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Op-ed

CAN SOUTH AFRICA LEARN FROM FINLAND'S MODEL FOR SOCIAL COHESION?

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In a world fraught with growing social divisions, economic disparities, and racial tensions, nations that manage to foster social cohesion stand as beacons of hope. The ability of diverse populations to live together peacefully and productively is essential for both political stability and economic growth. South Africa, a nation known for its historical struggles with inequality and division, finds itself at a crossroads. Thirty years into its democracy, social cohesion remains what feels like an elusive goal. However, perhaps there are lessons to be learned from countries like Finland, which has managed to create a relatively harmonious society despite its own challenges with diversity.

South Africa's Struggle for Unity

The recently conducted GovDem survey paints a sobering picture of South Africa's social landscape. Despite the hope that accompanied the end of apartheid in 1994, the dream of a "rainbow nation" is fading. Less than half of the population believes that a united South Africa is possible. Trust among racial groups is worryingly low, with only 40% of white South Africans expressing trust in their Black compatriots, and vice versa. Even more disheartening, only 39% believe that the nation's reconciliation process is moving in the right direction.

This decline in social cohesion is alarming, as it threatens not only the fabric of society but also South Africa's potential for economic growth. Without a foundation of trust, collaboration, and unity, nations struggle to thrive. The question arises: What more can be done to repair these fractures?

Why Look to Finland?

Finland, often celebrated for its education system and strong social welfare state, may seem like an unlikely model for South Africa. The two countries differ vastly in terms of history, economy, and demographics. Yet Finland's success in fostering social cohesion, despite its own challenges with diversity, offers valuable insights for South Africa's policymakers.

Finland has a unique history of managing linguistic and cultural diversity. For centuries, it has balanced the interests of its Finnish and Swedish-speaking populations. Today, although Finland remains predominantly Finnish-speaking, the country has taken deliberate steps to protect and promote the rights of its Swedish-speaking minority. This is achieved through comprehensive language policies, cultural rights, and the promotion of social inclusion from an early age.

Could South Africa adopt a similar approach to managing its own diverse population, where racial, ethnic, and cultural divisions remain deeply entrenched?

Education: The Great Equaliser

One of Finland's most powerful tools for promoting social cohesion is its education system, which ensures that students can learn in their mother tongue. Finland provides high-quality, free education in both Finnish and Swedish, allowing children to study in their native language while maintaining equal access to educational resources. This system fosters a deep respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, ensuring that students from different language backgrounds thrive separately in their own language streams, rather than learning together in a single system.

Åbo Akademi University, Finland's largest Swedish-speaking tertiary education institution, offers a wide range of programs and serves as a key educational hub for the Swedish-speaking community. Additionally, Institutions like Hanken School of Economics, with campuses in Helsinki and Vaasa, also support Swedish-speaking Finns by offering business education primarily in Swedish. Additionally, universities across Finland, including the University of Helsinki, offer courses and programs in Swedish, ensuring educational equity for this linguistic group.

Finland's commitment to linguistic diversity and bilingualism is reflected in its efforts to provide Swedish-speaking Finns with equal educational and professional development opportunities. These measures uphold the rights of the Swedish-speaking and contribute to a culturally inclusive society.

In contrast, South Africa's education system still struggles with vast inequalities, partly a legacy of apartheid, where many indigenous languages remain marginalised. While some efforts have been made to promote mother-tongue instruction, the system often falls short in providing sufficient resources and support for all official languages. By enhancing access to education in their own languages, South African students could not only improve their learning outcomes but also gain a stronger sense of identity and cultural pride.

Investing in mother-tongue education reforms would allow South Africa to strengthen inclusivity, ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed in their own linguistic and cultural context. Finland's example shows that when children are given the chance to learn in their own language, the foundations of social cohesion are built, as each group can maintain its distinct identity while contributing to the nation as a whole.

Cultural Rights and the Importance of Language

A key element of Finland's social cohesion strategy is its protection of cultural and linguistic rights. The country's Swedish-speaking minority is not only recognized but actively supported through policies that guarantee access to education, media, and public services in Swedish. This respect for cultural identity has played a significant role in creating a sense of belonging among all Finns, regardless of their linguistic background.

South Africa, with its 12 official languages, could benefit from a similar approach. While the country's Constitution guarantees linguistic rights, in practice, many of the nation's indigenous languages are marginalised. More investment is needed to preserve and promote these languages, ensuring that all South Africans feel represented and respected. Just as Finland recognizes the importance of maintaining its linguistic diversity, South Africa must do more to celebrate and protect its own.

The Power of Long-Term Commitment

Perhaps the most important lesson South Africa can learn from Finland is the importance of sustained, long-term efforts to promote social cohesion. Finland's success did not happen overnight. It took

decades of consistent investment in education, social policies, and community engagement to achieve the level of unity the country enjoys today.

South Africa, by contrast, has often relied on short-term initiatives and underfunded programs to address its social cohesion challenges. While the government has established institutions like the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission), these efforts are often hampered by a lack of resources and political will.

If South Africa is serious about fostering unity, it must commit to long-term, well-funded programs that address the root causes of division. This means investing in local community initiatives, expanding cultural and linguistic protections, and ensuring that social cohesion becomes a central focus of national policy.

Challenges in Adapting Finland's Model

Of course, Finland's model cannot be transplanted wholesale to South Africa. The two countries face very different challenges. South Africa's complex history of racial segregation, coupled with its high levels of economic inequality, presents obstacles that Finland has never faced. Moreover, Finland's population is far smaller and more homogenous compared to South Africa's multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic society.

However, the core principles of Finland's approach—respect for diversity, investment in education, and a long-term commitment to social inclusion—can and should be adapted to fit South Africa's unique context.

Recommendations for South Africa

To build a more cohesive society, South Africa could take several steps inspired by Finland's model:

Strengthen local community engagement: Create local forums for dialogue and collaboration, similar to Finland's "Good Relations Programme," to promote understanding between different population groups.

Expand linguistic and cultural protections: Ensure that all South African languages and cultures are given equal respect and resources, creating a sense of belonging for all citizens.

Invest in education reforms: Focus on creating more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities, helping to bridge the social divides that still exist between South Africa's different communities.

South Africa's journey towards social cohesion is far from over. But by looking to international examples like Finland, the country can find new strategies to address its own challenges. Building a cohesive society requires time, effort, and a willingness to learn from others. With the right policies and a long-term commitment, South Africa could be one step closer in achieving the dream of a united, peaceful, and prosperous nation.

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