

## Perceptions of Municipal Councillors and Officials on Promoting Social Cohesion in Selected South African Metropolitan Municipalities

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the perceptions of municipal councillors and officials regarding their role in promoting social cohesion within local government contexts. Social cohesion is closely tied to how communities experience trust, inclusion, and equitable service delivery, making local government a critical actor in fostering unity and resilience. The perceptions of municipal councillors and officials are therefore essential, as their attitudes, decisions, and practices directly shape how social cohesion is promoted or hindered within municipalities. A qualitative research approach was employed, using a multiple case study design to explore two metropolitan municipalities in South Africa, the City of Cape Town and the City of Ekurhuleni. These municipalities were purposively selected as they explicitly identify the facilitation of social cohesion, particularly through fostering trust and a sense of belonging, in their policy and strategic documents. The main findings of this study revealed three interrelated challenges that undermine the promotion of social cohesion at the municipal level: a lack of commitment, a lack of political will, and inadequate budget allocation. The lack of explicit budget allocations undermines the effectiveness of social cohesion policies at the local level. Municipalities must therefore consider integrating social cohesion into their budgeting processes as a strategic priority, thereby signalling their commitment to building cohesive, inclusive, and resilient communities.*

**Keywords:** social cohesion; municipalities; local government; communities; South Africa

### Introduction

The literature indicates that social cohesion has garnered widespread interest from supranational levels in both developed and developing countries, addressing complex policy challenges. Notably, social cohesion is widely used in the international policy environment

by organisations such as the World Bank, the European Union, as well as the United Nations-Habitat (UN, 2008) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Barolsky, 2016). In this regard, the UNDP (2020) indicates that social cohesion has gained prominence as an explicit goal pursued by the UNDP in conflict and fragile settings. Within the international academic landscape, social cohesion has received attention from various disciplines.

It has become an enduring subject of academic focus in sociology and psychology (Schiefer et al., 2012). Chan, To, and Chan (2006) observe that social cohesion has been explored across social science disciplines, including sociology and social psychology, and continues to receive significant focus as a subject of debate among spatial planners, geographers, and political scientists. Social cohesion has attracted extensive focus from political science (Schiefer et al., 2012). Fonseca et al. (2018: 233) also highlight that social cohesion is clearly visible in “psychology, social psychology, sociology, mental health, and public health”. Thus, the literature positions social cohesion as context-based, often used to respond to specific challenges in different and various spheres of life. In this regard, there are various perspectives on how social cohesion is understood and utilised. For instance, Cox and Sisk (2017) regard social cohesion as a valuable intervention for peacebuilding. This perspective is shaped by the understanding that polarisation resulting from conflict erodes social cohesion. Hence, the United Nations (2021) utilises social cohesion to foster peaceful societies. According to the United Nations (2019), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targeting peace are anchored on social cohesion. It is therefore acknowledged that social cohesion plays a crucial role in contributing to stability and constructive dialogue, which in turn helps build sustainable peace. In addition, social cohesion has become a perspective through which Western Europe has traditionally understood and developed responses to the challenge of migration. For the receiving countries, most of which are in Western Europe, the meaningful integration of immigrants into communities relies on social cohesion. De Wenden (2019) suggests that social cohesion is an integral part of the debates on addressing increasing migration across Europe. De Wenden (2019) and Nerone (2019) highlight that social cohesion is at the centre of debates on inclusion, well-being, diversity and integration of immigrants in European society. Furthermore, in some countries, especially industrialised countries in the North, social cohesion focuses more on promoting diversity, economic and social progress, and development (Fenger, 2012). In these situations, social cohesion was primarily a response to the process of globalisation and its associated economic impact (Chan et al., 2006). Thus, the pressures on many governments, especially those in North America, Europe and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Pacific region, are using social cohesion to address the growing political disenchantment arising from the increasing income polarisation, persistently high levels of unemployment, and widespread social exclusion (Fenger, 2012).

