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Social Contract and Social Cohesion: Synergies and Tensions between Two Related Concepts

Markus Loewe, Armin von Schiller, Tina Zintl & Julia Leininger

Summary

“Social cohesion” and the “social contract” are two related analytical concepts, which have become increasingly popular among researchers and practitioners. Both concepts help to understand and characterise societies and countries by shedding light on the relationships between members and groups of society and state institutions. Unfortunately, there is often little precision in the use of the concepts. As a result, their respective analytical strengths have not always been well utilised for policy analysis and project design. Furthermore, the synergies between them have been overlooked. This paper therefore defines both concepts, considers their respective strengths and discusses the relationship between them.

The concept of the social contract emphasises the deliverables exchanged between societal groups and governing authorities. Social contracts are the sum of formal and informal agreements amongst societal actors and between them and the actor in power (the government or any other type of authority) on the rights and obligations of one towards the other. Social contracts vary enormously, but all establish more stability in state–society relations, especially if they are inclusive and flexible enough to account for changes in the framework conditions.

The concept of social cohesion, in contrast, refers primarily to the *quality* of the relations between individuals, societal groups and the state, and the underlying values, norms and attitudes that shape

these relationships. Social cohesion can be characterised as the glue that holds a society together and enables it to develop a shared vision. It concerns the horizontal relationships between members of society and the vertical relationships between societal actors and political institutions.

Social contracts and social cohesion affect each other. Social contracts contribute to social cohesion because the regular and predictable exchange of deliverables between societal groups and the state creates an interdependence that strengthens mutual trust, willingness to cooperate and a sense of common identity. Conversely, social contracts tend to be more resilient and sustainable if they are based on cohesive societies.

Both concepts are thus useful for national governments and foreign donors to assess opportunities and design policies for sustainable development. The social contract concept helps us to understand the “give and take” in a country: it shows where governments could do better in delivering to society and thereby make state–society relations more stable. The social cohesion concept in turn helps to determine what holds societies together and which attributes of intra-society relations could or should be strengthened. In addition, both concepts assist foreign donors in assessing which interventions would be favourable for the internal relationships in partner countries and in thinking carefully about potential unintended harmful effects. In particular, international donors can benefit from exploiting the mutually enforcing relationship between social contract and social cohesion.

Introduction

Societies in the global North and South are increasingly suffering from internal polarisation and violent conflict. The ability of members of societies to cooperate over common goods and to respect divergent opinions seems to be in decay. Established mechanisms of conflict resolution and conciliation are increasingly unpopular and disregarded. They are not sufficient to cope with recent and current health, economic and climate crises on a global scale, which puts societies under high pressure. In more and more countries, polarisation and internal struggles thus devour large resources (in terms of wealth, time, energy etc.) and prevent collective efforts towards sustainable human, economic, social, environmental and political development. Civil and international wars have been increasing. Wherever polarisation and violent conflict emerge, social cohesion erodes and formally prevailing social contracts are questioned or even dissolve.

Given these trends, the global development community is discussing intensively how to support the resilience and stability of countries in a non-violent, inclusive and sustainable way, with a special emphasis on particularly vulnerable and fragile countries. As suggested in Sustainable Development Goal 16, supporting inclusive and peaceful pathways enables sustainability. Increasingly, the international community is acknowledging that the concepts of “social contracts” and “social cohesion” are key to such purpose and helpful for identifying strategies of assistance.

Unfortunately, these concepts are often used quite vaguely. However, defining measurable development goals, identifying a theory of change, and assessing the context and impact of development programmes depends on distinguishable and clear concepts. Therefore, from a practitioner’s perspective it is particularly important to clarify the content of the two concepts and to explore in what way they complement, condition or even contradict each other. In this vein, this briefing paper explains the two concepts, and describes their commonalities and differences, as

well as their interconnections. IDOS, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability is in a unique position for this task as it has developed precise definitions and manageable operationalisations of these two concepts and works extensively with and on them. Furthermore, the briefing paper discusses how and in which circumstances the two concepts can be used in a meaningful way to support and guide context analyses, and the programming and implementation of future development cooperation.

The social contract

The social contract concept provides a functional framework for the analysis of the (horizontal) relations between different societal groups and the (vertical) relations between them and state actors. A social contract can be defined as “the entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and [...] the government or any other actor in power, defining their rights and obligations toward each other” (Loewe et al., 2021, p. 3). Social contracts relieve their parties of renegotiating their reciprocal obligations all too often. Thereby, they create predictability, sustainability in state order and societal peace, even during crises. It is thus little surprising that the term has gained significance over recent years, not only in academic debates but also for international organisations and policy-makers.

