Social Cohesion: Concepts and Measurement

Introduction:
As the world witnesses communities splintering under the pressures of violence, poverty, famine, and rampant discrimination, social cohesion has emerged at the core of humanitarian and developmental discussions. Although the general meaning of the concept may seem easy to grasp, pinning down the elements leading to and constituting a socially cohesive community remains a slippery task. Such difficulty not only sparks debates in the academic community about how to define social cohesion, but also complicates the process of designing and evaluating interventions focusing on social cohesion in the international aid community. This report will begin with a broad discussion of definitions of social cohesion, before discussing UNDP’s social cohesion work in Jordan, international case studies of social cohesion, and future recommendations for programming and monitoring and evaluation.

Social Cohesion in Theory:
Social cohesion as a theoretical concept can be linked back to Durkheim’s study of the ties binding a society together in *The Division of Labor and Society*. In an attempt to determine the factors affecting social solidarity, and using the law as its external manifestation, he divides it into two types: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. According to Durkheim, mechanical solidarity results from a group of people with shared sentiments and beliefs, and is largely reflected in penal law. In these cases, social cohesion derives from the extent to which the collective conscience regulates social life and the nature of that cohesion is marked by such regulation. As societies expand, however, and resources become scarcer, the division of labor and specialization become necessary to ensure their survival. Such societies, rather than being united by a common mindset, cohere on the bases of socioeconomic interdependency. As such, their solidarity becomes a product of individual necessity rather than collective will. For Durkheim, social solidarity is intrinsically linked to the division of labor in a society: where labor division is low, solidarity relies on homogeneity of belief; where labor division is high, solidarity is built on the strength of socioeconomic ties.

Contemporary studies in both academic and aid communities tend (implicitly, if not explicitly) to favor organic solidarity as the “true” definition of social cohesion. While the Canada Social Cohesion Research Network initially defined a socially cohesive community as one of shared values, with common challenges and equal opportunity for all, conceptually similar to Durkheim’s mechanical community, they later adjusted their definition to the willingness and capacity to cooperate with others in their community to pursue their daily lives, with no requirement for shared values, conformity, or orderliness. Heuser offers an alternative definition, describing it as the propensity, built on interpersonal trust, of an autonomous individual to “act in a way that is beneficent to society as a whole.” Despite their differences, common threads run through them that likewise course through contemporary social cohesion

1 “…une solidarité sociale qui vient de ce qu’un certain nombre d’états de conscience sont communs à tous les membres de la même société.”
3 Durkheim 119.
discourse: an avoidance of shared values as a precondition for social cohesion and an emphasis on regular positive interpersonal interactions.

In fact, individual and collective capacities for such interaction are commonly cited as a driver for social cohesion, packaged in the term social capital. Fukuyama defines social capital as “the component of human capital that allows members of a given society to trust one another and cooperate in the formation of new groups and associations.”6 Within the context of the global economy, Fukuyama describes two primary forms of social capital: families and “spontaneous sociability,” or the ability to trust and cooperate with strangers.7 Societies without either form of social capital are likely deficient in social capital, resulting in the prevalence of strong criminal organizations.8

Fukuyama’s focus on criminal organizations as a product of low social capital, itself a component of social cohesion, raises an interest point for our discussion of social cohesion. Despite citing Bernard’s warning that social cohesion is treated as a quasi-concept maintaining a flexibility conducive to political manipulation, Stanley maintains that authoritarian societies based on hate, fear, or coercion do not count as socially cohesive though they may appear to be so.9 Similarly, Heuer asserts that social norms prescribed by the government and its institutions may create the semblance of social cohesion, but do not qualify as such; still, it is the responsibility the government to foster social cohesion “indirectly through conscious political action… the obligation of governments and citizens alike.”10 The point at which such action becomes coercive, and therefore not conducive to social cohesion, remains unclear.

Indeed, Entwisle et al. note that, contrary to such claims, social cohesion is not inherently “good,” but can describe positive, negative, and neutral group dynamics.11 In that vein, Blokland strips down the definition of social cohesion to simply mean the existence of interpersonal ties uniting a group of people as a whole. These ties can be antagonistic, as between two parties constantly in dispute, or cooperative, as is generally implied by the term. For example, Blokland claims that the warring parties in Kosovo can claim greater social cohesion than the upper and lower classes in New York City due to their respective levels of sustained interpersonal interaction.12 In its stead, Blokland thus proposes the introduction of “community” as an analytical device to assess the relational dynamics between group members rather than the inclusion or exclusion of specific individuals.13

Notwithstanding these semantic gymnastics, the relevance of which to the practical application of social cohesion remains limited, these authors raise important point concerning the potential for the political manipulation of social cohesion when infused with concepts such as good or evil, or when riddled with vague determinants. This flexibility may be conducive to academic study, but the practical application of the concept requires a more rigid framework.

