

# Social cohesion and quality life



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In the last few decades, quality of life has replaced the idea of wealth as the dominant goal of societal development. In opposition to the individual-centered perspective of societal development, several other welfare concepts emerged which put the focus on the aspects concerning societal qualities such as the extent of equality, security or freedom, or the quality and structure of the social relations within a society. Among those welfare concepts referring to characteristics of societies are, for example, „ sustainability“, „ social cohesion“, „ social inclusion“ etc. Idea of the social cohesion of a society received great political attention at the national and supranational level. In regard to these developments, this paper attempts: first, to clarify the meaning of the concept of social cohesion and to determine its inherent dimensions by reviewing the existing theoretical approaches to this issue; second, to explore relationship between social cohesion and the quality of life.

Quality of life is a concept related to the individual welfare. Although social cohesion represents a societal quality, it affects the individual quality of life because the elements of social cohesion are perceived and experienced by the members of the society. Thus, the social cohesion of a society can be conceived as an aspect relevant to the individual life situation, and in this sense, it represents a part of the individual quality of life. Under this perspective a broad conceptualization of quality of life seems appropriate. Quality of life can be considered as the complex policy goal which includes social cohesion as one component. The very broad and multidimensional notion of quality of life enlarged the perspective of societal development by considering not only economic aspects but also social and ecological

concerns. Several welfare concepts emerged which put the focus on aspects concerning societal qualities such as the extent of equality, security or freedom, or the quality and structure of the social relations within a society. One of these welfare concept is social cohesion.

The goal of this paper is: first, to clarify the meaning of the concept of social cohesion and to determine its inherent dimensions by reviewing the existing theoretical approaches to this issue; second, to explore relationship between social cohesion and the quality of life.

### **1. The concept of social cohesion**

The idea of social cohesion is difficult to express in a single definition. Émile Durkheim first coined the concept of social cohesion at the end of the nineteenth century. He considered social cohesion as an ordering feature of a society and defined it as the interdependence between the members of the society, shared loyalties and solidarity [14]. Aspects often mentioned in describing social cohesion are the strenght of social relations, shared values and communities of interpretation, feelings of a common identity and a sense of belonging to the same community, trust among societal members as well as the extent of inequality and disparities [26; 14). The simpler the division of labor in a society is, the stronger the bond between individuals and the social group will be. This bond is a result of mechanical solidarity, which arises from segmented similarities based on territory, traditions and group customs. The social division of labour that modernity brings with it erodes and weakens such bonds, as does the

increased autonomy of individuals in modern society. In such a context, cohesion is part of the social solidarity that is required in order for the members of a society to remain bound to it with a force comparable to that of pre-modern, mechanical solidarity. This requires stronger, more numerous ties, and must even include bonds based on common ideas and feelings, leading to what Durkheim calls “ organic solidarity”.

As of today there is no single definition of social cohesion and it is still debated whether social cohesion is a cause or a consequence of other aspects of social, economic and political life. There is no clear definition of the concept – probably because the very tradition of social citizenship that characterizes European societies assumes that social rights entail an intrinsic relationship between social inclusion and the provision of mechanisms to integrate individuals and give them a sense of full membership in society.

According to this view, social cohesion implies a causal link between the mechanisms that provide integration and well-being, on the one hand, and a full individual sense of belonging to society, on the other. Inclusion and belonging, or equality and belonging, are the cornerstones of the idea of social cohesion in societies organized around the principles of the welfare state.

The concept of social cohesion is often confused with other concepts, like social capital, social integration, or social inclusion. Social capital is closely related to social cohesion, and the two are very important concepts in policy and policy research circles. Social capital – understood as a symbolic societal asset consisting of the ability to manage rules, networks and bonds of social

trust which strengthen collective action, pave the way for reciprocity and progressively spread throughout society resembles cohesion, and can largely be described as a stock upon which social agents can draw to make society more cohesive. However, social capital is both a consequence and a producer of social cohesion. Whereas social cohesion emphasizes processes and outcomes, social capital emphasizes the notion of investments and assets that bring benefits, benefits that are not fully appropriated by the individuals making the investments.

