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## THE NEXUS BETWEEN THE ABSENCE OF A SOCIAL COMPACT, SOCIETAL POLARIZATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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**Abstract:** South Africa, a nation marked by profound disparities, is deeply entrenched in the painful historical legacies of its past. The discourse on socio-economic transformation has been ongoing since the African National Congress (ANC) came into power in 1994, aiming to foster a social compact and reconcile the polarized society. Despite these efforts, black communities continue to face discrimination in service delivery. Daily reports of protests in impoverished, predominantly black communities emphasize the absence of a social compact in South Africa. This paper, primarily conceptual in nature and relying on secondary data, seeks to explore the nexus between the absence of a social compact, societal polarization, and its impact on service delivery in South African local government. It contends that addressing issues of poor service delivery, public protests and anti-government sentiment must start with acknowledging the absence of a social compact. This recognition should serve as the foundation for pursuing new paradigms for effective development and good governance practices at the local government level. The findings of this study suggest that the absence of a social compact is not only a result of human actions but also reflects structural issues. This absence exacerbates societal divisions, erodes trust in governance structures and hampers collaborative efforts crucial for effective service provision. Furthermore, societal polarization compounds challenges related to resource allocation and perpetuates disparities in service access, particularly impacting marginalized communities. In conclusion, the paper proposes policy recommendations aimed at fostering social cohesion, addressing structural inequalities, and promoting inclusive governance practices.

**Keywords:** *social compact, societal polarization, service delivery, local government, South Africa.*

**Rezumat.** Africa de Sud, o națiune marcată de disparități profunde, este profund înrădăcinată în moștenirile istorice dureroase ale trecutului său. Discursul asupra transformării socio-economice este în desfășurare de la intrarea la putere a Congresului Național African (ANC) în 1994, cu scopul de a promova un pact social și de a reconcilia societatea polarizată. În ciuda acestor eforturi, comunitățile negre continuă să se confrunte cu discriminare în

furnizarea de servicii. Rapoartele zilnice despre proteste în comunitățile sărace, predominant negre, subliniază absența unui pact social în Africa de Sud. Această lucrare, în primul rând de natură conceptuală și bazându-se pe date secundare, încearcă să exploreze legătura dintre absența unui pact social, polarizarea societală și impactul acesteia asupra furnizării de servicii în administrația locală din Africa de Sud. Acesta susține că abordarea problemelor legate de furnizarea de servicii slabe, protestele publice și sentimentul antiguvernamental trebuie să înceapă cu recunoașterea absenței unui pact social. Această recunoaștere ar trebui să servească drept fundație pentru urmărirea unor noi paradigme pentru o dezvoltare eficientă și bune practici de guvernare la nivel de administrație locală. Concluziile acestui studiu sugerează că absența unui pact social nu este doar rezultatul acțiunilor umane, ci reflectă și probleme structurale. Această absență exacerbează diviziunile societale, erodează încrederea în structurile de guvernare și împiedică eforturile de colaborare esențiale pentru furnizarea eficientă a serviciilor. În plus, polarizarea societală agravează provocările legate de alocarea resurselor și perpetuează disparitățile în ceea ce privește accesul la servicii, afectând în special comunitățile marginalizate. În concluzie, lucrarea propune recomandări de politici care vizează promovarea coeziunii sociale, abordarea inegalităților structurale și promovarea practicilor de guvernare incluzivă.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *compact social, polarizare societală, furnizare de servicii, administrație locală, Africa de Sud.*