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7 Ibid 91.
8 Ibid 94.
9 Stanley 10.
10 Heuer 13.
13 Ibid 60.
Social Cohesion in Practice:

Social Cohesion at UNDP Jordan

The United Nations Development Programme has prioritized social cohesion in its programming since 2008. UNDP reduces the concept to two primary dimensions: “the reduction of disparities, inequalities, and social exclusion… [and] the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties.” In that vein, proposed interventions include engaging excluded groups to ensure people from different background have similar life opportunities and strengthening social capital through the development of social networks, encouraging active political participation, and improving state responsiveness, among other strategies. An example of a UNDP social-cohesion intervention targeting these dimensions is the leverage of traditional Melanesian conflict-resolution strategies in Papua New Guinea to draw ex-combatants to engage in dialogue at Peace Fairs in order to foster a sense of community between different groups.

Social cohesion has been mainstreamed into all of UNDP’s interventions in Jordan. While identifying and assessing risks to social cohesion is generally based on proxy variables, the specific proxy variable depends on the intervention in question. The following projects provide a general overview of how UNDP conducts social-cohesion programming.

1. Community Cohesion Grant Mechanism
   The Community Cohesion Grant Mechanism provides capacity building and sub-granting to CBOs in order for them to effectively address root causes of conflict and strengthen horizontal and vertical social cohesion. Interventions can take place in the thematic areas of education, justice and rule of law, political and civic participation, health, environment, media, arts, and recreation.

2. 3x6 Host Communities: Emergency Employment and Support to Establish SMEs
   The 3x6 Project provides emergency employment to vulnerable Jordanians in host communities through beneficiaries-designed community initiatives and subsequently provides training and support to establish new microbusinesses. While the project aims to address rampant unemployment and economic hardships in host communities, both potential barriers to social cohesion, it also provides beneficiaries with the opportunity to develop new relationships with one another and build trust within their community. As such, the program has been measured through both quantitative economic indicators and qualitative interviews assessing the psychosocial impact of the project on beneficiaries, including feelings of inclusion and community support.

3. Host Communities: Skills Exchange
   The Skills Exchange Project aims both to stabilize livelihoods and strengthen social cohesion in vulnerable Jordanian host communities through skills-exchange training targeting refugees and Jordanian host community members, encouraging them to teach, learn, and work together. Social cohesion in this project is being measured through the micronarrative approach, which provides a multitude of brief stories appropriate for both quantitative on a broad scale and more in-depth qualitative analysis for smaller samples.

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16 Ibid 25.
These projects represent just a few of UNDP Jordan’s work to foster social cohesion within Jordan. Rather than approaching social cohesion through one channel (i.e. one intervention “injecting” social cohesion into a community), UNDP’s approach is to address a variety of factors that could affect cohesion within a community, including employment, access to municipal services, and positive community interactions, and likewise uses a variety of indicators to measure it, including presence of barriers to it and factors conducive to it.

Case Studies

Indeed, UNDP’s multifaceted intersectoral approach to social cohesion reflects lessons learned from international case studies of social cohesion. For example, Zhao, in his study on Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China, examines the relationship between social cohesion and Islamic radicalization. Analyzing the establishment of egalitarian People’s Communes and Agricultural Production Cooperatives in the mid-twentieth century and swift transition to a free open-market economy, Zhao tracks the strengthening and subsequent breakdown in social cohesion in Xinjiang. However, although economic growth is often presented as having a positive correlation with social cohesion, he notes that government policies focusing on economic growth and increasing wealth among Muslim communities did not necessarily positively contribute to social cohesion. Rather, economic inequality, cultural discrimination and oppression, political oppression, and global radical Islam all contributed to a rise in Islamic radicalism in Xinjiang despite the continuing rise in average income. In this case, the rapid transformation from a collective local economic system into a liberal market-oriented economy in the absence of alternative support to develop new economic social ties and in conjunction with oppression and global trends actually undermined the economic foundation of social cohesion.

On the other hand, Brown and Zahar discuss peacebuilding efforts and social cohesion in the Central African Republic and the region. In this area, peacebuilding and social cohesion efforts were focused on the de-escalation of violence rather than attempting to positively contribute to the strengthening of trust between individuals, communities, and states. Furthermore, these efforts privileged horizontal social cohesion (i.e. between individuals in a community and not state-society ties) at the expense of vertical (state-society) linkages. Consequently, despite peacebuilding and horizontal social cohesion work, capital cities in these areas, which generally represent the seats of power, economic activity, and development work, have also emerged as centers of conflict, as between Sudanese and Darfuris and Khartoum and Northern Malians against Bamako. Rather than focusing strictly on community-based social cohesion and peacebuilding, then, social cohesion initiatives must recognize the realities of conflict and post-conflict societies and take into account both horizontal and vertical social cohesion. This includes not only ensuring trust between members of a community, but also ensuring that communities feel that they can trust state actors and institutions. Developing such trust cannot be the prerogative of international development organizations alone - indeed, they lack the authority and capacity to do so - but depends instead on partnership with and political actions on the part of governmental bodies and ensuring that all populations feel they are receive equal political power, economic support, and development funds. In other words, community-based social cohesion interventions, however effective they may be in that

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community, will nevertheless remain within the confines of that community and may even threaten social cohesion on a broader geographic scale unless there is a holistic nationwide social cohesion strategy conducted in partnership with both state and society actors.

