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THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL COHESION: THE CASE OF MASIBUMBANE LISTENERS' CLUB

ABSTRACT

This article responds to the primary research question, "What contributions do radio listeners' clubs make to social cohesion in local communities?". It responds to this question by demonstrating the relationship between participatory development communication and social cohesion amongst Khwezi community radio station's active listeners. The article draws on literature in conceptualising social cohesion and data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with members of the Masibumbane listeners' club, an informal association encompassing Khwezi's active audience in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Through outlining the characteristics of social cohesion encompassing social capital, inclusion and shared values, the study shows the critical formation of participatory spaces of engagement from radio listenership expanding to reciprocal gains in social capital and inclusion for members. The data further depicts the value of socially cohesive groups in contributing to improved quality of life for community members, although at a small scale. However, it also highlights the challenges with maintaining cohesiveness and reaping more comprehensive societal benefits from micro-community social cohesion. Finally, the article recommends further examination of the value of social cohesion in improving community livelihoods beyond the micro-relational gains shown in the study.

Keywords: participatory development communication; social cohesion; radio; radio listeners' clubs; community radio; social capital; development communication

INTRODUCTION

Although the "community" in community radio is expressed in the conceptualisation as media owned by the community for the benefits of the community, the roles in contributing to social cohesion and the implications on livelihood improvements constitute an area of study that provides

ample scope for research. Existing research covers various aspects of community radio's contribution to social change. In addition to development roles (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada 2002; Mano 2012; Manyozo 2007, 2009; Megwa 2007; Mhagama 2004; Mhiripiri 2011; Milan 2009; Naaikuur & Diedong 2014; Olorunnisola 2002), community radio is recognised as a powerful tool for creating strong and democratic communities both in the developed and developing world. However, the effects of promoting social cohesion as an important contributor to social change remain scant. Moreover, the roles of radio listeners' clubs as collaborative platforms that ignite social cohesion in communities need to be highlighted. The theoretical importance of social cohesion has often been the focus of research at national level (Putnam 2001), while the relational dimensions of social cohesion that occur at small scale and micro-community level need to be understood better. This study contributes to understanding the relational aspects of social cohesion through a community of radio listeners, namely the Masibumbane listeners' club (MLC).

The article highlights the intrinsic relationship between participatory development communication and social cohesion through studying a micro-community of Khwezi community radio listeners. The article demonstrates the primary characteristics of social cohesion, such as a sense of collectiveness and community expressed through shared values, and the willingness to cooperate for reciprocal gains. The case study of the MLC, an informal association of the Khwezi community radio station's active listeners, examines how social cohesion has been fostered through dialogic communication and interconnectedness between the station's active listeners. The article asserts that the role of community radio as a platform can strengthen societal harmony and social cohesion, which can result in conflict reduction in listenership communities (Al-Hassan *et al*. 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article seeks to address the following primary research question:

♦ What contributions do radio listeners' clubs bring to social cohesion in local communities?

In answering this question, the article presents an analysis of these sub-questions:

♦ What forms and characteristics of social cohesion are present in the Masibumbane listeners' club?

♦ What roles do radio listeners' clubs, with a particular focus on the Masibumbane listeners' club, play in fostering social cohesion in communities?

♦ What is the potential of social cohesion in facilitating improved livelihoods in communities?

METHODS

The data on which this article is based originated from the researcher's doctoral studies. Data collection took place from March to November 2019 in KwaZulu-Natal. Data was gathered in the form of interviews, focus groups discussions, non-participant observations and document reviews. Specifically, eight in-depth interviews and ten focus group discussions were conducted with members of 13 of the MCL's 54 branches. The case study approach (Henning *et al*. 2006; Stewart 2014) is suitable for the study as it ensures a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined; in this case, the MLC and its contribution to social cohesion in terms of the relational aspects of a particular group of people sharing common interests. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background to social cohesion

Social cohesion has been defined from various viewpoints by various scholars (Friedkin 2004; Moody & White 2003; Oxoby 2009; Putnam 1993; Berger-Schmitt 2002; Stanley 2003). In light of its multidimensional nature, there is little consensus on the conceptualisation of social cohesion. This has resulted in the concept being prone to vagueness and sometimes expression in particularistic ways (Moody & White 2003). However, what remains common amongst these is the centrality of a group's "connectedness", or how well a group is held together as central to social cohesion. This section presents some of the key components of a socially cohesive society that are present in literature and that provide a frame of analysis for this study. These include 1) belonging and committing to being part of a group; 2) positive interpersonal interactions, for example through face-to-face engagements; 3) social networks with interpersonal ties; 4) fostering inclusion and social relations between groups; and 5) interconnectedness through relational paths.