Social cohesion is often confused with social inclusion. Inclusion mechanisms include employment, educational systems, rights and policies designed to encourage equity, well-being and social protection. In that context, social cohesion may be understood in terms of both the effectiveness of instituted social inclusion mechanisms and the behaviours and value judgments of the members of society. Behaviours and value judgments include issues as diverse as trust in institutions, social capital, belonging and solidarity, acceptance of social rules and the willingness to participate in deliberative processes and collective endeavours.

Another proximate notion is that of social integration, defined as the dynamic, multifactoral process whereby individuals share in a minimum standard of well-being consistent with the level of development achieved by a country. This restrictive definition views integration as the opposite of exclusion. In a broader sense, integration into society has also been defined as a common system of efforts and rewards, which levels the playing field in terms of opportunities and delivers rewards based on merit.

The idea of social inclusion may be viewed as an expanded form of integration. Rather than emphasize a structure to which individuals must adapt in order to fit into the systemic equation, it also focuses on the need to adapt the system in such a way as to accommodate a diversity of actors and individuals. Inclusion requires not only an improvement in conditions of access to integration mechanisms, but also an effort to increase the self-determination of the actors involved.

The idea of a social ethic also includes an essential aspect of social cohesion, emphasizing common values, agreement on a minimum set of rules and social norms, solidarity as an ethical and practical principle, and the assumption of reciprocity.

These concepts are part of the “ semantic universe” of social cohesion. Viewed in this light, the specific difference that sets social cohesion apart is the dialectical relationship between integration and inclusion, on the one hand, and social capital and social ethics, on the other. Consequently, there is a distinction between social inclusion and social cohesion, inasmuch as the latter includes the attitudes and behaviours of actors, without being limited to those factors. Social cohesion may thus be defined as the dialectic between instituted social inclusion and exclusion mechanisms and the responses, perceptions and attitudes of citizens towards the way these mechanisms operate.

A definition of social cohesion by relating it to the concepts of social exclusion/exclusion and social capital has also been present. For example Dahrendorf et al. described a social cohesive society as a society preventing

social exclusion: „ Social cohesion comes in to describe a society which offers opportunities to all its members of a framework of accepted values and institutions. Such a society is, therefore, one of inclusion. People belong; they are not allowed to be excluded“ [4, str. vii]. Other scientist have emphasised that the social capital of a society is an essential foundation of its social cohesion [18; 17].

On the basis of review of the various approaches we could conclude that the concept of social cohesion incorporates mainly two societal goal dimensions which can be analytically distinguished:

- 1) The first dimension concerns the reduction of disparities, inequalities, and social exclusion.
- 2) The second dimension concerns the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties. This dimension embraces all aspects which are generally also considered as the social capital of a society [6].

These two dimensions must be viewed as independent from each other to a certain degree. In principle, strong ties within a community can be accompanied by the tendency to discriminate and exclude those people who do not belong to that community [19]. This problem highlights the importance of considering both dimensions – disparities/inequalities/social exclusion and social relations/ties/social capital – in order to get a comprehensive picture of the social cohesion of a society.

### **3. Social exclusion**

Social exclusion represents concept with increasing popularity among scholars during last decade. The popularity of the concept was especially promoted through the growing interest in matters of social exclusion at the level of the European Union. The European Commission

launched a series of research programmes in the framework of the European Observatory on National Policies to Combat Social Exclusion and of the European Poverty Programmes.

