

- better quality of life for citizens, in that cohesive societies are simply more liveable and sustainable for people.
- greater inclusivity, awareness and tolerance of diversity and multiculturalism.
- stronger conflict management and resolution, particularly after crises such as radicalism, violence, protests or political divisions, and in fragile states; and
- better social outcomes, particularly related to the interface between the well-being and general health of communities, inclusive of equality, employment opportunities and social support measures.

Advancing and improving national unity through targeted social cohesion interventions remains challenging in the local sphere of South Africa. It is generally accepted that local economic and social development is dependent on strong social bonds – the glue that binds citizens together, forging a common sense of identity and belonging. In the South African context, national unity and social cohesion can be regarded as upholding the values of the Constitution and adhering to the principles of human dignity embodied in the notion of *Ubuntu*. Former president Thabo Mbeki brought the idea of social cohesion and *Ubuntu* together: “a person is a person through other people and does not allow for an individualism that overrides the collective interests in a community” (Mbeki, 2007).

Studies on national unity and social cohesion conclude that addressing the current prejudices, interracial mistrust, and negative attitudes to integration remain vital, too, in the process of building social cohesion in South Africa. Further studies may want to explore causes of informal segregation in greater depth, especially to improve interracial contact in South Africa. In particular, it would be beneficial to strengthen the impact of local government strategies to address inequality in comparison with those aimed at building interracial trust and addressing racial prejudice and its respective impacts on social cohesion. The results of both the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) index and the Indlulamithi Barometer confirm that South Africa is far from attaining national unity and social cohesion, with the most significant driver of this being inequality. The multidimensionality and ambiguity of social cohesion make it an elusive pursuit within local government. As seen in a lack of strategic programmes and policies explicitly aimed at fostering social cohesion at a local level, there is a lack of a unified understanding about the role of local government in building social cohesion in South Africa. Addressing social cohesion is particularly critical in South Africa

given the context of widening inequality, growing unemployment, and persistent racial inequalities.

This book aims to investigate the determinants of national unity and social cohesion and explore the role of local government in facilitating these ideals in society. To achieve this aim, the following research objectives have been identified:

- To determine the role and mandate of local government in addressing national unity and social cohesion concerns.
- To probe the prevalence of indicators reflecting the health of social cohesion in South African society with particular reference to social inclusion and a sense of belonging, cultural and ethnic homogeneity, participation in local governance, non-racism, inequality, equal enjoyment of socio-economic rights, solidarity, mutual recognition, trust and respect, common perception of the nation, integrated human settlements, legitimacy of government, and the level of trust in public institutions.
- To identify and classify social cohesion indicators that can be used as measurement instruments and be supported at the local sphere of government.
- To identify possible areas of involvement where municipal services and programmes can enhance social cohesion and national unity.
- To propose a local government national unity and social cohesion strategic framework incorporating key (measurement) indicators and possible targeted municipal interventions.

Given the context and book aims outlined above, this publication is divided into three sections. Section A deals with the Determinants of National Unity and Social Cohesion comprising two chapters. Section B, consisting of two chapters, outlines the Diagnosis of National Unity and Social Cohesion in South Africa with specific reference to Indicators and Trends. Section C entails Towards a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework, consisting of two chapters.

In Chapter 1, “National Unity and Social Cohesion in Perspective”, Halima Khunoethe provides conceptual and contextual perspectives regarding national unity and social cohesion. She examines these concepts within the post-apartheid context, positioning local government as a critical site where cohesion is shaped. She draws specific attention to the fact that national unity, social cohesion, and cooperative governance are central to South Africa’s constitutional democracy, yet persistent inequalities and local governance weaknesses continue to undermine them. Drawing

on constitutional principles, policy frameworks, and legislation, she argues that social cohesion is both a governance process and an outcome, dependent on inclusive institutions, ethical leadership, effective service delivery, and public participation. Municipalities are highlighted as key arenas of state-citizen interaction, influencing trust, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging. She further analyses challenges such as coalition politics, uneven capacity, service delivery protests, and weak intergovernmental coordination, showing how they weaken cohesion. She argues that integrated, people-centred governance can strengthen unity, while fragmented approaches undermine it. Consequently, the chapter repositions national unity and social cohesion as core governance essentials and establishes local governance as central to democratic stability in South Africa.

Chapter 2, “Local Government’s Role in Building Inclusive and Cohesive Communities”, follows on this contextual and conceptual orientation. Tyanai Masiya expertly draws on the policy vision articulated in the *National Development Plan 2030* and related governance reform programmes, to examine the evolving role of local government in advancing inclusive development and strengthening social cohesion. He argues that municipalities are not merely service delivery institutions but also critical arenas for nation-building and democratic engagement. Through participatory governance mechanisms and inclusive service provision, local governments can facilitate interaction across social, racial, and economic divides. He uses a governance and community development lens to examine how institutional arrangements, decision-making processes, and community-based initiatives interact to promote inclusive development and social cohesion at the local level. This reflects on how local governance practices can either strengthen or undermine social cohesion depending on the extent to which they promote inclusivity, participatory decision-making, and equitable development. At the same time, persistent governance challenges, including capacity constraints, uneven community participation, spatial inequality, and institutional fragmentation, often limit the ability of municipalities to effectively nurture cohesive communities. He proposes ways to strengthen strategies such as participatory planning, community-centred service delivery, collaborative governance, and localised social cohesion programmes. By highlighting municipalities as key actors in fostering social solidarity and active citizenship, the chapter, thus, contributes to broader debates on local governance, democracy, and nation-building in South Africa.

In Chapter 3, “Local-Level Social cohesion indicators in South Africa”, Fundiswa Khaile proficiently delineates appropriate

indicators to measure the level of social cohesion. National instruments such as the *National Development Plan* and the *2012 Social Cohesion Summit Declaration* 7089 place social cohesion at the centre of nation-building. Yet policy recognition alone is insufficient. Progress depends on empirically grounded evidence, expressed through clear, measurable indicators that show whether interventions are implemented effectively and produce tangible, positive outcomes. While national-level social cohesion indicators have developed, there is a major gap at local government level. She addresses that gap by proposing a set of context-sensitive, locally grounded indicators for municipal use. Drawing on South Africa's specific conceptualisation of social cohesion, and on scholarship on the subsidiarity principle and the developmental role of local government, she identifies and empirically tests indicators capturing key dimensions of social cohesion in local communities. By proposing a coherent measurement framework, the chapter seeks to strengthen local governments' capacity to track progress, assess outcomes and impacts, and refine policies and programmes, thereby improving the effectiveness of municipalities in advancing social cohesion in an evidence-informed way.

"Municipal Entry Points for Advancing Unity and Cohesion" is the theme of Chapter 4, in which Maréve Biljohn skilfully provides a comprehensive perspective regarding the ways in which municipalities can advance unity and social cohesion through inclusive local governance, social innovation (SI), and the principles of *Ubuntu* within the South African local government context. Communities globally and in South Africa increasingly face complex socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, inequality, migration, limited access to basic services, public safety concerns, and social fragmentation, all of which undermine resilience, sustainability, and inclusivity. In response, she argues that fostering cohesive and resilient communities requires collaborative governance approaches grounded in community participation, social capital, shared ownership of development, and co-produced service delivery solutions. Through a conceptual exploration, she delineates SI as an inclusive local governance framework, examines the co-production of socially innovative development interventions through *Ubuntu* values, and analyses inclusive governance service delivery systems as mechanisms for strengthening community cohesion. Significantly, her chapter contributes a conceptual framework for operationalising unity and cohesion within municipal governance and service delivery systems in South Africa.

In Chapter 5, “Principles of a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework”, Temidayo Ofusori capably delineates the foundational principles, roles and responsibilities, strategic pillars, and institutional mechanisms essential for constructing a robust Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework in South Africa. Anchored in the constitutional mandate for developmental local governance and aligned with national imperatives such as the *National Development Plan*, he articulates core guiding principles which include constitutional democracy, human rights and equality, non-racialism and non-sexism, unity in diversity, inclusivity, social justice, redress and transformation, intergroup cooperation, social solidarity, active participatory citizenship, civic responsibility, and national consciousness that should inform municipal efforts to foster cohesive communities. He also clarifies the differentiated yet interdependent roles and responsibilities of stakeholders: municipal councils for political oversight and leadership; municipal administrations for planning, implementation, and reporting; ward committees for grassroots engagement; civil society and faith-based organisations for mobilisation and outreach; and the private sector for inclusive economic participation and investment. He then proposes embedding social cohesion within existing municipal instruments such as integrated development plans, spatial development frameworks, and local economic development strategies. Furthermore, he advocates for dedicated institutional arrangements which include a Social Cohesion Coordination Unit, multi-stakeholder advisory committees, ring-fenced budgets, personnel allocation, and performance management integration. Emphasis is placed on capacity-building for officials in areas such as conflict resolution, inclusive planning, amongst others, alongside the identification of research gaps to support evidence-based refinement of local approaches. By establishing these principles and structures, the chapter provides the normative and operational foundation for translating national aspirations for nation-building and social cohesion into practical, measurable, and sustainable municipal interventions, ultimately enhancing trust, inclusion, belonging, and collective prosperity at the local level in a diverse and unequal society.

In the final chapter, “Bringing it all together: A Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework”, Thokozani Nzimakwe and Muzi Zuma learnedly contend that promoting unity and solidarity amongst diverse groups is crucial to fostering social cohesion, reconciliation, and national development

in South Africa, a nation with a history of deep-rooted divides and conflicts. In this way, coalition local governments can advance solidarity and harmony amongst the population. When opposing ideologies and political parties unite to form a government, they are compelled to cooperate to achieve common goals and develop solutions that benefit all residents. This collaborative method encourages parties to put aside personal agendas and prioritise the nation's overall welfare. The contributors argue that a comprehensive and coordinated framework is needed to measure and track progress made with social cohesion and national unity in the local sphere of government. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the content of the preceding chapters by highlighting the objectives, components, and pillars of a proposed local government national unity and social cohesion framework. This framework is intended to support municipal efforts by proposing strategies to strengthen social cohesion and to indicate how municipal programmes and services can enhance social cohesion.

More information about this book series is available at: <http://ddp.org.za/blog/publications/>

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Foreword

Governance that Unites: Re-thinking Local Governance for a Cohesive South Africa appropriately recognises that local government occupies a uniquely important position within the governance architecture of South Africa. What is particularly noteworthy is the acknowledgement that municipalities are not merely administrative institutions responsible for the delivery of basic services; they are also critical development agents that may foster social solidarity, social trust, civic participation and a sense of belonging amongst diverse communities in South Africa.

The book responds, amongst other challenges, to inadequate strategic programmes and policy frameworks explicitly directed at fostering social cohesion at the local level. The edition does so by examining the determinants of national unity and social cohesion and further exploring the role of local government in promoting, nurturing and strengthening these ideals within society. It introduces a practical strategic framework, supported by measurable indicators and targeted municipal interventions to strengthen socially cohesive, inclusive and integrated communities. What is particularly commendable in the manuscript is the detailed presentation of key social cohesion indicators and monitoring frameworks at local government level. This is an invaluable volume which, through its interrelated Sections and Chapters, holistically and comprehensively advances discourse on developmental local governance, national unity and social cohesion beyond conventional approaches to local governance practices in South Africa.

The book adopts an accessible yet intellectually rigorous approach that enables it to identify not only with scholars and researchers specialising in social cohesion studies, but also with a broader readership committed to advancing national unity, democratic participation and social cohesion within contemporary society in South Africa. In this regard, the manuscript successfully bridges academic scholarship and practical governance discourse in a manner that is both insightful and socially relevant.

Governance that Unites: Re-thinking Local Governance for a Cohesive South Africa embodies intellectual depth, contextual relevance and practical orientation, thereby constituting a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship on social cohesion, developmental local governance and democratic transformation in

South Africa. Its analytical richness and forward-looking perspectives render it a timely and important publication.

I, therefore, confidently commend this scholarly work to academics, policymakers, practitioners and all those committed to advancing a more cohesive and inclusive society. This publication constitutes both a timely and valuable contribution to contemporary discourse on local governance and nation-building at a time when strengthening social solidarity, democratic participation and collective belonging remain central to South Africa's sustainable development and constitutional aspirations.

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Mr Muziwokuthula Zuma is currently working in local government in the Umgungundlovu District Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration and Management from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and is currently finishing his second Master's in Leadership Studies. He has more than 20 years' experience in the public sector. His research interests are in local government, local economic development, and leadership.

Abbreviations

COGTA	Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs
DAC	Department of Arts and Culture
DDM	District Development Model
EIP	Ethnic Integration Policy
GCRO	Gauteng City-Region Observatory
GPoA	Government's Programme of Action
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IDP	Integrated Development Plan
IGR	Intergovernmental relationship
IJR	Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
IUDF	Integrated Urban Development Framework
LED	Local Economic Development
LGSETA	Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NPC	National Planning Commission
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SALGA	South African Local Government Association
SARSC	South African Radar for Social Cohesion
SCR	Social Cohesion Radar
SDF	Spatial Development Framework
SI	Social innovation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WSP	Workplace Skills Plan

Section A

Determinants of National Unity and Social Cohesion

Chapter 1

National Unity and Social Cohesion in Perspective

Halima Khunoethe

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Abstract

National unity, social cohesion, and cooperative governance are central to South Africa's constitutional democracy, yet persistent inequalities and local governance weaknesses continue to undermine them. This chapter examines these concepts within the post-apartheid context, positioning local government as a critical site where cohesion is shaped.

Drawing on constitutional principles, policy frameworks, and legislation, the chapter argues that social cohesion is both a governance process and an outcome, dependent on inclusive institutions, ethical leadership, effective service delivery, and public participation. Municipalities are highlighted as key arenas of state-citizen interaction, influencing trust, legitimacy, and a sense of belonging. The chapter further analyses challenges such as coalition politics, uneven capacity, service delivery protests, and weak intergovernmental coordination, showing how they weaken cohesion. It argues that integrated, people-centred governance can strengthen unity, while fragmented approaches undermine it. The chapter repositions national unity and social cohesion as core governance essentials and establishes local governance as central to democratic stability in South Africa.

Keywords: Cooperative governance; developmental local government; local governance; municipalities; national unity; social cohesion; South Africa

Introduction

National unity and social cohesion occupy a central place in South Africa's democratic project and are closely associated with the constitutional reforms that emerged in the post-apartheid era. Emerging from a deeply divided past characterised by institutionalised racial exclusion and socio-economic inequality, the democratic transition of 1994 signalled not only political liberation but also the aspiration to construct a united, inclusive, and just society (Abrahams, 2016). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (RSA, 1996) explicitly envisions a society founded on human dignity, equality, non-racialism, non-sexism, and democratic governance. Within this constitutional order, national unity and social cohesion are not abstract ideals; they are normative commitments that shape the architecture of governance and the functioning of public institutions.

Despite notable democratic gains, South Africa continues to grapple with high levels of inequality, spatial fragmentation, unemployment, political contestation, and uneven state capacity (Beall *et al.*, 2005; Levy, 2021). These structural and governance challenges raise critical questions about the resilience of national unity and the depth of social cohesion within communities. Increasing instances of service delivery protests, fragile coalition governments in metropolitan municipalities, and declining levels of public trust in institutions suggest that cohesion cannot be assumed; it must be actively cultivated through governance practice.

This chapter situates national unity and social cohesion within South Africa's post-apartheid governance discourse, arguing that these concepts should be understood not merely as social outcomes but as governance processes. Social cohesion is shaped by the quality of institutions, the ethical conduct of leadership, the effectiveness of service delivery, and the inclusiveness of participatory mechanisms. In this regard, democracy, governance, and cohesion are intrinsically linked. Democratic legitimacy depends on citizens' trust in institutions; trust is reinforced through accountable governance; and accountable governance strengthens social cohesion by fostering a shared sense of belonging and fairness.

A distinctive feature of South Africa's constitutional framework is its commitment to cooperative governance across national, provincial, and local spheres. Within this multilevel system, local government occupies a particularly strategic position. Municipalities

represent the closest sphere of government to citizens and function as the primary sites of everyday state–citizen interaction. It is at this level that policies translate into tangible services such as water, sanitation, housing, spatial planning, and community development. Consequently, the effectiveness, responsiveness, and integrity of local governance profoundly influence citizens' perceptions of the state and their sense of inclusion within the national community. Where governance is fragmented, politicised, or ineffective, cohesion is weakened; where it is integrated, participatory, and development-oriented, unity is strengthened (Bigdon, 2006). The constitutional and legislative framework reinforces this positioning. Policy instruments such as the Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 (RSA, 1998), the Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (RSA, 2000a), the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (RSA, 2000b), the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003 (RSA, 2003), the Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act 13 of 2005 (RSA, 2005), and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013 (RSA, 2013) collectively operationalise constitutional values within good local governance practice. Together, they establish mechanisms for inclusive representation, participatory democracy, equitable development, and coordinated planning, each of which contributes directly to the building of cohesive communities.

Against this backdrop, the chapter advances three central propositions. First, national unity and social cohesion are foundational governance imperatives rather than peripheral social concerns. Second, local government serves as the crucible in which democratic cohesion is either consolidated or eroded. Third, strengthening cohesion requires integrated, ethical, and people-centred governance approaches that bridge institutional fragmentation and socio-economic divides.

National Unity and Social Cohesion: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

National unity and social cohesion are central themes in contemporary governance discourse and are frequently invoked in policy debates, constitutional interpretation, and development planning. The two concepts are closely related and are often used interchangeably in both academic literature and public discourse. Their proximity reflects the shared concern with fostering stable,

inclusive, and harmonious societies, particularly in contexts marked by historical divisions and socio-economic inequality.

In South Africa's democratic trajectory, these concepts carry particular significance. They address the broader project of building a society that transcends past injustices while promoting inclusive citizenship, accountable governance, and equitable development. However, despite their frequent use, national unity and social cohesion are complex and multi-dimensional constructs that require careful conceptual and theoretical engagement.

National unity is generally understood as the condition in which members of a political community share a sense of common identity, collective purpose, and allegiance to a set of shared values (Zajda, 2006). In post-conflict or transitional societies, national unity is frequently framed as the consolidation of a collective national consciousness that transcends ethnic, racial, or partisan divisions (Chafetz, 2000). It implies the existence of a shared narrative about the nation and a commitment to coexist within a common political framework. From a civic perspective, national unity is often associated with constitutional patriotism a concept advanced by Habermas (1996), which suggests that allegiance should be directed not towards ethnicity or culture, but towards democratic principles and constitutional norms (Marvakis, 2000). In this sense, unity is grounded in shared commitment to the rule of law, human rights, equality, and democratic governance. Within plural societies, such unity does not require cultural homogeneity but rather a collective commitment to institutional arrangements that guarantee justice and inclusion.

In the South African context, national unity has historically been linked to reconciliation and nation-building efforts following apartheid. It reflects the aspiration to build a "rainbow nation" founded on shared citizenship despite deep structural inequalities (Tutu, 1999). Thus, national unity encompasses both symbolic and institutional dimensions: symbolic in terms of identity and belonging, and institutional in terms of adherence to constitutional values.

Social cohesion, while related, is more frequently conceptualised in relational and socio-economic terms. It refers to the strength of relationships, trust, and solidarity amongst members of society. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) defines social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimise disparities, and

avoid marginalisation (Corry, 2012). Similarly, Moustakas (2023) conceptualises social cohesion as both the vertical and horizontal interactions amongst members of society, characterised by trust, inclusion, and cooperation. Central to these definitions are elements of trust, belonging, solidarity, reciprocity, and social inclusion. Social capital theorists such as Putnam and Goss (2002) emphasise the role of networks, norms, and trust in facilitating coordinated action and strengthening democratic life. Social cohesion, therefore, reflects not only attitudes of belonging but also patterns of interaction and institutional fairness. Importantly, contemporary scholarship increasingly views social cohesion not merely as a static outcome but as a dynamic process shaped by governance practices (Novy, 2012). Inclusive institutions, participatory mechanisms, equitable service delivery, and accountable leadership contribute to cohesive outcomes, while exclusion, corruption, and inequality undermine them.

A critical conceptual clarification involves distinguishing unity from uniformity. Unity implies collective alignment around shared principles and institutions, whereas uniformity suggests sameness or the erasure of difference. Democratic societies are inherently pluralistic, characterised by diversity of culture, language, belief, and political orientation. Genuine national unity does not demand homogeneity; rather, it accommodates diversity within a shared constitutional framework (Baumeister, 2007). Similarly, social cohesion does not require the absence of disagreement or contestation. Democratic engagement often involves debate and competing interests. Cohesion, instead, refers to the capacity of institutions and communities to manage diversity constructively without descending into fragmentation or conflict.

Synthesising these perspectives, national unity may be understood as the shared commitment of citizens to a common political and constitutional project, while social cohesion reflects the quality of relationships, trust, and inclusion that sustain that project in everyday life. National unity provides the normative anchor of collective identity and purpose; social cohesion represents the relational and institutional mechanisms through which that unity is experienced and maintained.

Crucially, social cohesion should be understood both as an outcome and as a governance process. It is an outcome insofar as it reflects levels of trust, belonging, and social stability within society. Yet it is also a process shaped by policy choices, institutional design,

and leadership practices. Governance structures that promote equity, participation, and accountability generate cohesive outcomes, whereas fragmented and exclusionary systems weaken both cohesion and unity.

Understanding national unity and social cohesion requires engagement with theoretical traditions that explain how relationships, institutions, and governance processes shape collective life. Several theoretical perspectives provide useful lenses for analysing how cohesive societies emerge and how governance arrangements can either strengthen or undermine unity. Amongst the most influential are Social Capital Theory, Developmental State Theory, Governance and Institutional Theory, Democratic Participation Theory, and the concept of Cooperative Governance. Together, these frameworks offer insights into the institutional, relational, and participatory foundations of cohesive societies.

Social Capital Theory provides an important framework for understanding the relational dimensions of social cohesion. Social capital refers broadly to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals and groups to act collectively for mutual benefit (Putnam & Goss, 2002). According to this perspective, societies characterised by high levels of trust, civic engagement, and strong social networks tend to exhibit more effective governance and greater social stability. Putnam and Goss (2002) argue that social capital facilitates coordination and cooperation amongst citizens and institutions, thereby strengthening democratic governance. Similarly, Fukuyama (1995) emphasises that trust functions as a form of social currency that enables societies to reduce transaction costs and foster cooperation across diverse groups (Fukuyama, 1995). Social capital is often categorised into three forms: bonding social capital, which strengthens relationships within groups; bridging social capital, which connects different social groups; and linking social capital, which refers to relationships between citizens and institutions (Claridge, 2018). Within the context of national unity and social cohesion, these networks of trust and cooperation contribute to social stability, collective identity, and effective governance.

Developmental State Theory is another theory worth exploring in connection to social cohesion and national unity. This theory emphasises the role of capable, interventionist states in promoting economic development, social inclusion, and structural transformation. Originating from analyses of East Asian economies, the theory highlights how strong institutions, strategic planning, and coordinated state action can drive development outcomes

(Stubbs, 2017). A developmental state prioritises long-term national development goals while ensuring that economic growth translates into broader social welfare.

In contemporary governance discourse, the concept has been expanded to incorporate the importance of inclusive institutions. Menocal (2017) argues that inclusive political and economic institutions create opportunities for broad participation in economic and political life, thereby fostering stability and cohesion (Menocal, 2017). When institutions distribute resources and opportunities fairly, citizens are more likely to trust the state and identify with the national project. Conversely, extractive or exclusionary institutions often generate inequality, marginalisation, and social fragmentation. In this regard, the developmental state framework emphasises the importance of capable and inclusive governance structures in sustaining national unity and social cohesion. Furthermore, Governance and Institutional Theory focuses on the role of formal and informal institutions in shaping political behaviour, public policy outcomes, and state legitimacy. Institutions are understood as the rules, norms, and organisational structures that guide social and political interaction (North, 1996). Effective institutions contribute to predictable governance, accountability, and policy coordination, which are essential for maintaining social order and public trust. From this theoretical perspective, social cohesion is closely linked to institutional legitimacy and performance. When public institutions deliver services efficiently, uphold the rule of law, and operate transparently, citizens are more likely to perceive the state as legitimate and trustworthy (Putnam & Goss, 2002). Conversely, weak or dysfunctional institutions undermine confidence in governance systems and may contribute to social fragmentation and political instability. Institutional quality, therefore, plays a central role in shaping the relationship between citizens and the state.

Democratic Participation Theory emphasises the importance of citizen engagement in political and governance processes. Participation strengthens democracy by ensuring that citizens have meaningful opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives. Scholars such as Goatcher (2005) argue that participation fosters civic competence, political efficacy, and collective responsibility amongst citizens. From a social cohesion perspective, participatory governance enhances citizens' sense of belonging and ownership within the political system. Arnstein's (1969) influential "ladder of citizen participation" illustrates varying levels of engagement, ranging from

tokenistic consultation to genuine partnership and citizen control (Varwell, 2022). Higher levels of participation enable communities to contribute to decision-making processes, thereby strengthening trust between citizens and public institutions. Participatory governance mechanisms, such as community consultations, local forums, and public accountability platforms, therefore, play a significant role in promoting inclusive and cohesive societies.

Cooperative governance represents a governance model in which different spheres of government and public institutions work collaboratively to achieve common developmental objectives. Rather than operating in isolation, governance actors coordinate policies, resources, and programmes to ensure coherent service delivery and development planning. This approach recognises that complex societal challenges require integrated and coordinated responses. In multilevel governance systems, cooperative governance facilitates collaboration between national, regional, and local authorities while promoting alignment of policy objectives (Varwell, 2022). Such coordination strengthens institutional coherence and improves the effectiveness of public service delivery. In the context of national unity and social cohesion, cooperative governance reinforces the principle that governance is a shared responsibility amongst institutions, communities, and leadership structures. Effective coordination and collaboration across governance levels contribute to the creation of inclusive, responsive, and stable societies.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives highlight that national unity and social cohesion are shaped by a combination of relational, institutional, and participatory factors. Social Capital Theory emphasises trust and social networks; Developmental State Theory highlights the role of capable and inclusive institutions; Governance and Institutional Theory emphasises the importance of legitimacy and performance; Democratic Participation Theory stresses citizen engagement; and Cooperative Governance illustrates the importance of coordination amongst state actors. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive analytical foundation for examining how governance practices influence the development of cohesive and unified societies.

Local Government as the Crucible of National Unity

Local government occupies a central position in the governance architecture of democratic states, particularly in societies seeking

to promote national unity and social cohesion. As the sphere of government closest to citizens, local government institutions function as the primary interface between the state and communities. In South Africa, municipalities are constitutionally mandated to promote democratic and accountable governance, ensure the provision of basic services, and encourage community participation in decision-making processes (RSA, 1996). These responsibilities place local government at the forefront of efforts to strengthen social cohesion and nation-building, as everyday governance practices at the municipal level significantly influence citizens' perceptions of the state and their sense of belonging within the national community.