In the South African context, social cohesion continues to be an important concept as the country grapples with divisions along racial, economic, and political lines over 30 years after the end of apartheid (Roberts et al., 2021). Recent survey data present a complex picture regarding South Africans' views on national unity and integration. While most South Africans express pride in being South African, many still perceive divides within society and politics (Afrobarometer, 2024). Similarly, analyses suggest moderately positive in-group and out-group views across racial lines, though tensions and lack of contact still manifest between specific communities (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2016). Similarly, scholars have examined multiple dimensions of social cohesion within this landscape. Structural elements, such as poverty, inequality, and lack of access to services, emerge as obstacles to cohesion, although interpersonal trust shows signs of gradual improvement (Chigunta et al., 2015). At a subjective

level, perceptions of fairness, reciprocity between groups, and lived experiences of integration also shape assessments of unity (Delaney, 2019). Consequently, some experts advocate for multidimensional measurements that blend objective indicators, such as income inequality, with survey data on perceived divides and alienation (Bernstein, 2015). While history casts a long shadow, shared spaces, values, and goals may enhance bonds between groups (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2016). Policy and public attitudes also matter – government services and programs can play an integrative role just as xenophobia and racism undermine social solidarity (Crush et al., 2015). Such insights highlight promising directions while underscoring the need for further analysis. Hence, this paper aims to explore the perceptions of municipal councillors and officials regarding their role in promoting social cohesion within the local government sphere. The article is structured into seven sections. Section One provides the introduction, while Section Two discusses the relevance of social cohesion. Section Three contextualises the role of local government, and Section Four outlines the methodological approach. Section Five presents the findings and discussion, followed by the conclusion in Section Six. Finally, Section Seven advances key recommendations arising from the study.

### **Relevance of Social Cohesion**

Social cohesion is a concept that has garnered substantial attention from both local and international academic and policy communities. Mekoa and Busari (2018: 107) assert that both “academics and policy makers have unanimously arrived at a consensus that social cohesion is a concept that is enjoying an ever-increasing popularity”. Schiefer and Van der Noll (2018) express similar views regarding the recognisable inflationary use of social cohesion by scientists and policy makers.

Global socio-economic developments, challenges, and responses to issues such as inequality, social fragmentation, migration, urbanisation, and multiculturalism have thrust social cohesion to the centre of global political discourse, governance, and policy agendas. Holtug and Mason (2010) state that responses to global social, economic and political challenges have contributed to making social cohesion a policy concern of developed and transitional countries alike. The UNDP (2020) describes the relevance of social cohesion as an imperative of the twenty-first century, characterised by the widespread decline of diversity and inclusivity due to the high incidence of conflict, increasing identity-based tensions manifesting in racial and ethnic tensions, religious intolerance, and divisive nationalist and xenophobic tendencies. This period has also witnessed the unprecedented increase in cultural heterogeneity within national borders. Watters, Ward and Stuart (2020) indicate that multiculturalism and the related challenges of diversity and heterogeneity have contributed to the relevance of social cohesion.

Social cohesion has undoubtedly gained traction as an important policy instrument or objective. According to Lefko-Everett (2016), social cohesion has gained relevance and expression in policies of multilevel governance – at global, national, and local levels – as governments confront contemporary social and economic challenges. International organisations such as the United Nations have endorsed social cohesion as part of their interventions for peace and development (UN, 2021).

Kolev (2017) highlights that social cohesion has become a policy objective in both developed and developing countries, aiming to address the increasing vulnerabilities of societies, political conflicts, and economic disruptions. Green et al. (2011) observe that social cohesion is identified as a possible solution to the diminishing sense of collective identity among citizens. In addition, growing tendencies such as the formation of sectarian, nationalistic, cult-

like groups, which negatively impact social bonds, have necessitated the use of social cohesion as a policy intervention. Structural inequalities in societies have led different countries to implement various interventions aimed at improving social cohesion (Hewstone & Reynolds, 2018; Stiglitz, 2010).

Burns et al. (2018) assert that there is consensus in the literature that social cohesion stabilises democracy and civic participation. According to Burns et al. (2018), social cohesion enables citizens to respond to the consequences of economic shocks. It is also regarded as helpful in promoting greater inclusivity and tolerance of diversity and multiculturalism. Social cohesion is also regarded as having beneficial properties for stronger conflict management and resolution. It empowers a society to undertake appropriate and sustainable measures to address violence, polarisation, mistrust, marginalisation, exclusion and injustice. McKenna et al. (2018: 1) maintain that social cohesion has become an approach to deal with situations in which “people living in racially and ethnically heterogeneous communities perceive others as a greater threat to resources and to their way of life”.