Research on social exclusion replaced, to some extent, older terms of poor living conditions, such as poverty or deprivation. Originally, the term was used in the context of debates on a new poverty and defined as a rupture of the relationship between individual and the society due to the failure of societal institutions to integrate individuals. Today, it is suggested that social exclusion should be conceptualised as the insufficiency of one or more of the following four systems [1, str. 258-259]:

This approach focuses on relational issues, i. e. on the disruption of social ties between individual and the society. Unlike social cohesion, poverty is concerned with distributional issues, i. e. on the lack of resources at the disposal of individuals or households [23; 12]. Thus poverty may be regarded as characteristic of individuals and households, whereas social exclusion may be conceived as a feature of societies and of the individuals' relations to society.

In contrast to this position are considerations that social exclusion can be regarded both as a property of societies and as an attribute of individuals. As



an individual attribute it is defined as a low level of welfare (economic disadvantage) and the inability to participate in social life (sociopolitical disadvantage). This perspective equals social exclusion to a multidimensional notion of poverty which describes a state or an outcome of a process. As a societal characteristic the term social exclusion refers to the impairment of social cohesion caused by the way in which institutions regulate and thereby constrain access to goods, services, activities and resources which are generally associated with citizenship rights. This view focuses attention to the processes of social exclusion and its causes which are attributed to the failure of institutions [5].

The conclusion arising out of these considerations is the requirement to differentiate between the causes of disadvantageous living circumstances and the processes leading to them on the one side and the outcomes of those processes themselves, that is peoples' living situation. The causes may be attributed to societal institutions and can then be described by the concept of social exclusion as a property of societies. The impact of social exclusion on people is observable in the form of poor living conditions. In this sense, social exclusion represents a characteristic of individual and corresponds to the concept of poverty in a multidimensional notion.

#### **4. Social capital**

The conceptualization of social cohesion as it is proposed here considers social capital as representing a second main dimension which may be used to describe the social cohesion of a society.

Social capital represents one of the most powerful and popular metaphors in current social science research. Broadly understood as referring to the community relations that affect personal interactions, social capital has been used to explain an immense range of phenomena, ranging from voting patterns to health to the economic success of countries [7]. Literally hundreds of papers have appeared throughout the social science literature arguing that social capital matters in understanding individual and group differences and further that successful public policy design needs to account for the effects of policy on social capital formation. In this paper we will give the primary focus to the role of social capital in strengthening the social cohesion and further link with the quality of life.

We often observe countries with similar endowments of natural, physical, and human capital achieving very different levels of economic success. This paradox has led scholars to search for deeper and more meaningful explanations about what holds people and societies together in order to foster economic development. Over time, scholars have constructed various frameworks for understanding the social aspects of this phenomenon and what we currently refer to as “social capital”. Fueled by continuous empirical investigations, these frameworks have evolved quite rapidly in recent decades. Since Loury [16] introduced it into modern social science research and Coleman’s [3] seminal study placed it at the forefront of research in sociology, the term social capital has spread throughout the social sciences and has spawned a huge literature that runs across disciplines. James Coleman popularized the term as he sought to conceptualize the aspects of social structure that facilitate economic

transactions. His work is widely recognized as one of the most significant, as is Robert Putnam's study of voluntary associations in Italy. Putnam [21] concluded that the high density of voluntary associations in the north was responsible for the region's economic success. Many others have also made significant strides in advancing our knowledge and understanding of the subject. However, despite the immense amount of research on it, however, the definition of social capital has remained elusive.

There are various theoretical approaches and perspectives of social capital which use more or less narrow concept. But they all have in common that they regard social capital as a property of a social entity and not of an individual [10]. It is a relational concept, it presupposes a social relation and exists only as far as it is shared by other individuals. Therefore, it cannot be the private property of a single person, but has a character of a public good [11; 19]. The social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development. Social capital, however, is not simply the sum of the institutions which underpin society, it is also the glue that holds them together. It includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust and a common sense of civic responsibility, that makes society more than a collection of individuals. Without a degree of common identification with forms of governance, cultural norms and social rules, it is difficult to imagine a functioning society [25, str. 1].

