

## Helpdesk Research Report

# State fragility and social cohesion

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## Question

*What is the current state of knowledge in the literature on state fragility regarding social cohesion as either a negative or positive factor? What are donor approaches to building social cohesion in fragile states?*

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## 1. Overview

This report reviews the relationship between social cohesion and state fragility – focussing on literature from 2010 onwards. The OECD definition<sup>1</sup> and 2013 list of fragile states are used<sup>2</sup>, although it is noted that there are varying definitions of fragility. Similarly, there are several definitions of social cohesion. The two strongest theories of social cohesion in the literature reviewed for this report draw on the Council of Europe's (2004: 3) definition of social cohesion as 'the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation', and Colletta and Cullen's (2000: 4) definition of it as 'the nexus of vertical and horizontal social capital and the balance of bonding and bridging social capital'. Social capital has a separate and comprehensive literature of its own, but there is considerable overlap with social cohesion. Social capital also has a number of definitions, but which all converge on the idea of leveraging social networks: 'networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995: 67). 'Bonding' capital refers to

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<sup>1</sup> Fragile states or provinces lack the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society and often have a weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions (OECD, 2013: 11).

<sup>2</sup> [www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/FragileStates2013.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/FragileStates2013.pdf)

links within a group, and ‘bridging’ capital to links with other groups. It is important to remember that all these terms and theories have multiple meanings and definitions.

There is **no clear empirical understanding** in the literature of how social cohesion contributes to state resilience or fragility, as it is very difficult to measure, and to assess independently other variables that impact on state fragility. Most literature is conceptual. However, there is a strong consensus from academics and practitioners that social cohesion does contribute positively in some way to state resilience; it is almost never regarded as a possibly negative factor (expert comments). This is a very dominant understanding of social cohesion. Social capital literature is similar, in that it suggests that social capital (networks) is a positive force, but this body of literature also notes the potentially negative effects of strong vertical social capital (connections between groups and leaders, including the state) which can encourage authoritarianism and exclusion. There is **mixed evidence about the effectiveness** of programmes aiming to increase social cohesion, and whether social cohesion contributes to state resilience. Building social capital may only be possible by internal actors, and it may be ethically unsound to attempt this as a development intervention. It is important to retain this understanding of the contested nature of the evidence.

**Key points** from this review are:

- There is a strong consensus that a lack of social cohesion contributes to state fragility, and that social cohesion can contribute to stability, although this is not clearly supported by evidence.
- Lack of social cohesion is seen to **contribute to local-level conflict**, which may escalate; **lack of trust** between groups; and lack of trust with the state.
- Social cohesion may be undermined by state or elite actions which deliberately discriminate or mobilise identity politics for personal gain. This contributes to fragility.
- Social cohesion appears to contribute to stability through **increasing trust** in state institutions and representatives and creating a greater capacity for **collective action**.
- Vertical social capital with the state can cause community leaders to lose legitimacy in their constituencies.
- Strong bonding capital within a group has the potential to allow mobilisation of that group for negative purposes, such as the Rwandan genocide.
- It is of high importance to recognise the **contested nature of attempting to foster social cohesion** as part of a development programme – especially programmes designed and implemented by external actors. Cohesion is essentially an endogenous process, which cannot necessarily be designed by outsiders. It is also a **highly politically sensitive** issue, as it approaches questions of social engineering, and should be treated with caution.
- Donors tend to measure social cohesion outcomes in terms of increase in associational life; decreases in community violence; greater trust in others; and attitudes towards the government.
- A number of usual development approaches have been adapted to incorporate social cohesion outcomes, including Community-Driven Development/Reconstruction, social protection, and jobs. These have mixed evidence in regards to impact, but show at least some positive results.

## 2. Lack of social cohesion contributes to fragility

This section explores the dynamics and factors in society which contribute to situations of fragility. There is a strong literature which suggests that lack of cohesion between groups in society tends to contribute to overall insecurity, lack of trust horizontally between groups and vertically with the state, and fragility of state institutions.