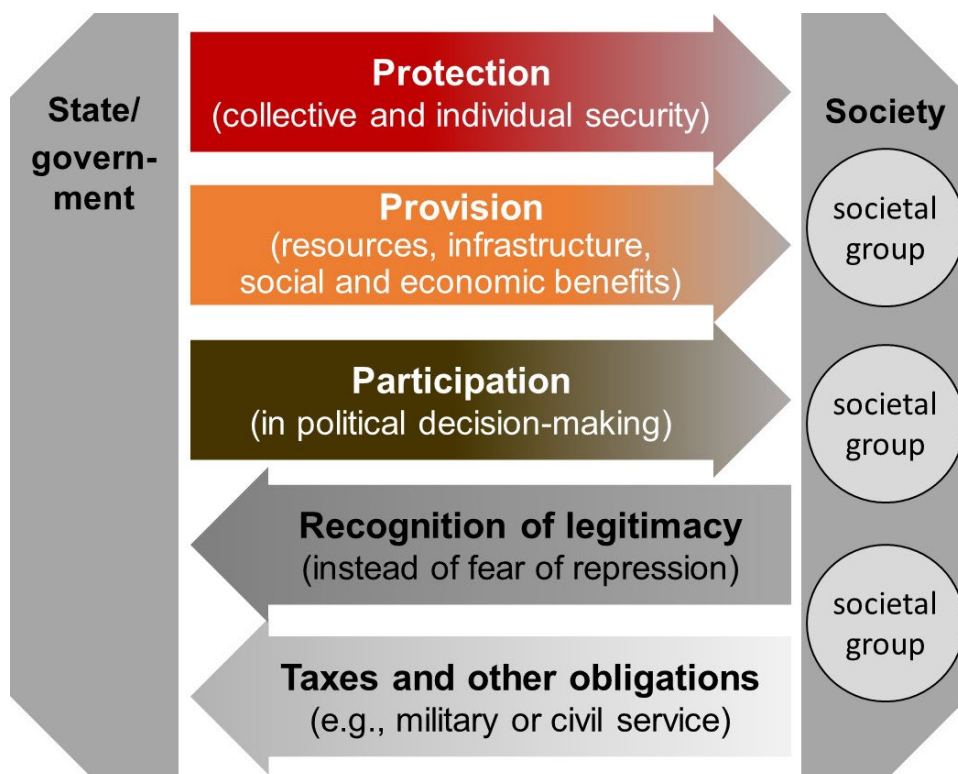
Often, a positive connotation is ascribed to the term social contract – probably stemming from Thomas Hobbes and other early state philosophers, who argued that social contracts help to overcome the “natural state of anarchy” (i.e. people fighting against each other over scarce resources) and build a state. A social contract’s sheer existence would thus be automatically something positive. Today, however, a social contract exists in almost every country, i.e. wherever a government – or any other de facto ruling player such as a militia or foreign power – is accepted by society. The question is instead what kind of social contract a country has. This does not mean comparing the quality of social contracts

with others on the basis of general, objective criteria but rather understanding different types of social contracts. Only the “contracting partners” can judge this, based on their respective backgrounds and preferences.

In all countries, the state provides one or more of the “three Ps”: *protection* (against threats to both collective and individual security); *provision* (of

social and economic services such as education, health, social protection and public infrastructure); and *participation* (in political decision-making). Members of society in turn value receipt of these three Ps by accepting state rule as legitimate, paying taxes and fulfilling other obligations such as, for example, military service (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Deliverables within the social contract



Source: Loewe, Zintl, & Houdret (2021)

Governments often prioritise one or two of the three Ps over the others, depending on their own interests and capacities. Members of society can also decide to what degree they show allegiance and fulfil their duties, but normally within narrow limits. The alternatives to allegiance, or at least acquiescence, are opposition and emigration – or “voice” and “exit” in Hirschman’s (1970) terminology.