One of the defining roles of local government lies in its function as a primary site of democratic interaction. Municipal institutions create opportunities for citizens to engage with governance processes through structures such as ward committees, public consultations, and integrated development planning forums. These participatory mechanisms enable communities to voice their concerns, contribute to policy discussions, and influence development priorities. Democratic engagement at the local level, therefore, strengthens the relationship between citizens and the state, reinforcing the principles of participatory governance and inclusive decision-making (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). By facilitating active citizen participation, municipalities help to nurture a sense of ownership and collective responsibility within communities.

Local government also plays a crucial role in shaping everyday governance and the construction of institutional legitimacy. Citizens typically experience the state through local services such as water provision, sanitation, housing, road infrastructure, and waste management. The quality, reliability, and fairness of these services influence public perceptions of government performance and legitimacy. When municipalities are responsive, transparent, and accountable, they contribute to strengthening trust between communities and governance institutions. Conversely, persistent service delivery failures can erode public confidence and contribute to social discontent (Rothstein & Teorell, 2012). Everyday governance practices, therefore, have profound implications for the development of cohesive and stable communities.

Another important dimension of local governance relates to trust-building through developmental local government. South Africa's local government system is guided by the principle of developmental local government, which requires municipalities

to prioritise social and economic development while improving the quality of life for communities (RSA, 2000b). Developmental local government emphasises integrated planning, participatory governance, and inclusive service delivery. According to scholars such as Parnell and Pieterse (2010), developmental local government seeks to address historical inequalities by promoting equitable development and expanding access to opportunities for marginalised communities. Through these initiatives, municipalities can foster greater trust in public institutions and strengthen social cohesion.

The relationship between spatial planning, land use, and social integration also plays a significant role in shaping national unity. Apartheid-era spatial planning created deeply segregated urban and rural landscapes that continue to influence patterns of inequality and social exclusion in contemporary South Africa. Municipalities are responsible for spatial planning and land use management, which positions them as key actors in addressing spatial fragmentation and promoting inclusive urban development. Integrated spatial planning can facilitate improved access to housing, employment opportunities, transportation networks, and social services, thereby reducing socio-economic disparities between communities (Turok, 2012). By promoting spatial justice and integrated settlements, municipalities contribute to creating environments that support interaction, cooperation, and shared citizenship.

In rural contexts, traditional leadership institutions play an important role in maintaining community cohesion and facilitating governance processes. Traditional leaders often serve as custodians of cultural heritage, mediators of local disputes, and facilitators of community development initiatives. The recognition of traditional leadership within South Africa's governance framework reflects the importance of integrating customary institutions into democratic governance structures (RSA, 2003). In many rural communities, collaboration between municipalities and traditional authorities helps to strengthen local governance systems and promotes culturally responsive development practices. Such partnerships can enhance community participation, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making, thereby contributing to social stability and cohesion.

Overall, local government functions as a critical arena in which the principles of national unity and social cohesion are translated into everyday governance practices. Through participatory mechanisms, developmental initiatives, spatial planning, and collaboration with

traditional leadership institutions, municipalities play a vital role in shaping the quality of state-citizen relationships. The effectiveness of local governance, therefore, has far-reaching implications for the broader project of nation-building and democratic stability in South Africa.

International Experiences

Singapore is frequently cited in the literature as a successful case of state-led social integration through urban and housing policy. Following ethnic tensions in the early post-independence period, the government introduced the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) in 1989 as part of its public housing programme administered through the Housing and Development Board (Edwards, 2023). The policy imposes ethnic quotas in public housing blocks and neighbourhoods to ensure that no single ethnic group dominates residential areas. By preventing the emergence of ethnic enclaves, the policy aims to encourage daily interaction amongst diverse groups and foster shared national identity within neighbourhoods (Tan, 2022). Given that approximately 80% of Singapore's population resides in public housing, the EIP has been widely regarded as a structural mechanism for promoting sustained social mixing and national cohesion (Government of Singapore, 2020). Empirical research suggests that the policy has played a significant role in limiting residential segregation and promoting interethnic interaction. Using longitudinal data between 1990 and 2020, Tan (2022) found that ethnic segregation levels in Singapore remain relatively low compared to many multi-ethnic societies, partly because of the EIP's quota system that distributes ethnic groups across neighbourhoods and housing blocks. However, the study also cautions that while the policy is effective in reducing ethnic segregation, its influence on socio-economic integration is more complex, indicating that residential integration policies must consider both ethnic and socio-economic dimensions simultaneously (Tan, 2022). Other scholars, similarly, note that Singapore's housing-based integration model demonstrates how urban planning and housing governance can serve as institutional tools for nation-building, particularly in societies characterised by ethnic diversity (Lim, 2020).

Similarly, Rwanda provides a notable example of post-conflict nation-building through policies aimed at rebuilding social cohesion and forging a unified national identity following the devastation of the Rwandan genocide which happened between 7 April and

mid-July, 1994. In the aftermath of the genocide, the government implemented a range of reconciliation and nation-building initiatives designed to transcend the ethnic divisions that had historically characterised Rwandan society. One of the central initiatives is the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (I am Rwandan) programme, which encourages citizens to identify primarily as Rwandans rather than through ethnic categories such as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa (Berman, 2023). The programme forms part of a broader state-led strategy to cultivate a shared civic identity and reinforce collective responsibility for national rebuilding. Scholars note that such identity-based initiatives have been instrumental in reshaping narratives of belonging and promoting a sense of common nationhood in post-genocide Rwanda (Staub *et al.*, 2005). These reconciliation efforts are complemented by the revitalisation of indigenous cultural practices aimed at restoring social trust and rebuilding fractured communities. Traditional community-based mechanisms such as *Umuganda* (coming together for common purpose), a monthly nationwide community service programme, encourage citizens to collectively participate in activities that improve local infrastructure and community well-being, thereby strengthening social bonds and civic responsibility (Staub *et al.*, 2005). Likewise, the *Gacaca* Courts were established as a community-based justice mechanism to address the vast number of genocide-related cases while facilitating truth-telling, accountability, and reconciliation within local communities. In addition, healing and resilience initiatives such as the Community Resiliency Model have created shared spaces where survivors and perpetrators can engage in dialogue and collective healing processes (Clark, 2010). Together, these initiatives demonstrate how the integration of cultural traditions, restorative justice, and psychosocial support can contribute to rebuilding trust, promoting forgiveness, and strengthening long-term social cohesion in post-conflict societies.

International experiences in promoting national unity provide valuable lessons for countries confronting persistent social fragmentation and historical inequalities. In the context of South Africa, where legacies of apartheid continue to shape patterns of inequality and social division, global best practices offer important policy insights for strengthening national unity. Lessons from countries such as Singapore and Rwanda illustrate the importance of deliberate state-led strategies that integrate governance reforms, inclusive identity-building programmes, and community-based initiatives to foster social cohesion. In Singapore, the EIP demonstrates how urban planning and housing governance can be

used as structural instruments to reduce ethnic segregation and encourage everyday interaction amongst diverse groups. Rwanda's post-conflict initiatives, such as the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* programme and community practices like *Umuganda*, highlight the role of shared national identity and civic participation in rebuilding trust and solidarity within diverse societies (Clark, 2010).

Drawing from these experiences, South Africa could strengthen its social cohesion agenda by adopting integrated approaches that combine policy reform, spatial transformation, and community engagement. One important lesson lies in addressing spatial inequality and residential segregation, which remain deeply entrenched in South African cities because of historical planning patterns associated with apartheid. Policies that encourage mixed-income and integrated housing developments could help to promote greater interaction amongst communities and reduce social distance. Equally important is the strengthening of national identity programmes and civic platforms that encourage collective participation in nation-building initiatives. Community-based activities that promote dialogue, shared responsibility, and social interaction similar to Rwanda's community service initiatives could complement existing programmes aimed at reconciliation and nation-building. Scholars argue that sustainable social cohesion requires not only policy interventions but also institutional mechanisms that encourage inclusive participation, trust-building, and shared development outcomes across different sectors of society (OECD, 2011; Putnam & Goss, 2002). Furthermore, strengthening social cohesion in South Africa requires aligning national policies with local governance structures and community-level initiatives. International experiences demonstrate that social cohesion is most effective when it is embedded within governance systems that promote accountability, citizen participation, and inclusive development. This includes strengthening partnerships between government, civil society, and community-based organisations to implement programmes that foster dialogue and collaboration across cultural, racial, and socio-economic divides. In this regard, South Africa's constitutional commitment to democratic participation and cooperative governance provides a strong foundation for developing innovative strategies that advance unity and shared national purpose. By adapting relevant international best practices to its unique socio-political context, South Africa can strengthen efforts towards building an inclusive society grounded in equality, social justice, and collective identity.

Social Cohesion as a Local Governance Process

Contemporary governance scholarship increasingly recognises that social cohesion is not merely a social condition or an end state, but also a dynamic governance process shaped by institutional practices, leadership conduct, and policy outcomes. While traditional approaches often treated social cohesion as a societal outcome reflected in trust, solidarity, and collective belonging, recent studies emphasise that cohesive societies emerge through governance arrangements that promote fairness, participation, accountability, and effective service delivery (Dobbernack, 2014). In this sense, social cohesion is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday interactions between citizens and the state.

One of the central governance factors influencing social cohesion is ethical leadership and accountability. Ethical leadership refers to the commitment of elected and appointed municipal officials to integrity, transparency, and responsible stewardship of public resources. When local government leaders demonstrate ethical conduct and uphold accountability mechanisms, they contribute to building public confidence in local governance institutions. Conversely, corruption, maladministration, and abuse of power undermine trust and weaken social cohesion by creating perceptions of injustice and exclusion. According to Rothstein and Teorell (2012), the quality and impartiality of government institutions are critical determinants of social trust and social stability. Ethical governance, therefore, plays a vital role in strengthening the legitimacy of the state and fostering citizens' willingness to cooperate with public institutions (Rothstein & Teorell, 2012).

Closely related to ethical leadership is the principle of inclusive decision-making and public participation. Democratic local governance systems rely on mechanisms that enable citizens to engage meaningfully in policy processes and community decision-making. Participation not only enhances the legitimacy of governance institutions but also strengthens citizens' sense of ownership and belonging within the political community (Putnam & Goss, 2002). Arnstein's (1969) conceptualisation of the "ladder of citizen participation" illustrates the varying degrees to which citizens can influence governance processes, ranging from passive consultation to active partnership and citizen control (Varwell, 2022). When local governance systems provide meaningful opportunities for participation such as community forums, consultative processes, and participatory integrated development planning, they help to build

trust between citizens and municipal councils and contribute to the development of cohesive communities.

Another important dimension of social cohesion as a local governance process relates to service delivery and distributive justice. Effective delivery of public services such as housing, water, sanitation, healthcare, and education is fundamental to citizens' perceptions of fairness and inclusion within society. When resources and services are distributed equitably, citizens are more likely to perceive governance systems as responsive and legitimate. Conversely, persistent service delivery failures or unequal distribution of public goods can generate frustration, marginalisation, and social conflict. Knecht (2012) emphasises that development and governance should expand people's capabilities and opportunities, thereby promoting social inclusion and human well-being. From this perspective, distributive justice, ensuring that public resources and opportunities are allocated fairly is essential for sustaining social cohesion.

A further governance dimension concerns institutional legitimacy and trust-building. Institutional legitimacy refers to the degree to which citizens perceive governance institutions as appropriate, credible, and deserving of support (Monk, 2009). Legitimacy is reinforced when institutions perform effectively, adhere to legal norms, and respond to citizens' needs. Trust in public institutions is particularly important in diverse societies where cooperation amongst different social groups depends on confidence in the fairness and reliability of governance systems. Studies on social capital and institutional performance suggest that societies with higher levels of institutional trust are more likely to experience stable governance and stronger social cohesion (Putnam & Goss, 2002; Rothstein & Teorell, 2012).

Collectively, these governance dimensions illustrate that social cohesion emerges through the interaction between institutional performance, leadership conduct, citizen engagement, and equitable policy outcomes. Ethical leadership strengthens accountability, participatory governance enhances inclusivity, effective service delivery promotes distributive justice, and institutional legitimacy fosters trust. When these governance processes function effectively, they contribute to the creation of societies characterised by mutual trust, shared belonging, and stable democratic institutions. Conversely, weak governance, exclusionary decision-making, and unequal service provision can erode cohesion and undermine national unity. Understanding social cohesion as a governance process,

therefore, provides a critical analytical lens for examining how public institutions and governance practices shape the broader project of democratic stability and nation-building.

Legal Framework, Principles and Determinants of Social Cohesion and Nation-Building in South African Municipalities

Social cohesion and nation-building are not only social or political aspirations but are also institutionalised through constitutional principles, legal frameworks, and governance arrangements. In democratic societies, legislation provides the structural foundation through which values such as equality, inclusion, accountability, and participatory governance are operationalised. These frameworks shape the manner in which state institutions, such as municipalities, interact with citizens and how resources, opportunities, and rights are distributed across society. As a result, the strength of national unity and social cohesion is closely linked to the effectiveness and implementation of these institutional frameworks.

In the South African context, the post-apartheid constitutional order introduced a comprehensive legal architecture designed to promote equality, democratic participation, and cooperative governance. Several legislative instruments support this objective by establishing governance mechanisms that facilitate inclusive development, equitable service delivery, and coordinated state action. Collectively, these frameworks contribute to the broader project of nation-building by promoting shared citizenship, strengthening democratic institutions, and addressing historical inequalities.

The Constitution (RSA, 1996) serves as the cornerstone of the country's democratic governance system and provides the normative basis for national unity and social cohesion. The preamble of the Constitution emphasises the need to "heal the divisions of the past" and to establish a society based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights (RSA, 1996). Through the Bill of Rights, the Constitution guarantees equality, dignity, freedom, and non-discrimination, thereby creating a framework that promotes inclusive citizenship and social justice. Furthermore, the Constitution establishes a system of cooperative governance amongst national, provincial, and local spheres of government, ensuring that public institutions work collaboratively to advance developmental objectives.

The Municipal Structures Act (RSA, 1998) provides the institutional framework for local government by defining the types of municipalities, their governance structures, and their roles in democratic administration. The Act seeks to promote democratic and accountable governance at the local level by ensuring representation, political oversight, and effective institutional arrangements (RSA, 1998). Through mechanisms such as municipal councils and committees, the Act facilitates participatory governance and strengthens the capacity of municipalities to respond to community needs.

Complementing this framework, the Municipal Systems Act (RSA, 2000a) establishes principles for municipal administration, service delivery, and community participation. The Act emphasises developmental local government, requiring municipalities to prioritise the social and economic development of communities while ensuring access to essential services (RSA, 2000a). Importantly, the legislation institutionalises mechanisms for community participation in municipal decision-making, thereby enhancing transparency, accountability, and public trust in local governance.

The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (RSA, 2000b) plays a critical role in advancing social cohesion by addressing systemic discrimination and promoting substantive equality. The Act provides legal mechanisms to prevent unfair discrimination on various grounds, including race, gender, religion, and disability, while promoting the transformation of social and institutional practices (RSA, 2000b). By addressing historical inequalities and ensuring equal protection under the law, the legislation contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Another important legislative instrument supporting social cohesion is the Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act (RSA, 2005). This Act provides mechanisms for coordination and cooperation between the three spheres of government. It recognises that effective governance requires collaboration across different levels of government to ensure policy alignment, integrated planning, and efficient service delivery (RSA, 2005). Through structures such as intergovernmental forums and coordination mechanisms, the Act promotes collaborative governance, which is essential for addressing complex developmental challenges and fostering national unity.

Spatial inequality remains one of the most enduring legacies of apartheid in South Africa. The Spatial Planning and Land Use

Management Act (RSA, 2013) seeks to address these inequalities by establishing principles and processes for equitable spatial planning and land development. The Act promotes spatial justice, sustainability, efficiency, and inclusivity in land-use planning (RSA, 2013). By encouraging integrated spatial development and improved access to economic opportunities, the legislation contributes to the reduction of spatial divisions that often undermine social cohesion.

Finally, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (RSA, 2003) recognises the role of traditional leadership institutions within the democratic governance system. The Act provides a framework for the integration of traditional authorities into local governance structures while ensuring that their functions align with constitutional principles (RSA, 2003). In many rural communities, traditional leaders play a significant role in maintaining social order, resolving conflicts, and facilitating community development. Their inclusion in governance processes, therefore, contributes to strengthening social cohesion and promoting culturally responsive governance.

Collectively, these constitutional and legislative frameworks establish the institutional foundations for nation-building and social cohesion in South Africa. By promoting equality, participatory governance, cooperative intergovernmental relations, and inclusive development, they provide mechanisms through which the democratic state seeks to build a unified and cohesive society. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks ultimately depends on their implementation and the capacity of institutions to translate legislative principles into tangible governance outcomes.

Social cohesion is shaped by a range of structural, institutional, and socio-political factors that influence how individuals and groups interact within society. These determinants play a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and collective responsibility amongst citizens. In democratic governance systems, the strength of social cohesion is closely linked to the ability of institutions to promote fairness, inclusion, effective service delivery, and participatory governance. Within the South African context, several key determinants influence the extent to which cohesive and unified communities can be sustained.

One of the most significant determinants of social cohesion is socio-economic equality and spatial justice. Persistent socio-economic inequalities often create divisions within society and

undermine shared citizenship. South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally, with disparities in income, employment opportunities, housing, and access to basic services (Tregenna & Tsela, 2012). These inequalities are further reinforced by spatial patterns inherited from apartheid-era planning, which continue to segregate communities along socio-economic lines. Spatial justice, therefore, becomes a critical component of nation-building, as equitable access to land, infrastructure, and economic opportunities contributes to social inclusion and shared development (Turok, 2012).

Closely linked to socio-economic inclusion is effective service delivery, which plays a central role in strengthening citizens' confidence in public institutions. The provision of essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, housing, and public infrastructure forms the basis of the social contract between the state and citizens. When governments deliver services efficiently and equitably, citizens are more likely to trust institutions and participate constructively in governance processes (Rothstein & Teorell, 2012). Conversely, persistent service delivery failures can lead to frustration, marginalisation, and social unrest.

Another important determinant is ethical and capable leadership. Leadership within public institutions shapes governance outcomes, policy implementation, and institutional culture. Ethical leadership emphasises transparency, integrity, and accountability in the management of public resources. Capable leadership, on the other hand, ensures that institutions possess the technical and administrative competence required to design and implement effective policies. Scholars have emphasised that capable and ethical leadership is fundamental to strengthening institutional legitimacy and ensuring that governance systems operate in the public interest (Fukuyama, 1995).

Strong intergovernmental coordination also plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion. In multilevel governance systems such as South Africa's, effective collaboration between national, provincial, and local spheres of government is essential for policy alignment and integrated development planning. Coordinated governance ensures that public policies and development initiatives are implemented in a coherent and complementary manner. Weak coordination between government spheres can result in policy fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and inefficient use of resources, ultimately undermining development outcomes (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010).

Another key determinant is public participation and accountability mechanisms. Democratic governance systems rely on participatory processes that enable citizens to influence policy decisions and hold public officials accountable. Participation enhances transparency and strengthens trust between citizens and institutions. Mechanisms such as public consultations, community forums, and oversight structures allow communities to engage with governance processes and ensure that their needs and priorities are reflected in policy decisions (Putnam & Goss, 2002). When citizens perceive that their voices are heard and respected, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the broader national project.

Finally, cultural diversity management and inclusive citizenship are essential for building cohesive societies, particularly in pluralistic contexts. South Africa is characterised by a rich diversity of cultures, languages, and identities. Managing this diversity in a way that promotes mutual respect and equality is fundamental to nation-building. Inclusive citizenship ensures that all individuals, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds, are recognised as equal members of society with access to rights, opportunities, and representation (Burt, 1986). Effective diversity management, therefore, contributes to social cohesion by fostering tolerance, respect, and shared national identity.

Collectively, these determinants illustrate that social cohesion is influenced by a combination of economic inclusion, institutional performance, participatory governance, and cultural recognition. Addressing these factors requires integrated governance approaches that promote equity, accountability, and inclusive development.

Local Governance Challenges Undermining Social Cohesion and National Unity

Despite the presence of an extensive constitutional and legislative framework designed to promote unity and inclusive governance, several local governance challenges continue to undermine social cohesion in South Africa. These challenges affect the effectiveness of municipal institutions, weaken citizen trust, and contribute to political and social instability.

One of the most prominent challenges is coalition politics and political instability, particularly within metropolitan and local

municipalities. In recent years, the emergence of coalition governments has created complex political dynamics characterised by fragile alliances, frequent leadership changes, and contested decision-making processes. While coalition politics is a legitimate feature of democratic systems, unstable coalitions may lead to policy uncertainty, governance paralysis, and reduced administrative efficiency (Booysen, 2011). Such instability can undermine the ability of municipalities to deliver services effectively and maintain consistent development planning.

Another significant challenge is uneven municipal capacity. Municipalities differ widely in terms of administrative capability, financial management, and technical expertise. Some local governments possess strong institutional capacity, while others struggle with limited resources, skills shortages, and governance weaknesses. These disparities often result in uneven service delivery outcomes across municipalities, reinforcing socio-economic inequalities and weakening citizens' trust in local governance institutions (National Treasury, 2022).

Closely related to service delivery challenges are the increasing occurrences of service delivery protests and declining public trust in local government institutions. Protests have become a common feature of South Africa's political landscape, often reflecting community frustration with inadequate services, corruption, and perceived municipal inaction. While protests represent a legitimate form of democratic expression, frequent unrest can also signal deeper governance challenges and strained relationships between citizens and the state (Alexander, 2010). Persistent dissatisfaction with local governance performance can erode institutional legitimacy and undermine social cohesion.

Another governance challenge concerns fragmented planning and weak intergovernmental relations (IGR) coordination. Effective governance requires alignment between national policies, provincial programmes, and local implementation strategies. However, weak coordination amongst these spheres can lead to policy fragmentation, duplication of responsibilities, and inefficient resource allocation. Poorly integrated planning processes can hinder development initiatives and create gaps in service provision, ultimately affecting the ability of government institutions to respond to community needs (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010).

Finally, an adversarial political culture within governance institutions can undermine efforts to promote national unity and

social cohesion. Political competition is an inherent feature of democratic systems; however, when political contestation becomes excessively confrontational or partisan, it may weaken collaborative governance and policy continuity. Adversarial political environments can also discourage constructive dialogue and limit opportunities for consensus-building amongst political actors. In such contexts, governance processes may prioritise partisan interests over collective national development objectives (Habermas, 1996).

These local governance challenges illustrate the complex interplay between political dynamics, institutional capacity, and community trust in shaping social cohesion in the local sphere of government. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening local governance institutions, promoting ethical leadership, enhancing coordination across government spheres, and fostering a political culture that prioritises cooperation and inclusive development.

Conclusion

This chapter scrutinised national unity and social cohesion from conceptual, theoretical, and governance perspectives, highlighting their central role in democratic stability and legitimacy. It argued that cohesion is both an outcome and an ongoing process shaped by effective institutions, inclusive governance, and equitable socio-economic development. The chapter emphasised that achieving national unity requires governance systems that promote inclusion, fairness, and participation. Key elements such as trust, institutional legitimacy, capable leadership, and accountability were identified as essential in fostering cohesive societies. It further emphasised the importance of local government as the primary interface between the state and citizens. Effective municipal governance enhances service delivery, strengthens public trust, and reinforces social stability, while weak performance undermines cohesion.

The chapter, furthermore, acknowledged persistent challenges in the local sphere of government, including political instability, uneven municipal capacity, and declining trust. Addressing these issues calls for more integrated and collaborative governance approaches (as reflected in the proposed Cohesive Governance Framework presented in the last chapter of this publication). Ultimately, the chapter argues that national unity must be embedded in governance practice through inclusive, accountable,

and development-oriented policies. It provides a foundation for subsequent chapters, which further explore institutional and policy dynamics shaping social cohesion.

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Chapter 2

Local Government's Role in Building Inclusive and Cohesive Communities

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Abstract

Local government is at the centre stage of development and transformation. It thus occupies a vital position in shaping inclusive and cohesive communities, particularly in a society such as South Africa, where historical inequalities, spatial fragmentation, and socio-economic exclusion continue to influence everyday life. Positioned at the interface between the state and citizens, municipalities are uniquely placed to translate national commitments to social cohesion into concrete local practices that foster inclusion, participation, and shared belonging.

Drawing on the policy vision articulated in the National Development Plan 2030 and related governance reform programmes, this chapter examines the evolving role of local government in advancing inclusive development and strengthening social cohesion. The chapter argues that municipalities are not merely service delivery institutions but also critical arenas for nation-building and democratic engagement. Through participatory governance mechanisms and inclusive service provision, local governments can facilitate interaction across social, racial, and economic divides. The chapter uses the governance and community development lens to examine how institutional arrangements, decision-making processes, and community-based initiatives interact to promote inclusive development and social cohesion at the local level. It further reflects on how local governance practices can either strengthen or undermine social cohesion depending on the extent to which they promote inclusivity, participatory decision-making, and equitable development. At the same time, persistent governance challenges, including capacity constraints, uneven community participation,

spatial inequality, and institutional fragmentation, often limit the ability of municipalities to effectively nurture cohesive communities. The chapter, ultimately, proposes ways to strengthen strategies such as participatory planning, community-centred service delivery, collaborative governance, and localised social cohesion programmes. By highlighting municipalities as key actors in fostering social solidarity and active citizenship, the chapter contributes to broader debates on local governance, democracy, and nation-building in South Africa.

Keywords: community engagement; inclusive development; local government; nation-building; participatory governance; social cohesion

Introduction

The pursuit of social cohesion remains one of the most pressing challenges in post-apartheid South Africa. The country continues to struggle with entrenched socio-economic inequalities, spatial fragmentation, and persistent social divisions despite profound political transformation since 1994 (Lowton, 2021). These challenges highlight how local government acts as an important, not just significant, institutional actor in building welcoming and cohesive communities. As the sphere of government closest to citizens, municipalities operate at the interface between the state and society, making them critical agents in translating policy aspirations into lived realities.

Studies increasingly acknowledge that social cohesion is not just a byproduct of economic progress, but rather a deliberate outcome of governance mechanisms that develop social inclusion, participatory and equal access to opportunities (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023). In this respect, the local government serves both as a source of necessary services and a mechanism to promote democratic deliberation and social cohesion. In this regard, local government plays a dual role: it is both a provider of essential services and a facilitator of democratic engagement and social integration. This dual role is particularly significant in South Africa, where local government is constitutionally mandated to promote social and economic development while encouraging community involvement in governance processes.