### Societal dynamics are one root cause of state fragility

Seth D. Kaplan (2008; 2009a; 2012; and forthcoming) has written extensively on this issue. His central thesis is that state fragility is not just a result of weak institutions and governance, but also of a lack of social cohesion. His 2008 book, *Fixing fragile states: a new paradigm for development*, suggests that fragile states have **diverse populations with limited common experience, few shared institutions and no unifying identity**. Formal state institutions are often seen as disconnected from the local population and as an external entity.

In practice, this can be seen when weak and new states rely more on society to help govern, by keeping property secure and policing each other's behaviour – where these societies lack social cohesion, these **functions become difficult or contested** (Kaplan, 2009a). When societies are fragmented along identity lines, **bureaucratic state structures are difficult to develop**, as they become tribalised (Kaplan, 2009b). A divisive society prevents the growth of a supportive environment for institutional development, contributing to a weak and fragile state (Kaplan, 2009b).

Socially fragmented societies also **lack trust across groups**, which prevents action in the collective interest. One example comes from the case of Somalia, where strong social cohesion exists within clan-based groups, but there is little social cohesion between groups (Kaplan, 2010: 90). Somali groups frequently act in their own interest, rather than collective interest, and have little trust in political or civic action at the national level (Herbert, 2013).

The World Bank has a stream of work on social cohesion and fragility. A comprehensive book published in 2013 (Marc, Willman, Aslam, Rebosio, with Balasuriya, 2013) covers the World Bank's rationale and findings on putting social cohesion at the heart of development programmes in fragile situations. The book conducted literature reviews, political economy analysis and fieldwork in five countries<sup>3</sup> including: interviews, focus groups and a national level workshop.

The book views fragility as a problem both of state capacity and relationships in society, reflecting similar ideas to Kaplan, meaning that some of the roots of fragility lie in societal dynamics (Marc, Willman, Aslam, Rebosio, with Balasuriya, 2013: 2). In this conception, social cohesion (defined in the book as: quality of relationships across groups) directly influences how fragile a society is. More socially cohesive societies experience more trust and collaboration, which allows more constructive interactions which contribute to a more stable society.

Its key findings are:

- **Building social cohesion is crucial for reducing fragility:** this draws on a conception of social cohesion as convergence across groups, which leads to collaboration and collective action.

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<sup>3</sup> Liberia; Central African Republic; Yemen; Indonesia (Aceh); and Haiti.

Convergence needs to last over time, requires trust in the system, needs to be sufficiently inclusive of different groups, and to have some common understandings of the rules of society.

- **Social cohesion is often weakened by perceptions of injustice between groups:** perceptions of injustice can cause development interventions to fail and can cause groups to coalesce inward and form oppositional identities.
- **Quality of interactions among different institutions appears strongly related to overall social cohesion:** the study finds that people were less affected by the effectiveness of individual institutions than interactions between them, e.g. customary and state law. Fragmented systems created further societal fragmentation.
- **Rigid relationships in society that cannot adapt sufficiently to rapid social change can hinder building social cohesion:** globalisation, urbanisation and technological innovations create shifting group boundaries and new formations. New interactions can create differing expectations, demands and lead to potential clashes. Young/old and male/female relationships may particularly change.

## Contribution to conflict

Since at least 2000, scholars and practitioners have produced work on the idea that low social capital and social cohesion will contribute to local-level conflict, which may escalate into national conflict. Colletta and Cullen (2000) is a seminal work on this theme. The authors suggest that the greater the degree of social cohesiveness, the **greater the possibility of mediating conflict before it turns violent** (2000: 4). Without social cohesion, mechanisms for socially reinforcing non-violence are weakened, and societies can become fragmented and exclusionary which can lead to violent conflict. Both vertical and horizontal inequalities are important in this conception – either can lead to conflict.