In many countries, the horizontal dimension of the social contract (agreements between the different societal groups) has come first, and the vertical dimension (between state and society) has been built upon it. The different groups that live in a

country must first negotiate with each other and agree that they want to establish a neutral body – the government – to mediate between their particular interests, identify compromises between their positions, represent them altogether to the outside and defend them against other countries. For example, more affluent people may be afraid of robbery, loss of assets and foreign capture, while poorer ones have more interest in redistribution, public infrastructure, and services such as education and health care. Over time, states have provided more and more of all of the deliverables that the different societal groups long for (protection, provision and participation).

Hence, the vertical dimension of social contracts (between the state and the different societal groups) has become the dominant element of them – most markedly in authoritarian contexts.

Social contracts can be more or less inclusive. Since they are negotiated between the government on one side and the different societal groups on the other, they can put some societal groups into a distinct position and favour them over others, depending on their respective negotiating power. In some countries, one could even say that there are different social contracts for different societal groups, reflecting how much the government depends on the loyalty of each of these groups. The only way out of such a situation is increased dialogue, negotiation and agreement between all societal groups in order to strengthen the horizontal dimension of social contracts and the bargaining power of society vis-à-vis the government. More inclusive social contracts of this kind have, of course, a better chance of being sustained because fewer actors have an interest in their change.

Social cohesion

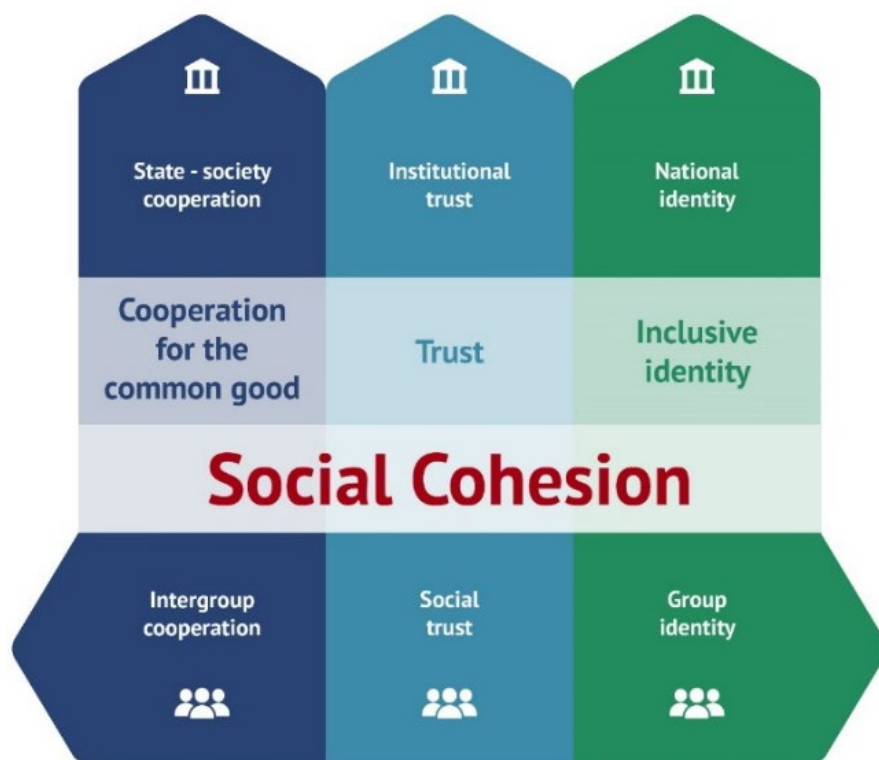
Social cohesion is mostly viewed as a desirable outcome and, similarly to the social contract, carries a positive connotation. Most people associate it with the idea of ties or a “glue” that holds societies together. In recent years, the concept of social cohesion has been gaining relevance in policy and academic discussion, but a clear, shared understanding of social cohesion has long been lacking. Only a rather fragmented picture of definitions and analytical approaches existed, which has hindered a more meaningful dialogue about the concept itself as well as an aggregation of knowledge concerning patterns, causes and drivers of social cohesion.

Against this background, the “Social Cohesion in Africa” project at IDOS has developed a definition of social cohesion that picks up core elements of social cohesion identified in the existing literature. In addition, in cooperation with Afrobarometer, the

project has operationalised and measured social cohesion with a consistent and comparable approach in more than 30 African countries. In theory, as long as data exist, the approach is applicable to countries worldwide. It represents a balanced compromise between recognising the context-specific nature of social cohesion and the need to have comparable measures across contexts by focusing on elements that are essential to any understanding of social cohesion. The newly established consistent approach to conceptualise and measure social cohesion offers development actors a tool to design, monitor and evaluate intended and unintended impacts of intervention on social cohesion. In addition, the common definition and operationalisation offer a common ground that is essential for more meaningful exchange and learning in this field and, in particular, helps to formulate and test theories of change more precisely.