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of contemporary South African society reflects a complex legacy inherited from its apartheid era. With the advent of democracy, the crafting of a new Constitution sparked hope of dismantling entrenched inequalities. Post-transition, considerable efforts by the state and various social partners have been directed toward realizing the foundational principles of human dignity, non-racialism, non-sexism, universal adult suffrage and national prosperity [1]. To build a nation with a unified national identity, the citizens must embrace inclusivity, regardless of cultural, racial, or social background [2]. Even though many South Africans struggle to climb up the economic ladder, the potential for inclusive prosperity remains a crucial aspect. Such ambitions are documented in the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, with the hope of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite these aspirations, three decades into democracy, the nation still grapples with the absence of a cohesive social compact, essential for fostering good governance and social cohesion among its diverse populace. The National Economic Development and Labor Council (NEDLAC) mandates the involvement of various stakeholders, such as the government, labor unions, businesses, and communities, in tackling South Africa's socio-economic issues [3,4]. Internationally recognized as the "rainbow nation" [5], South Africa's reputation contrasts harshly with the stark reality faced by many of its citizens, where only a privileged few enjoy the nation's wealth. Despite increasing attention on social compacts and efforts to bridge societal divisions, historically marginalized communities continue to endure disparities in service delivery. In response to these challenges, the District Development Model has been introduced as a catalyst to expedite service delivery and address backlogs [6].

The trajectory of inequality is influenced by both benign and malign forces, with apartheid's legacy relegating black South Africans to disadvantaged positions [7]. Service delivery discrepancies across municipal jurisdictions further exacerbate these disparities [8].

Societal polarization persists in South Africa, hindering progress toward social cohesion. Meanwhile, economic sectors remain predominantly segregated, with whites dominating agriculture, trade, business, transport and logistics, medical services, media and Indians prominent in hardware businesses, often leading to disjointed cooperation among racial groups. The pursuit of a social compact thus emerges as a pivotal mission for enhancing global competitiveness and economic viability. The NDP 2030 underscores the importance of social compacts to address entrenched socio-historical divisions, including exclusion, poverty, and limited opportunities. President Cyril Ramaphosa has championed this cause, envisioning a comprehensive social compact involving all stakeholders to rebuild the economy and foster higher growth [9]. However, criticisms from former President Thabo Mbeki highlight challenges in meeting these aspirations within designated timeframes.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Social Compact and Governance**

The relationship between a social compact and governance is interlinked and reliant on each other, unable to operate effectively in isolation [10]. The concept of a social compact implies a tacit agreement between the government and citizens about their roles and responsibilities in shaping society [11]. Governance is the structure that determines how a group is supervised and operates, including the strategies employed to uphold responsibility for the entity and its stakeholders [12]. The social compact defines the duties and obligations of various participants in society, specifying the anticipated contributions of government, civilians, non-governmental organizations, and businesses in advancing public welfare [13].

Social compact highlights the critical role of citizen engagement in governmental processes, advocating for their involvement in decision-making, holding authorities accountable and influencing the development of policies and programs [14]. Thus, social compact will ensure governmental accountability by promoting transparency, responsiveness, and integrity in managing public resources and delivering services at the local government level, thereby fostering good governance [15]. In South Africa, the social compact seeks to promote social justice by addressing inequalities, prejudice, and marginalization while protecting the needs and rights of all members of society [16]. It reinforces a commitment to upholding and advancing human rights, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as outlined in national constitutions and international agreements [17].

The goal of the social compact and effective governance is to support economic progress and fairness by encouraging inclusive growth, creating jobs, reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development, all while addressing the underlying issues of poverty and inequality. The social compact emphasizes the significance of maintaining the rule of law, advocating for transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in governance procedures, and addressing corruption and impunity [18]. It encourages unity among various societal groups, fostering feelings of belonging, mutual esteem, and collaboration in governance [19]. Ethical leadership and the prudent management of public resources are essential components of the social compact, with government officials and leaders expected to exemplify high levels of integrity and professionalism to foster good governance [20]. The social compact incorporates strategies for conflict resolution and peacebuilding, promoting dialogue, reconciliation and social cohesion within diverse and fragmented communities [21]. It recognizes the evolving nature of societal needs and priorities, necessitating ongoing

evaluations, adaptations, and revisions of the governing agreement to maintain its relevance and effectiveness in addressing emerging governance challenges [18]. Consequently, the social compact within political leadership serves as a foundation for building consensus, encouraging collaboration, and advancing shared goals and values to develop a just, diverse, and progressive community through good governance [13].