**Moving Forward**

As demonstrated, social cohesion is not a unit in and of itself but rather a composite of a multitude of variables, the dynamics between which can differ depending on a given context. These variables can be broken down into two sets: core variables and peripheral variables. Core variables comprise both horizontal attitudes and collective action tendencies and vertical attitudes. Horizontal attitudes can consist of sustained levels of interpersonal interaction; the level of trust between community members; senses of belonging and motivation; and tendencies for collective action against outgroups (rendering particularly important the definition of boundaries for the community for which social cohesion is being measured). Vertical attitudes include citizen perceptions of state and local authorities and citizen tendencies towards collective action against state authorities, or lack thereof. These two sets of variables, measuring citizen-citizen and citizen-state cohesion, represent the core of social cohesion. Peripheral variables, which may include human security, access to justice and rule of law, intergroup and interpersonal contact, and levels of civic participation and representation, may all facilitate social cohesion, but the presence of any one of them, or even all of them, does not necessarily indicate a socially cohesive group.

The most effective means of addressing social cohesion, then, would be the development of a long-term interagency strategy in partnership with the government for fostering social cohesion. This strategy would not necessarily have as its goal the design and implementation of social-cohesion-specific programming, but would rather coordinate development work nationwide to ensure the effective identification of needs and appropriate distribution of aid work in such a way as to holistically contribute to social cohesion within communities, between communities, and between state and non-state actors. This long-term national strategy must be measured by long-term national indices, including one national Social Cohesion Index and one national Social Cohesion Proxy Index. The Social Cohesion Index, as advocated for the Arab States by Charles Harb,

Social Cohesion in Jordan

These conclusions have a variety of implications for social-cohesion-related programming in Jordan

1. **Historical Context**

   Social cohesion is the complex interplay of a variety of factors, which are not necessarily geographically or temporally local. One of these factors is historical context. As demonstrated in the case of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the transition from traditional socioeconomic structures into an imposed market-oriented economies and individualistic society can undermine social cohesion in a community even as economic indicators improve. In the case of Jordan, traditional social

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connections and local collective economic systems have been transformed through the top-down shift towards a liberal economic system with little external support for the establishment of new socioeconomic ties. This sudden shift means that even before the Syrian refugee crisis, social cohesion, where it existed in Jordanian communities, was already under pressure. Social-cohesion interventions, which currently largely target ties between Syrians and Jordanians, need to take this historical context into account in order to maximize their effectiveness.

2. **Governmental and Institutional Responsibilities and Partnerships**
   Governments and state institutions are key partners in fostering nationwide social cohesion. International development agencies and the Jordanian government need to collectively decide how to foster both horizontal and vertical social cohesion and which communities, both in terms of which groups (among Syrians, among Jordanians, between Syrians and Jordanians) and which geographic communities, to target. They also need to define long-term goals for the nature of the social cohesion they would like to foster, whether it be peaceful coexistence, integration, or assimilation. Building off of these goals, they should develop a National Social Cohesion Strategy, including governmental policies and international development agency interventions, in collaboration with key national stakeholders and with a ground-up approach, to be measured by Social Cohesion and Social Cohesion Proxy Indices.

3. **Identifying Approaches**
   Social-cohesion interventions are generally locally based, which, in and of itself, is not necessarily a problem. However, when local interventions do not take into account the national and regional contexts, they can actually undermine broader improvements in social cohesion. In order to mitigate this risk, key stakeholders must be identified at the local, municipality, governorate, and national levels to collectively design and implement social-cohesion policies and action plans. These plans should ensure equal access and opportunity to services and outputs based on targeting areas in greatest need, while equally ensuring new tensions are not built and existing tensions are not exacerbated. Finally, these interventions must be sustainable and address both horizontal and vertical components of social cohesion.

4. **Measuring Social Cohesion**
   One of the most difficult aspects of social-cohesion interventions is measuring their results. National indices should be developed to measure the overall state of social cohesion throughout Jordan and its relationship with factors traditionally associated with it, such as economic wellbeing and access to services. These indices can guide the development and adaptation of Jordan’s National Social Cohesion Strategy and serve as a model for social-cohesion programming in the region and internationally. Program-specific monitoring and evaluation should include both qualitative and quantitative approaches to measuring social cohesion, and should ensure therein that their measurements actually assess the presence of social cohesion rather than simply its absence or factors assumed to be related to it.