Social cohesion has gained relevance as a means of promoting strong social bonds within families, communities, and society. Fonseca et al. (2018: 231) state that “social cohesion is an important construct that is at the heart of what humanity currently needs”. It has become increasingly relevant and necessary as people, communities, and nations become progressively individualistic, sectarian, and exclusive. This suggests that social cohesion has become an instrument of promoting quality families, socially strong communities and cohesive societies.

Available evidence also suggests that social cohesion has gained prominence in promoting social relations, tolerance, and respect for diversity, while being acknowledged as relevant in reducing disparities, inequalities, and social exclusion. Green, Janmaat and Cheng (2011) assert that social cohesion has properties that can respond to increasing levels of individualism and structural inequalities in society. In particular, social cohesion is also regarded as having the potential to mitigate against the adverse effects of group-based difference, especially othering. Cherry (2020: 1) describes othering as “a phenomenon in which some individuals or groups are defined and labelled as not fitting in within the norms of a social group”.

The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society (2016: 17) defines othering as “a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities such as religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone”. Societies commonly practise othering to classify groups into binary notions of “us” and “them” or “others” (Powell & Menendian, 2017). According to Powell and Menendian (2017), such labelling with the intention to exclude is one of the problems of the twenty-first century that is primarily shaped by group-based differences and prejudice. Othering also entrenches the notion of an in-group versus those who are seen as being part of the out-group. For example, othering is used to identify and exclude others as not being part of the family, community and society. Therefore, if not addressed through interventions such as social cohesion, othering has the potential to prejudice, exclude, marginalise, discriminate and reinforce biases and negative attitudes against different groups of people (Cherry, 2020). Social cohesion is therefore considered a valuable approach to address the problem of othering.

## Contextualising Local Government in South Africa

Local government in South Africa is positioned as the sphere of government closest to the people and tasked with promoting democratic, accountable governance and equitable service delivery. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) mandates municipalities to ensure sustainable development, provide basic services, and encourage community participation in governance. This constitutional vision links local governance not only to service provision but also to building inclusive communities where citizens feel recognised and valued. In this regard, local government is central to advancing social cohesion by creating platforms where diverse groups can interact, deliberate, and collaborate on developmental priorities.

The concept of “developmental local government,” introduced in the White Paper on Local Government (1998), emphasises the transformative role municipalities should play in addressing socioeconomic inequalities. According to Parnell and Pieterse (2002), municipalities are not merely administrative institutions but are critical actors in shaping inclusive development through participatory planning and service delivery. By reducing inequality and promoting shared access to resources, local government directly contributes to the conditions necessary for social cohesion, which Afrobarometer (2024) defines as the degree of trust, tolerance, and cooperation among members of society. Thus, municipalities have a dual responsibility: delivering material services and fostering relationships of trust that bridge social divides.

Moreover, the structures of local government, such as ward committees and Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), are designed to promote participatory democracy and strengthen civic engagement. Hofmeyr and Govender (2016) emphasise that social cohesion is closely linked to citizens’ ability to engage in decision-making processes and feel that their voices are heard in governance. When communities actively participate in local governance, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and a shared identity, which in turn strengthens the social fabric. Local government, therefore, serves as both a service delivery institution and a site for fostering dialogue, cooperation, and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

However, challenges such as corruption, service delivery protests, and weak institutional capacity often hinder the local government's potential to advance social cohesion (Mubangizi, 2019; Mubangizi, 2023). Research shows that citizens are more likely to distrust government institutions and disengage from civic processes when municipalities fail to meet basic needs or address inequality (Roberts et al., 2019). This erosion of trust weakens social cohesion and fuels social fragmentation. Strengthening local government capacity, improving accountability, and ensuring equitable service provision are therefore essential not only for good governance but also for creating inclusive, cohesive communities that embody the democratic ideals of South Africa’s constitutional order.

Additionally, municipal councillors and officials play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion by serving as the direct link between communities and government structures. Thus, councillors, as elected representatives, are responsible for articulating community needs in municipal councils, ensuring the formulation of inclusive policies, and mediating conflicts that may arise within diverse communities (De Visser, 2009). Officials, on the other hand, are tasked with implementing policies and delivering services that address socio-economic disparities and foster equitable development. When councillors and officials engage with communities transparently and responsively, they build trust in local governance and strengthen the sense of belonging among residents (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2016). In this way, the everyday practices of councillors and officials, through participatory forums, community

dialogues, and equitable service delivery, are central to advancing social cohesion in South Africa's municipalities.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising a multiple case study design, to explore the perceptions of municipal councillors and officials regarding the promotion of social cohesion. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. A total of 30 participants were interviewed, comprising officials, municipal councillors, and ward committee members from the City of Cape Town and the City of Ekurhuleni.