Stanley (2003) defines social cohesion as the willingness of societal members to cooperate to survive and prosper. "Willingness to cooperate" means they freely choose to form partnerships from which they have a reasonable chance of realising their goals (Stanley 2003). Similarly, according to (Friedkin 2004), individual group membership and the ability to remain in that particular group are central to maintaining social cohesion. Thus, the maintenance of structural features of groups and one's attraction to a group or to other group members are identified as socially cohesive. Friedkin (2004) further asserts a two-fold conceptualisation of what socially cohesive groups consist of – firstly, the extent of positive interpersonal interactions expressed through intimate face-to-face interaction among people forms a crucial basis for social cohesion; and secondly, a cohesive group consists of a social network in which all possible interpersonal ties are present and social networks enable the production of consensus and group coordination (Friedkin 2004: 417).

Oxoby (2009) sees social cohesion as intrinsically linked to inclusion and social capital. Inclusion is defined as an aspect of how one perceives their access to institutions and

resources in the decision-making environment (Oxoby 2009: 7). Oxoby further argues that greater inclusion incentivises investing in social capital; therefore, inclusion results in greater social cohesion. In contrast, where there is exclusion, there is less incentive to invest in social capital, and consequently there are low levels of social cohesion (Oxoby 2009: 8). This study views inclusion as manifesting itself in MLC members' shared values and beliefs, a sense of collectiveness and willingness to work together to change their circumstances. Association with the MLC is characterised by greater inclusion among members and those around them in their communities and results in members accessing various forms of social capital such as shared development information and entrepreneurial approaches.

Benefits of socially cohesive societies

As Friedkin (2004) asserts, interaction is the foundation of social processes, and the ability of societies to be socially networked has been associated with societal benefits. For example, the accumulation of social networks, more specifically social capital, is a benefit of social cohesion (Putnam 1993). Putnam's work demonstrates the societal benefits of more socially cohesive societies being well integrated and more developed than those that are not, inherently due to the social capital individuals inherit from belonging to groups characterised by reciprocal gains. He considers social capital as either formal or informal, operating within a central characteristic of constituting networks, which can develop through reciprocity and mutual gains across members. Similarly, the MLC is characterised as an informal association or network of highly networked listeners who work together to ensure collective gains. Putnam (2001: 1) states the central idea of social capital as "networks, and the associated norms of reciprocity have value. They have value for the people in them, and they have, at least in some instances, demonstrable externalities, so that there are both public and private faces of social capital."

The value of having social capital presents reciprocal gains for groups of people within networks. Putnam (1993) further argues for the emergence of trust arising from people's association with voluntary association(s), which fostered communication, dissemination of information and cooperation more broadly. This is closely associated with Berger-Schmitt's (2002) conception of social cohesion, which incorporates social capital and inclusion. Berger-Schmitt (2002) argues that there is a close relationship between social cohesion and improving quality of life. Guided by Putnam (1993; 2001) and Oxoby (2009), this study adopts a critical understanding of social cohesion as being intrinsically coupled with social inclusion and social capital, whereas socially cohesive groups are characterised by collective connections/social networks that are embedded in shared values and the willingness to cooperate for reciprocal gains.

Community radio listeners' clubs and social cohesion

There is some evidence supporting the critical role of community radio in strengthening social cohesion through bringing communities together. As Fairbairn (2009) opines, community media are crucial contributors to social cohesion and integration, given their ability to nurture public opinion and views by facilitating relevant

dialogues and discussions. For example, Rodrguez (2005) demonstrates the role of radio in strengthening social cohesion among ethnic groups through facilitating intercommunication, while Jakubowicz (2007) argues for the critical role of media more broadly in building social cohesion through their embeddedness in social relations. Jakubowicz (2007) sees media as providing pathways for communication, negotiation, consumption and production of meaning in societies.