According to the definition of IDOS, social cohesion refers to “the vertical and horizontal relations among members of society and the state that hold society together. Social cohesion is characterised by a set of attitudes and behavioural manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good” (Leininger et al, 2021, p. 3). Each of the three attributes have a horizontal dimension and a vertical dimension (Figure 2). The horizontal dimension of *trust* is social trust between societal groups and the individuals in different societal groups. It is the degree to which people trust people outside their own familiar or kinship circles. The vertical dimension, in contrast, is citizens’ trust in the institutional framework through which political power is executed and controlled. *Inclusive identity* is the quest for a common idea that unites, but also enables the coexistence of, different identities. It is thus more than just a sense of belonging. *Cooperation for the common good* finally, refers to the extent to which individuals work together with others or with state institutions to achieve goals that go beyond the individual goals of the respective individuals.

Figure 2: Illustration of the concept of social cohesion



Source: Leininger et al. (2021)

The definition is deliberately “minimalist”. Other definitions include additional attributes such as “well-being” or “inequality”. Such broad definitions are problematic because they mix up the essence of social cohesion with its drivers and effects. As argued by Chan et al (2006), much of the discussion on social cohesion focuses on the means to improve it. It is, however, impossible to analyse empirically the causal relationship between these means and social cohesion if, within the definition used, they are already attributes of social cohesion.

As a result, we understand social cohesion, essentially, as the quality of relationships between different types of actors that constitute a society. We claim that the behaviours and attitudes of individuals and societal groups – both horizontally towards each other and vertically towards state institutions – reflect the quality of these relationships. It is in this sense that social cohesion can be understood as the glue that hold societies together. The characteristics of that specific glue define, for instance, such important aspects as the

ability of the society to resist internal tensions and absorb external shocks without tearing them apart. Furthermore, the characteristics of the glue shape the degree to which society can mobilise its members and sustain collective efforts over time to define shared visions and support the policy reforms that are needed for their realisation.

Commonalities of the two concepts

The social contract and the social cohesion concepts thus both look at aspects of the vertical (state–society) *and* horizontal (society–society) relations between the different actors within countries. Yet, the social contract concept captures more of the material side of these relations and the rights and obligations arising from such an exchange, whereas for social cohesion, mainly the nature and quality of the relations and the underlying norms, values and attitudes matter. In both cases, we cannot directly observe all relevant aspects of the concept; we can only draw conclusions from the behaviours

and statements of the actors involved. In the case of social contracts, for example, society’s consent to the government can only be proxied, for example, from the number of demonstrations, discussions on (social) media, participation in elections and the like. And in the case of social cohesion, people’s attitudes towards others and state institutions can only be inferred from their self-declared perceptions and attitudes, and from the observable manifestation of cooperative behaviour, for example contributions to common goods such as volunteering for work in the community or helping people outside the close family and circle of friends.

Also, both concepts can be undermined if parts of society are excluded. Social cohesion suffers if some groups of society develop strong in-group cohesion that is defined on the basis of excluding other members of society. Social contracts are compromised if well-connected elites negotiate a better deal for themselves or for some groups of society at the expense of others.

Finally, both concepts are based on the assumption that a social contract and social cohesion is more than the sum of its respective elements. Both highlight that the type of relations between the different actors within a country affects their satisfaction, their behaviour and the stability of state and society.

Differences between the concepts

The focus of the social contract concept is on functionality, the substance of the relations: the give and take between the different societal groups as well as between them and the government (see Table 1). A functioning social contract provides all parties with better predictability in their expectations and duties towards others. Thereby, it makes state–society relations more stable. Nevertheless, social contracts must also be renegotiated from time to time and be changed accordingly if, for example, the framework conditions or the relative strength of some of the contracting parties have changed.