The City of Cape Town was selected as a case study because it represents one of South Africa's most diverse and complex metropolitan areas, where inequality, segregation, and challenges to social cohesion are highly evident. As the country's legislative capital, the city embodies the historical legacy of apartheid spatial planning, which continues to influence settlement patterns, access to services, and socio-economic opportunities (Turok, 2012; Seekings, 2015). At the same time, Cape Town is often recognised for its innovative governance approaches and efforts to foster inclusion and participatory development (Parnell & Pieterse, 2010). Its multicultural demographics, coupled with persistent socio-economic disparities, provide a critical context for examining how municipal councillors and officials perceive and engage with the promotion of social cohesion.

In addition, one of South Africa's biggest metropolitan municipalities and a major player in the nation's social and economic fabric, the City of Ekurhuleni, was selected as a case study. Known as the "aerotropolis" due to its proximity to OR Tambo International Airport, Ekurhuleni is characterised by rapid urbanisation, industrial development, and high levels of migration (Horn, 2020). These dynamics have created both opportunities and challenges for fostering social cohesion, as the municipality continues to grapple with issues such as service delivery protests, informal settlements, and socio-economic inequality (Masiya, Davids, and Mangai, 2019). Moreover, Ekurhuleni's diverse population, comprising people from different cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, makes it a strategic site for understanding how municipal councillors and officials conceptualise and promote social cohesion within a rapidly changing urban environment.

During the interviews, the researcher facilitated the discussions by asking both prepared and follow-up questions, allowing participants to describe their perceptions and experiences without suggestions or leading prompts. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of data collection, the transcripts were carefully reviewed and analysed. The analysis followed Creswell's (2013) coding protocols, where the data were systematically organised, and codes were developed. This inductive process enabled the emergence of themes and sub-themes in each case (Creswell, 2013). These themes and sub-themes are presented and discussed in the findings section below. The study also received ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of Western Cape (HS19/1/13). Following this approval, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings were conducted.

## Findings and Discussion

The study's objective was to explore the perceptions of social cohesion and its promotion among municipal councillors and officials in South African municipalities. Two key themes and sub-themes emerged on the perceptions of social cohesion. These include (1) promoting social cohesion and (2) understanding social cohesion.

### *Perceptions of the Promotion of Social Cohesion*

Perceptions of social cohesion are critical. Black and Street (2014) state that exploring perceptions helps develop insights into complex phenomena. Regarding social cohesion, the literature is unanimous that different stakeholders often perceive it differently. Dassopoulos and Monnat (2011), Schiefer et al. (2012), Burns et al. (2018), and Pollet and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2018) suggest that people's perceptions of social cohesion are often context-based, biased, and characterised by contestations and disagreements. My study highlights that there are individuals who support social cohesion, as well as those who are not in favour of it (Abrahams, 2016; Gower, 2017). It was therefore stated that the perceptions of stakeholders in the metros regarding the promotion of social cohesion are critical. These perceptions are likely to reflect their institutional knowledge and commitment to social cohesion. In response to the question regarding their perceptions on the promotion of social cohesion, a theme and sub-themes emerged.

- *Promotion of social cohesion*

Both the City of Cape Town and the City of Ekurhuleni make claims regarding their efforts to promote social cohesion. The City of Cape Town mentions in its successive IDPs that it is promoting social cohesion. The City of Cape Town's 2012 IDP states that it is aligning its IDP to what the NDP envisages regarding social cohesion. This IDP also indicates that it is promoting social cohesion to make citizens feel at home (CoCT, 2012). On the other hand, the City of Ekurhuleni's political leaders have made several statements regarding the promotion of social cohesion. In addition, on a rare and singular occasion in its IDP, the City of Ekurhuleni states that it promotes social cohesion to transform the lives of its people from conditions of abject poverty, underdevelopment, and racism (CoE, 2012).