In this chapter, we explore how local government helps to create inclusive and diverse communities. It locates the dialogue

within contemporary governance debates and South Africa's policy environment, while also drawing on global frames. The chapter then outlines the relevant theoretical frameworks for understanding how local governance and social cohesion can be interrogated before addressing constitutional and policy mandates. It then explores the role of municipalities in promoting participation, inclusion, and service delivery, before critically analysing key challenges and proposing strategic pathways for strengthening local governance in support of social cohesion.

Conceptualising social cohesion and inclusive development

Social cohesion and inclusive development are central concepts in contemporary governance and development discourse, particularly in societies marked by inequality and social fragmentation, such as South Africa. While both concepts are analytically distinct, they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Understanding their conceptual foundations is essential for analysing the role of local government in fostering cohesive and inclusive communities.

Social cohesion generally is about the quality of relations and the degree to which individuals and groups are closely related within society. It includes elements like trust, common values, social inclusion, and belonging. To account for diversity, inclusion, and active citizenship, recent scholarship has taken social cohesion beyond its narrow definition of just social harmony to a more fluid lens (Moleka, 2024). It suggests that social cohesion is a question of how efficiently societies learn how to deal with differences, not about the state of conflict, but rather how much societies can accommodate differences in a constructive manner, that is, how many individuals feel valued and treated with a sense of belonging. The inclusion is, therefore, a critical factor contributing to social cohesion, because it helps to remove the barriers to involvement in the social, economic and political activity.

Exclusion, whether based on race, class, gender, or geography, undermines cohesion by creating divisions and perpetuating inequality. In the South African context, the legacies of apartheid created long-standing patterns of exclusion that frame social relations and opportunities for access today (Modise, 2025a). Therefore, efforts to build social cohesion must address both the structural and relational dimensions of exclusion.

Another important element is social capital, which refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation within and between groups. Sufficient social capital correlates with high levels of civic participation, high governance outcomes, and increased resilience amongst communities (Sánchez-Hernández, 2024). Yet, social capital can be exclusionary when it perpetuates in-group solidarity at the expense of broader social integration. This emphasises the importance of promoting bridging social capital, connections amongst members of other groups to form the basis for more inclusive cohesion. In contrast, inclusive development examines how economic growth and development processes should benefit all society members, including groups historically excluded from development. It is concerned with equitable access to resources, opportunities, and services, as well as the fair distribution of development outcomes. According to recent global development frameworks, inclusive development requires not only economic inclusion but also social and political inclusion, enabling individuals to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes that affect their lives (UNDP, 2023).

The relationship between social cohesion and inclusive development is inherently reciprocal. Inclusive development strengthens social cohesion by decreasing inequality, fostering social mobility, and fostering equity (Dluhopolskyi & Zhukovska, 2023). Where people feel that opportunities and resources are fairly distributed, they trust institutions and tend to take collective action. On the other hand, social cohesion supports inclusive development by facilitating cooperation, diminishing conflict, and increasing institutional credibility. Social cohesion allows institutions and individuals to engage in equitable policies that are sustainable based on norms shared by both the partners and those groups as well as on the trust in each other as a unit.

In the South African policy context, social cohesion is closely linked to the values of the 1996 Constitution, including human dignity, equality, and non-racialism. It is also consistent with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is based on interconnectedness and common good. Furthermore, inclusive development is visible in national priorities on poverty reduction, job creation, and spatial transformation. Such policy perspectives show that addressing the disparities to provide inclusive societies is crucial to creating a society based on unity. Municipalities play a significant role in mediating the relationship between social cohesion and inclusive development at the level of local authorities.

At the local sphere of government, municipalities play a critical role in mediating the relationship between social cohesion and inclusive development. Through service delivery, spatial planning, and participatory governance, local governments shape the conditions under which individuals interact, access opportunities, and experience belonging (Cilliers *et al.*, 2024). For instance, better access to basic services can lead to a decrease in material deprivation and improve perceptions of justice, and participatory processes can improve trust and civic engagement. In much the same way, spatially integrated development may promote interaction between social groups, thereby nurturing mutual understanding and cohesion, as it can provide resources for other kinds of work. But the quest for social cohesion and inclusive development is complex and context-specific. Thus, we need to take into account our conflicting interests, the need to overcome historically unjustified actions, and meet socio-economic barriers. In addition, as these are multidimensional concepts, not only can they not be achieved with single interventions but they also require concerted and sustainable efforts across a range of sectors.

Theoretical framework for analysing local government's role in social cohesion

Participatory governance positions citizens as active contributors to public decision-making rather than passive recipients of services. It highlights the idea that inclusive engagement in governance processes is essential for building trust, legitimacy, and a shared sense of belonging within communities.

Participatory governance focuses on citizen participation in decision-making. They are typically considered a main route towards greater accountability, legitimacy, and social cohesion (Fung, 2020; Gaventa, 2002). Participatory modes of engagement including ward committees, public consultations and participatory budgeting are established in local government. Such institutional setting of the public can generate conversations in which local and community voices can be heard and citizens can communicate their concerns, decide what issues to address, even guide governance in terms of policy. In turn, from this point of view, social cohesion is enhanced when citizens feel the power of social cohesion when they realise that they are listened to and have a say on and have a voice in shaping decision-making that is important in their own life (Mehan, 2024).

Participation ensures that different groups are seen as belonging to similar groups and can facilitate mutual respect and collaboration in social bridging problems that will help to narrow social gaps. It also makes local government more responsive, as leaders gain real-time and visible knowledge of local concerns in areas influencing community needs which can also drive policies that better match up with the community's lived realities and policy. However, the effectiveness of participatory governance depends on the extent to which these processes are inclusive and meaningful. Tokenistic participation can undermine trust and exacerbate social divisions, while genuine engagement can strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of ownership (Mittal & Bansal, 2024).

In many local contexts, structural inequalities, such as disparities in education, income, or access to information, can limit the ability of certain groups to participate effectively. As a result, participatory processes may inadvertently reproduce existing exclusions if not carefully designed and implemented. To address these challenges, participatory governance requires deliberate strategies to ensure broad-based inclusion, transparency, and accountability. This includes creating accessible forums for engagement, providing adequate information to participants, and ensuring that citizen inputs have a tangible impact on decisions. When participation is embedded as a continuous and meaningful practice rather than a procedural requirement, it can significantly contribute to building cohesive, inclusive communities.

Local government's constitutional and legislative mandates

The role of local government in promoting social cohesion is firmly grounded in South Africa's constitutional and legislative framework. The Constitution (RSA, 1996) outlines the objectives of local government, which include:

- Providing democratic and accountable government
- Ensuring the provision of services in a sustainable manner
- Promoting social and economic development
- Encouraging community involvement.

These goals link closely to the notions of social cohesion, the ones that call for inclusion, participation, and equity.

The Local Government: Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (RSA, 2000) further reinforces the need for community participation

in governance by mandating that municipalities develop citizen participation mechanisms. The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 (RSA, 1998) (as amended by Act 33 of 2021, RSA, 2021) also provides for institutional arrangements to enable local participation like ward committees. Recent policy announcements further supported these orders.

A new approach, the District Development Model (DDM) seeks to facilitate harmonised progress between the different spheres of government and encourages integrated development at the local level (Tafeni, 2024). The DDM can improve social cohesion by encouraging more cooperative and inclusive development planning.

The National Development Plan (NDP): Vision 2030 (NPC, 2012) continues to be South Africa's dominant strategic blueprint for addressing poverty, unemployment and inequality, social cohesion and nation-building. The NDP explicitly identifies social cohesion as an outcome of development and integral to sustainable growth and democratic continuity. It places strong emphasis on active citizenship, social justice and economic participation as the three drivers of a cohesive society (NPC, 2012; The Presidency, 2024). One of the NDP's pillars for that vision is that local government serves as a key player to translate national ambitions into local actions. But municipalities are charged with crafting environments in which inclusion thrives, access to basic services is improved, and genuine participatory governance outcomes occur. The plan emphasises the importance of addressing spatial inequalities and building integrated settlements to enable interaction amongst citizens, and between them to form successful and mutually supportive social networks across social and economic differences. The NDP also emphasises the need to develop robust local institutions that are capable and ethical and that can deliver services appropriately while engaging citizens at the decision-making level. Recent policy reviews continue to affirm the relevance of the NDP in guiding local government efforts to promote social cohesion, particularly in the context of persistent inequality and social fragmentation (NPC, 2012).

The Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) is an integrated approach to urban development policy to manage urban growth and to promote inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban environments. Recognising that cities are central to economic growth and social transformation, the IUDF places strong emphasis on spatial integration, economic inclusion, and participatory governance as key pillars of social cohesion (COGTA, 2021). The IUDF seeks to address

the legacy of apartheid's spatial planning by promoting compact and connected urban forms that enable access to opportunities and services. The framework encourages mixed-use development, better public transport systems and the upgrading of informal settlements, amongst other measures aimed at reducing spatial segregation. Importantly, the IUDF also highlights the role of local government in facilitating inclusive planning processes that involve communities in shaping urban development. This participatory approach is critical for ensuring that urban interventions are responsive to the needs of diverse populations and contribute to a shared sense of belonging. Pieterse (2019) argues that the successful implementation of the IUDF promotes spatial justice and social cohesion in South African cities.

The Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2024–2029 implements the NDP's long-term vision by designing government priorities and achieving measurable outcomes to be achieved within five years. In this context, nation-building and social cohesion are singled out as priorities, suggesting that the issues remain a significant focus of the development agenda of South Africa (The Presidency, 2024). The MTSF highlights indicators such as better civic participation, improved confidence in public institutions and reduced social inequalities as progress towards social cohesion. It also demands coordination amongst national, provincial, and local governments to guarantee the harmonious and comprehensive implementation of these measures. For municipal authorities, the MTSF guides the strategic integration of objectives to enhance social cohesion into planning (e.g., via IDPs and performance management systems). And, above all, the framework emphasises the importance of collaboration with civil society and the private sector to enhance social cohesion. The MTSF acknowledges that building cohesive communities is dependent on a collective approach through collaborative governance and multi-stakeholder engagement. According to Chatterjee *et al.*, (2023), the effectiveness of the MTSF in promoting social cohesion will depend on the extent to which its priorities are translated into actionable programmes at the local level.

Local government as a site of inclusion and cohesion

Local government occupies a central position in promoting citizen participation and fostering inclusive governance within cohesive communities. As the sphere of government closest to the people, local, district and metropolitan municipalities are uniquely positioned to

facilitate direct engagement between the state and citizens, thereby strengthening democratic governance and social cohesion. Through mechanisms such as IDPs, ward committees, community forums, public hearings and stakeholder consultations, local government creates opportunities for communities to influence policy priorities, development planning, and service delivery decisions. Participatory governance structures such as this are intended to help in making governance processes more responsive to needs in their locality and reflective of interests from a wider group.

Inclusive, participatory governance is especially vital in societies with socio-economic inequality, a history of exclusion and spatial fragmentation, such as those in most African countries. In South Africa, local government is constitutionally required to promote local participatory governance, with communities and community organisations involved. The developmental mandate of participation acknowledges participation as a transformative power within local communities rather than just as a formal obligation. This will facilitate citizens' ownership of state development initiatives and strengthen their trust in public institutions and cooperative problem-solving where they are involved in decision-making processes. Engaging in meaningful participation plays an important role in fostering social cohesion by increasing citizen-to-state relations, increasing transparency, legitimacy and accountability (Roy & Sachdeva, 2025). Participatory processes can contribute to social capital by fostering conversation amongst various groups, promoting a culture of support and reducing social friction.

Municipalities are mandated to build opportunities for the marginalised in its processes of policy and development through inclusive participation. This is even more applicable in African contexts characterised by poverty, inequality, migration, and other social exclusion where certain groups can be disconnected from formalised forms of governance. There is much to be gained from participatory governance but the reality for many municipalities is that it is uneven and contested. However, in practice, participation is often characterised by low levels of public trust, weak institutional capacity, political interference, and unequal access to decision-making spaces. Marginalised groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, informal settlement residents, and rural communities, are frequently excluded from meaningful engagement processes. Participation frequently becomes symbolic and not substantive as decisions are already predefined for the

political or administrative class. Thus, it may result in frustration and disenfranchisement amongst communities that can weaken social solidarity and incite service delivery protests and social conflict.

To address these challenges, municipalities must develop new and inclusive methods for citizen participation. This is more than just trying to be more consultative – it is about making services and consultations more participatory, accessible, representative and aligned to community realities. Local authorities should promote the participation of vulnerable and often marginalised groups through targeted outreach programmes, multilingual communication strategies, and community-based participation activities. Digital governance platforms, mobile technology and the Internet can further foster participation by introducing more people, particularly younger people, to information and decision-making. However, digital participation must be complemented by face-to-face engagement to avoid excluding citizens affected by the digital divide (Berardinetti *et al.*, 2025).

Service delivery and social cohesion

Equitable service delivery is widely regarded as a cornerstone of social cohesion, particularly in societies characterised by deep historical inequalities and socio-economic disparities (Maenetja *et al.*, 2024). In the South African context, access to basic services such as water, sanitation, housing, electricity, and waste management is not only a constitutional right but also a critical determinant of citizens' quality of life and well-being. The extent to which local governments can deliver these services in a fair, efficient, and inclusive manner has profound implications for social cohesion, as it shapes perceptions of justice, belonging, and trust in public institutions.

Contemporary scholarship emphasises that service delivery is not merely a technical or administrative function but a fundamentally social and political process that mediates the relationship between the state and citizens (Pieterse, 2019). In this regard, equitable service delivery contributes to social cohesion by reducing material inequalities, fostering a sense of inclusion, and reinforcing the legitimacy of government institutions. When individuals and communities perceive that they are treated fairly and that their basic needs are being met, they are more likely to develop trust in local authorities and engage constructively in civic life. Conversely, persistent inequalities in service provision can exacerbate social divisions, fuel grievances, and undermine the social contract.

In South Africa, patterns of service delivery continue to reflect the enduring legacy of apartheid spatial planning, which systematically excluded black communities from access to basic infrastructure and services. Despite significant progress since 1994, disparities remain pronounced, particularly between urban and rural areas, as well as between formal and informal settlements (Vivek, 2024). Informal settlements often experience inadequate access to water, sanitation, and electricity, which not only affects living conditions but also reinforces feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. These service delivery gaps highlight the structural challenges facing local governments in their efforts to promote inclusive development and social cohesion.

Empirical evidence indicates that perceptions of unfair or inadequate service delivery are closely linked to declining levels of trust in government and increasing social unrest (Masiya *et al.*, 2025). South Africa has witnessed a high frequency of service delivery protests over the past decade, many of which are driven by dissatisfaction with the quality and distribution of basic services (Masiya *et al.*, 2019). These protests are not only expressions of material grievances but also reflect deeper concerns about accountability, responsiveness, and inclusion in governance processes. In this sense, service delivery failures can act as a catalyst for social fragmentation, eroding trust between communities and the state and exacerbating existing tensions.

On the other hand, responsive and equitable service delivery has the potential to enhance social cohesion by strengthening the legitimacy of local government and fostering positive state–society relations. Recent studies suggest that when municipalities demonstrate transparency, responsiveness, and fairness in service provision, citizens are more likely to perceive government as legitimate and trustworthy (Birdayanathi *et al.*, 2025). This, in turn, encourages civic participation and cooperation, which are essential components of cohesive communities. Effective service delivery can also create opportunities for interaction and collaboration amongst community members, thereby building social capital and reinforcing social bonds.

Achieving equitable service delivery, however, requires more than the efficient allocation of resources; it necessitates a deliberate focus on inclusivity and social justice. Local governments must prioritise the needs of historically marginalised and underserved communities, including residents of informal settlements, rural

populations, and vulnerable groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Targeted interventions, such as the upgrading of informal settlements and the expansion of basic services in under-resourced areas, are essential for addressing spatial and socio-economic inequalities (Nyangule, 2024). Moreover, integrating social equity considerations into service delivery planning and budgeting processes can help to ensure that resources are allocated in a manner that promotes inclusion and cohesion.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of co-production and community participation in enhancing service delivery outcomes. Co-production involves collaboration between citizens and government in the design, implementation, and monitoring of services. This approach not only improves the relevance and effectiveness of service delivery but also fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility amongst community members. By involving citizens in service delivery processes, local governments can strengthen trust, improve accountability, and build social cohesion. Furthermore, the use of data-driven and evidence-based approaches has become increasingly important in addressing service delivery inequalities. Advances in technology and data analytics enable municipalities to identify service gaps, monitor performance, and target interventions more effectively. For example, spatial mapping tools can be used to identify underserved areas and prioritise infrastructure investments, while citizen feedback mechanisms can provide real-time insights into service delivery challenges (UNDP, 2023). Such approaches can enhance transparency and accountability, thereby reinforcing public trust and cohesion.

Despite these opportunities, local governments continue to face significant constraints in delivering services equitably. Financial limitations, capacity shortages, and governance challenges often hinder the ability of municipalities to meet growing service demands. In addition, rapid urbanisation places increasing pressure on infrastructure and service delivery systems, particularly in metropolitan areas (Ogra & Onatu, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires not only improved resource management but also stronger intergovernmental coordination and support from national and provincial governments. Importantly, the relationship between service delivery and social cohesion is not linear or automatic. While equitable service provision can contribute to cohesion, it must be

complemented by broader efforts to promote participation, inclusion, and social integration. For instance, the provision of housing in peripheral areas without access to economic opportunities and social amenities may improve living conditions but fail to foster meaningful inclusion. This emphasises the need for integrated approaches that link service delivery with spatial planning, economic development, and community engagement.

Spatial justice and integrated human settlements

Spatial inequality remains a defining feature of South African cities. Apartheid-era planning has resulted in segregated settlements that limit social interaction and access to opportunities. Addressing these spatial divides is critical for building cohesive communities. Decades after the end of formal apartheid, the spatial imprint of exclusion persists in the form of peripheral townships, fragmented urban form, and uneven access to infrastructure and services (Mkhanazi & Jili, 2024). Many residents continue to experience long commuting times, high transport costs, and limited proximity to economic opportunities, all of which reinforce socio-economic marginalisation and inhibit everyday forms of social integration.

Spatial justice demands a reconfiguration of the built environment to ensure that all residents, regardless of income or location, can access the benefits of urban life. Importantly, spatial justice is not only about redistribution but also about recognition and participation. Communities that have historically been excluded from planning processes must be actively involved in shaping the spaces that they inhabit. For local governments, this requires a shift from technocratic planning approaches towards more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive spatial strategies.

The IUDF and related policies emphasise the need for integrated human settlements that promote social and economic inclusion. Mixed-use developments, improved public transport, and the upgrading of informal settlements can facilitate interaction across social groups and enhance social cohesion (Pieterse, 2019). Mixed-use developments, for example, combine residential, commercial, and social functions within shared spaces, encouraging daily encounters amongst diverse populations. These interactions, even when informal or routine, play an important role in breaking down social barriers and fostering mutual understanding.

Efficient and accessible public transport systems are equally critical for spatial integration. Reliable transport networks connect people to employment centres, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and social amenities. In doing so, they reduce the physical and psychological distance between communities and create opportunities for greater social mobility and interaction. Transport-oriented development, which concentrates housing and economic activity around transit corridors, further supports compact and connected urban forms.

Upgrading informal settlements represents another key pillar of integrated human settlements. In-situ upgrading approaches, focused on improving infrastructure, services, and tenure security within existing communities, help to preserve social networks while enhancing living conditions. This approach contrasts with past practices of relocation, which often displaced residents to peripheral areas and disrupted community ties. By investing in basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and public lighting, local governments can significantly improve quality of life while reinforcing dignity and inclusion.

Public spaces also play a vital role in advancing spatial justice and social cohesion. Parks, community centres, libraries, and recreational facilities provide shared environments where people from different backgrounds can gather, interact, and build relationships. Well-designed and safely managed public spaces can serve as important sites of social integration, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and fragmentation.

Despite these policy frameworks and interventions, significant challenges remain. Land constraints in well-located urban areas, rising property prices, and competing development priorities often limit the pace of spatial transformation. Institutional fragmentation across different spheres of government can further complicate coordination and implementation. Additionally, without sustained political will and adequate financial resources, spatial integration initiatives may remain uneven or incomplete. Nevertheless, advancing spatial justice through integrated human settlements remains essential for building inclusive and cohesive communities. By deliberately restructuring urban spaces to promote access, interaction, and inclusion, local governments can help to transform cities from sites of division into spaces of opportunity and shared belonging.

Challenges limiting local government's role

While local government holds significant potential to foster inclusive and cohesive communities, this potential is often undermined by a range of structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges. In the South African context, these challenges are deeply rooted in historical imbalances and governance deficits, as well as emerging socio-political complexities. Understanding these constraints helps us to establish realistic and context-sensitive strategies for local municipalities to work towards social cohesion.

Limited institutional and administrative capacity is also one of the most enduring problems facing municipalities. Many municipalities have inadequate personnel, weak organisational systems, and limited financial resources, even though developmental local government is constitutionally mandated (Edoun *et al.*, 2023). Recent assessments suggest that capacity constraints are particularly acute in small or rural municipalities where technical expertise in planning, infrastructure development, and community engagement is often absent (Chili *et al.*, 2023; Masiya *et al.*, 2021a). These limitations impact not only service delivery but also the ability of municipalities to develop and deliver inclusive programmes that promote social cohesion. Lack of capacity results in participatory processes being perfunctory and development initiatives not reaching the most vulnerable communities.

A related problem to capacity is the fragmentation of institutions and ineffective intergovernmental coordination. Effective collaboration across national, provincial, and local governments is critical to strengthening South Africa's multi-sphere governance system. However, in reality, coordination is weak, resulting in duplication of duties, unaligned priorities, and wasted and ineffective resource utilisation (Tafeni, 2024). The fragmentation of responsibilities can undermine integrated development planning and limit the effectiveness of social cohesion initiatives, which typically require cross-sectoral approaches.

While some efforts have been made to promote coordination through frameworks such as the District Development Model, they often lack continuity and are hindered by institutional inertia and capacity gaps (Tafeni, 2024). The lingering social and poverty imbalances that characterise the daily life of many South Africans remain another serious problem. High unemployment rates, income inequality, and service delivery inequalities, in turn, lead to social

exclusion and damage social solidarity. In this regard Modise (2025b) suggests that inequality remains one of the main drivers of social fragmentation because it destroys trust, fosters perceptions of injustice, and limits the possibility of meaningful engagement with the community. In these cases, local government measures alone rarely provide the necessary response to structural inequalities. This is especially problematic when a particular municipality operates with limited budgets. This creates a tension between rising community expectations and the limited capacity of local governments to respond effectively. Limited and uneven contributions by the community also inhibit municipalities from promoting social cohesion.

Though participatory governance is a fundamental part of South Africa's local government system, the quality and inclusivity of participation are uneven. Most participation is based on formal compliance procedures, such as public meetings and consultations, that do not adequately serve marginalised communities. Such inclusion is exacerbated by poverty, lack of information, and social exclusion, especially amongst women, youth, and informal settlements (Gaventa, 2002; UNDP, 2023). In addition, participatory processes are at times dominated by local elites or politicised interests, which distort decision-making power and trust in local institutions. As a result, participation does not translate into empowerment or improved governance outcomes, thereby limiting its contribution to social cohesion. In addition, governance failures, including corruption and maladministration, pose significant obstacles to building trust and cohesion at the local level. Public attitudes towards corruption and inefficiency in municipalities have been correlated with distrust in government institutions (Govindasamy, 2024). When people are disillusioned with local governance that they do not hold accountable or feel motivated to seek personal benefit, they become less willing to take part in joint actions and civil society participation. As with all erosion of public trust, citizens' trust in the state diminishes, and as trust erodes, the social compact between state and citizens, as well as the social gap between each other, is eroded. Consequently, enhancing ethical governance and accountability is necessary if confidence in local government is to be regained and its role in promoting social cohesion enhanced.

A further constraint is the lasting social consequences of spatial inequality and segregation that still prevent interaction across social structures. Diverse spatially distributed urban and rural landscapes have been the hallmark of apartheid's spatial planning

and are characterised by unequal access to transport, services, and economic and social resources (Nyamwanza *et al.*, 2025). Although policies such as the IUDF aim to promote spatial integration, progress has been slow, and many municipalities struggle to implement transformative spatial planning initiatives because of financial and technical constraints. Furthermore, increasing social tensions and community-level conflicts present an additional challenge for local governments. Issues such as service delivery protests, xenophobia, and competition over scarce resources highlight underlying social fractures and the fragility of cohesion in many communities (Khosa & Abdulkareem, 2023).

Recent studies suggest that municipalities often lack the capacity and tools to effectively manage and resolve such conflicts, which can escalate into violence and further undermine social cohesion (David *et al.*, 2018). The absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms and early warning systems exacerbates these challenges, leaving municipalities reactive rather than proactive in addressing social tensions.

Finally, the challenge of limited integration of social cohesion into municipal planning and performance systems cannot be overlooked. While social cohesion is recognised as a national priority, it is not always explicitly incorporated into local government strategies, budgets, and performance indicators. This lack of institutionalisation means that social cohesion initiatives are often ad hoc, fragmented, and under-resourced. Without clear frameworks and measurable indicators, it becomes difficult to monitor progress and assess the impact of interventions aimed at fostering cohesion.

Municipal strategies for strengthening social cohesion

Several strategies may be pursued to strengthen the role of municipalities in nation-building and social cohesion. Some of the most pertinent strategies are briefly explored below.

Strengthening participatory local governance

Strengthening participatory governance is central to enhancing local government's role in fostering social cohesion. In contemporary governance discourse, participation is no longer viewed merely as a procedural requirement but as a substantive mechanism for cultivating democratic legitimacy, accountability, and social trust.

In the context of South Africa, participatory governance is enshrined in such legislation as the Municipal Systems Act (RSA, 2000), and yet its application is uneven and, in many instances, superficial.

Existing research demonstrates that meaningful participation has a pronounced impact on social cohesion because it provides venues for dialogues, recognition, and collective problem-solving (Gaventa, 2002). When citizens are participating actively in decision-making, they can take ownership even further in the local development activities and identify with the community, the state (Masiya *et al.*, 2021a). The participatory governance structure further enables the engagement between different social groups, a prerequisite to mitigate prejudice and achieve mutual understanding amongst different populations in racially divided societies. However, the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms such as ward committees and IDP consultations is often constrained by issues of representation, accessibility, and power asymmetries. Marginalised groups, including women, youth, and informal settlement residents, frequently face barriers to meaningful participation because of socio-economic constraints and limited access to information (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023). As a result, participatory processes risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them. Therefore, participatory mechanisms may reproduce existing inequalities rather than tackle them. Municipalities need to take a more imaginative and inclusive approach to including a diverse range of perspectives on participation in the design of a city's government by overcoming the problems. Participatory budgeting, for example, has been an optimistic direction to promote citizen inclusion through shared power relations in which citizens directly influence the distribution of public resources. Based on evidence from the global context of participatory budgeting, both global and local, research has shown that transparency, service delivery outcomes, and social cohesion are associated with participatory budgeting (Masiya *et al.*, 2021b). In addition, the use of digital platforms and community-based outreach strategies can expand access to participation, particularly amongst younger populations and those in remote areas.

