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Building Social Cohesion Strategies in Response to COVID-19

COVID-19 has changed our world, the way we live and the way we work. In a few short months, the world has started to accept that many aspects of our lives may not return to our previous 'normal'. In many cases, a new normal means a departure from those practices which not only created, but continue to reinforce, the current levels of inequality across our society.

While it is clear that a lot has changed in a relatively short time, the key question is how much is likely to remain changed? **The National Business Initiative (NBI)** has examined how the work we do, will contribute to some of the most pressing social and economic solutions required to future-proof our country, communities and member companies.

Collective, bold action will be required to break with the dichotomies of the past. Central to this approach is enhancing social cohesion, which requires addressing the underlying issues which have contributed to the deterioration of the social fabric of our society. To do this, we must address the ongoing levels of mistrust rampant therein by offering mutually beneficial solutions, while at the same time fundamentally re-writing the terms of our current social contract.

The NBI's Social Transformation Programme focusses on addressing the broad societal issues of inequality through four key pathways:

Activating Bold and Transformative Leadership, Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption, Inclusion and Equity; and Enabling Economic Inclusion.

Each pathway is supported by a range of activities aimed at challenging and co-creating solutions to support companies in addressing the barriers to real social transformation and sustainability. Moreover, they echo the importance of establishing a consistent and robust leadership.

COVID-19 and entrenched inequality

COVID-19 has amplified globally, as well as locally, a set of existing socio-economic challenges, including entrenched and deepening inequality. In many ways, COVID-19 has thrown the systemic puzzle pieces into stark contrast, illustrating a concerning lack of cohesion.

The coronavirus is not just a health challenge; it is an issue of poverty and gender inequality.^[1] South Africa has been under lockdown since March 26th with many people experiencing being crowded into informal housing, where water and sanitation are scarce and disease outbreaks are common. For many of South Africa's citizens, following the social distancing rules set out by Government are almost impossible under these conditions.

Black Lives Matter protestors have highlighted correlations between the systemic impacts of racism and the disproportionate toll of the coronavirus on marginalised communities, demonstrated by the massive inequities laid bare by the Pandemic.^[2]

As a result, those fortunate enough to retain their jobs are working remotely. While this presents new opportunities, it also poses new challenges. This new world of work, as well as the resultant job losses in certain sectors, will mean that the marginalised suffer even more, while the privileged shoulder far less of the burden. For many, the multiple roles of employee, spouse and parent converging into one dimension at home have caused extreme anxiety, accompanied by a distressing increase in the instances of **gender-based violence** occurring.

We cannot rebuild a broken society without first addressing the fundamental issues that divided our society in the first place. The **NBI's Social Transformation** work aims to fundamentally reduce social inequality, while increasing social cohesion in the workplace. We do this by strategically focussing on the bold **ethical leadership** needed to transition our society to be both more just as well as **inclusive**.

In addition, the NBI's Social Transformation Team is well-placed to assist companies in tackling serious issues such as gender-based violence, gender **inequality** in the workplace and the rights of marginalised groups. These strategies are not only the initial building blocks for enhancing social cohesion, but creating a more vigorous social contract.

Prioritising ethical leadership

Pandemics bring out the best and the worst in both people and society. From a socio-economic perspective, the coronavirus was a looming catastrophe in the making. And not just a healthcare crisis, but a threat to the cohesion and resilience of society itself.

Regulations such as the ban on cigarettes and alcohol have been widely criticised for not including thorough consultations with these sectors, while under these conditions, corruption has been significantly on the rise through illegal trading.^[3] These factors have exacerbated the current levels of distrust around the governance and management of the Pandemic. Another example includes food parcels being mis-administered, landing in the hands of unethical officials who were stealing the very food intended for the most vulnerable members of these communities.^[4]

[1] Sylvie, B., 'Gender Equality: Why it Matters, Especially in a Time of Crisis', World Bank, 13 April 2020, Accessed: 20 May 2020. Available: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2020/04/13/gender-equality-why-it-matters-especially-in-a-time-of-crisis>

