

OPINION

# Social cohesion almost unthinkable in SA

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SOCIAL cohesion has become the buzzword in South Africa of late. Yet, as a nation, we would like to hypothesise that this nation-building project has largely failed.

The more important dilemma facing the nation now is how to address the growing gap between the super-rich and the extremely poor.

The growing inequalities, chronic unemployment and increasing poverty have remained a challenge. Social cohesion in such conditions is almost unthinkable.

How do we co-exist amid such social and economic contradictions? What then is the meaning of social cohesion when the majority cannot afford basic needs?

To interrogate the meaning of social cohesion under such circumstances, the Democracy Development Programme (DDP) and partners, Durban University of Technology (DUT) and Peace Oasis International (POI), co-hosted a national social cohesion conference in Durban last week. The theme was "Moving from identity-based conflict to a shared future".

The conference contended that identification along the lines of rank, class and privilege are the real issues that the nation needs to talk about authentically if citizens, as a collective, are to work towards a shared future.

The conference attracted more than 100 delegates from across departments in government, private and public sectors; including academia, political parties, labour unions, citizen interest groups and chapter nine institutions.

The message from the delegates was clear: until socio-economic conditions are addressed, meaningful and peaceful co-existence among citizens across races will not be achieved. The conference identified the binding constraints to enabling social cohesion:

- Inadequate skills among the majority, limiting their capacity to engage in the mainstream economy

meaningfully;

- The skewed distribution of land and productive assets, excluding the majority from access to them;

- The slow pace of basic services delivery in previously under-served and historically disadvantaged settlements;

- Increased corruption in government, across all spheres;

- Inadequate civic education on issues about migration and migrants as a key to peaceful integration into communities;

- Increased racial tensions.

The conference noted that these root causes are linked to South Africa's history of exclusion, which remained entrenched in land, capital, labour and product markets.

Based on the discussions, a set of concrete recommendations were identified for the promotion of dialogue and democracy:

- Increase civic education throughout the nation;

- Deliberate action by government and its social partners, including the private sector, to work speedily towards job creation so that the majority of unemployed citizens can gain access to economic opportunities;

- Government and social partners to work speedily towards improving access to economic opportunities for women and other marginalised populations, such as people living with disabilities;

- Mobilise all citizens, including government and civil society, in promoting gender relations in society to ameliorate the increasing rates of women and children abuse;

- Advocate government act decisively against all forms of racism, a scourge that is still latent in our society. Non-racialism is critical for building a socially cohesive nation;

- Mobilise political parties to enhance their political messaging from one of division due to competition for votes and increased footprint to one of promoting unity in a diverse society towards peaceful co-existence;

- Advocate stern action by the judiciary against all perpetrators of hate crimes in society;

In conclusion, it was acknowledged that the challenge was inconsistency in messaging. Contradictory messaging slows down efforts aimed at promoting peaceful co-existence.

We cannot preach non-racism while promoting racism and trying to attract foreign direct investment.

Facing many ways at once limits the government's ability to suture these contradictions and creates conditions for social conflict while cohesion is preached.

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