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## Research Report

# Strengthening social cohesion in conflict-affected societies: Potential, patterns and pitfalls

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## Strengthening Social Cohesion in Conflict-Affected Societies: Potential, Patterns and Pitfalls

Fletcher D. Cox, Charlotte Fiedler  
and Karina Mross

### Summary

Bilateral and multilateral donors are increasingly focusing on strengthening social cohesion in efforts to build and sustain peace in conflict-affected societies. What does promoting social cohesion mean with respect to international engagement? This policy brief provides an overview of the “social cohesion” approach, explains how it applies to conflict-affected and fragile contexts, and introduces a typology of common interventions. It discusses the added value of taking a social cohesion approach to development and peacebuilding practice, as well as challenges policymakers and practitioners may encounter when using it.

Social cohesion can be understood as positive relations among individuals and groups (the horizontal dimension) and between society and the state (the vertical dimension). While fostering, rebuilding or sustaining cohesion are challenges for any society, they are particularly difficult in conflict settings where divisions fuel violence and violence reinforces divisions.

We argue that taking a social cohesion approach in divided, conflict-affected societies offers several advantages. First, it has the potential to focus intervention on less tangible aspects of conflict – drawing attention to overlooked grievances and bringing tensions between groups and the state into focus. Second, it helps integrate a peacebuilding lens in a broad variety of policy spaces. Third, it helps policymakers to integrate citizen perspectives into development strategies and to focus on the provision of quality peace for all citizens.

Taking a social cohesion approach, however, also brings challenges. It may be sensitive for external actors to address social grievances, identity-based divisions and power relations. Dominant groups may feel threatened in their position of power and push back against these attempts, or tensions among historically marginalised groups may cause friction. Donors may experience backlash

against programmes that directly address sensitive topics. At the same time, if the intent is to take a transformative approach to building social cohesion, it may be difficult for donors to maintain a neutral stance. Social cohesion programmes may risk increasing tension in the short term, but to restore inter-group trust and state legitimacy over the long term, it might be necessary to confront and accept tension.

Reflecting on the potentials and pitfalls of strengthening social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, we suggest that policymakers and practitioners should:

- *Think politically.* Fostering social cohesion may initially appear less political or less contentious than peacebuilding, but it inevitably involves engaging politics, as well as identity and power dynamics. Securing donor support for “apolitical” social cohesion programming may at first appear to be advantageous, but this perception risks overlooking power relationships, politicised grievances, hierarchies and other salient dimensions of social structure (e.g., class dynamics).
- *Expect pushback.* The social cohesion approach has the potential to interrupt powerful political and economic structures that link social and political identities (e.g., ethnicity, class and gender) to power, status and public goods. Donors should expect overt and covert pushback and contention and be prepared to encounter the stickiness of informal institutions
- *Work across multiple dividing lines.* Strengthening in-group trust and cooperation may negatively affect out-group relationships and overall social cohesion. Fostering social cohesion in the wake of violent conflict requires networks to address multiple social divisions. Large coalitions that cut across race, ethnicity, gender, class and generation are notoriously difficult to form and sustain, yet essential for building sustainable peace.

## International support for social cohesion

Bilateral and multilateral donors, such as the BMZ, the World Bank and the UNDP, are increasingly investing in efforts designed to foster social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