The Community Driven Development/Reconstruction approach reviewed in King (2013) is premised on the idea that conflict at least in part develops from local factors, specifically **exclusion, inequity and marginalisation**. Frances Stewart (2006) argues that inequalities between groups – and therefore fragmentation of society and lack of social capital and social cohesion – are a root cause of conflict. The paper explains that **horizontal inequalities can lead to violence** when: they are durable (long-lasting); widen over time; groups have impermeable boundaries; are consistent across economic, social, political dimensions; aggregate incomes are slow; groups are sufficiently cohesive; they have leaders; and the government does not respond (2006: 5-6). Horizontal inequalities are not the only driving factor of conflict, but they contribute significantly.

## Diversity

There is **no clear empirical evidence** to argue strongly that diversity either helps or hinders social cohesion (Schaeffer, 2013), therefore any programmatic prescriptions around promoting or minimising diversity should be treated with extreme caution. Schaeffer conducted a quantitative and comprehensive review of 172 articles with findings on diversity and social cohesion, which shows that **evidence is very mixed** on whether diversity positively or negatively affects social cohesion.

On one hand, there is a body of literature which argues that **diverse societies are expected to increase trust** between 'others' (Schaeffer, 2013). On the other, Kaplan (2008: 33) among other scholars suggest that diverse societies lack trust, which leads to **reduced public goods and reduced welfarism** (Schaeffer, 2013). Diverse societies which are also divided are far less likely to support social spending or

government provision which benefits groups other than their own. Where identities are fractured, this can lead to civil conflict, as in Yugoslavia and Iraq (Kaplan, 2009b).

### State discriminatory practices exacerbate fragility

State discrimination can exacerbate or cause a fractured society, which can undermine its legitimacy and resilience. There are numerous examples where the **state's actions, or inactions, have fuelled ethnic, religious and other identity tensions**, provoking civil conflict.

In Côte d'Ivoire, southerners chose to amend the constitution to remove northerners' right to identity cards (removing their ability to vote and work), which resulted in civil war (Kaplan, 2009b). Many indigenous communities in Latin America have been systematically discriminated against by the state, disenfranchising them as citizens and weakening state legitimacy (Kaplan, 2009b). In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis was in part enabled by the preceding state-driven discrimination and systematic persecution which created a divisive society (Colletta & Cullen, 2000: 18). Where fragile states are providing social protection, the perceived unfairness of providing it to some groups and not others can cause internal conflict and negatively affect state-society relations (GIZ, 2012).

### Elites and leadership

Kaplan argues that, in fragile states, groups are more likely to feel allegiance to a traditional leader or clan than to a state with which they have few ties (Kaplan, 2009b). If one group achieves power, it is likely to conduct state affairs in a **patrimonial** manner, using the country's resources for personal and group gain rather than inclusive development (Kaplan, 2009b). This can contribute to state fragility as other groups see this **authority as illegitimate** and compete for power (Kaplan, 2009b).

Additionally, some leaders may **exploit group identity**. Spoilers may appeal to divisive factors, such as ethnic, religious, or clan divisions, in order to disrupt peace processes (Kaplan, 2013: 90). For some elites with constituencies based on identity, manipulating these loyalties is essential for maintaining power (Herbert, 2013). Social capital, therefore, has a 'dark side' (expert comments), which groups can exploit for their own gain (Colletta & Cullen, 2000: 6).

## 3. Social cohesion builds state resilience

This section explores the evidence for the idea that social cohesion can strengthen a fragile state.

Seth Kaplan's most recent book (2013) suggests that socially cohesive states are **more likely to have inclusive policies and to invest in state capacity** (2013: 88). Where nation-states are based on a common identity, **identity rivalries are reduced, and the state is less prone to conflict** (2013: 88). This is a common view in the literature – that social cohesion contributes positively to state stability. The Fragile States Resource Center<sup>4</sup> takes a view that social cohesion should be fostered in fragile states to encourage state effectiveness, bridge divides, minimise the potential for inter-group conflict and reduce friction.