Through media, people can become contributors to economic processes by exchanging information that informs decision-making. However, there is a gap in the development communication discourse that relates to radio listeners' clubs' contribution to strengthening social cohesion. Notably, radio listeners' clubs are still an emerging discourse on the African continent, with known studies being in Ghana and Malawi, where radio listeners' clubs are closely linked to offering alternative spaces of engagement across groups of people and they are seen as being alternative public spheres (Mhagama 2015).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In presenting a theoretical and conceptual analysis to study community radio's role in strengthening social cohesion in communities, this study broadly adopts Berger-Schmitt's (2002) conceptualisation, which relies significantly on Putnam's (1993) analysis of social capital as a central tenet to social cohesion. In conjunction with participatory development communication theory, which explains the characterisation of community radio as a dialogic space that facilitates the exchange of development-related ideas across audiences, this provides the theoretical framework.

Participatory development communication

This article adopts an amalgamation of participatory development and development communication theories (Melkote & Steeves 2015). Participatory development is anchored in people-centric development and maintains that people need to be central to their development and should be involved in decision-making about initiatives aimed at their progress. Thus, development cannot take place if people do not own it (Chambers 1992; Mohan & Stokke 2000; Cornwall 2002; Osikhena & Chikadzi 2014). On the other hand, development communication argues for the importance of communication, such as through community radio. Participatory development communication supports an understanding of the centrality of people having communicative spaces or spaces of interaction that help them to collectively address their communities' development issues/meet their desired social change.

A growing body of research examines the importance of radio listeners' clubs in facilitating social change through their intrinsic relationship between community radio and the community of listeners (Manyozo 2005; Mhagama 2015; Manda 2015). In essence, radio listeners' clubs make up the "community" in community radio and provide critical spaces of engagement for listeners to work towards implementing social change efforts in their communities. In the case of the MLC, beyond the radio station programming, listeners of the Khwezi community radio station have established

bonds within their collective spaces. These spaces are characterised by close ties, shared interests and a sense of family between individuals with similar values. In addition, innovative practices towards livelihood improvements have emerged out of these collective spaces of engagement. The belonging to or membership of the MLC symbolises a form of social capital for many members who have credited their belonging to the club as central to their state of being and livelihood.

Theorising social cohesion

Theoretical ideas of social cohesion are not contemporary; in fact, they date back to Durkheim (1933), who argued for a two-fold categorisation of social cohesion, namely mechanical and organic solidarity. Durkheim (1933) argued that mechanical solidarity was more evident in traditional societies and marked by shared values and closer connections between people who tend to identify with similar beliefs and ways of being. On the other hand, organic solidarity (Durkheim 1933) is related intrinsically to modern society, marked by the interdependence of people; for example, due to the division of labour and work specialisation people rely on one another for different tasks. Berger-Schmitt (2002) provides a two-dimensional conceptualisation of social cohesion, which provides a useful basis for understanding it. According to Berger-Schmitt (2002), social cohesion consists of the inequality and social capital dimensions. The inequality dimension involves promoting equal opportunities, reducing disparities and divisions, and combatting social exclusion. The social capital dimension embraces all forms of social capital; that is, to strengthen social relations, interactions and ties.

Berger-Schmitt (2002) presents a three-fold conceptualisation of social capital. First, social capital involves social relations and activities within primary social groups and associations. This is associated with Putnam's (1993) work in which he argued that people attaining membership and engaging in voluntary associations contributed to fostering communication and disseminating information, which in turn generated and reinforced trust in societal norms. As a result, Putnam (*ibid*.) argued that associations are conducive to cooperation and have an impact on the economic and social well-being of communities. Second, social capital encompasses the quality of social relations, namely shared values, feelings of affiliation, solidarity and trust. The third concept considers the quality of formal institutions such as the political, legal and judicial systems as important contributors to enabling civic engagement and cooperation; hence, supporting economic and social development. Social capital is thus concerned with the institution's functioning, efficiency, reliability and stability as enablers of civic engagement (Berger-Schmitt 2002; Putnam 1993; 2001).