The perceptions of participants regarding the promotion of social cohesion by their respective metros are expressed in the following quotations:

*"There is a lack of seriousness from my metro regarding social cohesion" (CCTC3).*

*"I am yet to see and experience it. So far, it is not happening in my municipality" (CCTCO1).*

*"I do not want to say it is not being promoted. But, I am not aware of it" (CEC2).*

*"We are failing dismally. Our metro, especially our political leaders, are not serious about promoting social cohesion" (CEO3).*

The perceptions regarding the promotion of social cohesion are distinctly negative. It is, however, understandable that the promotion of social cohesion in metros is perceived negatively. The divisions, emanating from racial, political, ethnic and class differences, are stark. Some politicians are benefiting from the current divisions to bolster their political ideologies. This view is consistent with Chan et al. (2006), who maintain that high social divisions frustrate efforts to promote social cohesion. The sub-themes are discussed below.

- ***Lack of commitment***

One of the key findings is the lack of commitment by local government actors to translate policy intentions into practice. While municipalities often acknowledge the importance of social cohesion in their strategic documents, implementation is sporadic and under-resourced. This reflects what has been described as a “policy practice gap,” where formal commitments remain largely symbolic rather than operationalised in concrete programmes or measurable outcomes. Such gaps undermine community trust in local institutions and weaken the perceived credibility of municipal leadership.

Additionally, social cohesion requires an unwavering commitment from local governments (Cloete & Kotze, 2009). In this regard, the Department of Arts and Culture (RSA, 2012a) emphasises the role of commitment in social cohesion. On the other hand, the NDP suggests that social cohesion is a long-term commitment that requires the involvement of all spheres of government (NPC, 2012b). In the same vein, Norton and De Haan (2013) agree that promoting and achieving social cohesion requires active commitment from all, especially the government's political leadership.

Participants in this study expressed negative perceptions about the promotion of social cohesion in their respective metropolitan areas. The theme of a lack of commitment emerged from the voluminous responses of participants regarding their perceptions of how their respective metros promote social cohesion. The finding from this theme is that participants from the City of Cape Town perceive the promotion of social cohesion negatively. Municipal councillors, officials and ward committee members from the City of Cape Town shared their perceptions of social cohesion as follows:

*“In my opinion, there is a lack of commitment towards social cohesion” (CCTO1).*

*“In my opinion, social cohesion has become a slogan. Our leaders just talk about social cohesion” (CCTO2).*

*“I think that the city occasionally, during the city address, makes statements on social cohesion” (CCTO3).*

The data revealed that municipal councillors and ward committee members from the City of Ekurhuleni also perceive the promotion of social cohesion by their municipalities in a negative way. It was noted that the municipal councillors blamed others for the lack of effective promotion of social cohesion. Participants described the promotion of social cohesion as follows:

*“From the side of my municipality, I honestly think that there is a lack of visible commitment to social cohesion” (CECO1).*

*“We need to see actions from the executive driving this initiative, ensuring all parties involved have a common understanding” (CECO5)*

- ***Lack of political will***

Participants expressed their concern about the lack of political will to promote social cohesion. Participants highlighted that a lack of political will results in a lack of decisive commitment

towards social cohesion. In particular, municipal officials in the City of Ekurhuleni displayed exasperation regarding the absence of political will and leadership in promoting social cohesion. These participants described the lack of political will to promote social cohesion in the following manner:

*“To be frank with you, there is a lack of political will. I only hear about social cohesion as a political rhetoric” (CEO1).*

*“We are good with speeches, but we are lacking when it comes to implementing decisions as a municipality” (CEC4).*

*“Political leaders emphasise the importance of social cohesion when they present their speeches. From there, you do not really see much effort in pursuing the commitments” (CEO2).*

Municipal councillors from the City of Cape Town shared similar views on promoting social cohesion. Despite being councillors who are expected to exercise political will, they blame the Democratic Alliance (DA) leadership of the City of Cape Town for not providing sufficient political leadership to promote social cohesion. The participants shared their perceptions of promoting social cohesion as follows:

*“Continuing racial divisions and marginalisation of Black people shows that the political leadership of the City of Cape Town is not serious about social cohesion” (CCTC02).*

*“Unfortunately, the municipal council does not provide leadership in terms of how social cohesion should be promoted” (CCTC05).*

*“In my view, social cohesion is becoming a buzzword, especially for our leaders. You only hear about social cohesion during the State of the City Address” (CCTC02).*