Finally, participatory governance cannot be concerned only with compliance but must also be radical in its efforts to include, consider, and empower participants. That is a shift that is necessary for building trust between citizens and local government, which is regarded as the key guidance of social cohesion.

Promoting inclusive and equitable service delivery

Inclusive and equitable service delivery is a cornerstone of social cohesion, as it directly influences citizens' perceptions of fairness, justice, and state legitimacy. In societies characterised by deep inequalities, disparities in access to basic services such as water, sanitation, housing, and electricity can exacerbate social divisions and undermine cohesion. Conversely, equitable service delivery can act as a unifying force by addressing material deprivation and promoting a sense of shared citizenship.

Pieterse (2019) argues that service delivery is not only a technical function but also a social and political process that shapes relationships between the state and citizens. When communities perceive that services are distributed fairly and efficiently, trust in local government is strengthened, and social tensions are reduced. However, persistent service delivery backlogs and uneven resource allocation in many South African municipalities continue to fuel dissatisfaction and, in some cases, social unrest. The challenge for municipalities, therefore, lies in ensuring that service delivery is both efficient and inclusive. This requires a deliberate focus on targeting historically marginalised communities, including informal settlements and rural areas, where service deficits are most pronounced. It also necessitates the integration of community perspectives into service planning and implementation processes to ensure that interventions are responsive to local needs.

Emerging evidence suggests that co-production of services, where citizens and government collaborate in the design and delivery of services, can enhance both efficiency and social cohesion (Pieterse, 2019; Tommy *et al.*, 2025). Co-production fosters a sense of shared responsibility and strengthens relationships between communities and local authorities. For example, community-led initiatives in areas such as waste management and water conservation have demonstrated the potential to improve service outcomes while also building social capital. Furthermore, the adoption of data-driven approaches to service delivery can enable municipalities to identify and address inequalities more effectively. By utilising spatial data and community feedback, local governments can prioritise interventions in underserved areas and monitor progress over time. Such approaches are essential for ensuring that service delivery contributes to inclusive development and social cohesion.

Enhancing collaborative local governance

The complexity of social cohesion challenges necessitates a collaborative approach that extends beyond the capacity of local government alone. Collaborative governance (which combines the power of government, civil society, private sector, and communities) has received increasingly more attention as a means of tackling complex social problems. Collaboration is important within the framework of social cohesion as it facilitates the mobilisation of multiple resources, knowledge and viewpoints.

Research conducted by Tommy *et al.*, (2025) highlights that collaborative governance practices can bolster policy effectiveness and legitimacy, through enhanced shared ownership and collective action. In South Africa, municipalities have an opportunity to act as conveners and facilitators of such collaboration, considering their proximity to communities and their mandate to advance development. Civil society organisations, such as non-governmental and community-based organisations that support the integration of people through dialogue facilitation, conflict resolution and community development programmes, contribute directly to social cohesion. In the same vein, the private sector can play a role through corporate social responsibility projects and inclusive economic growth programmes. This unification can help municipalities to synergise and create greater synergies to amplify the social cohesion intervention. But strong institutional capacity and governance frameworks are needed for effective collaboration.

Challenges such as mistrust amongst stakeholders, power imbalances, power disparities and lack of coordination can undermine collaborative efforts. Municipal authorities that respond to such issues need to make substantial investments in the development of trust amongst themselves regarding this issue and set up clear institutions for coordination and accountability. An effective framework to promote collaborative governance in South Africa is the District Development Model. The DDM has the potential to enhance service delivery and build social cohesion by encouraging integrated planning and coordination across spheres of government and other stakeholders (COGTA, 2022). Nonetheless, its success relies on proper implementation and a committed effort from all stakeholders.

Advancing spatial justice and integration

Spatial justice is a critical dimension of social cohesion, particularly in South Africa, where apartheid-era spatial planning has resulted

in deeply entrenched patterns of segregation and inequality. The physical separation of communities along racial and socio-economic lines limits opportunities for interaction and reinforces social divisions. Addressing these spatial inequalities is, therefore, essential for building cohesive communities.

Spatial integration can promote social cohesion by facilitating interaction, improving access to opportunities, and reducing inequalities (Pieterse, 2019). Local governments play a key role in advancing spatial justice through urban planning, land use management, and infrastructure development. Policies such as the IUDF emphasise the need for compact, connected, and coordinated cities that promote inclusion and sustainability. Initiatives such as the upgrading of informal settlements, the development of mixed-income housing, and the expansion of public transport systems can contribute to spatial integration and social cohesion. However, achieving spatial justice requires more than technical planning interventions; it also involves addressing underlying socio-economic inequalities and power dynamics. For example, land use decisions often reflect competing interests and can either perpetuate or challenge existing inequalities. Consequently, participatory planning processes are essential for ensuring that spatial development initiatives are inclusive and responsive to community needs. In addition, public spaces play an important role in fostering social cohesion by providing opportunities for interaction and cultural expression. Investments in parks, community centres, and cultural facilities can create shared spaces that bring diverse groups together and strengthen social bonds.

Building institutional capacity and ethical governance

The effectiveness of local government in promoting social cohesion ultimately depends on its institutional capacity and governance quality. Capacity constraints, including limited technical skills, financial resources, and administrative capabilities, continue to hinder the ability of many municipalities to deliver services and engage communities effectively (Masiya *et al.*, 2021b). These challenges are compounded by issues of corruption and maladministration, which undermine public trust and weaken social cohesion.

Strengthening institutional capacity is essential for improving governance outcomes and fostering social cohesion (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023). This includes investing in skills development, enhancing

leadership capabilities, and improving organisational systems and processes. Capacity-building initiatives should also focus on developing competencies in areas such as participatory governance, conflict resolution, and inclusive planning. Equally important is the promotion of ethical governance and accountability. Transparency and accountability are critical for building trust between citizens and local government, which is a key component of social cohesion. Mechanisms such as performance management systems, public reporting, and anti-corruption measures can enhance accountability and improve governance outcomes (Kapesa, 2025). Furthermore, fostering a culture of ethical leadership within municipalities is essential for promoting integrity and public service values. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping organisational culture and setting the tone for governance practices. By demonstrating commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and accountability, municipal leaders can build trust and strengthen social cohesion. In addition, the integration of social cohesion objectives into municipal planning and performance management systems can ensure that these goals are systematically pursued. This requires aligning social cohesion indicators with existing planning instruments such as integrated development plans and spatial development frameworks.

Conclusion

It is evident that municipalities in South Africa play a vital role in shaping inclusive and cohesive communities. As the sphere closest to citizens, it has the potential to foster social cohesion through participatory governance, equitable service delivery, and inclusive development. However, this potential is often constrained by structural and institutional challenges. This chapter has demonstrated that social cohesion requires more than service delivery; it demands deliberate efforts to promote inclusion, participation, and trust. By adopting integrated and collaborative approaches, municipalities can play a transformative role in building a more cohesive and inclusive South Africa.

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Section B

Diagnosing National Unity and Social Cohesion in South Africa: Indicators and Trends

Chapter 3

Local-Level Social Cohesion Indicators in South Africa

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Abstract

In post-apartheid South Africa, building a just, inclusive, and substantively unified society is a constitutional imperative. This commitment affirms diversity and emphasises collective responsibility across all spheres of government. National instruments such as the National Development Plan and the 2012 Social Cohesion Summit Declaration 7089 place social cohesion at the centre of nation-building. Yet policy recognition alone is insufficient. Progress depends on empirically grounded evidence, expressed through clear, measurable indicators that show whether interventions are implemented effectively and produce tangible, positive outcomes. While national-level social cohesion indicators have developed, there is a major gap at local government level. This chapter addresses that gap by proposing a set of context-sensitive, locally grounded indicators for municipal use. Drawing on South Africa's specific conceptualisation of social cohesion, and on scholarship on the subsidiarity principle and the developmental role of local government, it identifies and empirically tests indicators capturing key dimensions of social cohesion in local communities. By proposing a coherent measurement framework, the chapter seeks to strengthen local governments' capacity to track progress, assess outcomes and impacts, and refine policies and programmes, thereby improving the effectiveness of municipalities in advancing social cohesion in an evidence-informed way.

Keywords: barometer; cohesion index; developmental local governance; local government; municipal planning and evaluation; municipality; performance indicators; social cohesion

Introduction

The establishment of a just, diverse, and united society, along with the pursuit of nation-building, constitutes a constitutional commitment, ethos, and imperative for post-apartheid South Africa. Rooted in the transformative vision of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, (RSA, 1996), this imperative, together with the principle of *Ubuntu*, affirms the shared humanity of others within a collective, diverse, and inclusive community, and imposes obligations on all three spheres of government. The National Development Plan (NPC, 2012) and the Declaration of the July 2012 Social Cohesion Summit further affirm that these constitutional imperatives should be promoted through fostering social cohesion in South Africa. It is widely acknowledged that the pursuit of social cohesion requires not only an explicit expression in plans but also objective, measurable evidence of how relevant actors effectively implement them. While considerable effort has been made to develop social cohesion indicators at the national level, corresponding indicators at the local government level remain inadequately conceptualised. This gap hampers alignment and clarity with municipalities' functional competencies and developmental mandates. Specifically, there is a need for context-sensitive indicators to guide municipal councils and communities in developing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating programmes that genuinely reflect social cohesion. Drawing on South Africa's understanding of social cohesion and relevant literature concerning the subsidiarity principle and the developmental mandate of municipalities, this chapter contributes to the development of local-level social cohesion indicators and assesses the suitability of each in realising the relevant elements or dimensions of social cohesion. These indicators are valuable tools for municipalities and communities to measure and track the success or shortcomings of policies and strategies related to social cohesion.

Social cohesion in perspective

Around the world, social cohesion has been an enduring subject of enquiry, with a considerable body of scholarship devoted to interrogating its various dimensions, characteristics and complexities. These critical enquiries have been driven by the conceptualisation of social cohesion as a response to complex and vexing global and local social, economic, and political challenges. Notably, scholarly discourse on social cohesion has focused on the

understanding and appreciation of factors such as the growing polarisation in society and in politics, globalisation and its associated economic changes, global migration movements and growing ethnocultural diversity, undermine or erode social cohesion (Chan *et al.*, 2006; Delhey & Dragolov, 2016; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017; Schmeets & te Riele, 2014).

Social cohesion has emerged as a phenomenon embraced and practised for different reasons around the world. Observably, social cohesion has been widely adopted by international institutions and governments (UN, 2023). It has progressively become an increasingly central goal for many countries, and the international community and governments have placed it high on their agendas (Burchi *et al.*, 2026; UNDP, 2024). A major boost for social cohesion was when the United Nations General Assembly (UN, 2015: para 34) adopted a resolution on the declaration on social cohesion. Arguably, this declaration on social cohesion has contributed to a global discourse which has significantly shaped and transformed the concept from a normative ideal into a measurable, policy-relevant construct. Accordingly, social cohesion is variously viewed as an intervention to address the social, economic and political cleavages largely fuelled by race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, gender, and geography. There is consensus amongst scholars that globally, nationally, and domestically, both governments and civil society organisations regard exclusion, divisions, and inequality as manifestations of the lack of social cohesion.

Despite its global veneration and intuitive appeal as the essential force that binds society together, social cohesion remains a deeply contested, conceptually murky, and frequently misappropriated phenomenon. However, despite the constations regarding the definition of social cohesion, the literature refers to social cohesion as the “glue that binds society together or as societal solidarity or, more prosaically, as being to do with social relations, norms, values and identities” (Berman & Phillips, 2004:2). Irrespective, Chan *et al.*, (2006) state that social cohesion is a term that enjoys ever-increasing popularity amongst academics and policymakers. However, the literature is unanimous concerning the ubiquity and the ill-defined nature of the definition of social cohesion (Delhey & Dragolov, 2016; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). As a term that is variously appropriated across scholars, it has become a quasi-concept, with hybrid constructions making it difficult to pin down exactly what is meant by the construct. Recently, Bottoni and Addeo (2024) found

that despite the high relevance of the topic, there is, however, a major constraint to understanding social cohesion patterns, causes, effects and the lack of a common conceptualisation, and even more of a common measurement of it.

The lack of a single universally uncontested definition and conceptualisation of social cohesion presents a challenge for social cohesion. Similarly, the United Nations (2023) found that social cohesion is a latent concept not directly observable or measurable; it is measured using key dimensions of interest or its constituent parts. Thus, to address this challenge, given the multi-dimensional and context-dependent nature of the construct, scholarship has adopted an approach that utilises dimensions of social cohesion to facilitate a pragmatic and analytically robust way to overcome this limitation (MacIsaac *et al.*, 2023; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). The use of the dimensions approach allows for the disaggregation of complex abstract concepts, the avoidance of a common problem of conflating causes, indicators and outcomes of social cohesion (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). In addition, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) found that the use of a dimensional approach enables analytical clarity and empirical applicability and the operationalisation of social cohesion, irrespective of the context. Thus, there is an emerging consensus that to reduce the complexity and make social cohesion easy to grasp, as well as empirically operationalisable and valid across different contexts, varied frameworks, each reflecting their specific dimensions, and units of analysis, are indispensable.

Since Durkheim's seminal work on social cohesion in 1933, the literature has been awash with scholarly contributions on dimensions of social cohesion. A recent review of the literature by Riazi *et al.*, (2026:80) captures these historical efforts on scholarly engagement with dimensions of social cohesion as reflected in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Social cohesion dimensions and facets

Dimensions	Facets
Inclusivity and Equality	Economic and social inclusion, equality of opportunities, access to resources, solidarity
Civic Participation and Governance	Political engagement, institutional trust, governance quality, policy participation
Social Relationships and Networks	Trust, social capital, cooperation, networks, group membership, civic engagement

Dimensions	Facets
Shared Identity and Belonging	Belonging, collective identity, shared values, recognition, place attachment
Tolerance, Diversity, and Harmony	Openness to diversity, respect for norms, absence of conflict, and social harmony
Quality of Life and Development	Community quality of life, individual wellbeing, equitable development, demographic stability

Chan *et al.*, (2006) present these dimensions as vertical and horizontal. They regard the vertical dimension as reflecting the relationship between society and the state, manifested through institutional trust, perceived legitimacy, and political participation. On the other hand, the horizontal dimension reflects the quality of interactions amongst citizens, groups, and communities, characterised by interpersonal trust, social networks, and norms of reciprocity (Chan *et al.*, 2006). However, what is fundamental is that the dimensions and facets are abstract theoretical building blocks that, though they are not directly observable, may be used to construct a context-specific foundation for defining social cohesion. Thus, Chan *et al.*, (2006) emphasise that dimensions and facets facilitate and diffuse what is otherwise a contested concept.

Fundamentally, dimensions of social cohesion obviate the definitional challenge by providing a simple, clear, and practical category, making social cohesion discernible. Thus, for empirical purposes, there is a need to translate social cohesion from being a theoretical construct into observable, quantifiable phenomena that can be collected, validated, and compared. According to Schiefer and van der Noll (2017), indicators, by contrast, are observable and quantifiable variables that operationalise these domains. Despite the strategic usefulness of the dimensions of social cohesion, they are rarely quantified and measured, thereby undermining the ability to investigate the causes and consequences of social cohesion empirically (Langer *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, while dimensions determine what gets measured, indicators are needed to measure the dimensions of social cohesion.

Measuring social cohesion

A central organising logic running through this chapter is that social cohesion is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that requires

identifying context-specific dimensions and can be measured. Regarding the measurement of social cohesion, Abrams *et al.*, (2023) note that the challenge of measurement is the absence of a single definition, which has led to an array of models and approaches to measuring social cohesion. Similarly, Burns *et al.*, (2018) highlight that as social cohesion increasingly attracts the attention of international organisations, governments, policymakers and other practitioners, particularly in societies experiencing different forms of exclusion, division and conflict, resulting in the need for measuring and tracking it, despite the difficulties posed by the lack of conceptual consensus.

Measuring social cohesion involves utilising a specific instrument, metric, or method used to quantify or assess the indicator to quantify, assess, or evaluate the degree to which social cohesion or any of its constituent dimensions is present, absent, strengthening, or weakening within a given community, society, or population at a particular point in time or over a period of time (Jenson, 2010; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). There are different instruments and approaches used to measure social cohesion. Most prevalent are measures of social cohesion include, social cohesion index, social cohesion barometer, social cohesion radar, and social cohesion indicators. Mahoney (2023) infers that though these measures are often used interchangeably and inevitably create confusion, they are varied with distinct purposes and analytical utility.

Social cohesion indicators

A simple dictionary definition of an indicator is a quantitative or qualitative factor or variable that provides a simple and reliable means of measuring something or an achievement, reflecting the changes connected to an intervention, or helping to assess the performance of a structure or person intervening. In the context of social cohesion, indicators are observable and measurable variables that serve as proxies for specific dimensions or sub-dimensions of social cohesion (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). Equally, social cohesion indicators address the definitional challenges of social cohesion by providing the empirical content necessary to make the concept visible and measurable (OECD, 2024). Arnim *et al.*, (2017:328) suggest that a good indicator must have the characteristics, such as (1) “summarise complex multidimensional issues to assist policymakers; (2) be easier to interpret than by looking at the components separately; (3) help to rank countries at one time and progress over time; (4) facilitate communication with the general public”.

Social Cohesion Index

An index can be regarded as a single score made by combining several other scores, sometimes by straightforward addition but often in more complex ways, in order to measure some given variable. The social cohesion index is, therefore, an aggregate of multiple indicators across different dimensions into a single composite score to enable the development of a strong and necessary framework for making important policy choices (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation - IJR, 2018). It also facilitates the understanding of the interplay between persistent inequality, structural poverty and social cohesion. According to Arnim *et al.*, (2017), a key feature of the social cohesion index is that it takes a perceptions-based approach to social cohesion. That is, the focus is on perceived, subjective notions of inequality, trust, and identity, rather than objective measures such as GDP per capita or Gini coefficients.

Social Cohesion Barometer

A common definition of a barometer is associated with a scientific measurement of atmospheric pressure. Its broad definition includes something that indicates fluctuations or how people's opinions on a particular matter are changing. The Social Cohesion Barometer is the longitudinal monitoring tool for measuring changes in cohesion over time, with the intention of detecting shifts in social pressure, reflecting trends in public attitudes, perceptions, and experiences on social cohesion (Struwig *et al.*, 2011). According to Struwig *et al.*, (2011), the Social Cohesion Barometer measures social cohesion through three main domains, including (1) "economic domain, including employment, income, education, health, access to basic services, extent of socio-economic conflict and perceptions about affirmative action, amongst others; (2) Socio-cultural domain, including social networks, personal wellbeing, perceptions about discrimination, tolerance, fear of crime and extent of interracial contact; and, (3) Civic domain, including national identity, evaluations of regime performance, confidence in institutions, approval of elected representatives, political interest and participation, and citizenship norms".

Social Cohesion Radar

A radar is a term that is commonly associated with making something visible, primarily because it is hidden or it is too far away. Its usage in social cohesion discourse as the Social Cohesion Radar (SCR) was

initiated by the Bertelsmann Stiftung to advance research in this field and stimulate the relevant policy debate. The central objective was to measure social cohesion and to collect empirical data to serve as a basis for the political discussion (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). The Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) describes the SCR as a tool that makes it possible to gain a direct insight into a community's social fabric. It is premised on the assumption that a highly cohesive society is characterised by resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good. The SCR is compiled using data from a variety of different sources, including surveys and barometers, amongst many others (Dragolov *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, it is regarded as a multidimensional diagnostic approach enabling the mapping of cohesion across multiple domains and sub-dimensions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017). The Bertelsmann Stiftung (2017) highlights that the SCR assesses cohesion across three overall domains, namely social relations, connectedness, and focus on the common good. However, the measurement would remain purely theoretical, with nothing tangible to observe or analyse of indicators. Thus, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2017) cautions that indicators for measuring social cohesion are indispensable. Observably, indicators for measuring social cohesion have reverberated in the literature and discourse on social cohesion, primarily because indicators are observable variables assumed to point to, or estimate, some other (usually unobservable) variable (Frønes, 2007). In particular, indicators make social cohesion a measurable concept, mostly in public policy discourse (Riazi *et al.*, 2026). They are used to operationalise social cohesion for empirical analysis, policy monitoring, and comparative assessment (Chan *et al.*, 2006; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017).

It is generally agreed in the literature that indicators help to identify what cohesion means and how it manifests, and measure what makes social cohesion visible. They are what societies see, value, and act upon. To this effect, Chan *et al.*, (2006) argue that without indicators, claims cannot be measured and tested, and thus, relegate social cohesion to speculative rhetoric. Similarly, the Inclusive Society Institute (2020) argues that unless social cohesion is measured through appropriate indicators, it remains a pipe dream. In this regard, and in addition to being a necessity when engaging with a concept eclipsed by definitional challenges, indicators act as measurable proxies useful in tracking and monitoring trends, changes, progress or lack of it, along the various dimensions of

social cohesion and making them effective tools for evaluating policy implementation.

The literature identifies and classifies three types of social cohesion indicators, namely, rational indicators, distributive indicators and ideation indicators (Berman & Phillips, 2004). Relational indicators of social cohesion measure the quality of social interactions such as trust, civic participation, social networks, and cross-group engagement (Berman & Phillips, 2004; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017). On the other hand, distributive indicators assess the fairness of resource allocation and access to opportunities, including income equality, recognising that material disparities undermine trust and social stability (Delhey *et al.*, 2023). Lastly, ideational indicators capture the subjective dimensions of cohesion, such as shared values, sense of belonging, and institutional trust. Observably, these three categories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding social cohesion as a multidimensional construct shaped by relational connectedness, distributive justice, and shared normative commitments. Accordingly, different indicators are required to measure the different contexts. Furthermore, numerous dimensions must be measured through multiple constituent indicators (Scrivens & Smith, 2013). Lefko-Everett (2016) opines that around the world, several indices of social cohesion have already been developed and implemented with the benefit of robust and well-resourced development, testing and analysis.

Chan *et al.*, (2006) suggest that social cohesion be measured through both objective and subjective indicators. According to Chan *et al.*, (2006), objective indicators of social cohesion measure the structural and material conditions, such as income inequality, employment, access to services, and crime, while subjective indicators of social cohesion focus on individual perceptions and experiences, including trust and sense of belonging. Both indicators of social cohesion represent complementary approaches to measuring a complex social phenomenon, requiring conditions and subjective experiences to be integrated.

Social cohesion in South Africa

The pursuit of social cohesion in South Africa is largely linked to efforts to realise a constitutional imperative of building a united society and nation-building. Flowing from this broad imperative, social cohesion has been a subject used to reimagine, reconstruct,

and engender a new social fabric, emphasising the communality and interdependence amongst the diverse people of South Africa. The literature highlights that in South Africa, social cohesion is conceived as an intervention for addressing deep, obstinate historical divisions, structural inequality, and persistent social fragmentation (Van der Waldt & Fourie, 2022). Similarly, there is consensus amongst scholars that the promotion of social cohesion is particularly critical in South Africa, given the context of widening inequality, growing unemployment, and persistent racial inequalities (Palmary, 2015; Rocha *et al.*, 2020).

Significantly, the *White Paper on Families in South Africa* (DSD, 2021) refers to social cohesion as a process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community. There is also consensus in the literature that social cohesion in South Africa is conceived and pursued to address behaviours and practices that are characterised by a pervasive spatial and social fragmentation, which contributes towards weak social relations, inequalities, conflict, mistrust, marginalisation and, ultimately, to a lack of a sense of belonging (Kiguwa & Langa, 2015).

Social cohesion in South Africa has evolved from a constitutional imperative to a government policy and programme. It is explicitly articulated in various government policy documents as an objective to be pursued. For example, social cohesion has found explicit expression and institutionalisation in the National Development 2030 (NDP 2030) (NPC, 2012). The NDP enjoins the government, as a matter of policy, to address institutionalised racism, class divisions, social fragmentation, language, spatial exclusion, gender and sex, unemployment, crime, corruption, unequal experiences of the law, and moral decline as fault lines that impede social cohesion (NPC, 2012). Further institutionalisation and promotion of social cohesion followed the adoption of the National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and Cohesive South African Society (DAC, 2012). This strategy tasks the DAC with promoting and monitoring interventions aimed at an inclusive, cohesive, sustainable, dynamic and durable society (DAC, 2012).

Observably, social cohesion has been deliberately institutionalised and variously measured. As in other parts of the world, measuring social cohesion in South Africa has been a deliberate

pursuit by the government and civil society organisations. One of the first prominent efforts to measure social cohesion in South Africa was conducted by the South African Radar for Social Cohesion (SARSC) (Bradshaw & Stindt, 2017). According to Bradshaw and Stindt (2017), the SARSC was a comprehensive, multi-indicator perceptions-based, sourcing data from attitudinal surveys to measure social cohesion.

Government efforts to measure social cohesion were highlighted recently during the launch of the *2024 South African Social Cohesion Index* (South African Government, 2025). At this event, the Deputy President, Mr Paulus Mashatile, stated that the social cohesion index will help to assess society's current state and future direction by offering a picture of where South Africa stands in its collective journey towards social harmony (South African Government, 2025). He further highlighted that the social cohesion index provides insights into the strengths and challenges facing the nation, highlighting areas where progress has been made and areas that require urgent attention, particularly in policies that promote inclusivity, equity, and tolerance amongst all citizens. In addition, a civil society organisation, the Inclusive Society Institute (2024), conducted a quantitative, index-based measurement study to assess social cohesion in South Africa. The study utilised survey data and a structured conceptual framework developed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. This study utilised the Bertelsmann Social Cohesion Radar to assess three domains: resilient social relations, positive emotional connectedness amongst its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good (Inclusive Society Institute, 2024:5).