Social capital is not only considered to be an essential basis for the social cohesion of a society, but at the same time as a main component of the

wealth of a nation and as an important determinant of economic growth, besides physical, human and environmental capital [13]. The view is empirically supported by results showing a relation between the social capital of a society and its economic well-being [21; 15; 24]. Furthermore, there are also investigations pointing to the improvement of other dimensions of welfare such as education, health, rates of crime, and the environment [3; 20].

5. The interdependence of social cohesion and the quality of life The concepts of social cohesion and quality of life are interrelated [8; 9].

Although social cohesion represents an attribute of a society, it ultimately rests on the behaviour, attitudes and evaluations of its members, too. Social cohesion is based on social capital which is also created by social relations and ties established, maintained and experienced by individuals. Thus, looking at the social cohesion of a society involves aspects which are part of the individual life situation and in this sense components of the individual quality of life. Secondly, elements of the social cohesion of a society may have direct impact on individual quality of life. Empirical examples are the above cited results on the influence of social capital on economic and other dimensions of welfare. At a conceptual level, the perspective of social exclusion as a process rooting in the malfunction of social institutions and resulting in a deprived living situation of the individual is another example.

Social cohesion can be conceived as a societal quality which is experienced by individuals in their daily lives, for example in the form of the perceived inequality or the social climate at the working place, at school or in the neighbourhood, and thus also refers to the individual quality of life. This

perspective considers elements of the social cohesion of a society to form an integral part of the quality of life of the individuals belonging to that society. Such a position, which is supported here, advocates a broad conceptualisation of quality of life encompassing not only individual characteristics of the life situation but also societal qualities. In this sense, quality of life represents the common policy goal with social cohesion as an important component to be addressed.

6. The measurement of social cohesion On the basis of the conclusion about two dimensions of social cohesion, measurement of social cohesion should include measures concerning:

Concerning the first dimension – measurement dimensions for the various aspects can be derived for nearly all domains. Regional disparities are taken into account for example with respect to access to transport, leisure and cultural facilities, educational and health care institutions, employment opportunities or the state of the environment. Issues of equal opportunities/inequalities could be considered through political participation and employment opportunities, generation of inequalities in social relations or unemployment risks; inequalities between disabled and non-disabled people in access to public transport or educational institutions; etc. The aspect of social exclusion can be operationalised in many domains, too. Manifestations of social exclusion are usually measured such as homelessness, social isolation, long-term unemployment, poverty or a lack of social protection.

Concerning second goal dimension of social cohesion and that is strengthening the social capital of a society, most of the aspects of this dimension refer to the life domain of „ social and political participation and integration“. This domain covers all general issues of social relations and engagement outside the own household community such as the availability of relatives and friends, frequency of contacts and support within those personal networks, membership in organisations, engagement in the public realm such as volunteering and political activities. The quality of societal institutions is a component of social capital which applies to several life domains since, for example, institutions of education, health care, social security or the legal system.

7. Possible contemporary threats to social cohesion There are numerous possible demographic, socio-economic and political trends and processes which have been associated with a general deterioration of social cohesion throughout the world.

Over the past three decades, globalization in the form of processes of structural transformation has impacted severely, in many ways, on people throughout the world. The intensified linkage of local social conditions with activities and decisions within world financial, commodity and labor markets is increasingly apparent and in many places it's consequences are devastating.

Perhaps the most fundamental feature of structural transformation in industrial countries has been reducing the share of industry in the formation of GDP and consequently the massive decline in manufacturing employment.

We have been witnesses to the massive relocation of capital, jobs and manufacturing to areas of the globe where labor is cheaper. Instead of a relatively stable work conditions, characterized by institutionalized wage agreements and strong trade unions, internal labor markets within large firms, and secure, tenured and full-time employment; new socio-economic patterns emerge:

More and more, opportunities for work and flows of income became variable and unpredictable and stable conditions characterizing employment are replaced by growing insecurity. These kinds of changes add to a growing polarization not only between employed and unemployed, but between secure, highly skilled, well paid workers and the larger proportion of insecure, unskilled, low paid workers. In addition to that, the gender dimension is critical to this shift, since women are greatly over represented in the new flexible yet precarious sectors of casual, part-time and short-contract employment [2, str. 142].