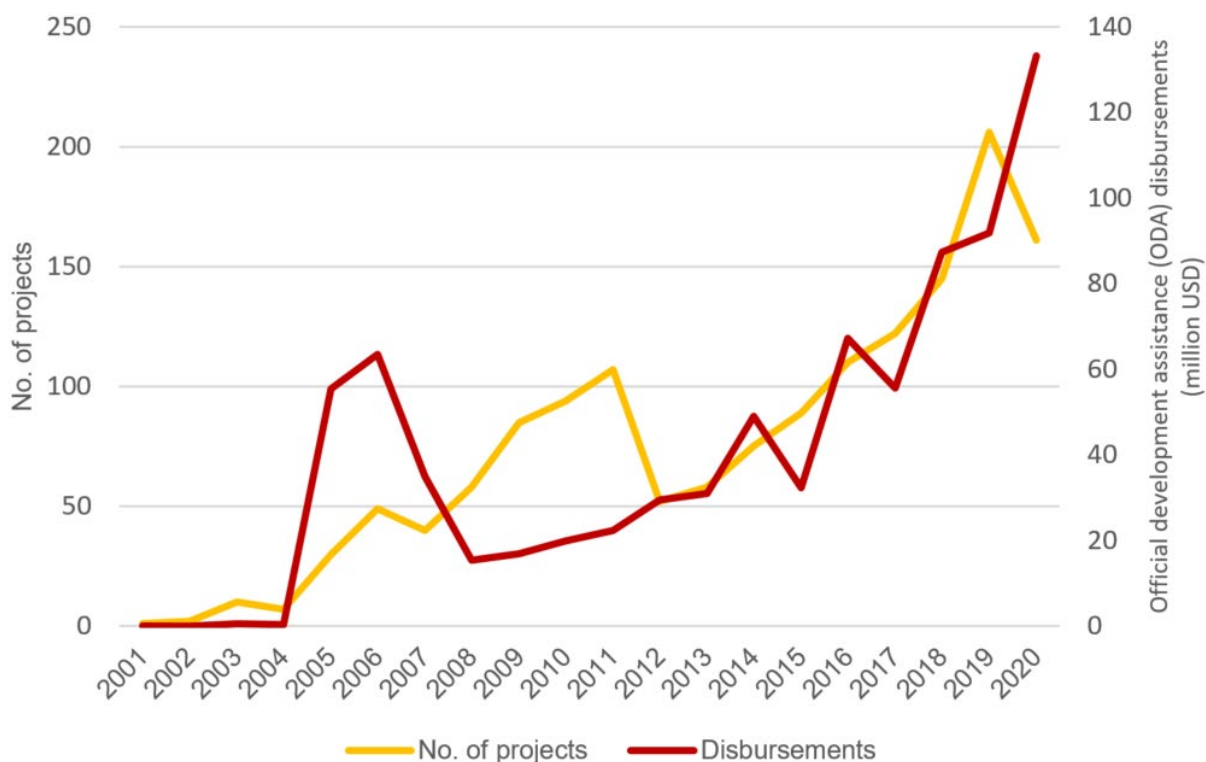
Figure 1 shows a clear increase in the number and financial volume of projects explicitly linked to social cohesion as reported by OECD/DAC donors over the past two decades. This growing attention is reinforced by global trends of political polarisation and autocratization, as well as the climate change crisis and forced displacement.

Despite increasing interest in the topic, definitions of social cohesion often remain vague in development cooperation dialogue and practice. This policy brief aims to advance a clearer understanding of the concept of social cohesion, how it can be promoted, how it relates to sustainable peace, and the added value of the approach for building peace in divided, conflict-affected

contexts. Following Leininger et al. (2021), social cohesion consists of the “vertical *and* the horizontal relations among members of society and the state, which hold society together”. A cohesive society has high levels of horizontal and vertical *trust* (people trust each other and political institutions), an *inclusive identity* (the harmonious coexistence of different identities within one society) and a high level of *cooperation for the common good* (civic and political participation related to public goods that transcend the interests of individuals).

Social cohesion and sustainable peace are directly related. A society engulfed in armed conflict or civil war cannot be cohesive. Instead, conflict-affected communities are often marked by high levels of fragmentation, sharp divisions between identity groups and deep distrust in state institutions. Mass violence fractures societal bonds and impacts prospects for peace well after the direct violence has ended.

**Figure 1: Social-cohesion related-engagement 2001-2020**



Source: Authors' representation, based on OECD/DAC data

A country at peace (especially if reduced to a *negative* peace or the mere absence of direct violence) is not automatically cohesive. Dangerously low levels of social cohesion create fragility and make many countries susceptible to the outbreak or recurrence of conflict and protracted political violence. While all fragile and conflict-affected countries are likely to struggle to (re)build cohesive bonds, the social divisions that are most problematic are particular to a specific context and may not be limited to the groups directly involved in violent conflict.