Table 3.2: Domains and related measures and dimensions

Domain	Measures	Dimension
Social Relations	The strength and resilience of individuals' social ties	Social networks
	The degree to which people trust others	Trust in people
	The extent to which people accept individuals of different background, lifestyle, and values as equal members of society	Acceptance of diversity

(Continued)

Table 3.2: Domains and related measures and dimensions
(Continued)

Domain	Measures	Dimension
Connectedness	The strength of individuals' identification with the geopolitical entity	Identification
	The degree to which individuals trust the entity's institutions	Trust in institutions
	Individuals' perception that they are treated fairly and that material resources are fairly distributed	Perception of fairness
Common Good	The extent to which people feel and demonstrate responsibility for weak others	Solidarity and helpfulness
	People's willingness to abide by the rules of society	Respect for social rules
	Participation in society and political life	Civic participation

Source: Adapted from Inclusive Society Institute (2024, p.24)

The report found that social cohesion in South Africa is moderately high (51.7) but has steadily declined over recent years (Inclusive Society Institute, 2024). In this report, community-level strengths such as social networks, solidarity, and identification remain relatively stable, while significant weaknesses persist in institutional trust, perceptions of fairness, and respect for social rules. The report concluded that, although there are slight improvements in civic participation and interpersonal trust, these do not offset the broader downward trend. In addition, the report highlights that social cohesion varies across provinces, with lower levels in KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, and Gauteng, pointing to an overall fragile and gradually weakening cohesion landscape (Inclusive Society Institute, 2024).

Using the same Bertelsmann concept, Social Cohesion Radar, the report indicates that in 2025, the overall level of social cohesion in South Africa as a whole is “moderate” at 56 points (Inclusive Society Institute, 2025). According to the Inclusive Society Institute (2025), the dimension of identification (in the domain of Connectedness) has proved to be the strongest. The score for identification, currently at 76.7, has grown by 3.5 points since 2021. However, the biggest

increases over this period were achieved by the measurement of civic participation, which grew 6.2 points since 2021, to now stand at 60.6, and solidarity and helpfulness, which grew 4.1 points, to now stand at 63.1 points. The report further indicates that at the other end of the scale, the lowest scores are still registered for respect for social rules (in the domain of Focus on the Common Good). This score currently measures 42, but it also grew by 1.7 points since 2021 and is now regarded as moderate and no longer low (Inclusive Society Institute, 2025).

The strategic significance of measuring social cohesion was emphasised by the Deputy President when highlighting that the 2024 South African Social Cohesion Index is timely because it will serve as a tool to address this subject as we approach another 30 years of our democracy (South African Government, 2025). According to the Deputy President, measuring social cohesion helps South Africa in assessing society's current state and future direction and offers a picture of where South Africa stands in its collective journey towards social harmony. Equally, according to the Deputy President, measuring social cohesion provides South Africa with valuable insights into the strengths and challenges facing our nation, highlighting areas where progress in understanding what needs to be achieved in strengthening targeted strategies and policies that promote inclusivity, equity, and tolerance amongst citizens.

Local-level social cohesion indicators

While the conceptualisation, institutionalisation and measurement of social cohesion are the responsibility and the concern of organisations and government operating at multiple scales, what matters to them at these different levels, the indicators to measure social cohesion are not necessarily seamlessly transferable nor applicable to the contextual dynamics of local government. Considering the issues, dimensions and indicators of social cohesion are inherently scale-sensitive and context-dependent, it is apparent that there are practical faultlines distinguishing the approach to national and local government. In addition to the need for a scale-sensitive and context-dependent approach, the distinct governance mandates of local government are different from national dimensions and indicators.

The assignment for the promotion of social cohesion to local government, particularly in South Africa, requires a conceptual understanding of local government and constituent communities

as the ground zero of social polarisation, divisions and exclusion anchored and perpetuated by spatial segregation. Turok (2012) highlights that racialised exclusionary spatial patterns were and continue to be the cornerstone of the lack of cohesion in many municipalities. Thus, it is widely accepted that spatiality strengthens or threatens social cohesion and inclusion. Spatiality refers to how space is perceived, used, lived, and constructed, including the meanings, social relations, and identities that are attached to specific areas (Monama, 2015). Observably, South African society reflects its space and spatiality, and they have both shaped and influenced the social relations, feelings of belonging or unbelonging, as well as inclusion and exclusion (Monama, 2015). Similarly, Khaile *et al.*, (2021:11) found that “the persistent social polarisation and racial cleavages create an environment prone to conflict, mistrust, and injustice and are detrimental to social cohesion. In addition, untransformed spatial configurations continue to further strengthen peripheralisation, othering, and a destructive notion of ‘us and them’.”

In an effort to direct, measure and monitor the involvement of local government in social cohesion, the need for the indicators is indispensable. As indicated already, the failure to measure social contribution, related policies and programmes will remain elusive, thereby complicating the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and programmes in the local sphere of government towards improved social cohesion and inclusive development (Palmary, 2015; Rocha *et al.*, 2020). Fundamentally, measuring social cohesion at the local level is a governance performance imperative linked to the developmental and service delivery mandates of municipalities. Particularly, while the various policy documents articulate what social cohesion should be pursued and achieved, measuring it or its dimensions reflects commitment and will and appreciates its inherent implementation outcomes.

As indicated previously in this chapter, indicators of social cohesion are a conscious, theory-grounded selection about what observable evidence best expresses an aspect of the relational, distributive and ideational indicators that hold society together. Arguably, the selection of an indicator is not a technical exercise but rather a conceptual act that influences what observers can see, measure, and ultimately improve. There is general consensus in the literature that social cohesion policy efforts at the local level, particularly municipalities in South Africa, can benefit from

social cohesion indicators. The South African Local Government Association (SALGA) (2022) suggests the need to measure and track progress at a local government level on a nationwide scale. In particular, municipal-level enquiry on social cohesion, utilising an appropriate indicator, should reveal how relations are perceived, used, lived, and constructed, including the meanings, social relations and identities that are attached to specific areas. In this regard, Van der Waldt and Fourie (2022) suggest that indicators are relevant and important to uncover dimensions and indicators that could be used in the design of an evidence-based measurement instrument to gauge the extent to which local governments succeed in promoting social cohesion in communities. Furthermore, Van der Waldt and Fourie (2022) indicate that a literature review reveals that one of the most severe gaps is the lack of a coordinated evidence-based social cohesion-building effort, especially in the local sphere of government, where there is close interaction between communities. In addressing this gap, Van der Waldt and Fourie (2022:301) utilised a proposed “Municipal Social Cohesion Barometer” to gauge the extent to which local governments succeed in promoting social cohesion in communities. Thus, the literature is instructive that indicators of social cohesion should be used to achieve three primary functions, namely, (1) descriptive, in order to map the state of social cohesion, (2) analytical: to identify patterns, disparities, and trends over time, and (3) normative, to inform policy interventions aimed at strengthening cohesion.

In South Africa, local-level social cohesion indicators should logically be shaped by the country’s historical inequalities, spatial divisions, and developmental priorities. The formulation of local-level social cohesion indicators should not be a technical exercise but a context-sensitive, participatory and policy-driven process. To this effect, the DAC’s (2012) *National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and Cohesive South African Society* serves as the relevant, guiding framework for the development of appropriate indicators to measure social cohesion. In particular, the strategy contains principles that harness the social integration and inclusion in communities and society at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression amongst individuals and communities (DAC, 2012). These principles that guide the country’s social cohesion policy drive are:

- Constitutional democracy;
- Human rights and equality;
- Non-racialism, non-tribalism, and non-sexism;

- Unity in diversity;
- Inclusivity and social justice;
- Redress and transformation;
- Intergroup and community co-operation;
- Social solidarity;
- Active and participatory citizenship;
- Civic responsibility; and
- National consciousness.

It is important to note that the above principles find expression in the integrated development plan (IDP) processes of a municipality. As a legislatively prescribed process, the IDP is the principal strategic planning instrument for South African municipalities, which has the potential to be used in the promotion of social cohesion at the local level. In terms of Section 26 (b) of the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 (COGTA, 2000), municipalities must assess the existing level of development in the municipal area, which must include an identification of communities which do not have access to basic municipal services. In addition, Section 26 (e) requiring the municipality to develop a spatial development framework which must include the provision of basic guidelines for a land use management system for the municipality. Fundamentally, this will ensure that local-level social cohesion indicators are influenced by South Africa's historical and current inequalities, spatial divisions, and developmental priorities, and nation-building and social transformation agendas.

In following the logic that has been developed in this chapter, Table 3.3 outlines how the principles of social cohesion, as articulated in the DAC's (2012) *National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and Cohesive South African Society*, can mutate into social cohesion indicators and measurement.

The strategic value of the above local-level indicators is in their ability to measure social cohesion. These indicators are calibrated instruments for measuring social cohesion in South African municipalities through their systematic alignment with three interdependent indicator types, namely, relational indicators, distributive indicators and ideational indicators. Collectively, these three types of indicators are capable of transforming constitutional principles into social cohesion dimension, indicators and measures.

Table 3.3: Local-level indicators

Principle	Dimension	Indicator	Measurement
Constitutional democracy	Vertical Trust and Legitimacy	Confidence in local democratic institutions	• % of community members satisfied with ward councillor's response to complaints.
Human rights and equality	Perceived Equity	Fairness in service delivery access	• % of community members who believe that water and electricity are accessible the municipality. • % of community members who believe that job opportunities in the municipality are accessible regardless of race/gender /political affiliation.
Non-racialism, non-tribalism, and non-sexism	Acceptance of Diversity	Intergroup trust and inclusion	• % of community members in particular area who report trusting people from other racial/ethnic groups. • % of residents who would welcome a neighbour from a different racial/ethnic group. • % of women serving as ward councillors.
Unity in diversity	Social Integration	Spatial and social integration	• Index of integration by race at ward level.
		Social integration in public spaces	• % of residents who regularly use public facilities (parks, libraries, sports fields) outside their immediate neighbourhood.

(Continued)

Table 3.3: Local-level indicators (*Continued*)

Principle	Dimension	Indicator	Measurement
Inclusivity and social justice	Inclusive Governance	Inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making	• % of women, youth, and people with disabilities participating in IDP ward consultations (IDP participation records).
		Support for persons with disabilities	• % of municipal buildings and public transport compliant with disability access standards.
Redress and transformation	Economic Transformation	Understanding of economic transformation	• % of community members who understand local economic opportunities as empowerment.
Intergroup and community co-operation	Community Volunteerism	Participation in community-led projects	• % of community members participating in school governing board and sport clubs.
Social solidarity	Social Solidarity	Willingness to support others	• % of residents who would assist by donating to needy projects.
Active and participatory citizenship	Civic Engagement	Ward committee meetings	• % attendance to ward committees meeting.
Civic responsibility	Civic Responsibility	Participation in elections. Compliance with municipal credit management policy norms	• % of citizens participating in local government elections. • % of households paying municipal rates and services.
National consciousness.	Local Identity and Belonging	Sense of belonging to municipality	• % of community members who feel a strong sense of belonging to their municipality.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive discussion of the concept of social cohesion by outlining its key meanings, dimensions, and relevance in contemporary societies. It also examined the various approaches and methods used to measure social cohesion, highlighting the importance of using clear and context-specific indicators in both policy and academic research. In addition, the chapter explored how social cohesion is conceptualised within the South African context, taking into account the country's unique historical background, socio-economic inequalities, and persistent spatial divisions. The discussion demonstrated that social cohesion in South Africa is closely linked to transformation, nation-building, reconciliation, and the pursuit of social justice.

Finally, the chapter proposed a set of local-level social cohesion indicators and assessed the extent to which each indicator is suitable for achieving the relevant elements or dimensions of social cohesion. These indicators serve as valuable tools for municipalities and local communities, as they enable the systematic measurement and monitoring of progress. Moreover, they assist in identifying policy successes and shortcomings, thereby strengthening local government strategies and interventions aimed at promoting social cohesion and inclusive development.

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Chapter 4

Municipal Entry Points for Advancing Unity and Cohesion

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Abstract

This chapter examines how municipalities can advance unity and social cohesion through inclusive local governance, social innovation (SI), and the principles of *Ubuntu* within the South African local government context. Communities globally and in South Africa increasingly face complex socio-economic challenges, including unemployment, inequality, migration, limited access to basic services, public safety concerns, and social fragmentation, all of which undermine resilience, sustainability, and inclusivity. In response, the chapter argues that fostering cohesive and resilient communities requires collaborative governance approaches grounded in community participation, social capital, shared ownership of development, and co-produced service delivery solutions. Through a conceptual exploration, the chapter delineates SI as an inclusive local governance framework, examines the co-production of socially innovative development interventions through *Ubuntu* values, and analyses inclusive governance service delivery systems as mechanisms for strengthening community cohesion. The chapter further demonstrates how municipalities can serve as strategic entry points for co-creating sustainable and resilient communities through participatory governance and socially innovative practices. Significantly, the chapter contributes a conceptual framework for operationalising unity and cohesion within municipal governance and service delivery systems in South Africa.

Keywords: community development; local governance; social cohesion; social innovation; *Ubuntu*

Introduction

Globally, communities in the 21st century face challenges including ageing populations, the integration of migrant populations, unemployment, limited access to basic services, public safety issues, and economic inequality. These challenges affect the sustainability and resilience of these communities, as well as their ability to remain inclusive. The South African local government case is no exception to these challenges. Co-creating solutions to these challenges through fostering cohesion and unity requires collaboration at a community level, which is grounded in ownership of municipal development, social innovation (SI) principles, values of *Ubuntu*, and social capital. At a municipal level, interventions through inclusive governance processes, campaigns aimed at building trust, equitable access to service through co-production and SI are essential to tap into society's broader capacity for social action. Against this background, this chapter explores municipal entry points to advance unity and cohesion in the South African local government sphere through the lens of SI and *Ubuntu*, and their operationalisation in local governance service delivery systems. This is achieved by delineating:

- SI as inclusive local governance frameworks
- co-producing socially innovative solutions to development challenges through *Ubuntu*
- inclusive local governance service delivery systems
- co-creating resilient and sustainable cohesive communities

Significantly, this chapter contributes a framework for advancing unity and cohesion in municipalities through the local governance service delivery system.

Social Innovation as Inclusive Local Governance Framework

In the 21st century, SI is considered an approach for successfully meeting environmental, economic, social and political challenges at local, regional and national levels (Domanski *et al.*, 2020:454). Given its versatility as a problem-solving approach, it is applied across different fields and sectors. Scholars, therefore, consider this application of SI across different fields and sectors synonymous with fostering ongoing and transformative change and igniting processes of renewal (Caramizaru & Uihlein, 2020; Galego *et al.*, 2022; Phillips *et al.*, 2015). To this end, SI is conceptualised as the generation of new and innovative ideas and solutions that culminate in meeting societal

needs. These ideas and innovations can be in the form of products, services and models towards meeting societal needs and are usually guided by collaborative or collective practices (Phillips *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, SI's use is undertaken with the intention of resulting in good and a benefit for society as well as enhancing society's capacity to act. In this regard, scholars categorise SI's application as being goal-oriented, given its focus on meeting or addressing a societal need (Biljohn, 2018:38; Bouchard, 2012:50, cited in Phillips *et al.*, 2015:431). SI, therefore, has its central purpose in creating and supporting social values (Patiño-Valencia *et al.*, 2022:440).

Achieving the goal-oriented nature of SI is likewise embedded in collaborative practices that implement innovative solutions to address societal challenges. These collaborative practices are a key feature and success factor in SI's use. Also referred to as the process-oriented nature, SI cannot take place in the absence of collective actions through collaborations, networks, relationships and partnerships that are necessary to address societal challenges (Galego *et al.*, 2022:265). It is within SI's process-oriented nature that stakeholders and role-players convene to diagnose the underlying reasons for a societal challenge, identify possible solutions to the challenge, resource the solutions, and assign stakeholders who will implement the resourced solutions. Outcomes of this process-oriented nature include stakeholders co-creating solutions, the exchange of learning, and the emergence of a constellation of new rules of interaction (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010).

From a transformative perspective, SI is conceptualised as an innovation that drives systemic changes but also challenges and alters dominant institutions from a social context. Benefits attributed to the transformative nature of SI include the ability to (i) address societal challenges, (ii) challenge the status quo, (iii) drive systemic changes, and (iv) influence governance relations. Transformative SI that contributes to addressing societal challenges is embedded in how its application contributes towards making an impact in society. Such application ranges from being adopted as a response to crisis or conflict, new social practices, improved processes, and developing new products and services, which are all aimed at creating a society that is fair, sustainable, equitable, effective and efficient (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020:46).

Concerning challenging the status quo, distinctly transformative SI culminates in changing the institutional, societal, or contextual narrative through agendas and formal and informal institutions

(Biljohn & Magaiza, 2024). These formal and informal institutions could include routines, organisational culture, and policies. Communities would, therefore, participate in collective efforts to change the contextual narrative by negotiating and constructing new future narratives opposed to the current status quo (Davies, 2002 in Avelino *et al.*, 2019:3). Challenging the status quo in this regard is with the ultimate goal of contributing to achieving broad societal outcomes with a positive impact. SI that drives systemic changes, results in improved socio-economic outcomes, more sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles, increased resilience and the creation of public value.

Regarding governance relations, the transformative nature of SI enhances society's capacity to act through participatory opportunities and platforms. To this end, the traditional governance roles that communities assume as service users have shifted to a more direct role in decision-making processes as collaborators and co-creators (Caramizaru & Uihlein, 2020:3; Galego *et al.*, 2022:265). This new role of communities not only democratises service delivery decision-making processes but gives them a more prominent role in the type of decisions that are taken, as well as their impact through new arrangements.

Within the context of the local governance service delivery system, SI's use aligns with three key features that are interconnected. First, it is grounded in undertaking action to address a societal challenge associated with meeting a human need (Galego *et al.*, 2022:268). Second, it contributes towards the empowerment of communities, and third, it transforms social relations (Galego *et al.*, 2022:268). Given these features, it could be considered an optimal approach to address service delivery challenges at a local government level. Notably, its contribution to empowering communities is fundamental to encouraging active participation in South Africa's local governance service delivery systems. Moreover, such empowerment and active community participation are necessary to restore unity and social cohesion in communities and establish new relationships, which are requisite to meet human or societal needs. Thus, instead of merely providing services based on existing needs, communities' participation in this system allows local governments to become aware of their future and latent needs (Osborne *et al.*, 2013:146). Moreover, the collective capacity of communities is built upon during the SI process.

Through SI, communities can take on a more active and constructive role in addressing service delivery challenges by

participating in co-producing solutions to such challenges (Galego *et al.*, 2022:269). Thus, instead of waiting on local government to solely resource service delivery, communities participate in resourcing services through the co-production stages. Such participation results in more direct participation of communities as service users at a grassroots level through their time, skills, and expertise. Moreover, this grassroots-level community participation has profound significance for their role. Firstly, it allows them to take initiative in crafting solutions suited to their needs. Secondly, the collective capacity of communities is built either through the goal-oriented nature of SI, where communities participate in solving service delivery challenges, or through the process-oriented nature of SI where they become part of emerging networks and collaborations to solve the challenge. Thirdly, it results in the construction of new relations between different groupings within a community and the reconfiguration of governance relations between communities and local government (Galego *et al.*, 2022:269). Fourth, their participation should culminate in transforming the service delivery status quo into one that also benefits the collective good of the community.

Co-Producing Socially Innovative Solutions to Development Challenges through *Ubuntu*

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which, in short, means personhood, is captured in the aphorism “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Battle, 2009:1-2). This infers that the identity of self is interdependently formed through community and that individual humanity is achieved through an interdependent relationship and interconnectedness with others (Battle, 2009:3; Ewuoso, 2019:98). Therefore, the value of community in *Ubuntu*, has the connotation of “good for its own sake” and is deemed necessary to develop one’s personhood (Ewuoso, 2019:97). Community is likewise considered as a means to an end which is synonymous with the goal-oriented nature of SI and the values guiding social cohesion (Ewuoso, 2019:97). Respectively, the good of the community and the individual are co-substantively intertwined (Eze, 2008), which is consistent with the individual and communal relational values of social cohesion. Although *Ubuntu* emphasises the collective or communal worth, the individual’s worth is not diminished (Bongmba, 2016). Instead, the individual’s contribution is recognised as equally important to the collective worth, which can be achieved through social cohesion.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes a person with *Ubuntu* as being available and affirming to others, and having a self-assurance that they belong to a greater whole (Battle, 2009:2). This also makes *Ubuntu* people-centred with its focus on people and the role of each within the communal collective (Msila, 2015). Archbishop Tutu further associates the personhood of *Ubuntu* as someone who is not threatened by the good or abilities of others but who feels diminished when others are oppressed, tortured or humiliated (Battle, 2009:2). *Ubuntu* in its literal meaning, therefore, refers to humanness which recognises the humanity of others and prioritises their rights, promoting the collective good, relatedness, and respect for human dignity (Metz, 2021:1; Ngubane & Makua, 2021:3). Such humanness or personhood is nurtured and developed through the communal relationships that the individual engages in (Ewuoso, 2019:98).

Ubuntu is regarded as a fundamental principle of democracy and should thrive when there are dependence, democracy, and consensus amongst people (Msila, 2015). To this end, *Ubuntu* is considered an important philosophy for a society aspiring to be more cohesive, inclusive, equal, cooperative, and to have a collective willingness (Battle, 2009:2, 4; Msila, 2015; UNDP, 2020). Such a society could be achieved through the values of *Ubuntu*, which is entrenched in the cultures and communities across the African continent through the political, social, economic and cultural institutions of society (Mwipikeni, 2018:323; Nicolaides, 2022:123). These values include love, humility, responsiveness, honesty, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, hospitality, responsibility, dignity, justice, peace, respect, and co-existence (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* is guided by principles of shared identity, shared goals, communal relations, and goodwill, which are synonymous with social cohesion (Chan, To & Chan, 2006). Through the *Ubuntu* principle of a shared identity, individuals regard themselves as being part of a community, whether in a local or global context (Metz, 2011:538; Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332; Nicolaides, 2022:127). The concept of community could be guided by shared goals, which require the collective to work in solidarity towards mutual support that would benefit the collective (Metz, 2011:538). To stand in solidarity means to support others as well as act and behave towards the beneficence of others and the common good (Muwanga-Zake, 2009:415). From this perspective, *Ubuntu*

is regarded as seeking a local or global social order that attributes human beings with equal worth (Mwipikeni, 2018:332).

The principle of a shared goal is guided by individuals or community members participating in actions and behaviours that facilitate the collective coordination of activities towards the attainment of shared goals (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332). Shared goals could include promoting good health, achieving economic prosperity, alleviating poverty, and protecting rights (Mwipikeni, 2018:332), which are often associated with social cohesion outcomes. *Ubuntu's* element of a shared goal (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332) is consistent with the goal-oriented nature of SI. The coordination of activities to achieve shared goals could encompass finding redress for inequality and identifying solutions to service delivery challenges (Mwipikeni, 2018:332). In achieving shared goals, an individual contributes strategies, time, resources, experience, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2008).

Concerning the principle of communal relationality, activities and participation are coordinated to serve the collective goal (Ewuoso, 2019:96; Mwipikeni, 2018:332). These communal relations are often located in a community with interdependent relations and interconnectedness through a shared identity and collective decision-making (Ewuoso, 2019:99; Msila, 2015). In this regard, individuals' interconnectedness is established through their mutual interdependence and cooperation (Akamonye, 2019:181). Despite co-existing in communal relations and interconnectedness, an individual's identity persists. Within the framework of these communal relations, disagreements are resolved through discussions and negotiations amongst the community to derive consensus (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2008).

The principle of common good or goodwill is predicated on the collective or community helping each other and likewise engaging in activities with such an outcome (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332). Such a common good is centred on common values and ethical principles towards the common good (Nicolaidis, 2022:123). The common good is, therefore, rooted in loyalty and collaborative work through collective willingness, which includes the sharing of knowledge in a reciprocal manner (Msila, 2015; Ngubane & Makua, 2021:8).

Inclusive Local Governance Service Delivery Systems

A systems approach to understanding public service delivery systems has gained increased attention from academics, practitioners, and policymakers. This emanates from, amongst other things, a growing awareness of the complex and unpredictable nature of policy implementation and the performance of the bureaucracy as influenced by the local governance service delivery system.

The public service delivery system which is regarded as an open system and, therefore, non-linear, can be delineated as comprising subsystems of a social and technical nature (Biljohn, 2018:162). In the South African context, the public service delivery system is demarcated as systems at the national, provincial and local government levels, which, per organ of state, implements its service delivery programmes and policies. These systems deliver services aligned with the legislative mandate of each organ of state. Such a system would include frameworks that model (i) the mandate of the organ of state, (ii) its competencies or functions, (iii) stakeholders from its service delivery environment, (iv) governance processes for engaging its external environment, (iv) accountability structures, and (v) reporting structures. Per organ of state, it could be argued that these systems are institutionally embedded and operated. Local governance service delivery systems across the 257 South African local, district and metropolitan municipalities would likewise be institutionally embedded and operated. However, their optimal functioning is not exclusively institutionally bound, given the direct participation of communities in its governance system to inform its outputs. Such participation stems from the close proximity of local government to communities and the role that they play in informing the outputs and impact of each local government service delivery system.

Through its service delivery system, local government delivers basic services and services aligned with its mandate. Given the central role of the local governance service delivery system in communities' livelihoods, as a direct outcome of its service delivery environment, it can be inferred that its impact is far-reaching for service users compared to that of national or provincial government service delivery systems. For this reason, its optimal functioning is of immense strategic importance to the resilience and governance of service delivery. The service delivery system, which comprises a technical (policies, processes, and procedures) and a social system (co-production of services, collaboration and SI spaces), relies on

its social system to stay responsive to communities' service delivery needs (Biljohn, 2018:185).

Technical sub-system

In the overall scheme of the local governance service delivery system, the technical sub-system primarily delivers tangible and intangible services. Whilst this sub-system is dependent on various aspects required to deliver a single service, this chapter considers these in terms of the overall policies, processes and procedures that support them. In this sequence, this sub-system comprises the components of policies, processes, and procedures which inform service delivery (Biljohn, 2018:185). The ability of the municipal administration to implement and drive the technical sub-system will require specialist skills, expertise, and capacity to deliver services that are responsive to the needs of the service delivery environment.

The policy component

Policies include deliberate courses of action, frameworks of intent and principles adopted by an organisation to guide decision-making. Policy is, therefore, conceptualised as an action plan, declaration, statement of intent, or implementation framework towards “transforming a perceived problem into a future solution” (Cloete & De Coning, 2011:4). The policy cycle comprises distinct stages such as agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Valle-Cruz *et al.*, 2020:5). This cycle is, however, not the focus of this discussion but instead the role that policies could play as a component of the technical sub-system.

From the local governance service delivery perspective, the first component of policies would guide current and future decisions regarding service delivery. Pertaining to service delivery, policies could guide internal institutional processes and procedures, processes and procedures for engaging service delivery stakeholders, community participation in service delivery decision-making, supply chain management, service delivery operations and actions as well as procedures. The policy component could be regarded as the rulebook that informs how the technical subsystem delivers services. Therefore, it guides internal institutional processes and procedures that guide service delivery.