RESULTS

The data points to two key spaces that foster social cohesion in the radio listeners' communities, namely community co-operatives and the MLC. While this study focused mainly on the MLC as a case study, it is important to show the links between groups belonging to co-operatives and the MLC. For example, MLC club branches typically form community co-operatives exclusively, or with non-MLC members. Furthermore, these co-operatives are also an expression of reciprocity amongst community

members. They collectively work towards achieving common goals to uplift their livelihoods and support the greater societal good.

Community co-operatives

Community co-operatives (co-ops) are community groups that MLC members mentioned belonging to, which illustrate collective support among members. One MLC member expressed the idea of joining a co-operative as emerging from one of their listeners' club's branch meetings as a form of advice to support each other in various economic activities:

> We met and were encouraged to start/join co-operatives, to do handwork such as sewing mats. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Co-operatives are a way for individuals and their families to practice farming as well as other forms of handwork as means to maintain their livelihoods. Co-operatives illustrate shared efforts and group support in communities catering for their households and sometimes even assisting with broader community needs. One MLC member mentioned the benefits of belonging to a farming co-operative in their area. Members support each other with farming approaches and jointly purchasing seeds and manure to facilitate more effective and efficient farming processes:

> I joined a co-operative, which helps us with manure and tractors as we are farming. We farm, make contributions, and then there's an organisation where we buy seeds and manure. Then each one is able to farm. It's a big co-operative, it keeps growing. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Community co-operatives are thus an example of community groups fostering social cohesion. Noteworthy, on several occasions the membership connected people from the same listeners' club branches who had established social ties.

Social cohesion through MLC interactions

The majority of MLC members are female as Khwezi attracts more female listeners. Consequently, group activities with a targeted focus on women supporting each other towards improved livelihoods were reported by participants:

> We have women programmes, we meet and do gardening, and we have our own organisation called 'Mayisize' whereby we assist each other. They contribute money to help each other in time of need, and it accumulates interest. We also make crochet shoes and bags, dresses, and we sell them. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, Pietermaritzburg)

Groups for women can foster social inclusion, as women from neighbouring communities are likely to share similar concerns and goals, and be willing to cooperate on initiatives that seek to improve their livelihoods, such as co-operatives (Moody & White 2003).

Characteristics and benefits of socially cohesive groups

Several tenets of social cohesion were expressed through MLC member interactions. These included group coordination in the listeners' club, social capital gained through members' association with the MLC, reciprocal gains obtained from the membership, and the shared values and collective approaches adopted to address community development issues. The study found evidence of members collaboratively working to improve community livelihoods. However, the findings also pointed to some inherent challenges in maintaining social cohesion and agreement as individuals' expectations might diverge from the rest.

Group coordination and reciprocal gains

Listeners expressed the benefits associated with the group coordination through their MLC membership. The MLC space offers a feeling of closeness through which members receive reciprocal gains such as support and collective approaches towards sustaining their economic and social livelihoods. Notably, the values of the MLC are grounded in Khwezi radio's Christian values, where love and caring for one another is central. The communal spirit of "we are better together" strongly embedded in the value of Ubuntu was expressed in interactions with MLC members across different branches. In addition, Masibumbane members extended the sense of support to their broader community members in times of distress and need. Expressing the value of Ubuntu in practice, an MLC member expressed the significance of belonging to the listeners' club as a form of connecting with other members, establishing strong ties, and being able to support one another:

> We meet our 'sisters' at Masibumbane; we can help each other. As members of Masibumbane, we know that when there is one in need, we ensure that they get help. This is where I saw that Masibumbane is like a mother and a father. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Masibumbane membership resembles a strong sense of community connectedness towards the common good and support with reciprocal gains. A case worth highlighting is jointly sharing and implementing ideas to boost financial sustainability through stokvels in various MLC branches. Gains in improving members' livelihoods were elucidated during a focus group discussion:

> As women, we have stokvels, where, say per month, each person contributes R500 each when it's nine of us working towards supporting each other towards achieving our specific goals. With my R500 alone, if there's something I'm planning to do, it becomes more difficult. I think this is now our fourth year pushing this, and we don't quarrel over it. We are progressing as women; even in our homes, we help our husbands instead of waiting for them to always be giving us money; we are also getting more involved and contributing to our families' livelihoods. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Another participant indicated how the stokvel pay-out has assisted in them building their house and therefore improving her livelihood:

When it was my turn to get paid, I was able to build a house and put tiles, and my house is looking good. Even if someone from Khwezi radio were to walk in, they would see the work of Masibumbane. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Social capital

It was also evident from the results that the MLC provides active listeners of Khwezi with forms of social capital. These ranged from forming closer ties with fellow community members, to sharing ideas and strategies to uplift individual and household incomes, to collectively addressing community development challenges. These efforts resulted in reciprocal gains that strengthened the sense of community and consequently social cohesion. In some instances, being a part of the MLC offered members the advantage of accessing opportunities in their communities. Thus, the credibility of the network association and the MLC being a part of Khwezi received recognition, which resulted in associated gains for active listeners. One participant remarked how their MLC membership enabled them to grab hold of an opportunity to start a mushroom farming initiative:

Some were asking me how I got hold of the mushroom opportunity; what helped me was that when I introduced myself, I said Masibumbane, which is under Khwezi. Khwezi has enabled us because even when we speak on air, there are people who know us. I believe that if we get help, the mushrooms can assist the entire KwaZulu-Natal because some people even wish to know me, the guy who speaks about mushrooms. I want people even out there to see the work of Masibumbane, even those that are starting farming programmes. (Interview, MLC coordinator, Ntembisweni)

Moreover, the desire to expand the "reciprocal gains" of belonging to the network to other community members is also expressed as a critical prerequisite. This speaks to the key question of the value of social cohesion in improving livelihoods, which, as evidenced in this case, was on a micro-level, supporting the short-term needs of individuals and households.

Shared values and collective approaches in addressing development challenges

Social cohesion was further characterised by the social capital obtained from being an MLC member through having mutual support and shared values. These shared values and interests fostered collective approaches to tackling development challenges affecting the group and, to some extent, the broader community. In addition, the values shared within the MLC encouraged members to be proactive and work together to develop themselves and their communities:

Masibumbane teaches that even when you are not working, you can't just wake up and do nothing, so one must be engaged in something in order to live well with people. It helps a lot for people to work together in developing their communities. (Interview, Khwezi staff responsible for MLC coordination)

The connectedness and willingness to collaborate across group members demonstrated characteristics of social cohesion. Moreover, several MLC branches attested to the value and gains that they received from the network association. This primarily included gains relating to their livelihoods because of the MLC association and members' willingness to extend their support collectively to address needs outside of the MLC space, such as supporting community members in need of food and clothing. The sense of community and the collective approaches initiated by different MLC members across branches to improve their livelihoods were summarised by the MLC coordinator as follows:

> At Mangethe, we never hear them crying about money, when we say we have a meeting, they contribute money, and they attend. They develop themselves; they are farming, then they sell the crops – they have a garden, and some people have received help from their produce. At Darnall, they have a lady who wakes up and goes to Stanger every day to go and sell. They are farming vegetables, spinach, cabbage, lettuce, so their community is developed because they can never go hungry. They have food in their gardens, so that's Masibumbane that opened their minds. They grow mushrooms at the Ntembisweni branch; they develop the communities so they don't lack; there's always something they are doing, they teach each other. (Interview, Khwezi staff responsible for MLC coordination)

Shared values were evident through association with the network, which drew from the interconnectedness expressed by MLC members, symbolising a form of social capital given the reciprocal gains that members experienced from these close ties. The participants highlighted how their association with the MLC resulted in nurturing shared values that encouraged a sense of responsibility, proactiveness, and a sense of solidarity closely aligned to the value of Ubuntu (as discussed above). Values of Ubuntu are embedded in the MLC network ideology, with the data illustrating a strong willingness to cooperate in living aligned to the shared values. For instance, one listener expressed how they had learnt the attribute of selflessness and caring for others through Masibumbane:

> I have also learnt to live well with other people. Masibumbane has shown me that you cannot be a person alone; you become a person when you are around people. I also learnt that when I have/possess something, then my neighbour should also have some of it. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

Moreover, the close ties and interconnectedness between fellow members brought a sense of community and togetherness in tackling life's challenges, such as in times of distress. A case in point was how men in one MLC branch had supported each other in the fatherhood journey. One MLC coordinator expressed is as follows:

> We encourage each other about how to be as a father in a household. Our branch is diverse - men and women. We can meet and talk about issues concerning men and how to treat themselves as men in their households, for instance, when you get home, make sure your family is happy, you're happy, and not run away. (Interview, MLC coordinator, Vikindlala)

The results demonstrate that the social capital gained from MLC membership translated into individual and household gains, such as improving households'

economic livelihoods and the sense of support and togetherness in tackling economic and psychosocial challenges. This demonstrated the value of a sense of community or connectedness and being part of a collective grounded in shared principles and values (Moody & White 2003). Therefore, there are worthwhile gains in socially cohesive societies. However, while there is some evidence from various MLC branches of these gains reaching beyond MLC members to addressing broader community challenges, the significance to community livelihoods cannot be directly inferred, as it is case dependent. This warrants further research.

Contributing to improving community livelihoods

This research further suggests that socially cohesive groups can support the broader functioning of their communities collectively, indirectly contributing to improving their society's livelihoods. This was apparent through the cohesive nature of the MLC, contributing in various ways to improving community livelihoods. Notably, these are ad hoc efforts mainly targeted at small scale, specific needs, and they are not sustainable interventions. In essence, it cannot be inferred that the examples found in the study support socially cohesive groups improving their community livelihoods more broadly. Nevertheless, the examples provided present a valuable depiction of the MLC's contributions to enhancing broader community livelihoods.

Some examples of collective support to communities facilitated by the group coordination and shared vision of MLC members included supporting the needy through financial and food contributions, assisting school children with fees and uniforms, and supporting school-going orphans. In addition, the desire to cohesively generate and implement collective solutions to improve community livelihoods, even though this may have been at a small scale, was evident. These are some excerpts from MLC branches detailing their specific contributions:

> We have instances/examples where our branch has been able to support those in need. We have contributions as branch members that help to meet people's needs. This helps a lot. We help each other as members of Masibumbane who have joined. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, KwaKopi)

> You find that some people are suffering in the community; we sit with them as Masibumbane so that we understand their challenges and take them to the war rooms. We are able to pass people's challenges to the councillor. (Interview, MLC coordinator, Vikindlala)

> At Eshowe, we are united; we support each other, we help children in need, for example, giving school shoes, we contribute through the coordinator, even school uniforms. At Samumu, people lost their houses - they got burned; we came together and contributed what we had, for instance pots and clothes. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, Eshowe)

These cases demonstrate how MLC members have collaboratively contributed towards addressing various concerns in their communities through the group's cohesive nature, in a way contributing to improving individuals and some households'

social and economic livelihoods at varying levels. This further illustrates the shared values and shared approach in tackling life's challenges across members.

Other distinctive forms of community support that participants alluded to were in relation to MLC members extending their psychosocial, emotional and spiritual support to community members in need, such as those living in poverty, orphans and vulnerable children, and the elderly. This included providing solace and praying for those facing different forms of distress, such as sickness and grief. A desire for supporting the broader community and civic engagement, even at a personal level, was also revealed:

> When we have something to give, even prayers, we give to people that need help. We contribute and also help by visiting the sick. Unfortunately, we failed in the farming part since we didn't get help. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, Howick)

> We also contribute groceries (those that are able to) at the end of the month and take them to those in need. (Focus group discussion, MLC member, Howick)

Similarly, another initiative contributing to improving livelihoods at a small scale through the network of the MLC has been providing support to orphans and vulnerable children by donating school uniforms and food to identified orphaned children in Khwezi's listener communities. The MLC coordinator described the school uniforms initiative as follows:

> Some parents passed away and left their children. We proposed a programme to support these children by collecting donations and then buying these children uniforms; then we go and give them. Last year we supported about 25 children - we buy them uniforms and groceries, so they have food before going to school. (Interview, Khwezi staff responsible for MLC coordination)

Some scholars (Kawachi & Kennedy 1997; Kaasa *et al*. 2007, Jenson 2010) view communities with high levels of social capital as being more likely to provide resources to individuals and have collective resources leading to healthier and more developed societies. In this study, the MLC initiatives may be targeted, and at a smaller scale, such as the school uniforms project, and societal-wide benefits may not be extrapolated. Nevertheless, the initiatives, however small, make a valuable contribution to supporting youth education in communities by supporting children to progress with their schooling as an investment in their future well-being.