## Potential: Bringing dynamic relationships into focus

A social cohesion perspective can help make peacebuilding efforts sustainable by aiming to foster a higher quality peace. The key advantages of the approach include:

- *Making social divisions and attitudes visible for strategic conflict prevention.* The approach can serve as a tool for early-warning risk assessment and conflict prevention. In contexts that are not marked by overt armed conflict, this approach draws attention to societal dynamics that are less tangible and easily overlooked (i.e., because they are not linked to existing conflict lines), although they can have severe consequences for peaceful coexistence and resilience. It helps expand a narrow perspective on armed violence to a broader view of societal dynamics that drive marginalisation, grievances and everyday violence.
- *Highlighting relationships among groups and relationships with the state.* The approach emphasizes vertical *and* horizontal relationships. It helps policymakers and practitioners to think carefully about how to consider both society and the state in their programming.
- *Facilitating a cross-sectional approach.* The approach can be applied to different sectors, such as efforts to promote education, social welfare, economic integration and even countering violent extremism programming. It can integrate a peacebuilding lens into efforts

that are not usually approached from a conflict prevention perspective, helping to go beyond the do-no-harm approach in development and peacebuilding practices. The World Bank, for example, uses this approach to ensure that economic development policies make social cohesion a primary objective. Preventing perceptions of injustice from emerging during infrastructure development projects can, for instance, limit societal grievances, reduce fragility and decrease conflict vulnerability (Marc et al., 2013).

- *Incorporating a broader citizens' view of the conflict.* Particularly in post-conflict contexts, the social cohesion approach helps broaden the perspective beyond the immediate conflict parties. It recognizes the interests and rights of all groups to participate in, and benefit from, processes of reconstruction and reconciliation.
- *Maintaining a long-term focus on the quality and sustainability of peace.* The approach makes policymakers and practitioners think carefully about how to improve the qualitative aspects of peace rather than merely maintaining the absence of direct violence.

## Patterns: Common types of social cohesion interventions

Interventions aiming to foster social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected contexts can be differentiated according to theories of change (primary goals) and whether they primarily address horizontal or vertical relationships. While practitioners and policymakers have constructed plausible theories of change for various forms of social cohesion programming, generalisable evidence of effectiveness is still lacking for many types of intervention (for a recent meta evaluation of donor interventions to foster social cohesion, see Sonnenfeld et al., 2021).

On the horizontal level, fostering social cohesion commonly includes the following four types of intervention that aim to strengthen inter-group trust and cooperation as well as an inclusive identity.

**Table 1: Horizontal interventions**

	<b>Description (primary goal)</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Dialogue-based interventions</b>	Restore trust through dialogue that bridges social divisions. One of the most direct and most common types.	Mediation and dialogue fora, or, in post-conflict contexts, reconciliation projects.
<b>Collaborative contact interventions</b>	Engage members from different identity groups in a joint activity in a political, economic or social arena.	Community-driven development programmes or engaging youth from different backgrounds in sport activities.
<b>Social cohesion messaging</b>	Provide information aimed at reducing prejudices and stressing the commonalities among diverse groups.	Media campaigns, theatre and art-based interventions or long-term educational programmes.
<b>Social engagement</b>	Strengthen civic engagement by encouraging higher levels of participation in civil society groups and activities.	Funding and capacity building for civil society organisations and leaders, and youth leadership development programmes.

On the vertical level, four main types of interventions aim to strengthen trust in the state, as well as identification and cooperation with it.

**Table 2: Vertical Interventions**

	<b>Description (primary goal)</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Foster participation</b>	Increase and broaden participation in governance processes, and improve the approachability of state institutions.	Civic education programmes, consultative local budgeting processes and local governance reform.
<b>Enhance inclusiveness</b>	Reduce political and socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion, and improve impartial accessibility to state institutions.	Civic education programmes for historically marginalised groups, with quota systems to foster equitable service delivery.
<b>Increase performance</b>	Improve service delivery and increase the efficiency of state institutions. Focus on the output and effectiveness of state institutions.	Programmes to improve the provision of public goods, including support for the rule of law and technical support to develop the bureaucracy.
<b>Strengthen integrity</b>	Increase the (perceived) neutrality, professionalisation and impartiality of state institutions.	Anti-corruption programmes aimed at reducing the misappropriation of funds and security sector reform in post-conflict contexts.

Social cohesion programmes often include several types of interrelated interventions and may be applied within and across multiple policy spaces. Content-wise, the social cohesion approach does not contradict current post-conflict peacebuilding practice. However, it focuses more on intervening to remediate long-running societal grievances than addressing immediate risks for (renewed) armed violence – thus more strongly emphasising and widening the conflict prevention lens. It offers a different perspective on how to approach classic (liberal) peacebuilding topics, such as economic reconstruction, elections and transitional justice, so that each type of peacebuilding support strengthens horizontal and vertical societal relations and does so across a broad spectrum of societal groups, policy arenas and levels of governance.