For stakeholder engagement in service delivery, policies would outline which stakeholders should be involved in service delivery

and decision-making processes. Similar to community participation in service delivery decision-making, such policies would determine the requirements for such participation, stakeholders of the process, participatory levels and vehicles, institutional resources to coordinate participation, parameters and frameworks to execute participation. A typical example is policies related to community participation in the development of integrated development plans of South African municipalities. Institutional community participation policies would ordinarily outline the activities and processes to facilitate such participation. Apart from creating opportunities for communities and stakeholders to participate, such policies should consider how to empower communities to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Fundamentally, empowering communities means providing them with information that helps them to make informed decisions.

Apart from participation in service delivery decision-making processes, municipalities' accountability responsibility to communities should, likewise, be directed through such policies. Accountability is facilitated through regular and accurate reporting to communities through public meetings or forums, ward committee meetings, *imbizos*, and the publication of online or printed reports. Policies should determine the frequency, mode, format and audience of such reporting. Such policies would also specify aspects that should be reported on, such as service delivery mechanisms, budget implications, and planned versus actual service delivery performance.

The process component

The second component of processes is considered part of a system and is defined as a series of operations and actions that lead to a particular result (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024a). In the local government service delivery environment, the particular result or goal is to deliver services that are aligned with and responsive to the needs of the service delivery environment. This component of processes is regarded as inherent to designing services, as the ultimate product delivered to service users in conjunction with service providers, as the people component (Mata, 2020). Despite processes being part of the technical sub-system, the creation and execution of service design depend on inputs from the social sub-system. From this, it is apparent that although the technical sub-system is responsible for delivering services, this cannot take place in isolation from inputs from the service delivery environment. Inputs from this environment

would be facilitated by the social sub-system of the local governance service delivery environment.

As part of a system, processes comprise activities through which inputs are transformed into outputs of value to the service recipient or user (Harvey, 2021). To this end, inputs would be the service needs and preferences of communities, obtained through the actions of the social sub-system. The transformation of inputs would encompass service needs and preferences, which are translated into the actual services delivered to communities. These delivered services become the outputs released into the service delivery environment through the actions and operations of the technical sub-system.

The technical sub-system's ability to deliver its service delivery priorities is highly dependent on the functionality of its process component's underlying actions and operations. Actions of its process component could include (i) compiling and approving the service delivery budget, (ii) supply chain management service delivery processes, and (iii) coordination and allocation of required resources for service delivery. Operations of the process component could include the practical application and implementation of resources, labour, expertise and equipment to deliver services.

Concerning processes, these are regarded as the “know-how” of the organisation and understanding them is fundamental to becoming a learning organisation (Harvey, 2021). In the local governance service delivery technical sub-system context, this “know-how” could be understood to encompass the actions and operations for processing information from the social sub-systems specific to service delivery needs, and how this is transformed into actionable plans for service delivery. Building service processes is critical to ensure that service priorities or goals are achieved, service quality is maintained, service users' expectations are met, and service value is created (Mata, 2020). Where service processes are vague, they will consequently impact the delivery of services and their outcomes (Mata, 2020).

The procedure component

Concerning procedures, these relate to traditional or established ways of achieving specific goals (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024b). Procedures are action-oriented, with steps to follow as well as the sequence for such steps. In terms of service delivery, the procedure component could include steps to obtain service delivery needs,

transforming such needs into service priorities, designing the final product for each service priority, delivery of service products to the service recipients, and service evaluations. From a procedural perspective, the mentioned steps are tangible outputs that are further guided by institutional activities essential to delivering these outputs. Whilst these steps are driven institutionally by the technical sub-system, each output, requires inputs from the social sub-system as well. This ensures that the final service delivered to service users meets their needs and pre-determined preferences.

The steps towards achieving the respective outputs must be managed effectively and efficiently by the local government organisation. Managing the pragmatic implementation of these steps might require approaching this per service department. This will make the procedural component more manageable and ensure that the outputs of these steps align with stakeholder needs according to the service department's delivery mandate.

Once the identified service needs are prioritised, service departments should have an overall strategy for stakeholder engagement and participation in service design, delivery, and evaluation. Traditionally, community participation in South African municipalities is coordinated through the political office of the Speaker of the Council. This, however, creates a bottleneck, particularly regarding the turnaround time between the Speaker's office informing service departments of service delivery enquiries and the response times of such departments. In light of this, consideration should perhaps be given to coordinating community participation post the prioritisation of service needs in the service department towards completing the service delivery cycle.

Social sub-system

The two major actors in service delivery are the state and society (Zerihun & Mashingo, 2022). This role of society in service delivery confirms the importance of community participation in the local government service delivery system, particularly the social sub-system. The purpose of the social sub-system in the overall local government service delivery system is to facilitate community participation in the identification, prioritisation, and assessment of service impacts. To this end, the social subsystem facilitates society's role in the service delivery system through the components of service co-production and SI spaces (Biljohn, 2018:185).

The component of co-producing services

Concerning the co-production of services, society's role can be realised through community participation across the four stages of the co-production service delivery cycle: co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-evaluation. This would imply community participation in the respective co-production stages, through various activities. For co-planning, communities would contribute inputs regarding their service needs and preferences and play a decision-making role in determining service priorities. Regarding community participation in the co-design and co-delivery of services, they could contribute their skills, resources, time and expertise. Community participation in the co-evaluation of services is fundamental towards improving services.

Regarding collaboration, SIs are frequently open and collaborative, involving a diverse range of actors. As a result, communities and service users can contribute insights, resources, and assets to assist local governments and policymakers in achieving service delivery and programme goals. Users are created "with" and "by" SI, rather than "to" and "for" them. As a result, SI can both strengthen communities' capacity to act and have a direct impact on service outcomes by influencing and directing service delivery programmes and policies. During the co-production of services, local government plays a facilitator role to include service users in the co-production process (Makanyeza *et al.*, 2013:4). This role should be coordinated through the institutional policies, processes and procedures of the technical sub-system.

The component of social innovation spaces

Participatory local governance of services is essential to ensure that local government delivers services that meet the needs, preferences, and quality expectations of its service delivery environment. This is only possible through creating participatory spaces for service recipients to contribute meaningfully to shaping the direction and prioritising of local services.

Regarding SI spaces, local governments could establish them through an institutionalised culture that promotes community participation in service delivery. Such spaces could be created by taking spaces to communities either in locations where communities reside or through online platforms (Biljohn, 2018:185). Through these spaces, diverse communities can contribute to identifying service

delivery challenges and solutions to address these challenges. These spaces also become catalysts for the emergence of new networks around the current challenge or even new areas of collaboration.

Convergence of the local governance service delivery sub-systems

Service delivery challenges in the South African local government sphere make it contingent on municipalities to take a holistic view of their service delivery systems and their functionality. Understanding this system's social and technical makeup, and where the two converge and intersect, is critical to supporting its operation. The intersection of these two sub-systems affects the overall functioning of the systems and their ability to stay responsive to a municipality's service delivery environments. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, both subsystems' separate but interdependent functioning relies on a two-way flow of inputs and information between them. This means that neither of these sub-systems can function independently, as one depends on the other to fulfil its purpose. Thus, although the social sub-system is intended to facilitate societal agency in identifying, prioritising, and assessing the impact of services through participatory platforms, none of this will be achieved without the machinery of the technical sub-system. On the other hand, the technical sub-system, which is intended to deliver tangible and intangible services, cannot achieve this without the inputs of the social sub-system. Consequently, if these two sub-systems are not in sync, it could result in the delivery of services that are not aligned with the needs of communities and could subsequently result in wasted financial and human resources.

The overall service delivery system can only function with the inputs of the social sub-system. Thus, from a social sub-system perspective, the participation of service users, actors, and stakeholders with a service interest is central to informing this sub-system and determining what the service delivery environment needs. The participation of these actors and input from the service delivery environment should be facilitated and driven by the overall municipal service delivery system, but, more specifically, propelled through the technical sub-system (Figure 4.1).

Against this background, a fragmented service delivery system could adversely affect the impact of service outcomes in communities and their intended beneficiaries. Moreover, a fragmented system could affect the performance of the overall system and the respective sub-systems. Such fragmentation could result from one or both

needing to be adequately capacitated in terms of skills and expertise to manage them. With a skill or expertise deficit in one sub-system, the other will have to overcompensate for these shortcomings. This means that the sub-system that is capable of delivering on its purpose may be performing the purpose of the sub-system with a capacity deficit. Apart from putting strain on one of the sub-systems, this also results in the capacitated sub-system fulfilling a role that it is not purposed for.

To prevent system fragmentation, the interdependent nature of the two sub-systems relies on coordination between the institutional implementers of these sub-systems. Such coordination can be found in integrating activities that both rely on to fulfil their purpose. These activities are grounded in the components of each sub-system, which dictate its functioning. This means that the participatory opportunities facilitated by the social sub-system should be aligned with the policy frameworks, processes and procedures of the technical sub-systems and vice versa. In turn, decision-making undertaken through the components of the technical sub-system should be aligned with the components of the social sub-system.

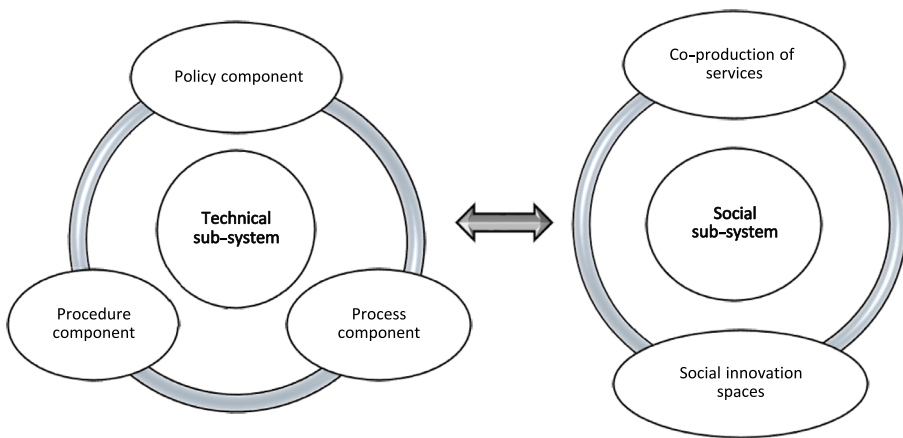


Figure 4.1: Convergence of the technical and social sub-systems

Source: Author's own construction

Co-Creating Resilient and Sustainable Cohesive Communities

Social cohesion is embedded in the trust amongst society and the extent to which trust is held in government, as well as the collective willingness to participate in a shared vision towards common development goals and sustainable peace (UNDP, 2020:7).

Social cohesion is conceptualised in terms of horizontal and vertical relations (UNDP, 2026). In this regard, horizontal social cohesion is concerned with relations between groups of society and between citizens, whereas vertical social cohesion is embedded in the relation between government and citizens (UNDP, 2026).

Using thematic content analysis, this section starts by reflecting on common principles guiding SI, social cohesion and the philosophy of *Ubuntu* towards creating resilient and sustainable cohesive communities. These principles result from the juxtaposing of parallel themes that guide the principles of SI, values of social cohesion and the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. These principles are the common good, common goals, collaborative practices, communal relationality, and resourcing of the collective good (Figure 4.2). Following a discussion of these shared principles, this section presents a praxis for the South African local governance service delivery system predicated on SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*.

Common principles of SI, social cohesion and Ubuntu

Common good

The common good is the first principle shared between SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*. During the application of SI, the common good is found in why SI is undertaken. This is, for example, to address a societal need to result in good and benefit for society. Conversely, for the praxis of social cohesion and *Ubuntu*, the common good serves as the basis for the collective willingness and community helping one another during collaborative activities that they engage in (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332; Ngubane & Makua, 2021:8; UNDP, 2020:7). The collective good is considered fundamental in operationalising the praxis of the local governance service delivery system from the social sub-system's perspective.

Common goals

Common goals are the second principle that identifies with SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*, which are embedded in achieving common societal goals (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332). SI, specifically, is undertaken as a means to an end, which could be to address a societal need or challenge towards resulting in good and a benefit for society. This means to an end, and its ultimate outcomes attribute SI as goal-oriented. The *Ubuntu* principle of a shared goal and the collective willingness on which social cohesion is grounded is likewise aimed

at addressing societal needs in the interest of the collective and the common good (Mwipikeni, 2018:332; UNDP, 2020:7).

Communal relationality

The third principle of communal relationality is grounded in the interdependent and interconnected collective relations concerned with the common goal and goodwill. It is also this communal relationality that enhances the collective capacity to act, which is central to the horizontal and vertical relations guiding social cohesion (Abrams, Davies and Horsham, 2023). In this regard, through SI's process-oriented nature, communal relationality is fostered through established networks and collaborations. Similarly, *Ubuntu*'s element of communal relationality is rooted in the interdependent relations and interconnectedness between individuals who participate in activities to serve a collective goal (Akamonye, 2019:181; Ewuoso, 2019:96; Ngubane & Makua, 2021:5).

Collaborative practices

Collaborative practices are the fourth principle coherent with SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*. Central to social cohesion, collaborative practices are evidenced in the ability of communities to work and live in shared spaces (UNDP, 2020:46). These practices are, likewise, central to *Ubuntu*, with individuals or community members participating in actions and behaviours that facilitate the collective coordination of activities towards attaining common goals (Metz, 2007 in Mwipikeni, 2018:332). These collaborative practices encompass the contribution of time, experience, skills, strategies, knowledge and resources towards attaining common goals (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2008). The practice of SI is similarly grounded in networks, relationships and partnerships deemed essential to address societal needs or challenges. Like social cohesion and the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, SI can only take place in the presence of these collaborations, which is attributed to its process-oriented nature.

Resourcing the collective good

The resourcing of the collective good is a fourth principle. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* depends on using individual and communal resources for the collective good. In the form of time, experience, skills, strategies, abilities and knowledge, these resources contribute towards attaining common goals (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2008). These resources are also required when social cohesion and SI are used to resource solutions to a societal need or to implement such solutions.

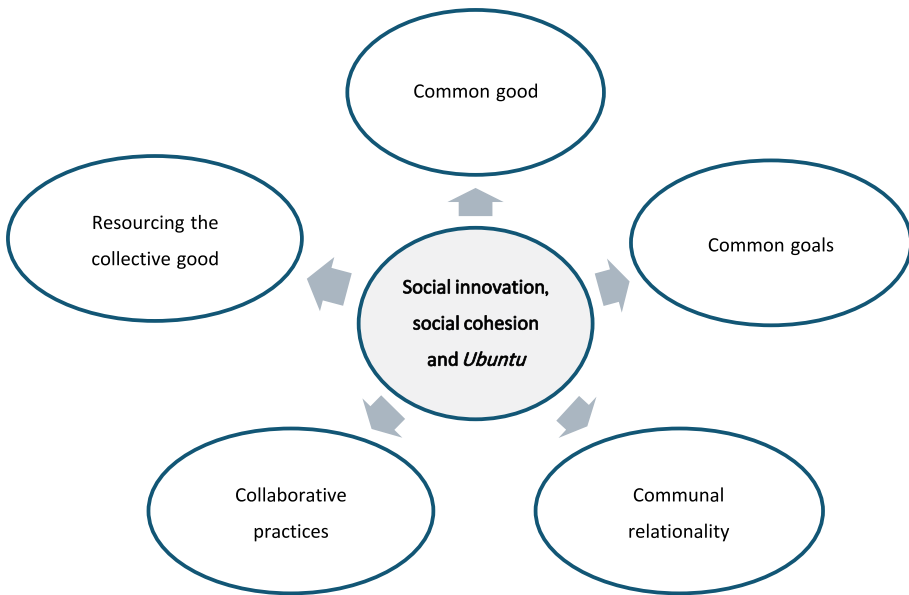


Figure 4.2: Common Principles of SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*
Source: Author's own construction

Advancing Unity and Cohesion in Municipalities through the Local Governance Service Delivery System

South Africa's local governance service delivery systems can no longer rely solely on its institutional resource frameworks. The resilience of the local governance service delivery system depends on the optimal functionality and integration of its technical and social sub-systems. Recent evidence illustrates that the relevance of the social sub-system is equally important in the local governance service delivery system compared to the technical sub-system. In fact, the service delivery system cannot exist without the social sub-system. Against this background, this section contemplates how a praxis of SI and *Ubuntu* could inform South Africa's local governance service delivery system as entry points for advancing unity and social cohesion.

From the discussion about the local governance service delivery system, it is clear that it cannot function disintegrated from its social sub-system. Fundamentally, local government use the inputs from this system to inform the technical sub-system to keep it active. Moreover, inputs from the social sub-system will support the ability of the technical sub-system to stay responsive and resilient. Such inputs could be fostered by applying SI, which is guided by the co-production of services through SI and the principles of *Ubuntu*.

The preceding section juxtaposed five principles of the common good, common goals, collaborative practices, communal relationality, and resourcing the collective good, which aligns with SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*. It can be inferred that these principles also align with the objectives of the local governance service delivery system. Apart from the delivery of basic and other services aligned with the local government's mandate, services produced by this system directly impact the livelihoods of communities, businesses and other actors in its service delivery environment. Thus, there is no dispute that the outputs of the local governance service delivery system are for the common good, derived from a shared societal goal and collective willingness. This common good and shared goal would be rooted in the service needs which the community identified, which should positively impact their lives through public value. Against this background, facilitating common goals, collaborative practices, communal relationality, and resourcing of the collective good are considered through the social sub-system.

The social sub-system facilitates a role for communities in the service delivery system through the components of co-producing services and SI spaces (Biljohn, 2018:185). Determining a common goal for service delivery does not rest solely with local government but is a collective effort in conjunction with communities. This starts with local government involving communities in deliberations on their service needs, and which should be prioritised. Considering the local government's institutional resources, there should be a mutual understanding and consensus regarding the common goal of service delivery. Thus, amidst a wish list of service needs, service priorities should be delineated in collaboration with communities, highlighting the principle of collaborative practices. In this regard, the principles of SI are applied, where the collective willingness, which is coherent with social cohesion, emphasises the identification of service or societal needs, as well as possible solutions to those needs. The co-planning stage of the co-production cycle is ideal to achieve this.

Once the common goal for service delivery priorities has been identified during the co-planning stage of co-production, the services to be delivered should be designed. During the co-design stage, these services should be collaboratively co-designed by municipalities and the community through vertical social cohesion. In this regard, their participation should be grounded in the collaborative practices and principles that transcend SI, social cohesion and *Ubuntu*. These collaborative practices, which facilitate community participation and

resource acquisition, should be coordinated through the technical sub-system. This might be easier said than done and will rely strongly on the principle of communal and horizontal relationality to build trust with stakeholders for resources. Of note is that in the absence of a technical sub-system sufficiently resourced with skills and expertise to design services, the collaborative social capital and resources of the community's collective become essential to design services. These resources could include, but are not limited to, the experience, skills, strategies, and knowledge of the community and society at large.

After co-designing services, co-delivery focuses on their actual delivery. During this stage, the local governance service delivery system and its technical sub-system could rely on the social sub-system to support service delivery. For this, the principle of collaborative practices is necessary to coordinate resources to deliver services. This delivery of services is mainly driven by resourcing, which relates to the principle of collective resourcing. The success of such resourcing would depend on communal relationality to establish partnerships supporting resourcing service delivery. Such resources could take various forms, amongst which are resourcing services by the technical sub-systems. It could also entail the delivery of certain services through external mechanisms. Regardless of the selected delivery mechanism, decisions in this regard should also be taken in deliberation with the community.

The last stage of the co-production cycle is co-evaluation, which requires service evaluation to occur in consultation with community members. Community input could provide valuable feedback to improve service quality. Building trust relationships with the community to ensure their meaningful participation during co-evaluation should be developed through communal relationality during the preceding co-production stages. This is important to foster buy-in from communities and the community at large to the objective of co-evaluation and its integration into the delivery of future services.

Community participation in the co-production stages should be facilitated through the technical sub-system by prioritising and coordinating SI spaces to enhance community participation. It is critical that the ideal spaces, whether physical or online, are designated to facilitate community participation at the respective stages of the co-production cycle. Local government and the community should negotiate and agree upon these spaces. In

conclusion, upholding the principles of SI and *Ubuntu* in the social sub-system requires a concerted effort from the technical sub-system. The technical sub-system should facilitate these principles through its policies, processes and procedural components.

Conclusion

This chapter explored SI and *Ubuntu* as praxis to advance unity and social cohesion in the South African local governance service-delivery system (entry point). This system was established as comprising technical and social sub-systems which co-exist, are integrated, and function in equilibrium. Five common principles grounded in SI, social cohesion, and *Ubuntu* were identified as integral to operationalising the local governance service delivery system as an entry point to advance social cohesion and unity. These principles comprise the common good, common goals, collaborative practices, communal relationality, and the resourcing of the collective good. Finally, this chapter contributes a framework for advancing unity and cohesion in municipalities through the local governance service delivery system.

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Section C

Towards a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework

Chapter 5

Principles of a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework

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Abstract

This chapter delineates the foundational principles, roles and responsibilities, strategic pillars, and institutional mechanisms essential for constructing a robust Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework in South Africa. Anchored in the constitutional mandate for developmental local governance and aligned with national imperatives such as the National Development Plan, the chapter articulates core guiding principles which include constitutional democracy, human rights and equality, non-racialism and non-sexism, unity in diversity, inclusivity, social justice, redress and transformation, intergroup cooperation, social solidarity, active participatory citizenship, civic responsibility, and national consciousness that should inform municipal efforts to foster cohesive communities. It clarifies the differentiated yet interdependent roles and responsibilities of stakeholders: municipal councils for political oversight and leadership; municipal administrations for planning, implementation, and reporting; ward committees for grassroots engagement; civil society and faith-based organisations for mobilisation and outreach; and the private sector for inclusive economic participation and investment. The chapter proposes embedding social cohesion within existing municipal instruments such as integrated development plans, spatial development frameworks, and local economic development strategies. It advocates for dedicated institutional arrangements which includes a Social Cohesion Coordination Unit, multi-stakeholder advisory committees, ring-fenced budgets, personnel allocation, and performance

management integration. Emphasis is placed on capacity-building for officials in areas such as conflict resolution, inclusive planning, amongst others, alongside the identification of research gaps to support evidence-based refinement of local approaches. By establishing these principles and structures, the chapter provides the normative and operational foundation for translating national aspirations for nation-building and social cohesion into practical, measurable, and sustainable municipal interventions, ultimately enhancing trust, inclusion, belonging, and collective prosperity at the local level in a diverse and unequal society.

Keywords: Capacity-building; institutional mechanisms; local government framework; nation-building; social cohesion principles; stakeholders; strategic pillars

Introduction

This chapter establishes the normative and operational foundation for developing a coherent Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework. It articulates the core principles that should guide municipal responses to social fragmentation, clarifies the differentiated roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, and proposes strategic pillars together with supporting institutional mechanisms necessary for effective implementation at the local sphere.

South Africa's persistent challenges of inequality, racial mistrust, spatial divisions, and uneven service delivery continue to undermine national unity and social cohesion. The National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 (NPC, 2012) rightly positions social cohesion as both an end in itself and a critical enabler of sustainable development (Ramphele, 2017). It emphasises transforming society and uniting the nation through active citizenry, inclusion, redress, and a social compact that promotes equity and shared prosperity. Similarly, Outcome 14 of the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) emphasises nation-building and social cohesion as national priorities, with measurable indicators linked to constitutional values, reduced racism, active citizenship, and pride in South African identity (Matlala, 2025a).

Local government, as the sphere closest to communities, occupies a strategic position to translate these national aspirations into tangible outcomes. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 ("The Constitution") (RSA, 1996) assigns

municipalities developmental responsibilities that extend beyond basic service delivery to include promoting social and economic development, encouraging community participation, and fostering a safe and healthy environment. Yet, in practice, social cohesion remains largely implicit rather than explicitly included in municipal planning instruments such as integrated development plans (IDPs), spatial development frameworks (SDFs), and local economic development (LED) strategies (Gardener, 2014; Mathonsi, 2016). This chapter addresses this gap by outlining how municipalities can systematically embed social cohesion into their core functions and operations.

The chapter begins with a clear exposition of the guiding principles for local-level social cohesion interventions. These principles which are drawn from the Constitution, the NDP, and the National Strategy for Social Cohesion and Nation-Building include constitutional democracy, human rights and equality, non-racialism and non-sexism, unity in diversity, inclusivity and social justice, redress and transformation, intergroup cooperation, social solidarity, active participatory citizenship, civic responsibility, and national consciousness (Abrahams, 2026; Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024). They serve as ethical and practical touchstones to ensure that municipal efforts are rooted in *Ubuntu* (“a person is a person through other persons”) values of mutual recognition, cooperation, and collective well-being rather than short-term political expediency. The chapter then examines the roles and responsibilities of multiple actors in a multi-stakeholder approach. Municipal councils provide political leadership and oversight, while municipal administrations drive planning, implementation, and performance reporting. Ward committees act as vital conduits for grassroots voice and feedback. Civil society organisations and faith-based groups contribute mobilisation, outreach, and community trust-building, and the private sector supports inclusive economic participation and investment.

Central to the framework is the integration of social cohesion goals into existing municipal systems, supported by dedicated institutional arrangements such as a Social Cohesion Coordination Unit, multi-stakeholder advisory committees, ring-fenced budgets, and capacity-building programmes for officials responsible for planning, conflict resolution, and monitoring. The chapter also addresses monitoring and evaluation systems and identifies research gaps to strengthen evidence-based practice at the local level.

Ultimately, the chapter equips local governments with the conceptual clarity and structural tools needed to move beyond fragmented or symbolic interventions towards systematic, sustainable efforts that build trust, belonging, inclusion, and a shared sense of South African identity in diverse communities. In doing so, it reaffirms the transformative potential of developmental local governance in realising a united and cohesive South Africa.

Methodology

This chapter was developed through a qualitative, normative, and policy-oriented research process using a structured multi-step approach comprising a systematic synthesis of key national policies and legislation, including the Constitution (RSA, 1996), the NDP (NPC, 2012), the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) Outcome 14, the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), as well as the National Strategy for Social Cohesion and Nation-Building. The methodology also made provision for the review and synthesis of social cohesion literature, indicator frameworks, and best practices from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO), The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), and the Indlulamithi Barometer (Adelzadeh, 2021; Morse & Polzer-Ngwato, 2025). In addition, a desktop analysis of municipal planning instruments (IDPs, SDFs, LED strategies, and performance management systems) to assess current including and integration potential was undertaken. This was supported by stakeholder role-mapping and institutional design analysis, drawing on governance literature and successful sectoral models.