Kaplan (2008) has as its central thesis that state fragility can be addressed through increasing societal members' **ability to cooperate** – through their social cohesion. It places societal relationships,

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fragilestates.org/about/articles-and-publications/topics/social-cohesion/>

government capacities and identities at the centre of development, rather than political will. In political history, he identifies state success as stemming from strong and cohesive societies, often based on a national identity, which facilitates governance and economic development by **drawing on a shared past and culture**. Strong states can draw on the shared national identity of a cohesive society to build effective institutions (Kaplan, 2009b). Thus he suggests that a cohesive society is central to enabling a state to function. It is widely recognised in the broader literature that, in fragile states, it is important to consider the relationship of identities, social cohesion and state legitimacy (Herbert, 2013).

Some development programmes provide insight into theories of change for social cohesion leading to state resilience, drawing on ideas of vertical social capital. Community-Driven Development/ Reconstruction (CDD/R) has as its theory of change that social cohesion provides greater **ability for collective action**, meaning groups are more able to hold governments accountable (King, 2013: 15). In post-conflict environments this may also help build peace by tackling local grievances and improving economic development (King, 2013: 15). However, there is **not much evidence** on whether CDD/R programmes are effective in strengthening state-citizen relations. What little evidence there is suggests that **attitudes towards government officials may improve** as a result of social protection programmes, increasing trust in the government a little (Carpenter, Slater & Mallett, 2012).

There is some empirical evidence which suggests that service delivery in fragile and conflict-affected states can improve social cohesion and state-society relations, through **building trust in governmental institutions** (Carpenter, et al., 2012). The evidence is mixed, with both positive and negative effects reported.

## 4. Negative aspects of social cohesion

This section presents a short overview of some of the negative attributes of social cohesion and social capital. In general, social cohesion is talked about very positively in the literature, and few academics view it as a possible source of conflict. However, the literature on bonding/bridging social capital highlights that strong bonds and cohesion within a group can lend itself to authoritarian structures and exploitation of power<sup>5</sup>.

### Vertical social cohesion can cause co-optation

In some contexts, it has been noted that building trust and social capital vertically with the state can reduce the possibility of acting (democratically) against the state, or reduce grassroots connections.

Marc et al. (2013: 5) report that in Yemen, customary leaders were brought into the formal system and given stipends and gifts for their loyalty. They became **state representatives, losing the legitimacy** they had enjoyed in their communities. This isolated the sheikhs from their communities and hardened divides between social groups and the state.

Democracy (and/or liberalisation) does not necessarily have a positive relationship with social cohesion. Deep and long-lasting privilege of one group over another means that, **in democracies, the higher group is in a better position** to win votes and exploit the market (Stewart, 2006: 5). **Majoritarian democracies do not address the horizontal inequalities** which create social divisiveness (Stewart, 2006: 5), but

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<sup>5</sup> Social capital has a robust literature on its potential negative aspects, such as the Mafia having strong social capital but this having negative effects. Social capital is not inherently positive, as its effects depend on who it is used by and for what purpose.

continue to privilege one group over another. In the language of social capital, *bonding capital* between groups and the state may benefit those groups, but it is the *bridging capital* between groups which creates a more equal and democratic society.

Sigrid Roßteutscher (2010) conducted analysis on the 70 countries reviewed in the World Values Survey 2000, where 28 are classed as 'nondemocratic'. She shows that **social capital can support authoritarianism** and that **citizens in nondemocratic systems have greater trust** in their governments than those in democracies. Social capital appears to be positively related to the form of political action supported by the leaders of a country, and negatively related to the form feared most by them (2010: 744). She concludes that **social capital helps stabilise authoritarian regimes, and does not have a democratising effect**. Her findings present **evidence which contradicts the mainstream view** of social capital, showing that social capital can have negative effects, or works differently, in nondemocratic contexts. This paper highlights that actions taken on the basis of social capital/social cohesion theory must be reviewed extremely carefully, as the **evidence base is currently contradictory and unestablished**.

### Social cohesion as mobilising factor

Frances Stewart posits (2006: 2) that most internal conflicts are committed by organised groups, not individuals, which **mobilise people with a shared identity into attacking others** in the name of the group. Both leaders and followers may be motivated into violent action where there are perceived or real inequalities between their group and other groups (Stewart, 2006: 3). This indicates that strong (bonding) social capital and a high degree of social cohesion can be used for negative purposes, as above.

