REALISING DEMOCRATIC GAINS THROUGH SOCIAL COHESION IN AFRICA

CONCEPT NOTE

13TH ANNUAL EISA SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

EISA will organise its 13th annual symposium on 20-21 November 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa, to share experiences, harness lessons, and explore the concept of 'social cohesion' as a means to building more resilient and sustainable democracies. The symposium will provide a platform for dialogue among key democratic governance stakeholders such as representatives of political parties, members of parliament, civil society organisations, academia, as well as the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The symposium aims to generate policy-oriented recommendations with a view to shaping future direction in fostering and contributing to the consolidation of democracy in Africa.

Background

Since 2006, a growing body of evidence suggests that a period of democratic consolidation has begun to falter and that, in some places, states have begun to move away from democratic norms and values. Measures of freedom and democracy in the world show evidence of stagnation or in some cases even regression. There has been no net expansion in the number of electoral democracies - which has oscillated between 114 and 119 since the 1990s (Diamond 2015). In 2017 International IDEA suggested that this trend has continued and that democracy in many countries seemed 'fragile' – citing the rise of populist movements, corruption, vulnerable state institutions and the erosion of rights and electoral processes (Sisk 2017). The stalling, and in some cases, the regression of

democracy globally has serious implications for the ethnically and economically diverse populations of African states. It is unsurprising that this global context characterised by economic downturn, tensions associated with migration, and ethnic or cultural conflict – all of which exacerbate pre-existing divisions and cleavages within African societies - has prompted interest and research in the idea of 'social cohesion' (Burns et al: 2018). Social cohesion has been linked to positive outcomes such as "democratic stability and participation, economic growth and greater productivity, and an overall good quality of life for citizens" (Burns et al 2018).

Why is social cohesion important for democracy?
The economic and political interactions within states, and how these interactions are impacted by specific historical turning points, have prompted theorists to examine what ties communities together. The extent and resilience of social cohesion within a state is often revealed during these historical watershed moments, either positively or negatively.

 In early 18th century social cohesion was pioneered by the writings of a German, sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in the concepts of *'Gemeinschaft'* (organic community) and *'Gessellschaft'* (mechanical society). *Gemeinschaf*t refers to an organic community which is associated together by ties of kinship, blood relationship, intellectual ties, communal ownership of primary goods and history. *Gessellschaft* is mechanical society; where by individuals lacking immediate social ties interact with one another through commercial market, self-interest and in civic association (Harris 2011).

In the late 19th century French philosopher Émile Durkheim further contributed to a theory of social cohesion. Durkheim's work examined what holds societies and social groups together? Specifically, how social ties, the basis of society, can be maintained in an increasing individualistic world (Émile Durkheim). Durkheim's theory centered on two concepts: '*conscience collective*' and '*solidarité*. *Conscience collective* refers to the condition of group identity and process of individual identification with a group. For Durkheim *Solidarité* has two meaning, first, it is the mechanical individual social links in traditional societies, and second, organic social links between individuals' modern societies (Giddens 1972).

By the late 1980-early 1990s the study of social cohesion, particularly in European countries, incorporated other related concepts such as social exclusion, social solidarity, social integration and social capital (Atkinson, 2017). More crucially, the relationship between social cohesion and other terms could have a positive or negative association. For instance, "exclusion, marginalization,

segmentation, fragmentation, poverty and segregation tend to have negative connotations, whereas cohesion has a more positive connotation as do inclusion, integration and sustainability" (Atkinson 2017).

The Human Science Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa has used social cohesion as a descriptive term to refer to "the extent to which a society is coherent, united and functional, providing an environment within which its citizens can flourish". The organisation suggests that "Social cohesion is deemed to be present by the extent to which participants and observers of society find the lived existence of citizens to be relatively peaceful, gainfully employed, harmonious and free from deprivation" (Michael Cardo 2014, 9-10). Examples of social cohesion as a value can be found in many societies, at many times in history. "From an African perspective, there are parallels between social cohesion and *Ubuntu* and related concepts that pre-date European theory and include values focused on community, altruism, solidarity, and interdependence" (Lefko-Everett 2016).

Strengthening social cohesion theoretically reduces income inequalities, improves access to basic services and opportunities for decent jobs, and increases upward social mobility. New inclusive growth models that encompass effective economic redistribution policies and comprehensive social protection programmes are needed to ensure both sustainable development and social cohesion. Social cohesion has three major components:

1. <u>Social inclusion</u> - The World Bank Group defines social inclusion as: the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. This includes the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity to take part in society (The World Bank).

2. <u>Social capital</u> – Social capital determines the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions (Cardo 2014). Putnam defines social capital in terms of four features of communities: the existence of community networks; civic engagement or participation in community networks; a sense of community identity, solidarity and equality with other community members; and norms of trust and reciprocal help and support.

3. <u>Social mobility</u> – Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals to move up or down the "social ladder" within their lifetime (IJR). Relative mobility, in contrast, is a measure of which rung of the income ladder a person lands on, compared with his or her parents' position (Reeves 2013).