## **2.2. Challenges and Consequences of Fractured Social Compact in South African Local Government**

There is a widespread belief that local government does not have appetite to meet citizen's needs. This sentiment is particularly evident in the rural areas of South Africa, where persistent poverty and sluggish service delivery continue to afflict communities. Within the marginalized populations, individuals grappling with poverty and vulnerability encounter a myriad of challenges, necessitating a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to intervention [22]. The dearth of a cohesive social compact, characterized by a failure to foster consensus and collaboration among diverse societal stakeholders, exacerbates the existing societal polarization along political, ethnic, and socio-economic fault lines. This deficiency has profound ramifications for the efficacy of service delivery mechanisms within South African local governance structures. In a nation beleaguered by a plethora of issues, socio-economic inequality stands out prominently as a persistent challenge. It is undoubtedly true that service delivery protests can turn violent and, to some extent, lead to regime instability.

A poignant example of this dynamic can be observed in the unrest that unfolded in Phoenix, in Durban, where 38 fatalities resulted from clashes between members of the Black and Indian communities, rooted in the erosion of social cohesion [23, 24]. These incidents, alongside numerous other troubling occurrences in South Africa, underscore the imperative for fostering social diversity. However, a critical inquiry emerges regarding the extent to which societal unity is perceived as a collective responsibility or solely as the concern of the marginalized groups striving for equitable societal structures. The report on the July 2021 unrest by the South African Human Right Commission (SAHRC) underscores the prevalence of racial animosity as a catalyst for discord. The absence of a social compact further compounds societal polarization, reflecting a deficit in shared values, commitments, and mutual support and trust among governmental bodies, private enterprises, and civil society.

## **2.3. Service Delivery in South African Local Government**

Understanding the concept and components of service delivery is crucial, as it is considered a key challenge in South Africa [25, 26]. Local government is tasked with providing vital services like water, sanitation, waste management, and roads by the constitution of South Africa [27, 28]. South African local government define public service delivery as sharing of basic resources and human needs to inhabitants [29]. Public service delivery includes guaranteeing that services are accessible to all South African citizens, particularly those in disadvantaged regions with a history of marginalization [28]. Providing efficient services involves engaging with the community in a meaningful way [30]. This occurs when local authorities engage citizens in decision-making, collect input on service delivery, and attend to the distinct requirements and interests of various populations. Service delivery is a concept that involves a contractual relationship between the government agency and the general public, where the agency is required to provide the service in the best possible way [31]. This is to make sure that services are provided to local residents in a timely, long-lasting, and impactful manner, treating them with the utmost respect and care. Service delivery functions

as a method to guarantee that local government remains open about their actions and responsible to the public [32]. This happens when local communities participate in meetings that discuss service delivery reports, including budgets, expenditures, performance indicators, and addressing citizen complaints and grievances.

Service delivery serves as a mechanism to dismantle the spatial planning remnants of the apartheid era in South Africa, which have resulted in significant disparities in service accessibility between urban and rural areas, and among various racial and socio-economic groups [33]. Consequently, local governments prioritize addressing these disparities through targeted interventions and inclusive development strategies.

Furthermore, public service delivery in South Africa aims to address unemployment and alleviate poverty [34]. This is achieved by employing local community members in projects, thus providing various income opportunities that help reduce poverty. Although these job opportunities are often temporary, they impart valuable skills and knowledge. Service delivery involves a government entity fulfilling its promises by providing goods and services to the community [35].

This is crucial as local governments are elected to represent and address the concerns and needs of their communities, thereby preventing unrest and dissatisfaction that can arise from unmet needs or unequal resource distribution. Additionally, service delivery in South Africa's local government enhances monitoring and evaluation [36]. This improvement occurs when the general public and local governments continuously monitor progress, address obstacles, and gather feedback from stakeholders, thus promoting accountability, transparency and efficiency in service delivery processes.