Colletta and Cullen (2000) note that strong, exclusionary bonds of social capital partially enabled the 1994 Rwanda genocide, by providing Hutu extremists with a strong group identity, perceived ethnic duty, shared goals and solidarity (p.18). High levels of bonding social capital existed within Hutu groups, while bridging social capital to Tutsis was eliminated (p.18). Vertical links with the state provided rhetoric, information and a sense of civic duty.

These examples demonstrate that particular forms of social capital and social cohesion can be exploited or used to negative effect as well as positive.

## 5. Approaches to building social cohesion

It is of high importance to note the sensitive nature of this area. Social cohesion is linked to state-building and national identity narratives, which are heavily contested in the literature in regards to the legitimacy of external actors' interventions (Herbert, 2013; Lemay-Hébert, 2009). The discussions above about social cohesion's role in democracy and authoritarianism, and whether ethnic diversity is positive or negative, highlight the **politically sensitive nature of this kind of approach** to development. Coupled with a **lack of clear empirical evidence**, any interventions around social cohesion must be treated with extreme care.

Aside from legitimacy, there is a **limit to the role that external actors can play** in building national identities (Fearon, Humphreys, & Weinstein, 2009; Herbert, 2013). The logical conclusion to Kaplan's work is that fragility cannot necessarily be addressed by action from external development actors, as it requires endogenous trust- and relationship-building (Kaplan, 2008: 49).

A previous GSDRC Helpdesk report (Carter, 2013) reviews interventions to increase trust in society (both between groups and with the state), so these will not be repeated here<sup>6</sup>. Other programmatic ideas turned up in this review include peacebuilding, state-building and conflict resolution tools; anti-discrimination policy and tools; and many social exclusion/inclusion approaches.

## Kaplan's approach

Kaplan proposes a model which enmeshes state institutions within society, using local models and understandings to bring the state closer to the population. Instead of propping up the (democratic) state, he says development actors should try to connect it to its society by **changing the institutions to be more relevant**. His 2008 book suggests that redesigning governing bodies to better fit local needs is the key to legitimacy (as opposed to macroeconomic restructuring, social policy or administrative reform). States with multiple identity groups, for example, need to reflect those identities in their governance to be effective. Kaplan suggests that **local models of statehood are more likely to be successful** than Western democratic models

The World Bank currently strongly recommends that social cohesion is included as an objective of development policies, including in situations of fragility. This re-focus requires **emphasis on society and its relationships**, and the state as one actor among many rather than the principal actor (Marc et al., 2013: 8). It also requires a flexible approach to assessing societal dynamics, as these can change rapidly. The World Bank's policy and programmatic focus picks up two themes: **perceptions of injustice** across groups and improving the **quality of interactions between institutions** (Marc et al., 2013: 170).

Tackling perceptions of injustice requires starting by understanding who means what by 'injustice' or 'unfairness'. When this is established, some tools recommended are:

- **Conflict resolution tools** and **informal justice** mechanisms can be used to address injustice with locally-appropriate means.
- **Reducing horizontal inequalities** between groups, through, for example, affirmative action, egalitarian service provision, and participation.
- **Address diversity** through accommodating different group identities and recognising cultural rights, perhaps through inclusive education policies, reserved seats in parliament, and official language diversity.
- **Healing trauma across groups**, through restoring livelihoods and recognising victims positively.

Improving interactions between institutions suggests that connecting institutions with a positive relationship provides safe spaces for different interests to converge, and facilitates dialogue among groups (2013: 186). The World Bank focuses on improving relations between formal and customary institutions. It recommends:

- **Community Driven Development** and **local governance interventions** to connect people with state representatives.
- **Support civil society**, building groups which interact with the state and which foster inclusion and democracy.

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<sup>6</sup> The key areas in which interventions take place are 1) Social accountability; 2) Community-driven development; 3) Tax-related interventions; 4) Transformative social protection.

- **Strengthen state capacity** for engaging with society, rebuilding the social contract and providing public goods, decentralisation.