A content analysis and a thematic analysis were applied to integrate the respective data sources. Principles were derived thematically and deductively from policy sources and refined inductively, with strong emphasis on practicality, scalability, and alignment with existing municipal systems.

Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion: A Conceptual Framework

The content of this chapter is grounded in a normative and integrative conceptual framework that positions local government as a central actor in advancing national unity and social cohesion in South Africa. The framework synthesises constitutional imperatives, national

policy directives, the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, and multidimensional understandings of social cohesion, treating it as a core developmental goal to be systematically included into municipal governance and service delivery.

At its foundation lies the Constitution (RSA, 1996), particularly Section 152, which mandates local government to promote social and economic development, community participation, and a safe environment, thus providing both the legal and ethical basis for municipalities to contribute to nation-building. The framework draws heavily on the NDP(NPC, 2012), which identifies social cohesion as a key long-term goal linked to five sub-outcomes:

- promoting constitutional values and knowledge;
- equalising opportunities, inclusion and redress;
- increasing interaction across race and class;
- promoting active citizenry and leadership; and
- building a social compact for equity and prosperity.

It is further supported by MTSF Outcome 14, which prioritises nation-building and social cohesion with measurable indicators.

A distinctive element is the integration of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises cooperation, mutual recognition, solidarity, and collective well-being as a moral and practical ethic for local governance.

Social cohesion is conceptualised multidimensionally, encompassing inclusion (access to opportunities and services); belonging (shared identity and acceptance); social relationships (trust, intergroup contact, and social capital); participation (active civic engagement); and legitimacy (trust in institutions and fair governance). These conceptual framework dimensions distinguish between structural (e.g., inequality, service access, spatial integration) and perceptual (e.g., trust, belonging, fairness) dimensions of cohesion. In addition, they recognise local government's unique proximity to communities as ideal for addressing through planning, participation, and service delivery.

Guiding principles for social cohesion in the local sphere of government

Promoting national unity and the development of a social cohesion strategic framework should be firmly rooted in a set of clear, guiding principles. As such principles provide the normative

lens for the development of stakeholder roles, strategic pillars, institutional mechanisms, and monitoring systems presented in the chapter, advancing a transformative vision of developmental local governance capable of uniting communities and addressing South Africa's structural divisions. These principles also serve as an ethical foundation, strategic direction, and practical orientation for municipal efforts to foster national unity and social cohesion. They are derived from the Constitution (RSA, 1996); the NDP (NPC, 2012); the National Strategy for Social Cohesion and Nation-Building, Outcome 14 of the Medium-Term Strategic Framework, and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Together, they ensure that local government interventions move beyond ad hoc or symbolic activities towards systematic, transformative action that addresses both the structural and relational dimensions of cohesion.

Key principles that should guide all municipal policies, programmes, and service delivery initiatives aimed at building cohesive communities are briefly outlined in the subsections below.

Constitutional democracy and the rule of law

Municipalities are mandated to uphold the foundational values of the Constitution, including human dignity, the achievement of equality, the advancement of human rights and freedoms, non-racialism, non-sexism, and supremacy of the Constitution. Local governance processes must be transparent, accountable, and participatory, reflecting the democratic ethos enshrined in Section 152 of the Constitution (Masango & Mfene, 2017).

Human rights and equality

All interventions should promote and protect fundamental human rights while advancing both formal and substantive equality. This includes ensuring equal enjoyment of socio-economic rights and actively combating discrimination in all its forms (Abrahams, 2026; Dugard, 2015).

Unity in diversity

South Africa's rich multicultural, multilingual, and multi-faith heritage must be celebrated as a strength. Municipal programmes should foster a shared sense of national identity and belonging while respecting and accommodating diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious expressions (Devarakonda, 2020; Moodley, 2020).

Inclusivity and social justice

Priority should be given to the meaningful inclusion of historically marginalised groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, migrants, and the poor in decision-making processes, economic opportunities, and social life. Social justice demands that no community or group is excluded (Govender, 2016; Madonsela, 2020).

Redress and transformation

Municipalities have a constitutional duty to address the enduring legacies of apartheid, including spatial fragmentation, economic inequality, and racial divisions. Targeted redress measures in planning, budgeting, and service delivery are essential to correct historical imbalances (Sithenkosi & Nzewi, 2024; Sutcliffe, 2020).

Intergroup cooperation and dialogue

Local government should actively promote meaningful interaction and contact across race, class, and other social divides. This includes facilitating forums for dialogue, joint community projects, and intercultural exchange to reduce prejudice and build bridges across social divides (Roy & Sachdeva, 2025).

Social solidarity and mutual support

Drawing on the spirit of *Ubuntu*, municipalities should cultivate a culture of mutual recognition, empathy, cooperation, and collective responsibility. Social solidarity strengthens community resilience, especially during times of crisis or economic hardship (Ajitoni, 2024; Seroto, 2021).

Active participatory citizenship

Citizens must be empowered to move beyond passive recipients of services to active participants in local governance. This principle supports mechanisms such as ward committees, participatory budgeting, and community-based planning to enhance voice, agency, and ownership.

Civic responsibility

Residents and leaders alike should be encouraged to embrace their responsibilities towards the common good, including respect for public property, adherence to community norms, and contribution to local development.

National consciousness and pride in a South African identity

Municipal initiatives should nurture a positive sense of shared South African identity and pride, while simultaneously strengthening local identities and a sense of belonging to one's immediate community (Khaile *et al.*, 2021).

Roles and responsibilities across stakeholders

Effective implementation of a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach. No single actor can achieve meaningful social cohesion in isolation. Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities ensures accountability, prevents duplication of efforts, promotes synergy, and utilises the comparative strengths of different institutions and sectors. This section outlines the primary roles of key stakeholders in advancing national unity and social cohesion at the local level, while emphasising the importance of cooperative governance and partnerships.

Municipal councils

Municipal councils provide political leadership, oversight, and strategic direction for social cohesion initiatives (Mlambo & Mpanza, 2024). Its responsibilities include: approving policies, budgets, and programmes that include social cohesion into municipal operations; providing political accountability and ensuring that social cohesion remains a standing agenda item in council meetings; championing the framework at provincial and national forums to secure support and resources; and overseeing the performance of the municipal administration in delivering on social cohesion targets.

Municipal administration

The administration of a municipality is responsible for the operationalisation, coordination, and day-to-day implementation of the framework (Munzhedzi, 2020). Key responsibilities include: integrating social cohesion objectives into the IDP, SDF, LED strategy, and annual performance plans; establishing and managing a dedicated Social Cohesion Coordination Unit or focal point; planning, budgeting, implementing, monitoring, and reporting on social cohesion-related projects and interventions; facilitating interdepartmental coordination to ensure a whole-of-municipality approach; and building and maintaining partnerships with other stakeholders.

Ward committees

Ward committees serve as the critical link between municipalities and communities (Nemakanga & Mashamaite, 2025). Their responsibilities include facilitating grassroots participation and providing community feedback on social cohesion challenges and opportunities; identifying local social tensions, prejudices, and opportunities for intergroup cooperation; supporting the organisation of community dialogues, cultural events, and participatory planning processes; and acting as advocates for marginalised groups within their wards.

Civil society organisations and faith-based organisations

These actors bring community trust, mobilisation capacity, and specialised expertise (Onwuegbuchulam & Mtshali, 2022). Their roles encompass leading community outreach, awareness campaigns, and civic education programmes; facilitating dialogues, trauma counselling, and arts-based interventions that promote healing and mutual understanding; and monitoring social cohesion trends and holding local government accountable. It furthermore entails partnering with municipalities in the delivery of specific programmes, particularly in cultural integration and conflict resolution initiatives.

Private sector

The private sector contributes through economic inclusion and resource mobilisation (Adeosun *et al.*, 2023). Typical responsibilities include supporting inclusive LED initiatives that create jobs and skills opportunities for marginalised communities; investing in corporate social responsibility projects aligned with social cohesion goals (e.g., youth empowerment, infrastructure development in disadvantaged areas); and participating in multi-stakeholder forums and advisory committees. In addition, the private sector also plays a key role in promoting workplace diversity and contributing to broader community development efforts.

Strategic pillars and focus areas

The proposed Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework is built upon five interconnected strategic pillars. These pillars translate the guiding principles outlined earlier into concrete focus areas that municipalities can include into their core functions. Rather than treating social cohesion as a separate

add-on programme, the pillars position it as a cross-cutting priority that utilises existing municipal mandates in governance, service delivery, spatial planning, economic development, and community safety. Each pillar is aligned with the sub-outcomes of the NDP (NPC, 2012) and supports the broader goals of nation-building and social cohesion as articulated in national policy.

Inclusive governance and participation

This pillar emphasises deepening democracy at the local level through meaningful citizen engagement and responsive governance. It focuses on strengthening ward committees and other participatory structures so that grassroots voices shape local decisions, implementing participatory budgeting processes that give communities direct influence over resource allocation, rolling out civic education programmes on constitutional values, rights and responsibilities, and enhancing transparency and accountability to build public trust in local institutions. This pillar fosters active citizenship and a sense of ownership, directly supporting the NDP sub-outcome on promoting active citizenry and broad-based leadership (Grobler *et al.*, 2019).

Social and economic inclusion

This pillar addresses inequality and promotes equitable access to opportunities and resources. It includes targeted support for marginalised groups, particularly women, youth, persons with disabilities, and the poor through skills development and economic empowerment initiatives, pro-poor LED projects that create jobs and shared prosperity, expanded and equitable access to basic services such as housing, water, electricity, sanitation, healthcare, and education, and youth empowerment programmes that channel energy into constructive community development. This pillar responds directly to the NDP's focus on equalising opportunities, inclusion, and redress (Ngcaweni & Saloojee, 2021).

Cultural and social integration

This pillar harnesses arts, culture, heritage, and social interaction to build mutual understanding and a shared sense of belonging. Key activities include supporting arts, culture and heritage programmes such as public art, festivals and cultural events that celebrate diversity while promoting unity, organising multilingual and multicultural events and dialogues, implementing local campaigns against racism and xenophobia, and developing integration programmes

for migrants and minority groups. By increasing positive intergroup contact, this pillar advances the NDP sub-outcome on promoting social cohesion through increased interaction across race and class (Ndinga-Kanga *et al.*, 2020).

Safe, just and cohesive communities

This pillar focuses on safety, justice, and conflict resolution as foundations for liveable neighbourhoods. It involves strengthening community policing forums and partnerships with law enforcement, implementing violence and crime prevention strategies (including interventions on gender-based violence and substance abuse), promoting restorative justice and alternative dispute resolution at community level, and establishing early warning systems for social tensions. This pillar helps to create secure environments where citizens feel respected, thereby enhancing trust and solidarity (Njozela & Burns, 2019).

Spatial justice and integrated human settlements

This pillar tackles the persistent apartheid spatial legacy through inclusive planning. It prioritises the upgrading of informal settlements with access to well-located housing, the development of mixed-income and mixed-use areas that encourage social mixing across race and class, improved public transport and community facilities, and the inclusion of social cohesion considerations into SDFs to reduce fragmentation. This pillar is vital for addressing structural inequality and enabling everyday interaction in integrated living spaces (Makalima, 2024; Ntuli, 2024).

Integration with IDPs, LED, and performance management systems

For a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework to succeed, social cohesion cannot remain a standalone or peripheral initiative. It must be systematically included into the municipality's core planning, budgeting, implementation, and accountability instruments. This integration ensures that social cohesion becomes an embedded priority rather than an optional add-on, allowing municipalities to utilise existing resources, processes, and reporting cycles. The key instruments for achieving this are the IDP, LED Strategy, and performance management systems.

The IDP serves as the municipality's principal strategic planning document and five-year blueprint for development (Masipa, 2021).

Social cohesion should be elevated as a cross-cutting priority within the IDP, rather than confined to a single sector or chapter (Noyoo, 2025). Specific actions include explicitly incorporating social cohesion objectives and targets into the IDP's vision, strategic objectives, and development priorities; aligning social cohesion with the NDP sub-outcomes and MTSF Outcome 14 (nation-building and social cohesion); including dedicated projects and programmes under relevant key performance areas (e.g., good governance, community development, spatial planning, and economic growth); and ensuring that social cohesion considerations inform the situational analysis, stakeholder consultation processes, and prioritisation of projects during IDP review cycles.

LED strategies provide a powerful vehicle for advancing social and economic inclusion which is one of the strongest drivers of social cohesion (Mathonsi, 2016). Integration requires designing LED projects that deliberately target disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups to reduce inequality and promote shared prosperity. It also demands incorporating social cohesion outcomes into LED objectives, such as job creation through community-based enterprises, skills development programmes for youth and women, and support for small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) owned by historically disadvantaged individuals. This should be supported by municipal infrastructure and service delivery projects as instruments for local economic empowerment and intergroup cooperation (e.g., community maintenance programmes or joint ventures that bring different communities together). In addition, promoting inclusive procurement practices that broaden economic participation and build trust between the municipality and residents are essential success factors.

Sustainable implementation depends on accountability. Social cohesion goals must be embedded in the municipality's performance management framework to ensure that they are measured, monitored, and incentivised (Kamara, 2020). This involves incorporating relevant social cohesion indicators and targets into the municipal scorecard and the performance agreements of senior managers as well as aligning social cohesion deliverables with the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP). It also entails including social cohesion outputs and outcomes in quarterly and annual performance reports submitted to council and provincial authorities as well as linking performance rewards and consequences to the achievement of social cohesion targets where appropriate.

In addition, sustainable implementation should involve ensuring that departmental heads and programme managers are held accountable for including cohesion within their respective functions.

Capacity-Building and Institutional Readiness

Successful implementation of the Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework depends heavily on the institutional readiness and capacity of municipalities to plan, coordinate, implement, monitor, and sustain social cohesion interventions. Many municipalities currently lack dedicated structures, skills, and resources to treat social cohesion as a core strategic priority. This section outlines the key requirements for building institutional capacity and ensuring that municipalities are adequately prepared to drive the framework effectively.

Establishment of dedicated institutional mechanisms

To provide focused leadership and coordination, municipalities should establish a Social Cohesion Coordination Unit or designate a focal point within an existing department such as Community Services or Governance and Transformation, to serve as the central hub for integrating social cohesion across all municipal departments and functions (Khaile *et al.*, 2021). They should also create multi-stakeholder Social Cohesion Advisory Committees or Task Teams comprising representatives from the municipal council, administration, ward committees, civil society, faith-based organisations, and the private sector. These bodies should meet regularly to guide strategy, monitor progress, and address implementation challenges. In addition, municipalities should allocate dedicated funding and personnel within the municipal budget to support coordination, programme implementation, and capacity development activities. Such institutional arrangements ensure that social cohesion receives sustained attention rather than being fragmented across departments or treated as a once-off initiative.

Capacity-building for municipal officials and stakeholders

Targeted training and skills development are essential to equip officials and community structures with the competencies needed to advance social cohesion (Durokifa *et al.*, 2023). Capacity-building should focus on developing an understanding of the conceptual and

policy foundations of social cohesion, including NDP sub-outcomes, constitutional values, and its multidimensional nature through structural and perceptual indicators. It should also strengthen skills in inclusive and transformative planning by integrating social cohesion into IDPs, SDFs, LED strategies, and spatial planning processes. Training in conflict resolution and dialogue facilitation is necessary to support mediation, restorative justice, early warning systems for social tensions, and intergroup dialogue. Programmes should further promote cultural sensitivity and *Ubuntu* leadership by deepening appreciation of diversity, non-racialism, and principles of mutual recognition and collective well-being (Johnson *et al.*, 2024). In addition, municipalities need stronger monitoring, evaluation, and data-use capabilities to collect, analyse, and report on social cohesion indicators through community perception surveys and municipal data, while participatory governance training should empower ward committee members and community leaders in effective engagement and participatory budgeting. These programmes should be implemented progressively, beginning with senior management and cascading to frontline staff, ward committees, and community-based partners, with the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) playing a central role in developing standardised training modules and facilitating peer-learning exchanges between municipalities.

Institutional readiness assessment

Prior to full rollout, municipalities should conduct an institutional readiness self-assessment covering existing policies, structures, and budgets relevant to social cohesion, current staff skills and knowledge gaps, the availability of baseline data on local social cohesion indicators, the strength of partnerships with civil society and other stakeholders, and the alignment between current IDP and LED priorities and social cohesion goals (Legodi *et al.*, 2025). The findings of these assessments should be used to develop tailored capacity-building plans and guide resource allocation. Institutional readiness also depends on sustainable resourcing, requiring municipalities to ring-fence a portion of the municipal budget for social cohesion coordination and high-impact interventions, explore funding opportunities through national and provincial grants, donor support, and private sector partnerships, and integrate capacity-building costs into the workplace skills plan (WSP) and annual training budgets.

Capacity-building and institutional readiness are not optional extras but foundational prerequisites for translating the principles and pillars of the framework into real impact. By establishing dedicated coordination structures, investing in targeted training, conducting readiness assessments, and ensuring sustainable resourcing, municipalities can move from fragmented or symbolic efforts to a professional, systematic approach to building cohesive communities.

Monitoring and evaluation systems

A robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system is essential for the successful implementation of the Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework. Without systematic tracking, municipalities risk implementing activities without knowing whether they are achieving meaningful progress in building trust, inclusion, belonging, and national unity. An effective M&E system enables evidence-based decision-making, adaptive management, accountability to communities and council, and continuous improvement of interventions. The M&E system for social cohesion at the local level should be practical, cost-effective, and fully integrated into existing municipal reporting processes rather than creating burdensome parallel systems (Mabizela & Zwane, 2023).

The framework proposes a balanced scorecard approach that combines structural (objective) and perceptual (subjective) indicators. This balanced method recognises that social cohesion is shaped by both measurable material conditions and the lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of residents. By integrating these two dimensions, municipalities can obtain a more comprehensive understanding of progress towards cohesive communities. The monitoring and evaluation system should include indicators linked to the five strategic pillars of social cohesion. For inclusive governance and participation, indicators may include the percentage of residents participating in ward committee meetings, public hearings, and participatory budgeting processes, levels of satisfaction with consultation processes, and the number of civic education programmes conducted (Matlala, 2025b). For social and economic inclusion, indicators should track local inequality levels, household access to basic services, employment and skills opportunities created through LED projects, and representation of marginalised groups in leadership and procurement (Mubangizi, 2019). Cultural and social integration indicators may include the number of inclusive cultural and heritage events, participation in intergroup dialogues, and

reported levels of mutual respect. Safe, just, and cohesive communities can be measured through reductions in hate crimes and conflict, the functionality of community policing forums, and perceptions of safety and trust in institutions (Rosenberg & Kotschy, 2020). For spatial justice and integrated human settlements, indicators should assess progress in informal settlement upgrading, mixed-income housing developments, reduced spatial segregation, and improved access to amenities and transport in disadvantaged areas (Kakana *et al.*, 2025; Mashiri *et al.*, 2017).

Data for the M&E system should be drawn from multiple sources to ensure reliability and depth. These include municipal administrative data and annual reports, community perception surveys conducted annually or biennially, ward committee reports, and participatory monitoring feedback. Existing national surveys such as Afrobarometer, the Statistics SA General Household Survey, and the Indlulamithi Social Cohesion Barometer may also be adapted for local use. In addition, qualitative data from community dialogues, focus groups, and case studies of successful interventions can provide valuable insights into community experiences and outcomes (Nguliki, 2025).

The Social Cohesion Coordination Unit should be responsible for overall M&E coordination, with clear reporting lines to the Municipal Manager and Council. Social cohesion indicators should be integrated into the Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plan (SDBIP) and annual performance reporting cycles. Quarterly progress reports should be submitted to the Mayoral Committee or relevant portfolio committee, while an Annual Social Cohesion Report should be presented to Council and made publicly available. Independent verification or external evaluations every three to five years should also be undertaken to assess long-term impact and credibility (Cloete, 2018). To strengthen accountability, social cohesion targets and indicators should form part of the performance scorecards of the Municipal Manager. Progress towards social cohesion goals must be reflected in the municipality's annual report and IDP review documents. Results should also be communicated publicly through community meetings, local media, and digital platforms to promote transparency, citizen awareness, and active engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter establishes the principles, roles, strategic pillars, and institutional mechanisms needed for a practical Local Government

National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework for South African municipalities. Grounded in the Constitution, the National Development Plan: Vision 2030, Outcome 14 of the Medium Term Strategic Framework, and the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, it positions local government as a key driver of nation-building and social cohesion. The framework is guided by values such as democracy, equality, unity in diversity, inclusivity, social justice, redress, solidarity, active citizenship, and national consciousness. It outlines the shared responsibilities of municipal councils, administrations, ward committees, civil society, faith-based organisations, and the private sector in promoting collaborative governance. Five strategic pillars are identified, namely, inclusive governance and participation, social and economic inclusion, cultural and social integration, safe and cohesive communities, and spatial justice with integrated human settlements. The chapter further emphasises integrating social cohesion into municipal planning tools such as IDPs, LED strategies, SDFs, and performance systems, supported by coordination units, advisory committees, dedicated budgets, and capacity-building programmes. Monitoring and evaluation systems, along with future research, are highlighted as essential for accountability and continuous improvement. Ultimately, the chapter argues that municipalities, as the sphere closest to communities, can help to heal historical divisions, reduce inequality and prejudice, promote active citizenship, and build a shared South African identity rooted in constitutional values and *Ubuntu*.

Although the chapter provides a strong normative and operational foundation for a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Strategic Framework, important research gaps remain that must be addressed to strengthen its practical relevance across South Africa's diverse municipalities. Further empirical studies are needed to test the framework through pilot implementation in metropolitan, district, and rural municipalities, develop cost-effective local indicators for measuring social cohesion, and conduct longitudinal assessments of how municipal interventions influence trust, belonging, and civic participation over time. Additional research should examine the effects of coalition governance, political dynamics, traditional leadership, faith-based institutions, fiscal constraints, and innovative funding models on cohesion initiatives. More nuanced enquiry is also required into how interventions affect marginalised groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and migrants. Opportunities for future study include comparative case studies, participatory action research, mixed-methods approaches, digital data tools, and stronger cross-sphere learning between local,

provincial, and national government. Addressing these gaps through collaboration between municipalities, SALGA, CoGTA (Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs), academics, and research institutions will help to ensure that the framework remains evidence-based, adaptable, and capable of supporting municipalities in building a more united, inclusive, and prosperous South Africa.

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Chapter 6

Towards a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework

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Abstract

Promoting unity and solidarity amongst diverse groups is crucial to fostering social cohesion, reconciliation, and national development in South Africa, a nation with a history of deep-rooted divides and conflicts. In this way, coalition local governments can advance solidarity and harmony amongst the population. When opposing ideologies and political parties unite to form a government, they are compelled to cooperate to achieve common goals and develop solutions that benefit all residents. This collaborative method encourages parties to put aside personal agendas and prioritise the nation's overall welfare. It is argued that a comprehensive and coordinated framework is needed to measure and track progress made with social cohesion and national unity in the local sphere of government. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the content of the preceding chapters by highlighting the objectives, components, and pillars of a proposed local government national unity and social cohesion framework. This framework is intended to support municipal efforts by proposing strategies to strengthen social cohesion and to indicate how municipal programmes and services can enhance social cohesion.

Keywords: Collaboration, cooperation, framework, local government, national unity, reconciliation, social cohesion, solidarity.

Introduction

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, the country has made significant strides towards building an inclusive society grounded in

the constitutional values of human dignity, equality, freedom, and social justice. Nevertheless, persistent socio-economic inequalities, spatial segregation, unemployment, poverty, political polarisation, service delivery challenges, and social fragmentation continue to undermine efforts aimed at fostering national unity and social cohesion. These challenges are often most visible at the local level, where communities experience the direct consequences of exclusion, conflict, inadequate service delivery, and uneven development. Consequently, social cohesion and national unity have become increasingly important policy priorities for strengthening democratic stability, peaceful coexistence, reconciliation, and sustainable development.

In societies characterised by diversity in ethnicity, language, religion, culture, and socio-economic status, social cohesion is essential for promoting solidarity, mutual trust, collective identity, and cooperation amongst citizens. Within the South African context, the importance of social cohesion is closely linked to the country's historical legacy of apartheid, which entrenched divisions and inequalities across communities. Building cohesive communities, therefore, requires deliberate interventions that promote inclusion, participation, tolerance, collaboration, and shared developmental goals. Local government, as the sphere of government closest to communities, is uniquely positioned to facilitate these processes and to translate national ideals of unity into practical community experiences.

Coalition local governments have emerged as an increasingly significant feature of the contemporary South African political landscape. In municipalities where no single political party secures an outright majority, opposing political parties are compelled to cooperate and govern collectively in pursuit of shared objectives and service delivery outcomes. Although coalition governments are often associated with political instability and competing interests, they also present opportunities for collaboration, compromise, participatory governance, and inclusive decision-making. By encouraging political actors to move beyond narrow partisan interests, coalition governments can contribute to fostering social solidarity, reconciliation, and democratic cooperation within municipalities. In this regard, coalition governance may serve as an important mechanism for advancing social cohesion and national unity at the local sphere of government.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of social cohesion, there remains a need for a comprehensive and coordinated framework through which municipalities can measure, monitor,

and strengthen social cohesion and national unity initiatives. Existing interventions are frequently fragmented, inconsistently implemented, and inadequately aligned with broader developmental objectives. A coherent framework is, therefore, necessary to guide municipalities in integrating social cohesion principles into governance processes, community participation mechanisms, service delivery programmes, and developmental initiatives.

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the key insights emerging from the preceding chapters by highlighting the principles and pillars of a national unity and social cohesion framework. This framework is intended to support municipalities in their social cohesion responsibilities by identifying strategies through which municipalities can strengthen social cohesion, promote collaboration and reconciliation, and enhance the contribution of municipal programmes and services towards inclusive and cohesive communities. In doing so, the chapter examines the role of local government in fostering social cohesion and analyses its growing significance within the current South African geopolitical and governance context.

Social cohesion and national unity in perspective

As alluded to in Chapter 1, social cohesion refers broadly to the extent of unity, trust, inclusion, and cooperation amongst members of a society. The Council of Europe (2005:23) defines social cohesion as a “society’s ability to secure the long-term well-being of all its members, including equitable access to available resources, respect for human dignity with due regard for diversity, personal and collective autonomy and responsible participation.” In turn, Dragolov *et al.*, (2016:8) regard it as the “manifestation of an intact society, marked by solidarity and helpfulness, and by a kind of team spirit ... a desirable quality that makes a society liveable and sustainable”. Burns *et al.*, (2018) and the OECD (2012) add that it denotes a sense of togetherness that keeps societies united and harmonised, while Khaile *et al.*, (2022) focus on a shared sense of belonging and mutual respect between various social groups. Burns *et al.*, (2018) maintain that this sense of togetherness, harmony, and mutual respect usually leads to several advantages, including:

- stable democracies and civic participation;
- productivity and economic growth;
- quality of life for citizens;

- inclusivity and tolerance of diversity and multiculturalism;
- stronger conflict management and resolution, particularly after crises such as radicalism, violence, protests or political divisions, and in fragile states; and
- positive health outcomes, particularly related to the link between health and income inequality, employment and social support measures.