### **Pitfalls: Common challenges for the social cohesion approach**

Donors and development partners working to strengthen social cohesion in fragile and conflict-affected contexts should be prepared to encounter complex challenges, including evoking measurable societal change in short timeframes, managing reactive responses and maintaining neutrality (Cox & Sisk, 2017).

Social cohesion programmes are based on theories of change that aim to shift citizens' attitudes and behaviours – toward each other and the state. These types of changes are particularly difficult to promote from the outside and interventions tend to have difficulties evoking observable structural transformation.

Furthermore, when using the social cohesion approach, donors confront a number of challenges well-known in peacebuilding, such as increasing trust in state institutions when the state is weak, faces severe resource constraints or is not trustworthy. Restoring confidence in government institutions is particularly difficult in cases where the state was a party to violent conflict or remains captured by a small group of leaders.

Reactive behaviours, including pushback and backlash, are also common. Fostering social cohesion can involve supporting specific groups, addressing sensitive topics related to identity and questioning political power dynamics. Addressing the grievances of historically marginalised groups may increase friction in the short term. Dominant groups may feel threatened in their position of power, which can lead to *pushback* – political groups actively working against the intended improvement. Pushback can also lead to *tokenism* – the formation of symbolic institutions with minimal power to influence policymaking – that can undermine vertical trust.

Friction may also arise between historically marginalised groups. If donors support specific groups (e.g., victims in a post-conflict situation or a region considered most at risk of radicalisation) other groups may feel left behind. *Backlash* in the form of heightened tensions between two or more identity groups may trigger new dynamics of mistrust and fragmentation.

Donors and development partners also face the question of whether to maintain a neutral stance. This is because they usually strive to be perceived as neutral in order to reach across societal divisions and get key stakeholders on board for societal change. However, pushback and backlash dynamics can also affect donors, especially if they are working to empower historically marginalised groups.

To avoid pushback, donors often take a neutral approach, avoiding sensitive issues. However, the pursuit of social cohesion can push donors to think carefully about their positions vis-à-vis social movements or efforts to hold government officials accountable for fully addressing grievances. In some cases, strengthening social cohesion may not allow for remaining entirely neutral and concentrating only on easy peacebuilding (promoting rules, supporting new bureaucracies, hosting ad hoc dialogues, etc.). The pursuit of cohesion may require more difficult emancipatory peacebuilding (supporting demands for rule changes, power

shifts and more equitable and accountable state institutions).

The case of post-civil-war Nepal illustrates the neutrality challenge. Donors supported the development of a post-conflict constitution that included the formation of seven commissions with mandates to directly remediate grievances of historically highly marginalised groups, including Dalits, women and indigenous peoples. New institutions increased expectations of power redistribution and resource allocation for historically disadvantaged regions and communities. In practice, however, patronage and corruption, as well as caste, class and gender-based exclusion, continued – leading to the re-emergence of conflict-related grievances, rising identity-based political mobilisation and weak governance. Donors might have been more effective if they had been less neutral and had backed domestic social movements. At the same time, many donors experienced pushback after supporting marginalised groups and were accused by politicians of “stoking ethnic sentiments” in the guise of social cohesion (Cox & Sisk, 2017).

## **Social cohesion and sustainable peace: Main messages**

Adopting a social cohesion perspective in development and peacebuilding practice offers several advantages. It can help to bring less tangible societal dynamics to the forefront, which may help to achieve a higher quality and more sustainable peace. It can be applied to different policy sectors and highlights both the relationships among groups as well as their relationship to the state. The approach makes social divisions, grievances and inter-group attitudes visible for strategic conflict prevention.

However, donors also need to be aware that strengthening social cohesion can be a sensitive and highly political endeavour. Although fostering social cohesion may initially appear less political or less contentious than other types of peacebuilding support, it involves addressing societal

fissures, deep grievances and identity politics. Strengthening social cohesion relates to power dynamics and must be approached as such. This may require difficult decisions regarding neutrality versus active involvement, as well as careful planning for how to respond to pushback and backlash.

It is important for donors and peacebuilding practitioners to acknowledge the multidimensionality of social identities and relationships and how they are linked. Strengthening in-group cohesion and state-society relations that are limited to a dominant group or coalition can undermine overall social cohesion. In the pursuit of sustainable development and peace, it is therefore crucial to work across multiple societal dividing lines.

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An online appendix with an overview of relevant literature on social cohesion and peacebuilding is available at <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb3.2023app>



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