The rise of neo-liberal political philosophy has driven many of the processes of political restructuring over the past two decades. A key aspect of the neo-liberal vision of society is bringing the market principle, along with notions of self-responsibility and individualism, to almost every sphere of politics, economics and society. Aspects of political change which have subsequently emerged, and impacted dramatically on social cohesion, include:

Such policies and processes which have brought about “ the new inequality” can be seen as fuelling a process of “ inequalisation”. The consequences for social cohesion, however defined, are devastating. “Such a divergence of

the life chances of large social groups”, Dahrendorf observes, “ is incompatible with civil society” [4, str. 38]. The most socially stigmatised, spatially segregated and economically disadvantaged also become the most politically excluded.

The combined forces of economic and political restructuring, along with the new social fissions created in their wake, have also threatened a key socio-psychological source of social cohesion, the idea of “ the nation”. The changes associated with globalization (here considered as processes involving the intensified linkage and increased scope, scale and speed of world-wide economic activity) are now so pervasive that national governments arguably no longer hold the keys to their own national larders. The flow and control of a variety of forms of investment, currency trading, commodity markets, and labor pools are increasingly determined by agents and forces above and beyond the reins of nation-state policy. For the nation-state, prerogatives and margins for maneuvers in economic policy are greatly reduced.

## **Conclusions**

Social cohesion represents a concept which focuses on societal qualities such as the extent of inequality or the strength of social relations and ties within a society. In the terms described above, it is both a means and an end. As an end, it is an object of public policy, to the extent that policies attempt to ensure that all members of society feel themselves to be an active part of it, as both contributors to and beneficiaries of progress. In an age of profound, rapid changes resulting from globalization and the new paradigm of the information society, recreating and ensuring a sense of belonging and



inclusion is an end in itself. Social cohesion is also a means, however, in more ways than one. Societies that boast higher levels of social cohesion provide a better institutional framework for economic growth and attract investment by offering an environment of trust and clearly defined rules. Moreover, long-term policies that seek to level the playing field require a social contract to lend them force and staying power, and such a contract must have the support of a wide range of actors willing to negotiate and reach broad agreements. In order to do so, they must feel themselves to be a part of the whole, and they must be willing to sacrifice personal interests for the good of the community. The formation of the social covenants needed to support pro-equity and pro-inclusion policies is facilitated by a greater willingness to support democracy, become involved in issues of public interest, participate in deliberative processes and trust institutions, as well as a stronger sense of belonging to a community and solidarity with excluded and vulnerable groups.

In this paper we have established two goal dimensions inherent in the concept of social cohesion: 1) the reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion and 2) the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties. Concerning the first dimension of social cohesion, examples of measurement dimensions within various life domains are regional disparities of the state of environment, equal opportunities of women and men in employment, inequalities between social strata in the state of health, social exclusion from material goods measured by income poverty. As far as second dimension is concerned, it comprises all aspects which together constitute the social capital of a society. This includes the social relations available at

the informal level of private networks and the more formal level of organisations, the activities and engagement within private networks as well as within public realms, the quality of social relations and the quality of societal institutions. The quality of societal institutions represents a component of social capital which applies to several life domains. Institutions of education, health care, working life, social security, social services, the political system and legal system. The perceived quality of these institutions are measured by the level of trust, satisfaction with or approval of institutions.

The combined forces of economic and political restructuring, along with the new social fissions created in their wake, threaten to deteriorate a key sources of social cohesion in contemporary societies. It is therefore not surprising that idea of social cohesion receives great attention by social scientists as well as by politicians and gradually establish itself as one of the central societal goals at the national and the supranational level.