To realise these benefits, Riazi *et al.*, (2026) propose that six key dimensions and the related facets of social cohesion should be incorporated in initiatives to build social cohesion, namely –

- inclusivity and equality, encompassing facets such as equal opportunities, access to resources, and solidarity;
- social relationships and networks, including social capital, cooperation, networks, and group membership;
- civic participation and governance, entailing institutional trust, governance quality, and policy participation;
- shared identity and belonging, referring to collective identity, shared values, recognition, and place attachment;
- tolerance, diversity, and harmony that promote respect for norms, the absence of conflict, and social harmony; and
- quality of life and development, including individual well-being, equitable development, and demographic stability.

According to Van der Walddt and Fourie (2022), promoting social cohesion is particularly critical in South Africa, given the context of widening inequality, growing unemployment, and persistent racial inequalities. In the South African context, social cohesion is closely linked to nation-building and reconciliation; reduction of inequality and poverty; promotion of non-racialism and non-sexism; as well as social justice and human rights. Current government policy frameworks emphasise that social cohesion requires collective action across sectors, including the state, civil society, and the private sector. Furthermore, social cohesion is not only an outcome, but also a process of creating shared identities while respecting diversity (Bidandi, 2021; RSA, 2020). Without measurement, the resolution of key potential contributing factors that may influence social cohesion (inequality, poverty, violence, gender conflicts, and mistrust) will remain elusive, thereby complicating the formulation of effective policies and programmes in the local sphere of government to improve social cohesion and inclusive development (Van der Walddt, 2022). It is positive to note that social cohesion aligns with the

principles outlined in the National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NPC, 2012), emphasising active citizenship, inclusive economic growth, equal access to opportunities, and social justice.

According to the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) (2022), social cohesion establishes spatial justice and social balance, economic prosperity, personal health and vitality, and national identity and awareness of diversity within South African society. The activities to improve social cohesion should be based on a collaborative, participatory process to address practices that lead to or maintain social and economic inequality, disparities, and fractures (SALGA, 2022). Similarly, Struwig *et al.*, (2012) have defined social cohesion as the process of unifying South Africans across diverse backgrounds to create a common vision for working in the interests of the nation and all individuals therein. In addition, both the President's Fifteen-Year Review and the National Planning Commission recognise social cohesion as a key constituent of a broader development agenda for the country, an objective to be pursued in its own right, defining it as a "common attachment to the ethical principles of the constitution" (Chipkin & Ngqulunga, 2008:64). Furthermore, the Department of Social Development (DSD)'s *White Paper on Families* (DSD, 2021) identifies social cohesion as "a process of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community" (DSD, 2021). It is, thus, evident that notions of social cohesion are already strongly rooted in the country.

The foregoing perspectives collectively emphasise that social cohesion is not merely a theoretical or policy ideal within South Africa, but a nationally endorsed developmental imperative that requires deliberate institutionalisation through coherent local government strategies, programmes, and service delivery interventions capable of translating constitutional values and shared societal aspirations into tangible community outcomes.

Whereas social cohesion encompasses the degree of social integration, trust, and solidarity amongst individuals and groups, national unity refers to a shared sense of belonging and commitment to a common national identity. It denotes a shared sense of identity, belonging, and commitment to a common national vision (OECD, 2012). In addition, it emphasises collective solidarity while respecting diversity. The OECD (2012) further states that national unity refers to

the sense of togetherness, solidarity, and collective identity amongst the people of a nation. It is the feeling that all citizens, regardless of their differences, belong to the country and work together towards common goals and interests.

Social cohesion principles and dimensions

The former Department of Arts and Culture (DAC)'s National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and Cohesive South African Society (DAC, 2012) outlines the following principles that guide the country's social cohesion policy drive:

- constitutional democracy;
- human rights and equality;
- non-racialism, non-tribalism, and non-sexism;
- unity in diversity;
- inclusivity and social justice;
- redress and transformation;
- intergroup and community co-operation;
- social solidarity;
- active and participatory citizenship;
- civic responsibility; and
- national consciousness.

The absorption of these principles in a local government national unity and social cohesion framework is essential to fostering inclusive governance, strengthening democratic participation, promoting social solidarity and reconciliation, and enhancing the capacity of municipalities to build resilient, peaceful, and cohesive communities.

In addition to the principles of social cohesion, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (2009:14) has identified two main dimensions of social cohesion: first, reducing disparities, inequalities and social exclusion; and second, strengthening social relations, interactions and ties. According to the UNDP (2009), social cohesion also involves "tolerance of, and respect for diversity (in terms of religion, ethnicity, economic situation, political preferences, sexuality, gender and age) – both institutionally and individually", and non-cohesive societies risk "increased social tension, violent crime, targeting of minorities, human rights violations, and, ultimately, violent conflict." Rocha *et al.*, (2020) propose that these dimensions should be operationalised by pursuing the following four fundamental approaches:

- a socio-economic approach that promotes growth and prosperity;
- a cultural approach, which emphasises common values and identity;
- an ecological approach that stresses sustainability and ecological justice; and
- a political approach, which emphasises social partnerships, good citizenship and civil society engagement.

Collectively, these dimensions and proposed approaches should act as pillars of a local government national unity and social cohesion framework.

Local government's social cohesion mandate

As outlined in Chapter 2, local, district and metropolitan municipalities in South Africa play a central role in fostering social cohesion by fostering local democracy and inclusive development. This role has become a central concern in post-apartheid South Africa, given the country's history of racial segregation, inequality, and social fragmentation. The local sphere of government is constitutionally mandated to promote democratic and accountable governance; ensure provision of basic services; encourage community participation; and promote social and economic development. In this regard, Khaile *et al.*, (2024) argue that municipalities are key agents in achieving national unity, diversity, and social justice imperatives. They add that one of the most important contributions of municipalities in this respect is to foster a sense of belonging amongst residents. This should be achieved by creating inclusive public spaces, supporting community engagement initiatives, and by encouraging participation in local decision-making. However, they maintain that recent research shows that local government policies often lack clear and coherent strategies for how municipalities should actively operationalise this mandate. Furthermore, despite democratic progress since 1994, deep divisions rooted in apartheid-era policies continue to shape socio-economic and spatial realities (RSA, 2020). In addition, stronger policy clarity, improved capacity, and targeted interventions are required to realise this constitutional mandate fully. Ultimately, building a cohesive society in South Africa depends on collaborative efforts between government, communities, and other stakeholders, with local government acting as a key facilitator of social unity and inclusion. In this regard, Van der Walddt and Fourie (2022) aver that municipalities play a key role in addressing

spatial inequalities through focused initiatives such as integrated development planning, urban and rural development programmes, and housing and land reform interventions.

Municipalities' direct proximity to citizens enables them to cultivate trust through engagement on key local issues, such as the provision of community spaces and essential services. The strength of these relationships and the corresponding trust in local governance serve as a vital stabilising force. This suggests that social cohesion in most states is fragmented rather than uniform, with varying levels of trust at the community level. It should be noted, however, that several demographic and socio-economic factors influence the degree of public trust in local councils. Research conducted by Prokopenko (2025) indicates that trust is not consistent across different demographics. For example, older women and those without a university degree tend to express lower levels of trust in local councils.

As confirmed in Chapter 4, recent studies highlight the importance of developing tools (e.g., the Municipal Social Cohesion Barometer) to measure levels of trust, inclusion, and community participation. Without such tools, it is difficult to design effective interventions at the local level (Van der Walddt & Fourie, 2022). Furthermore, municipalities need to implement robust performance management and demonstrate predictability (Fakazi, 2022). Beyond the fact that this is now a legislated requirement going forward, it is a rational requirement to drive an internal culture of performance in municipalities. This aspect should also be absorbed into a framework that promotes national unity and social cohesion.

Social cohesion in municipal coalitions

The era of coalition local governance, especially since the 2016 municipal elections, has marked a significant shift in how social cohesion-building unfolds at the local level. Coalition governments have introduced a new dynamic characterised by negotiated power-sharing and increased collaboration amongst diverse political formations.

According to Mlambo and Mpanza (2024), such an environment presents both opportunities and challenges for social cohesion. On the one hand, coalitions have opened avenues for more inclusive governance, encouraging smaller parties and marginalised groups to participate actively in decision-making processes. This enhanced inclusivity can foster a sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility amongst different communities. The insights gained

from coalition governance include the importance of dialogue, compromise, and patience in handling divergent interests, all key ingredients for social cohesion. Challenges, however, remain significant, such as political instability within coalitions, frequent policy paralysis, and the risk of undermining trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, the potential for increased polarisation and factional disputes can threaten social harmony. Despite these hurdles, coalitions hold promise by forcing political actors to prioritise consensus-building and foster a culture of negotiation and respect, which are essential for strengthening social bonds in increasingly diverse local societies (Khumalo, 2025).

Makhanya (2025) argues that political collaboration and cooperation are two important ways that coalition local government advances solidarity and unity amongst disparate populations. When opposing ideologies and political parties unite to form a government, they are compelled to cooperate to achieve common objectives and develop solutions that benefit all residents. This collaborative method encourages parties to put aside personal agendas and prioritise the nation's overall welfare. Coalition governments support the development of unity and solidarity amongst disparate groups by encouraging cooperation and teamwork (Makhanya, 2025). Additionally, by offering forums for inclusive decision-making, coalition governments and governments of national unity foster solidarity. A framework for national unity and social cohesion should make provision for the dynamics associated with coalition government in the local sphere of government.

The Government of National Unity and coalition governments in South Africa have been instrumental in fostering social cohesion, nation-building, and reconciliation in a nation still severely damaged by the legacy of apartheid. These forms of governance have created forums for communication, cooperation, and inclusivity, enabling many groups to work together to address structural injustices and advance shared objectives. Even though these governance systems have faced obstacles and criticism, they have still proved crucial in promoting social cohesion, empathy, understanding, and unity amongst the country's various populations (Makhanya, 2025). The ability of coalition governments and the government of national unity to bring together representatives of various political parties, civil society organisations, and social groupings for productive discourse and decision-making processes has been one of their main advantages. This approach should help to embed system thinking and

a more holistic view of the social cohesion intervention and its context into the awareness of everyone involved in its development, delivery, and evaluation. In the context of local government, social cohesion highlights the extent to which people are cooperative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation (Burns *et al.*, 2018).

Municipal service delivery as social cohesion instrument

One key domain through which municipalities can foster trust in communities is effective service delivery. They are responsible for providing essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and housing. These services are fundamental to improving living conditions and reducing inequality. In terms of the Constitution (RSA, 1996), municipalities must provide democratic and accountable governance; deliver basic services; promote social and economic development; and encourage community participation (RSA, 1998b). These functions directly support social cohesion and unity. In addition, the White Paper on Local Government (RSA, 1998a) introduced the concept of developmental local government, which requires municipalities to work with communities to meet social, economic, and developmental needs. Municipalities are expected to:

- promote democratic participation;
- deliver equitable services;
- reduce poverty and inequality;
- facilitate local economic development; and
- build inclusive communities.

Developmental local government contributes directly to social cohesion by improving citizen trust and reducing social exclusion (RSA, 1998a).

The SALGA highlights that municipal service delivery should promote social cohesion through spatial transformation, community engagement, and conflict resolution (SALGA, 2022). By involving communities in decision-making processes, municipal councils should build trust, accountability, and a sense of belonging amongst citizens. A practical example can be seen in eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, where initiatives focus on improving infrastructure and delivering services in previously disadvantaged areas such as Umlazi and KwaMashu. These efforts contribute to reducing

inequality and promoting social inclusion and, therefore, should be considered in the design of a local government national unity and social cohesion framework.

Towards a Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework

The legacy of racial segregation, inequality, and social exclusion continues to affect communities today. In response, the government introduced the National Strategy for Developing and Inclusive and a Cohesive South African Society on 7 June 2012 under the auspices of the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture. This served as a draft discussion document by highlighting the role that municipal councils, SALGA, the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) and traditional leaders should play in promoting national unity and social cohesion. It was suggested that the National Strategy be supported by several core pillars, namely, inclusive planning and spatial redress; active citizenry; constitutional values and *Ubuntu*; and effective and uncorrupted governance.

Consistent with the commitments in its manifesto, the government developed the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2014/2019, with 14 strategic outcomes. The fourteenth outcome of the current MTSF is “a diverse socially cohesive society with a common national identity”, referring to social cohesion and nation-building. As part of the framework, five sub-outcomes provide the basic architecture of the MTSF, namely, fostering constitutional values; equal opportunities, inclusion and redress; promoting social cohesion across society through increased interaction across race and class; promoting active citizenry and leadership; and fostering a social compact. The Government’s Programme of Action (PoA) for Outcome 14 on social cohesion and nation-building has a total of 42 performance indicators and 42 performance targets against which to gauge performance. Chapter 4 of the latest MTSF 2024/2029 also makes specific mention of social cohesion and nation-building in section 4.4.6.

To give effect to this strategic outcome, the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture was mandated to spearhead initiatives for nation-building and social cohesion through social transformation. The Department’s vision was framed around creating a socially cohesive nation. Therefore, the Department acts as the custodian

of nation-building strategies; social cohesion policies; cultural integration programmes; heritage promotion; intercultural dialogue initiatives; and constitutional values advocacy. This aligns directly with municipal objectives relating to inclusive governance, reconciliation, and community cohesion. For municipalities, this provides opportunities for building community partnerships, mobilisation, and civic education support. The latter is specifically aimed at conflict resolution and social integration. The Department, furthermore, encourages municipalities to design suitable local arts and heritage programmes, to host community festivals, and to run programmes aimed at promoting intercultural sensitivity and understanding. This is particularly important in municipalities characterised by historical divisions, migration pressures, and multicultural communities. The recent incidences of racial tension and xenophobic attacks in the country accentuate the importance of such initiatives.

Framework construction

Based on the literature review, policy analysis, and the synthesis of insights derived from the preceding five chapters, a proposed Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework is presented (see Figure 6.1). The framework should not be regarded as a rigid or stand-alone prescriptive model, but rather as an integrated policy-oriented approach and strategic local governance instrument that draws upon existing legislative and policy frameworks, the Constitution (RSA, 1996), national development priorities, and contemporary principles of democratic local governance. It provides municipalities with a coherent conceptual and operational foundation through which national unity, social cohesion, reconciliation, inclusion, and participatory governance can be advanced within local communities.

The framework further seeks to align social cohesion objectives with existing municipal planning, governance, and service delivery mechanisms, thereby embedding nation-building principles within everyday municipal functions and developmental interventions. In this regard, the framework promotes a holistic and collaborative approach that integrates service delivery, spatial transformation, economic inclusion, ethical governance, public participation, cultural integration, and community development into a unified local governance agenda. It also recognises that social cohesion is a dynamic and evolving process that requires continuous institutional commitment, intergovernmental collaboration, community engagement, and evidence-based monitoring to ensure sustainable and inclusive developmental outcomes.

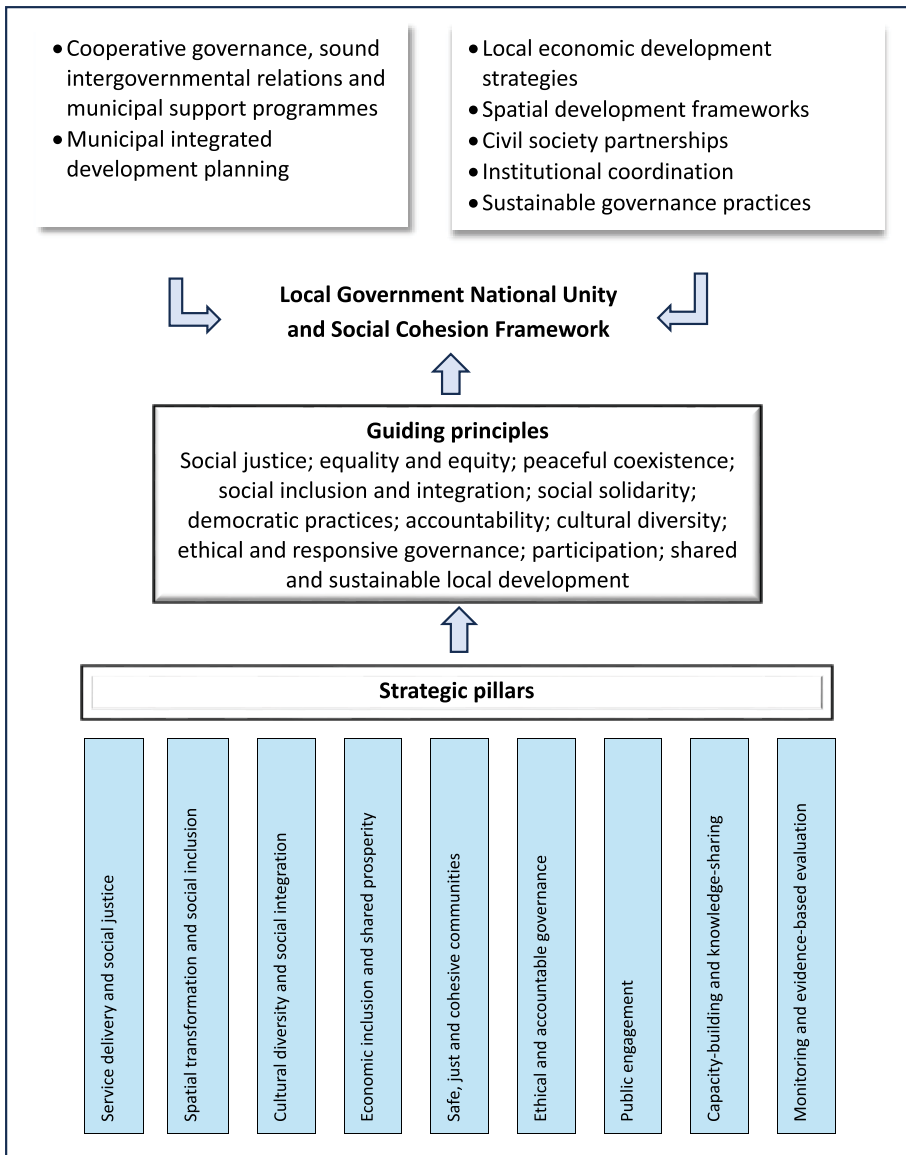


Figure 6.1: A Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework

Source: Authors' own construction

Contextual framework dimensions

The framework is embedded in a macro local governance environment characterised by South Africa's system of cooperative governance and intergovernmental relations. The outer layer, thus, represents the enabling environment required to sustain social cohesion initiatives

across municipalities. This environment should be characterised by adequate municipal support programmes by national and provincial governments as well as support initiatives from the SALGA and the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA). In addition, the framework should be aligned with existing municipal planning imperatives such as integrated development planning, local economic development strategies, spatial development frameworks, and civil society partnerships. These contextual factors should all support sustainable local governance practices and functions.

Guiding principles

The inclusion of guiding principles within the Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework is of critical importance, as these principles provide the normative foundation and strategic direction necessary to guide municipal decision-making, governance practices, and community interventions. Guiding principles establish a common value base through which municipalities can consistently interpret and implement social cohesion objectives in alignment with constitutional values, developmental priorities, and democratic governance imperatives. They further promote coherence, accountability, inclusivity, ethical conduct, and participatory governance across diverse municipal contexts, while ensuring that programmes and initiatives remain responsive to local realities and community needs. Importantly, the guiding principles serve as a unifying reference point for municipalities, stakeholders, and communities by fostering a shared understanding of the values, behaviours, and institutional commitments required to strengthen national unity, reconciliation, social justice, and sustainable community development.

The key principles proposed for the framework are –

- social justice
- equality and equity
- social inclusion and integration
- social solidarity
- democratic practices
- accountability
- cultural diversity
- ethical and responsive governance
- inclusion and participation
- community resilience-building

- shared and sustainable local development
- peaceful coexistence

Strategic pillars

The strategic support pillars of the Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework are essential because they translate the framework's guiding principles into coherent, actionable areas of intervention that can be systematically implemented at municipal level. These pillars provide the structural architecture through which municipalities can integrate social cohesion objectives into core governance functions such as service delivery, spatial planning, economic development, community safety, and participatory governance. By organising complex and interrelated developmental priorities into clearly defined yet interconnected domains, the pillars enhance policy coherence, improve coordination across municipal departments, and strengthen alignment with national and provincial priorities. They also ensure that social cohesion is not treated as a peripheral programme, but rather embedded as a cross-cutting outcome within existing municipal systems and planning instruments. In this way, the strategic support pillars enable municipalities to operationalise national unity and social cohesion in a practical, measurable, and sustainable manner that is responsive to local conditions while remaining aligned with broader constitutional and developmental objectives.

The following strategic pillars are suggested:

1. Service delivery and social justice that make equitable access to municipal services and developmental opportunities possible.
2. Spatial transformation and social inclusion through urban planning that makes provision for integrated settlements and reduced segregation.
3. Cultural diversity and social integration that promote tolerance, intercultural dialogue, and shared identity.
4. Economic inclusion and shared prosperity by reducing socio-economic disparities and by promoting local economic participation.
5. Safe, just and cohesive communities that enhance community safety, social stability, and peaceful coexistence.
6. Ethical and accountable local governance characterised by transparency, responsiveness, integrity, and public trust.
7. Communication and public engagement that promote active citizenship, participatory governance, stakeholder engagement, and civic dialogue.

8. Capacity-building and knowledge-sharing that support institutional learning, leadership development, and municipal collaboration.
9. Monitoring and evidence-based evaluation through continuous assessment, policy learning, and adaptive governance.

Monitoring progress

As far as the last pillar is concerned, key performance indicators should be designed to monitor progress made with the implementation of the framework. These indicators may include the following:

• percentage of residents participating in local governance initiatives and official planning and consultative processes such as integrated development planning forums, ward committees, public consultations, and participatory budgeting • frequency and quality of community engagement processes • service delivery satisfaction levels • conflict incidence and resolution rates • social cohesion programme coverage • number of recorded community disputes, protests, or service-related conflicts and the percentage resolved through structured dialogue or mediation • frequency of positive interactions between different social, cultural, or economic groups within communities (e.g., participation in shared spaces, events, or initiatives). • youth participation in civic and social cohesion programmes • number of volunteer initiatives • spatial integration indicators • proximity of low-income households to economic opportunities	• percentage of municipal procurement or local economic programmes benefiting informal traders and disadvantaged groups • public safety perception index • civic education and awareness levels • percentage of residents aware of municipal programmes, rights, and participation mechanisms • degree of alignment between integrated development plans (IDPs), spatial development frameworks (SDFs), and social cohesion objectives measured through audit or compliance scoring • trust levels in municipal councils • inequality metrics (e.g., Gini coefficient at municipal level) • representation of marginalised groups in ward committees and other decision-making mechanisms • number of cultural events hosted by the municipality, aimed at promoting inclusion • percentage of residents reporting a sense of belonging, trust in neighbours, and shared identity.
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All of these indicators should be absorbed in a social cohesion index and national unity barometer to gauge community belonging and shared identity.

The successful implementation of the framework is also dependent on political will at all spheres and tiers of government as well as the allocation of adequate finances and other resources to implement plans to achieve social cohesion targets. The framework should also be supported by strategies for the realisation of the support pillars. These strategies should have immediate and longer-term targets, and there should be a clear, visible link between development planning, social conditions, the needs of communities, and macro-economic policy and planning. This requires clear roles and responsibilities for the respective political and administrative structures of municipalities as well as for partners such as civil society organisations, local businesses, non-governmental organisations, and development agencies.

Conclusion

Social cohesion influences socio-economic development. While nurturing a more cohesive society is an important policy goal in itself, it is argued that a comprehensive, coordinated effort is needed to measure and track progress at the local government level nationwide. Social cohesion includes both addressing the individual needs of citizens for personal growth and individual freedom of choice. At the same time, it also includes promoting collective aspects of social justice, economic prosperity and equitable access to resources. Increased cohesion will, thus, ensure that all citizens live in a safe environment, with common rules for resolving conflicts.

Because of the country's past, social cohesion remains a critical goal for South Africa's development and stability. While progress has been made, persistent inequalities and historical divisions continue to pose challenges. Although challenges such as inequality and unemployment persist, continued efforts at the local level can strengthen social cohesion and promote sustainable development. By working together, government, communities, and other stakeholders can create a society where all citizens feel valued, included, and empowered.

The proposed Local Government National Unity and Social Cohesion Framework offers a comprehensive and integrated approach to strengthening inclusive governance, democratic participation, and sustainable community development in South Africa.

For municipalities, the framework provides a practical and structured guide to embed social cohesion objectives within core planning, budgeting, and service delivery systems, thereby enhancing institutional coherence, accountability, and responsiveness to diverse community needs. For government more broadly, it contributes to improved policy alignment across spheres of governance by linking constitutional imperatives, national development priorities, and local implementation processes in a unified and measurable manner. For local communities, the framework creates meaningful opportunities for participation, representation, and social integration, while promoting trust, mutual understanding, and shared ownership of development outcomes. Ultimately, the framework advances a transformative agenda aimed at fostering resilient, inclusive, and cohesive communities where national unity is actively built through everyday governance practice and collective local action.

It is evident that the local sphere of government is central to building cohesive, inclusive societies. By implementing the structured framework grounded in equity, participation, and collaboration, municipalities can transform diversity into a strength and contribute meaningfully to national unity. A commitment to social cohesion at the local level ultimately strengthens the nation. It can create resilient communities capable of navigating social, economic, and political challenges together. Establishing trust and confidence in governance institutions has been made possible by the emphasis on advancing accountability, transparency, and good governance in coalition governments and the government of national unity. These governance systems have proven their dedication to providing for the public good and protecting the rule of law by maintaining the highest standards of integrity, preventing corruption, and encouraging public oversight. This dedication to excellent administration has been essential in building trust and accountability across various groups, thereby facilitating societal cohesion and togetherness.

Building national unity and social cohesion in South Africa requires sustained, coordinated effort across all spheres of government, with local municipalities at the forefront. By adopting the comprehensive and inclusive framework, local government can transform communities into spaces of trust, opportunity, and shared identity. The vision of a cohesive South Africa, which is rooted in the ideals of the Constitution and realised through active citizenship, remains achievable. However, it demands commitment, innovation, and collective action.

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