#### **2.4. Societal Polarization and its Implications on Service Delivery**

Societal polarization not only increases the likelihood of violence within communities [25], however, violent protests can also exacerbate societal polarization, dividing people along party lines [8]. The adversary of polarization is politics. As observed by [7], the USA is no exception to societal polarization; at the highest levels of government, entrenched political differences in the capital have impeded legislative agreements, weakened established norms of behavior, and encouraged politicians to pursue their goals through means other than stalled governmental bodies, such as the legal system. These divisions extend beyond those in power, as widespread polarization is causing Americans to segregate into distinct and opposing political groups. The dynamics and challenges that haunt the USA are inextricably linked to the South African context in terms of societal division due political differences.

The rise of an "us versus them" mentality and the entrenchment of political identities in American socio-political life are evident in various aspects, from the growth of highly polarized media to the decreasing openness of Americans to marrying someone from a different political party [7]. Americans are becoming increasingly divided based on political party and ideology, even within their own neighborhoods [36].

These conundrums are also prevalent in South Africa. At times, services are rendered subjectively due to spouses engaged in different political parties.

This separation increases the likelihood of vilifying one another, ultimately leading to instabilities in service delivery. When individuals lack unity and cohesion, disagreements over certain services are more likely. Such disagreements hinder the effective provision of services, resulting in delays and inefficiencies in service delivery.

### **2.5. Tribalism and Ethnicity are Sources of Societal Polarization**

Polarization involves more than simply having a divergent view from your neighbor on specific matters [37]. It occurs when individuals choose not to live beside neighbors with different political beliefs or opt not to enroll their children in racially diverse schools [37]. Tribalism is a significant driving force behind societal polarization. In the context of South Africa, tribalism and ethnophobia are pervasive issues that fracture black African communities and are seen as tactics historically used by colonizers to maintain control through division and violence within black societies [38]. Ethnic prejudice and tribalism have led to self-hatred across different races in South Africa, with different groups striving for dominance and recognition [38]. Individuals sometimes engage in ideological competition, considering the beliefs and traditions of other groups as less important and unnecessary compared to their own. Tribalism also exists in the workplace, where black people, whites, Indians, and coloreds associate themselves along racial lines [39]. This issue is closely linked to the persistent problem of racism that continues to haunt the country. An ethnically divided society can compromise service delivery in certain instances, as specific ethnic and tribal groups may demand preferential services over others. This division and favoritism can lead to ineffective and unequal provision of services, exacerbating societal disparities.

### **2.6. Helping Each Other is Foreign in the Communities**

Helping others is believed to be a method through which individuals form, sustain, and enhance their social relationships. Assisting others enhances social engagement, diverts attention from personal issues, and boosts self-worth and abilities. Physical well-being and helping others result in greater social inclusion, enabling individuals to lead more active lives. However, it is inevitable to have enemies in any community, implying that no one is without adversaries. Because of this, the spirit of jealousy can pervade the lives of certain individuals. Jealousy and enmity are factors that hinder social cohesion, as some individuals may rejoice in the suffering of others instead of offering help. Controversial as it may be, this phenomenon is prevalent in some communities. This attitude leads to people hating each other, ultimately contributing to societal polarization.

### **2.7. Deception is our Friend in Societal Polarization; Trust is our Foe**

Trust does not pertain to any specific social or political group. Instead, it is a general attitude towards others, specifically towards the average person in society [40]. Learning from [41] the failure of trust erodes moral behavior of individuals. It is cumbersome nowadays to trust because of deception. Gorge Crabbe indicates that "*Deceivers are the most dangerous members of society; they trifle with the best affections of our nature and violate the most sacred obligations*". Moreover, "*Secrets with girls, like loaded guns with boys, are never valued till they make a noise*" [42]. Crabbe highlights the difficulty of trusting a person. The quotes by Crabbe center on societal polarization, because individuals have become so attached to deceiving one another and have normalized it.