The notion of political will in the context of social cohesion entails a resolve, intent, and motivation on the part of political leaders to take action. Regarding the promotion of social cohesion, it is about the commitment of political leaders, both individually and collectively, to actively pursue social cohesion. Fenger (2012) describes political will as the exercise of the authority and competency of local government to develop policies that may directly or indirectly affect social cohesion. Thus, a lack of political will militates against the need to provide leadership and collective support for social cohesion. The lack of political leadership contradicts Fenger’s (2012) argument that the government needs to provide leadership through initiating policies and programmes to build the required foundation for social cohesion. Similarly, the lack of political will to promote social cohesion hinders the advancement of the vision of social cohesion as outlined by the NPC (2012b) in the NDP. Furthermore, the lack of political will to promote social cohesion fails to demonstrate the spirit of the outcome of the National Social Cohesion Summit held in Kliptown, Soweto, in 2012, at which all structures of government committed to promoting social cohesion (RSA, 2012a). Notably, closely connected to weak commitment is the lack of political will among elected representatives. Political will is a decisive factor in ensuring that social cohesion moves beyond rhetoric to become an actionable priority. However, councillors are often more concerned with short-term political gains, electoral calculations, and service delivery issues that are perceived as more urgent to constituents. This focus limits the extent to which cohesion is championed as a strategic municipal goal. The absence of political will also reflects deeper structural challenges, including polarised party politics, limited incentives for councillors to invest in long-term social outcomes, and competing priorities within resource-constrained environments.

- *Lack of an explicit budget to promote social cohesion*

Participants articulated concern about the absence of an explicit budget dedicated to promoting social cohesion. Several participants highlighted that there is limited awareness and prioritisation regarding budget allocation for this purpose. They viewed this as an indicator of a lack of seriousness in advancing social cohesion initiatives. A municipal councillor in the City of Ekurhuleni emphasised that allocating a budget for activities such as team-building is crucial, as these activities play an important role in fostering trust among stakeholders:

*“As a councillor for more than 10 years, I have not come across a budget allocated to promote social cohesion. Even though we understand the importance of social cohesion.” (CEO1)*

*“To be honest with you, there is no specific budget allocated to promote social cohesion. I do not think there is an understanding that, in order for us to succeed in promoting social cohesion, there must be a budget allocated.” (CCT03)*

Participants consistently emphasised that without dedicated resources, efforts to strengthen social cohesion remain largely rhetorical rather than practical. This aligns with existing literature, which emphasises that policy intentions must be accompanied by adequate financial and institutional support to be effectively implemented (Smith, 2019; Cloete & Wissink, 2020).

The expressed concern by councillors that there is “no specific budget allocated to promote social cohesion” reflects a broader issue of prioritisation within municipal governance. According to Moyo (2021), budgeting is not only a technical process but also a political one that signals the values and priorities of an institution. The absence of a social cohesion budget, therefore, may be interpreted as an indicator of the lack of seriousness with which municipalities approach this policy area.

Furthermore, the results suggest that there is a limited understanding within local government structures of the link between resource allocation and the success of social cohesion initiatives. Participants argued that dedicated financial support is necessary for successful social cohesion promotion through relevant programmes, such as community dialogues and team-building activities. This view is consistent with international research, which points to the importance of sustained funding in fostering inclusive communities and building trust among diverse groups (Kraler, 2022).

The councillors’ reflections also point to a gap between policy discourse and practical implementation. While national frameworks often emphasise the importance of social cohesion (Department of Arts and Culture, 2016), the translation of these priorities into municipal budgets appears inconsistent. Haghighi and Takian (2024) argue that effective governance requires not only visionary policies but also the institutional capacity and financial mechanisms to operationalise them. Without strong institutions, well-designed policies may fail to achieve their intended outcomes, as bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited human resources, and weak coordination can hinder implementation. Similarly, even the most comprehensive policies cannot be realised without adequate financial support, as resource constraints limit the ability of government agencies to deliver services, monitor progress, and sustain long-term initiatives. Thus, the combination of strategic policy design, robust institutional structures, and sound financial planning is essential for translating policy visions into tangible results that address societal needs and promote inclusive development.