## Community Driven Development/Reconstruction

CDD/R programmes support new local institutions which promote social reconciliation in post-conflict areas (Fearon et al., 2009). The World Bank lends 2 million USD per year to such programmes, making them a standard type of intervention (Fearon et al., 2009). DFID also supports these kinds of programmes. The programmes aim to support improved socio-economic recovery; improved social cohesion; and improved governance (King, 2013).

A randomised control trial study in Liberia revealed that **CDD/R did improve community cohesion**, as measured through hypothetically raising more funding for public goods (Fearon et al., 2009). The project established community development councils, which implemented a short and long-term development project. The study shows strong evidence that supporting these local institutions **increased social cohesion by reducing social tension, including marginalised groups and enhancing trust in community leadership**; moderate evidence that it reinforced democratic political attitudes and confidence in local decision-making processes; and weak evidence that material wellbeing improved (Fearon et al., 2009).

As a follow-on to this project funded by DFID and undertaken by the International Rescue Committee, these bodies commissioned a comprehensive literature review of CDD/R in conflict-affected contexts, available as King (2013). It revealed that CDD/R does not have a unified theory of change, but that all projects aim to shift power relations and support people working together on collective action problems. Of the five rigorous studies included, **only one (the Liberia study above) had positive outcomes on social cohesion** (2013: 24). One study (Aceh) reported negative social cohesion effects; individuals receiving the intervention were less accepting of ex-combatants than non-treatment communities. The author concludes that CDD/R is better at producing economic outcomes than social change.

## Social protection

There is a large body of literature on using social protection to increase social capital, by enabling beneficiaries' participation in community events and increased credit lines, and to increase social cohesion by increasing trust in state institutions. State-building literature assumes that social protection helps establish a state-society contract (GIZ, 2012).

In general, there is **mixed evidence on social protection and social cohesion** – social protection has both positive and negative effects (Carpenter, et al., 2012: 28; GIZ, 2012). For example, social protection can both facilitate and prevent migration, which can have positive or negative effects depending on the situation (GIZ, 2012). Results vary quite widely across contexts, with many authors attributing positive or negative effects directly to particular factors in the environment, often pre-existing levels of social capital and social cohesion (Carpenter, et al., 2012: 30). There are definitely examples of social protection and CDD/R programmes stimulating more violence, and social protection alone is unlikely to tackle deeply entrenched exclusion (GIZ, 2012). However, there is also some positive evidence from the Philippines that conditional cash transfers reduced violent conflict in treatment communities and in nearby villages (Carpenter, et al., 2012: 22).

There is also very little evidence on social protection's impact on state-society relations, and this is **inconclusive** (2012: 30). Where there is positive evidence, it tends to manifest in the form of more positive relationships and attitudes towards local officials.

## Jobs

The World Bank's World Development Report 2013 focuses on jobs and contains a chapter on social cohesion (World Bank, 2012). It analyses values surveys to suggest that job loss or high unemployment leads to lower levels of trust and civic engagement, potentially eventually resulting in violence (2012: 126). In opposition, it suggests that some particular types of jobs increase social cohesion – those which are empowering, build agency, and provide access to voice. Other jobs may **increase trust in institutions, and provide interactions with diverse groups, as well as forming social identity**. Unemployment is significantly linked to lower membership in associations and less participation. However, the causality flows both ways – **jobs contribute to social cohesion, and social cohesion contributes to jobs**. Social cohesion may create an environment conducive to economic growth, and economic ties may reduce the propensity to violence.

Job creation is difficult to operationalise. Short-term job creation programmes with no long-commitment may do more harm than good, and jobs gained through personal networks do not reduce inequalities, plus most employment resides in the private sector (2012: 140). The World Bank recommends that policy and legal frameworks are used which **reduce inequality in access** to jobs, such as anti-discrimination legislation and workplace policy, **access to information on rights, legal protection** for domestic workers and migrants, and **affirmative action**.

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## Key websites

- Fragile States Resource Center – Social cohesion section: <http://www.fragilestates.org/about/articles-and-publications/topics/social-cohesion/>

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