[2] Hernandez, J.C., & Mueller, B., 'Global Anger Grows over George Floyd Death, and becomes an Anti-Trump Cudgel', *New York Times*, United States, 1 June 2020, Accessed: 8 June 2020. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/world/asia/george-floyd-protest-global.html>

[3] Chingono, N., 'South Africa tobacco ban greeted with cigarette smuggling boom', *The Guardian*, 26 June 2020. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/26/south-africa-tobacco-ban-greeted-with-cigarette-smuggling-boom>

[4] Mahlangu, T., 'Government to Tackle Food Parcel Corruption,' *Corruption Watch*, 24 April 2020. Available: <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/government-to-tackle-food-parcel-corruption/>

For many people, the jobs and role models we thought were the most important in our societies have shifted, at least for the present. It has become apparent that those maintaining our fragile economies, keeping our supply chains moving and ensuring we stay healthy, are often those paid the least and given a lower status in our societies.^[5]

South Africa now finds itself in the predicament of broken social contracts and low trust between stakeholders, precisely at the moment when Government needs to maximise cohesion and the populations' willingness to adhere to Regulations. A crucial element of the COVID-19 recovery process will be how to address the deep levels of mistrust that have arisen, especially between business, Government and with society at large.

The NBI has a long history of being a leadership enabler, playing a convening role in addressing sustainable growth and development. Bold leadership can aid in building cohesion by strengthening trust between the public and private sectors, while tackling dichotomies and enabling systemic change.

In light of the large-scale job losses in certain sectors, the NBI's Social Transformation Team are exploring new pathways to enhance skills development and youth employment. The Skills Development Pathway aims to create new ways of working, focusing particularly on youth employability, as well as new industries in a post COVID-19 world.

COVID-19 and system level shifts

Taking stock of the impact of COVID-19, includes understanding what happens when we have a breakdown in social cohesion. We need to use these unprecedented times to make extraordinary shifts in order to reduce inequality, increase social cohesion and repair the social contract in our country.

We need to promote equity while dramatically increasing healthcare access and social protection. These may be utopian ideals but they are also the only way to ensure we do not find ourselves in a future situation similar to the reality created by COVID-19. A good place to start is to build trust between stakeholders through mutually beneficial and agreed actions, while simultaneously prioritising economic decisions that will assist in funding increased healthcare access and social protection.

They say that change is hard, but remaining static is too risky. We have shown that where there is the impetus, we can make the necessary changes required to tackle this Pandemic. A good example of international collaboration has been the combined global effort to share data and knowledge in the race to develop a vaccine in response to the virus. While COVID-19 is a calamity, we can also use this as an opportunity to address what was fundamentally wrong with our collective economy and society.

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^[1] Sylvie, B., 'Gender Equality: Why it Matters, Especially in a Time of Crisis', World Bank, 13 April 2020, Accessed: 20 May 2020. Available: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2020/04/13/gender-equality-why-it-matters-especially-in-a-time-of-crisis>

^[2] Hernandez, J.C., & Mueller, B., 'Global Anger Grows over George Floyd Death, and becomes an Anti-Trump Cudgel', *New York Times*, United States, 1 June 2020, Accessed: 8 June 2020. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/world/asia/george-floyd-protest-global.html>

^[3] Chingono, N., 'South Africa tobacco ban greeted with cigarette smuggling boom', *The Guardian*, 26 June 2020. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/26/south-africa-tobacco-ban-greeted-with-cigarette-smuggling-boom>

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^[5] Schrad, M.L., 'Coronavirus will Change the World Permanently. Here's How: A New Kind of Patriotism', *Politico Magazine*, 19 March 2020. Available: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>

^[5] Schrad, M.L., 'Coronavirus will Change the World Permanently. Here's How: A New Kind of Patriotism', *Politico Magazine*, 19 March 2020. Available: <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/19/coronavirus-effect-economy-life-society-analysis-covid-135579>



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