Table 1: Differences in focus between the social contract and the social cohesion concept

	Social contract	Social cohesion
Dimension of relations	<i>Functional:</i> Rights and duties of societal groups and the government.	<i>Attitudinal:</i> Norms, attitudes and behaviours of individuals and societal groups towards each other and the state.
Level of analysis	Focus on relations between societal groups as well as between the government and societal groups.	Focus on individuals, societal groups, communities and society as a whole.
Direction of relations	<i>Horizontal:</i> Interaction between societal groups. <i>Vertical:</i> Interaction between societal groups or society as a whole and the state/government.	<i>Horizontal:</i> Interaction between groups and individual members of a society. <i>Vertical:</i> Interaction between individuals or groups and state institutions.
Nature of relations	Social contracts make state–society interaction more predictable and hence stable. Still, they are subject to being renegotiated and changed from time to time if, e.g., the framework conditions have changed.	Dynamic process, comprising societal conflict on value change and constant negotiations within society about questions of belonging and the common good.
Operationalisation	Perception, attitudinal and expert data; data on material inputs in key policy fields and political economy analysis, existing indicators of government performance.	Perception, attitudinal and expert data.

The concept of social cohesion in turn considers the quality of the relations between different members of society and the state: the underlying attitudes and norms as well as cooperative behaviours that hold a society together. Its focus is on societal groups' and individuals' relations with different entities, for instance with communities, societal groups or societies as a whole. Social cohesion as a concept thus acknowledges that social relations are dynamic. We do not expect social cohesion to change significantly from one year to another unless there are major shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Relationship between the two concepts

The strength and inclusivity of a social contract can be a key factor for social cohesion. It establishes predictability in the give and take between the state and the different groups of society, and thereby promotes mutual trust and cooperation. In addition, social contracts constitute the kind of stable entity that people can identify with. Thus, they can foster a sense of identity as one central element of social cohesion, especially if they are associated with a common narrative (an ideology or a value system) that gives the rules of cooperation a deeper sense.

Of course, these effects are all the stronger, the more inclusive social contracts are. Their positive effects stem at least in part from the fact that a social contract constitutes a focal point for societies to come together and overcome differences and tensions between the various groups of society. This works best when all societal groups are well included and treated fairly. Otherwise, a social contract might foster cohesion within particular groups much more than between them. If some groups consider the prevalent social contract as unfair, while others refuse to renegotiate its reform, both the horizontal and the vertical dimension of all attributes of social cohesion are at stake: trust, inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good. The social contract and the distribution of goods or services

reflect the balance of power and political structure in a country, with subsequent repercussions for social cohesion.

Conversely, social cohesion eases the conclusion of social contracts and stabilises existing ones. Mutual trust, inclusive identity and the readiness to cooperate for the common good are crucial prerequisites for the relevant actors in a country to sit together at all, to negotiate a social contract with rights and obligations towards the other, and to compromise in the interest of a peaceful long-term cohabitation. Vice versa, once a social contract exists, social cohesion is likely to reduce its vulnerability to external and internal shocks. If social cohesion is low, social contracts can still survive even during crises, but this is more likely if one contracting partner has enough power to uphold the social contract by force, thus further reducing social cohesion. In this sense, social cohesion and social contracts tend to reinforce each other. They can start a vicious circle, if social cohesion is low and the social contract unfair, or a virtuous circle, if they are strong and inclusive.

The level of social cohesion in a society is therefore both a proxy indicator for society's acceptance (though not necessarily support) of the prevailing social contract and a predictor for the likelihood that social contract reforms get societal support. In addition, a deterioration of social cohesion can be a warning signal that the social contract might be challenged, sooner or later.

Yet, even if a social contract has become dysfunctional, a more cohesive society is better able to bear the consequences. Once a new social contract has been renegotiated, it is more likely to stay in place in a more cohesive society.

Implications for development policy

The terms "social contract" and "social cohesion" are very present in international development cooperation. Here, we outline what relevance they have for sustainable development in different contexts, how clear concepts are essential to

enable better development policies, and how both phenomena can be fostered either in parallel or in sequence.

Relevance for sustainable development

Social cohesion and an inclusive social contract are both goals and means of sustainable development. A key goal of international cooperation for sustainable development is to foster the peaceful and fair coexistence of people within countries and to strengthen their collaborative efforts in addressing development challenges. The social contract and social cohesion are thus fundamental aspects of sustainable development. In addition, however, countries and societies that are built on peaceful and collaborative relations and distribute their available resources fairly are better able to develop sustainably, and to cope with crises and shocks. Beyond that, they are often more reliable partners in addressing global challenges.

The social contract and social cohesion both constitute leverage points for international cooperation. Both focus on actors but also highlight the relevance of support to enabling institutions, which shape rights, obligations and the quality of relations.