Has the failure to build social cohesion contributed to a 'democratic ceiling'?

The post-cold war period from 1990's to 2010 has seen an increase in democratisation in Africa; this being congruent with an increase in civic political participation which recorded an increase of 40% in 2010 (International Peace Institute 2011). Similarly, until 2016 the Sub-Saharan region was averaging annual GDP growth rates of 5 percent. The political and economic development in Africa, particularly in Sub Sahara Africa, were unable to bring substantive change in the lives of the poor and working class (Ayittey, 2008). In addition, by early 2000's African economies were not capable to deliver basic service for the growing population size. The failure of governments to address citizen needs has resulted in social inequalities and marginalisation, in turn leading to local crises, conflict and violence (Sisk: 2017). As Cox (2017) notes: "In the absence of social protections and economic and social rights, the risk of democratic backsliding increases".

Inequality in particular undermines democratic resilience by increasing political polarisation, disrupting social cohesion and undermining trust in and support for democracy (Cox: 2017). Reeves (2013) however suggests that it is not necessarily inequality but the stagnation of social mobility (that is oftentimes the consequence on this inequality) that contributes to economic malaise - "When the income gap of one generation becomes an opportunity gap for the next, inequality hardens into social stratification".

While the SSA region as a whole exhibits the highest levels of inequality globally, seven states in the region - Angola, the Central African Republic, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia, Comoros, and South Africa - exhibit extremely high levels of inequality (driving up the average) reporting a Gini of above 0.55 (Bhorat: 2015). Resource rich countries with 'narrow' economies have tended to rely on the export of one or at best a handful of commodities. In Angola, which depends hugely on its oil, or Zambia, which relies on its copper. These governments are funded by royalties from oil or by mining companies rather than by taxes" (The Economist: 2016). Prof. Mick Moore argues that taxation is a real motivator for development as "governments that depend on tax need their citizens to prosper". Likewise, citizens that are taxed are more likely to organize if their money is not being spent well (for example SA service delivery strikes).

The alternative to this system, as Paul Collier explains, is that "instead of governing well, politicians are keener to steal money so as to bribe and rig their way back to power. Ideological differences and arguments over policy barely register in election campaigns. In many cases politicians fall back on appeals to tribal, religious or regional loyalties." (The Economist: 2016). The latter scenario has been all too apparent in the recent elections in Kenya (2018), Nigeria, Tanzania (2016), Cote Ivoire (2017)

where these divisive short term political strategies have a profoundly detrimental effect on the levels of cohesion in states. When societies lack cohesion, the results may include "increased social tension, violent crime, targeting of minorities, human rights violations, and, ultimately, violent conflict." (Lefko-Everett: 2016 – quoting UN 2009)

This symposium will probe the extent to which social cohesion can be part of the solution to realising democratic gains in African states.

Rationale and problem statement

Problem Statement: Countries with lower levels of social cohesion tend to exhibit weaker electoral and democratic processes.

Rationale: Improving social cohesion within the state will lead to improvements in the strength and quality of democratic processes and institutions. Where social cohesion is weak, democratic institutions will take additional strain, and where social cohesion is strong, democratic institutions are buffered from scandal/controversy.

While there is existing evidence to support the claim that electoral processes impact social cohesion within a society (Crouzel, 2014; Fried, 2017; Selehyan & Linebarg, 2017; Liban, 2013; International Peace Institute 2011; Maendeleo Policy Forum) the impact that social cohesion has on electoral processes is less well understood, particularly in the African context. Given the many varied and heterogeneous societies in Africa, and the influence of identity in political allegiances, it is critical to understand what impact social cohesion has on the quality and perceived credibility of national elections.

Key objectives

The overarching objectives of the 13th annual EISA symposium are: (1) to contribute to the development of a deeper understanding of social cohesion; and (2) how social cohesion might contribute to democratic gains for African states. Specifically, the EISA symposium will explore the following areas:

1. Social inclusion
   - The ability and opportunities for citizens to participate in society
   - The relationship between the state and citizens: exclusive and inclusive democracies
2. Social capital
   - The politics of competing identities
   - Building trust and a sense of belonging within the state
3. Social mobility

- Economic inequality and social stratification as a danger to democracies
- Access to resources and social welfare and the possibility of social mobility

Methodology

The symposium will be conducted over two days with the intention of developing policy-oriented recommendations that aim to shape the future direction of and contribute to the consolidation of democracy in Africa. The above objectives will be met through the holding of plenary sessions that will enable participants to share international and national comparative case studies and experiences. The symposium will be opened with a keynote address from an eminent African personality chosen for his/her scholarship, political and/or symbolic role in championing democracy on the continent. Prior to the workshop, authors will be selected and guided by Terms of Reference for writing papers as well as arrangements for their participation to the symposium. Papers will be consider for publication and distributed after the symposium.

Participants

Participants will be drawn from key democratic governance stakeholders including representatives of political parties, members of parliament, election management bodies, civil society organisations, academia, as well as the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

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