Overall, this finding reveals that the absence of explicit budget allocations undermines the effectiveness of social cohesion policies at the local level. Municipalities must therefore consider integrating social cohesion into their budgeting processes as a strategic priority, thereby signalling their commitment to building cohesive, inclusive, and resilient communities.

- ***Lack of commitment by the administration***

Participants explained that a lack of commitment is evident among municipal officials. Officials from both metros conceded that they have internalised the promotion of social cohesion as their responsibility. However, participants described their nonchalant attitudes as follows:

*Although the city is making pronouncements regarding the promotion of social cohesion, in my view, the administration is failing to guide the political structures on how to promote social cohesion (CEO3).*

*The municipal officials do not regard things like social cohesion as important (CCTO1).*

*I do not recall the City Manager discussing social cohesion. That goes to other senior officials of the metro (CCTO2).*

Like all other processes within the municipality, senior management's commitment to promoting social cohesion is a fundamental requirement. Initiatives such as social cohesion can only be successfully conceptualised, planned and implemented if there is commitment from the senior administration of the metros. In this regard, Olsen (2008) states that the achievement of social cohesion is primarily shaped by senior administrators in the municipality.

Disturbingly, the administration's lack of commitment constitutes a serious setback to promoting social cohesion. Chapter Four of this thesis highlights that promoting social cohesion requires more than inspirational statements; instead, it needs action from all stakeholders, including the administration. The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) states that there is a need to institutionalise the goals of the NDP (RSA, 2017). To this effect, the DPME emphasises that "structures and processes need to be institutionalised in various government structures to ensure a systematic response to changing conditions in support of the achievement of development goals" (RSA, 2017, p. 12). The institutionalisation, as expected by the DPME, is critical in the actualisation and socialisation of the commitments outlined in the NDP. Failure to institutionalise these goals of the NDP, which include commitments made on social cohesion, will lead to them remaining rhetorical inspirations that are never implemented. Furthermore, administrative structures play a critical role in ensuring policy continuity and effective implementation. However, the findings suggest that municipal officials, such as councillors, often exhibit a limited commitment to advancing social cohesion. This may be attributed to capacity constraints, competing departmental mandates, and a lack of clarity about how social cohesion aligns with existing performance indicators. Without strong administrative ownership, initiatives risk being fragmented, short-lived, or dependent on individual champions rather than embedded within institutional processes.

- ***Lack of prioritisation/integration of the promotion of social cohesion***

The majority of the participants indicated that there is a lack of prioritisation of social cohesion in their respective metros. Participants highlighted that social cohesion is very obscured in the

list of priorities. Most councillors from the City of Ekurhuleni indicated that social cohesion is not discussed in their caucuses, committees and even council meetings. Participants from both metros described the lack of prioritisation of social cohesion as follows:

*I do not think social cohesion is regarded as important in my municipality (CEC3).*

*In our interaction with our councillor as a ward committee, social cohesion has never been discussed (CEWC1).*

*In my opinion, the City of Cape Town does not consider social cohesion a key policy objective or priority. I also think that we lack the vision to incorporate social cohesion in our work and programmes (CCTC4).*

Meaningful promotion of social cohesion requires that it be embedded in the governance and other processes of the metros. Prioritisation or integration ensures that the promotion of social cohesion is included on the metro's agenda. Similarly, promotion is evidenced in the actual normalisation of social cohesion in municipal institutional processes. De Beer (2014) states that social cohesion requires prioritisation in government policies and plans. However, participants, mainly those from the City of Cape Town, indicated that their respective metros are not prioritising/integrating the promotion of social cohesion effectively in their planning and implementation processes. Finally, the study highlights the inadequate prioritisation and integration of social cohesion across municipal programmes. Although policy frameworks recognise social cohesion as a developmental imperative, it is often treated as a secondary or "add-on" issue, overshadowed by more immediate service delivery concerns such as housing, water, and electricity. This lack of integration means that cohesion is seldom mainstreamed into core planning instruments, such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), or linked to budget allocations. As a result, interventions remain ad hoc, uncoordinated, and challenging to sustain.