- (i) Foreign donors can support *social contracts* by promoting a more reliable and more comprehensive definition of the rights and obligations of all contracting parties and ensuring that all parties make their respective contributions.
- (ii) And they can strengthen *social cohesion* by supporting the attitudinal qualities of relationships in a society. This comprises fostering mutual trust among actors, their common identity and their willingness to cooperate, which is a precondition for their collaboration in defining and achieving common goals as well as in responding collectively to external challenges and shocks.

Since social contract and social cohesion are complex phenomena, development policies need to rely on clearly defined concepts. Clear definitions help, first, to inform sound theories of change that identify traceable causal mechanisms and, second, to build transparent indicators to measure the impact of development programmes.

Fostering social contracts and social cohesion

The question remains how to decide for one of the two concepts, and to what degree they are complimentary. The **social contract concept** is particularly appropriate if low or unequal levels of give and take in a country are the main issue. The concept helps to detect if any actor in a country – in particular the government – should deliver more or better deliverables, more equally, to the other actors. For example, it can be used to analyse if a society demands more protection, more provision of services or more political participation, or different forms or kinds of these deliverables. By better understanding society's demands, donors can better prioritise and reconcile the manifold goals of development cooperation (e.g. economic development, poverty reduction, democracy promotion, trade, migration management and security) by taking a longer-term perspective, and thereby identify the best moment for engaging in dialogue with a country in favour of a more inclusive and sustainable social contract (Furness & Loewe, 2021).

In conflict-affected countries, the social contract has particular relevance. A violent conflict is a clear symptom of a dysfunctional social contract. Addressing the social contract as one development priority is part of peace- and state-building because physical reconstruction is often not sustainable without societal reconstruction. The social contract concept sharpens the view on the horizontal relations between societal groups. In addition, it helps to find out which gaps in the old social contract may have caused the grievances that ultimately led to open conflicts. By doing so, it may facilitate not only state–society but also intra-society dialogue for a new social contract and

avoid development cooperation strengthening already dominant actors in the local balance of power.

By contrast, the *social cohesion approach* is more appropriate if the main issue is the erosion of the quality of relationships in a society (be it horizontally or vertically). This comprises a lack or deterioration of the preconditions for having a wide, open and sincere public debate on common visions and shared values. Mistrust, missing sense of shared identity, or resistance to any type of cooperation decrease a society's ability to develop a common vision for their future. Development policy measures that strengthen social cohesion can therefore help to understand the open policy space for reforms, expand this space, and increase the effectiveness and viability of different types of development interventions.

The other way around, the **social cohesion concept** helps to assess and more precisely discuss what positive or negative effects different development cooperation initiatives in any sector might have on the quality of relationships within a society. In this sense, the concept of social cohesion is particularly relevant when it comes to visualising and taking into account potential unexpected effects of interventions and thereby respecting the “do no harm” principle.

Especially at the beginning of an engagement, it is advisable to use both concepts in parallel to assess the main risks and feasible goals.

The concepts have complementary focal points, and they help to pinpoint the level of intervention to focus on through development cooperation: the social contract often – but not always, particularly not in extremely fragile states – takes into account

the state or nation as a whole. Social cohesion, in contrast, has more often been referred to in connection with the community and group level rather than the national one. If development actors use both concepts for context analysis before formulating projects, they can identify the key leverage point(s) for their intervention.

Once foreign donors have identified the main development issues and level of intervention, it is often more effective and strategic to focus on one approach.

In most cases, there is a two-way positive relationship between the social contract and social cohesion, so that working on the one element at the heart of the problem may kick start a positive virtuous cycle. Because of the two-way relationship, it may sometimes even make sense to start *not* with the root problem, if tackling it directly seems unfeasible. For instance, in authoritarian settings with strong power imbalance in the social contract, development actors might promote social cohesion as a first step toward a reform process of the social contract. However, they need to take care that they do not stabilise autocracy with such measures. And in conflict settings affected by polarisation and engrained cleavages, starting with small-scale horizontal social contracts between former opponents may help towards strengthening social cohesion and trust.

Overall, support to build solid social contracts and social cohesion has become not only more challenging but more relevant and urgent in our increasingly polarising and violent world. Concepts and their appropriate use are not in themselves the solution but a first necessary step towards sound and meaningful policies to counter these trends.

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