

Social Cohesion and FoRB¹

The term “social cohesion” has been used to describe the “glue” that holds a society or community together. However, there is no consensus on a single definition of social cohesion. Social cohesion carries different connotations, depending on context, identity, culture, and social and political dynamics. Social cohesion is inextricably linked in many contexts to the wider scope of democratic governance including thematic topics including human rights and social accountability. Several conceptions of social cohesion are discussed below:

According to the UN, a cohesive society is one where all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, recognition and legitimacy... Such societies are not necessarily demographically homogenous. Rather, by respecting diversity, they harness the potential residing in their societal diversity (in terms of ideas, opinions, and skills).² **United Nations Development Programme meanwhile** defines social cohesion as the state of a society’s convergence, or the ‘common bonds’ that unify different people and groups that share space or territory. It comes about when people buy into and interact with each other based on a common set of political, economic and social institutions.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that while social cohesion is often perceived to be the overarching goal of social policy in Asia, little agreement exists on what it means.³ For the OECD, a cohesive society works towards the well-being of all members, minimizing disparities and trying to avoid marginalization within and between groups. Social cohesion can be reinforced by fighting discrimination, social exclusion and inequalities, by building social capital (i.e., networks of relationships, trust and identity between and within different groups of society) and by enabling upward social mobility.

UNICEF considers social cohesion to refer to ‘the quality of coexistence between the multiple groups that operate within a society. Groups can be distinguished in terms of ethnic and socio-cultural origin, religious and political beliefs, social class or economic sector or on the basis of interpersonal characteristics such as gender and age. Quality of coexistence between the groups can be evaluated along the dimensions of mutual respect and trust, shared values and social participation, life satisfaction and happiness as well as structural equity and social justice.’⁴ 6

The World Bank describes social cohesion ‘as the glue that bonds society together, promoting harmony, a sense of community, and a degree of commitment to promoting the common good. Beyond the social relations that bridge ethnic and religious groups, vertical linkages in which state and market institutions interact with communities and peoples can further cement the cohesiveness of a society if they are inclusive, transparent, and accountable.’⁵ It implies a set of accepted norms and rules around inclusion and equity, social and national membership and access

¹ See: “SOCIAL COHESION FRAMEWORK social cohesion for stronger communities: SC2 approach” UNDP, https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/SC2_Framework-copy.pdf

² <http://undesadspd.org/SocialIntegration/Definition.aspx>

³ OECD (2012), “Social Cohesion Indicators”, in *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2011*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264106154-11-en>

⁴ Key Peace building Concepts for the Peace building, Education, and Advocacy (PBEA) programme, UNICEF

⁵ Nat J. Colletta, Teck Ghee Lim, Anita Kelles-Viitanen, *Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention in Asia: Managing Diversity Through Development* (World Bank Publication 2001)

to livelihoods and basic services, as well as a state that actively promotes these. The World Bank further emphasizes that the interplay between these vertical and horizontal ties is a critical component for conflict management.

The Council of Europe defines social cohesion 'as a society's capacity to ensure the well-being of all its members by minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization; to manage differences and divisions and to ensure the means of achieving welfare for all. It is considered 'essential for achieving social justice, democratic security and sustainable development.'

Search for Common Ground regards social cohesion as the glue that bonds society together, essential for achieving peace, democracy and development. This 'glue' is made up of four key components: (1) social relationships, (2) connectedness, (3) orientation towards the common good, and equality. These components in turn require good governance, respect for human rights and individual responsibility. Social cohesion is not an ideal, but rather an attainable objective requiring the active and constant commitment of all levels of society and is critical to the process of building a peaceful society and nation. In contexts where social cohesion is weak, conflicts are usually more frequent, more profound, more violent, and more destructive. A society that is socially cohesive, however, is not necessarily immune to conflict. Conflicts will still occur in these societies, but they are more likely to be effectively managed.

A society or community that is inclusive, equal and united will more readily employ conflict management mechanisms to protect these values and is therefore more resistant to division.