Challenges with maintaining cohesiveness

It is worth noting that social groups can be divided on core objectives, and these divisions can occur over time, resulting in less cohesion (Oxoby 2009). In addition, different expectations could drive groups apart, leading to limited reciprocal gains and withdrawal from the association for others. Consequently, a central challenge that emerged from the study pertains to the difficulty of maintaining cohesiveness in a particular MLC branch in which members had divergent expectations, thereby threatening the cohesive sustainability of the group:

> *The branch has declined. People don't know the difference between Masibumbane and funeral parlours, so they don't understand. They don't understand; some people join for their death and help to bury loved ones and for themselves when they die. They don't understand that through joining Masibumbane, you can find a brother, sister, a mother, a gran, etc. Other people give up when they see that they don't get direct benefits from the club. They don't see that Masibumbane gives you someone who can pray for you and help you grow. (Interview, MLC member, Ntunjambili)*

This case, although unique to the study, illustrates the challenges of maintaining cohesiveness in social groups. Some member expectations may not align with collective support and shared values towards achieving common goals over time. As a result, there could be frustration when returns are not feasible/evident in the short term. Social cohesion is thus an ongoing process, with reciprocal gains such as social capital and reciprocal returns from group collectiveness being witnessed over time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study highlighted the embeddedness of participatory development communication with social cohesion through studying the results of MLC members' interpersonal interactions and collective efforts towards improving their livelihoods and those of their communities. The results speak to two main characteristics of social cohesion highlighted in literature (Putnam 1993; Putnam 2001; Friedkin 2004; Jenson 2010; Oxoby 2009), namely social inclusion and social capital. These are demonstrated through the reciprocal gains members receive from network association as well as the primacy of a sense of connectedness characterised by solidarity and building trust among group members (Moody & White 2003).

The article's value lies in the emerging empirical evidence demonstrating the role of radio listeners' clubs as informal associations that are critical in fostering social cohesion in communities. It has done so by unravelling the nature of social capital and social inclusion that members obtained from their membership and association in the network. Social cohesion in the MLC group association is expressed through positive interpersonal interactions, strong ties and support across members, shared values such as the value of Ubuntu, sharing innovative ideas to improve their livelihoods that members gained from being part of the association, and the willingness to cooperate towards improved livelihoods for members and their communities. However, one of the challenges with cohesive groups is the benefits being maintained within that particular circle of membership, with limited evidence of these reciprocal gains spreading to have a broader, community-wide reach. It is challenging to establish shared values and interests across a wider societal reach as individuals, households and communities are diverse and may differ in community social change agendas and personal interests. Understanding the benefits of micro-community socially cohesive groups to improve broader community livelihoods is a recommended area for further study.

The question of how radio listeners' clubs such as the MLC foster cooperation and ultimately the economic and social well-being of communities requires further examination. Notably, even though the various forms of social cohesion may be present, the enabling environment plays a critical role in ensuring that social cohesion

benefits are community-wide and have development gains (Berger-Schmitt 2002). DeFilippis (2001) critiques Putnam (1993) on the societal benefits of social capital and demonstrates how societies that are not cohesive could be wealthy, and wealth can also be produced in isolation. DeFilippis (2001) argues that having connected communities is insufficient for economic well-being and recommends shifting power dynamics in favour of the poor to ensure community-level gains.

Moreover, while social cohesion is critical to building collective efforts in communities, the importance of good governance in improving community livelihoods cannot be overstated (Helliwell *et al*. 2018). Hence, principles of good democratic governance characterised by transparency, accountability, and supportive and inclusive community leadership are essential requisites in ensuring improved quality of life for citizens.

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