## **3. Materials and Methods**

This paper used a literature-centered approach to assess the nexus between the absence of a social compact, societal polarization and its implications on service delivery. This approach has been used to assess the possibilities and difficulties involved in the study concerning societal polarization. This approach was the foundational principle of the paper. Therefore, philosophers employed it long ago [43]. This kind of approach is qualitative

research that centers on the perspectives and viewpoints of various scholars, both subjective and objective. Nevertheless, this approach enabled the researchers to deeply engage with the current literature, pinpointing the deficiencies and shortcomings of the literature. Therefore, these voids were filled by pointing out that a lack of social compact, and societal polarization lead to ineffective provision of basic services.

### **3.1. Data collection**

Because of the type of research being conducted, information was gathered using a desktop computer. Desktop research is another method for gathering data by reviewing existing literature. Therefore, information was gathered by reviewing journals, books, and reports to analyze and evaluate the topic being studied. This allowed the researchers to assess, examine, and debate various perspectives of scholars in order to accomplish the paper's objective.

### **3.2. Data analysis**

Analyzing documents is a crucial aspect of conducting social research. Researchers analyze documentation in qualitative research to provide insights and interpretations on evaluation matters. Document analysis serves different academic needs. Document analysis is an effective way to gather data because documents are manageable and valuable resources. Using documents can assist in situating one's research within their specific subject or field by offering background information and thorough data coverage [43]. This analysis was utilized in this paper to clarify and explain the themes discussed in the paper. Furthermore, this enabled the researchers to delve deeper into the concepts, grasp perceptions, and clarify qualitative results.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The study emphasizes the critical need for policy interventions to address the absence of a social compact, societal polarization, and their implications on service delivery in South African local government. The recommendations proposed in this paper are rooted in the understanding that the challenges facing South Africa today are complex. The absence of a social compact has contributed to ongoing societal polarization, which in turn undermines efforts towards effective service delivery and socio-economic development. One of the key recommendations is to actively promote social cohesion through inclusive policies that bridge societal divides. Fostering social cohesion is seen as a fundamental step towards building a more unified and inclusive society. This can be achieved through community dialogues, cultural exchange programs and initiatives that encourage mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse communities. By promoting understanding and cooperation among different racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, the government can reduce tensions and build a foundation for collaboration in addressing shared challenges. Addressing structural inequalities is crucial for achieving sustainable development. Decades of apartheid-era policies have left a legacy of inequalities that continue to impact access to services and opportunities for many South Africans, black people in particular. Targeted interventions are needed to ensure that historically disadvantaged communities receive the support they need to thrive. To address these, policies should focus on redistributing resources more equitably, particularly in historically marginalized communities. This may include targeted investment in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and job creation programs that benefit disadvantaged groups. Additionally, reforms in land and housing

policies are crucial to address historical injustices and promote economic empowerment among marginalized communities. Promoting inclusive governance practices is essential for building trust between citizens and government institutions. By enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, local governments can improve service delivery and ensure that resources are allocated fairly and effectively.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper strongly aligns with the Congolese proverb that says, "A single bracelet does not jingle," suggesting that unity is power. The paper holds a positive perspective that when people are united, they can eventually overcome all the scourges faced by the country. The South African government should lay the groundwork for new paradigms in development and governance that prioritize equity and effective service delivery for all South Africans. By addressing the underlying causes of poor service delivery and societal polarization, there should be establishment of local and practical policies that aim to address the current and continuous challenges. Policies that are flexible are intended to contribute to sustainable socio-economic transformation in the country. In conclusion, the paper proposes that research on the social compact in South Africa is essentially and should be conducted annually to fully understand the hindrances thereof. Furthermore, the findings of the research study will assist in providing guidelines for the development of several policies that are necessary to be structured and for the review of existing policies to ensure that they are aimed at fostering social cohesion, addressing structural inequalities, and promoting inclusive governance practices at the local government level. These recommendations are intended to guide policymakers and stakeholders in South Africa towards a more equitable and inclusive future. By prioritizing social cohesion, addressing structural inequalities and promoting inclusive governance practices, the country can move closer towards achieving sustainable socio-economic transformation and ensuring a better quality of life for all its citizens.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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