Taken together, these themes suggest that while municipalities acknowledge the normative value of social cohesion, institutional and political realities constrain its effective promotion. A shift is required from symbolic recognition to practical integration, supported by political leadership, administrative buy-in, and adequate resource allocation. Without such a shift, social cohesion risks remaining peripheral, limiting municipalities' ability to foster inclusive and resilient communities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the perceptions of municipal councillors and officials regarding the promotion of social cohesion within South African municipalities, with a focus on the City of Cape Town and the City of Ekurhuleni. The main findings of this study revealed three interrelated challenges that undermine the promotion of social cohesion at the municipal level: a lack of commitment, a lack of political will, and inadequate explicit budget allocation. The lack of explicit budget allocations undermines the effectiveness of social cohesion policies at the local level. Municipalities must therefore consider integrating social cohesion into their budgeting processes as a strategic priority, thereby signalling their commitment to building cohesive, inclusive, and resilient communities.

These challenges highlight the persistence of a policy practice gap, where social cohesion is acknowledged in municipal documents but rarely embedded in systematic programmes or measurable outcomes. Unless political leadership and administrative structures demonstrate more substantial commitment, and unless social cohesion is integrated into core municipal

strategies such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), the concept risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

At the same time, the study highlights opportunities for municipalities to expand their role. Building political will, strengthening administrative accountability, and embedding social cohesion into mainstream governance processes can help ensure that municipalities act as catalysts for more inclusive and cohesive communities. Ultimately, advancing social cohesion at the local level is not only a normative ideal but a practical necessity for sustainable development, social stability, and democratic consolidation in South Africa.

## **Recommendations**

The findings of this study highlight several pathways through which municipalities can strengthen their role in promoting social cohesion in South African municipalities.

### ***Strengthen Political Leadership and Will***

Social cohesion requires strong political leadership at the local level. Municipal councillors should be capacitated to appreciate the strategic importance of cohesion beyond electoral considerations. Building this capacity would enable councillors to position cohesion as a long-term governance priority rather than a short-term political tool. Political parties also play a critical role by explicitly incorporating cohesion into their policy agendas and ensuring that elected representatives actively champion inclusive practices within their constituencies.

### ***Embed Social Cohesion in Municipal Planning and Budgeting***

For social cohesion to move beyond symbolic recognition, it must be systematically embedded in municipal planning instruments. Frameworks such as the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), the Spatial Development Framework (SDF), and annual performance plans should incorporate cohesion objectives as measurable and actionable outcomes. In addition, municipalities should establish dedicated budget lines for cohesion-related programmes. Without such financial commitments, interventions risk being ad hoc and unsustainable.

### ***Enhance Administrative Commitment and Accountability***

The administrative arm of local government plays a decisive role in the continuity and effectiveness of cohesion initiatives. Municipal officials should be trained to integrate social cohesion principles into their departmental work, ensuring that programs directly link inclusivity with service delivery outcomes. Furthermore, performance management systems should incorporate measurable indicators of cohesion. This would provide clear lines of accountability and ensure that cohesion is not treated as an optional activity but as a core component of municipal performance.

### ***Develop Localised Measurement Tools***

Accurate measurement is essential for assessing progress. Municipalities should develop or adapt localised social cohesion barometers to capture community-level data on trust, belonging, and inclusion. These tools would provide an evidence base to inform decision-making, programme design, and the allocation of resources. By grounding interventions in empirical data, municipalities can ensure that strategies respond to the specific social dynamics of their communities.

### *Foster Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships*

Municipalities cannot achieve social cohesion in isolation. Strong partnerships with civil society organisations, community-based groups, academia, and the private sector are necessary for co-designing and implementing effective programmes. Engagement with faith-based organisations and cultural associations can also facilitate inclusive dialogue and support community-building activities. Such partnerships help pool resources and enhance the sustainability of cohesion initiatives.

### *Prioritise Community Participation and Dialogue*

Public participation platforms should be strengthened to go beyond legal compliance, functioning as genuine spaces for inclusive dialogue. Municipalities should expand initiatives that promote intercultural and intergroup interaction, including cultural festivals, sports events, and the creation of shared public spaces. These programmes can enhance social trust, reduce tensions, and foster a stronger sense of belonging within communities.

### *Address Structural Barriers to Cohesion*

Finally, municipalities must align cohesion initiatives with broader developmental priorities. Structural issues such as inequality, unemployment, and spatial segregation remain significant barriers to building inclusive communities. Integrated approaches that connect service delivery with cohesion outcomes are essential for long-term impact. Addressing these root causes will ensure that social cohesion efforts are meaningful, sustainable, and transformative.

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