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Coordination of international statistical work

in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region:

Social cohesion

In-depth review on social cohesion

Addendum

Outcome of the electronic consultation on in-depth review on social cohesion

Prepared by the Secretariat

Summary

This document presents the outcome of the in-depth review on social cohesion that the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians carried out in February 2023 and summarises the feedback from the electronic consultation on the review among members of the Conference of European Statisticians in April–May 2023.

The in-depth review paper (ECE/CES/2023/8) was prepared by Canada with feedback provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the NSOs of New Zealand, Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom. The review paper identifies definitions and conceptualisations of social cohesion, specifically for the purposes of national statistical offices, and covers ongoing debates concerning defining social cohesion, the breadth of the concept, and its multi-dimensional nature. The review provides several implications for the operationalisation of the concept by national statistical organisations and outlines a number of methodological priorities of interest. As an outcome of the February 2023 review, the CES Bureau supported further work in this area and decided to establish a new task team.

The Conference will be invited to endorse the outcome of the in-depth review on social cohesion (ECE/CES/2023/8).

I. Introduction

1. Each year, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) reviews selected statistical areas in depth. The purpose of the reviews is to improve coordination of statistical activities in the region of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), identify gaps or duplication of work, and address emerging issues. These reviews focus on strategic issues and highlight concerns of statistical offices of both a conceptual and coordinating nature.
2. The Bureau carried out an in-depth review on social cohesion in February 2023 based on a paper by Canada with feedback provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the NSOs of New Zealand, Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom (provided as document ECE/CES/2023/8).
3. The UNECE Secretariat conducted an electronic consultation in April–May 2023 to inform all CES members about the in-depth review on social cohesion and provide an opportunity to comment on its outcomes.
4. The following eleven countries replied to the electronic consultation: Ecuador, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Russian Federation, Switzerland and the United States.

II. Outcome of the Conference of European Statisticians Bureau discussion in February 2023

5. The Bureau made an in-depth review of social cohesion at its February 2023 meeting.
6. The CES Bureau supported establishing a task team to collect information on how the concept of social cohesion is measured in different countries and to identify good practices. Canada will lead the task team.

III. General comments received in the electronic consultation

7. The countries that provided comments welcomed the in-depth review on social cohesion and further work in this area. **Ecuador, Latvia, Netherlands and Poland** appreciated the excellent review of the concept of social cohesion through time, and its different operationalizations. **Hungary** and **Malta** considered this topic to be very interesting and highly important. Hungary appreciated the initiative for mapping of threats to cohesion and agreed on the need for continuous development of the methodology of data collection for measuring social cohesion. Finally, the **United States** noted that the examples included in the in-depth review provide helpful frameworks for NSOs looking to undertake further research in these areas, especially the factor analysis example included in the appendix.
8. **Ecuador** proposed to consider the following two aspects. One is a subjective measure on the perception of progress related to social cohesion, which has to take into account country-specific context, dimensions and indices and at the same time allow for comparison among countries. Second is to take into account the effects that colonization processes could have had to social cohesion, and more specifically on indigenous populations.
9. **Poland** noted that in addition to measuring social cohesion and ranking countries, it might be also of interest to extend the measurement towards building a structural model of influence of the main factors or dimensions of social cohesion, taking into account the well-being of the population at the geographical unit. Detailed substantive comments by Poland are provided in the Annex.
10. **Mexico** supports further work on operationalisation and empirical applications and provides several references to its practices that could help to explore dimensions of social cohesion and alternative data sources used in the country.
11. The **United States** highlighted the importance of considering context and the ability to disaggregate these measures both to look at specific aspects of social cohesion and to look

at measures of social cohesion for particular areas or subpopulations. They suggest that there could be value in exploring political polarization in this context in the future.

12. The **United States** and the **Netherlands** pointed at the possible impact of social cohesion on the NSOs' work. Declining response rates to surveys, particularly for vulnerable subpopulations, may be a by-product of diminished social cohesion. Similarly, individuals with low levels of trust in government may be less likely to respond to surveys than other individuals. Strategies to address these issues and to explore alternative data sources (e.g., web-scraping of publicly available social media data) could be helpful to diversify and improve measurement of social cohesion.

13. In 2008, **Statistics Netherlands** started a research program on social cohesion and developed a conceptual framework that includes 17 core indicators classified in 3 dimensions: participation, trust and integration. All indicators are included in an annual year-round survey since 2012. Netherlands offered to share their current national survey content on social cohesion, including the questionnaires and information on the design.

14. The comments will be taken into account in the CES discussion and in further work in this area. Several countries (**Mexico**, **Netherlands**, and **Russian Federation**) made references to their work related to social cohesion, which will be shared with the task team.

15. **Finland** and the **Netherlands** expressed interest in joining the work.

Annex

Detailed substantive comments by Poland received during electronic consultation

<i>Page para. / line</i>	<i>Issues / quotations</i>	<i>Comments / clarifications / suggestions</i>
Page 2 Para. 2	As a latent concept that is not directly observable or measurable, social cohesion is measured through key dimensions of interest.	It seems worth noting at the outset that dimensions – like trust, belongingness, recognition, etc. – are still latent constructs which need to be operationalized and measured by a set of items/observable features/variables (this is mentioned later in Para. 21). In fact, there are three (not two) levels of consideration in framing a measurement model: concept - its dimensions – items ‘representing each dimension. In deciding on which dimension to include, critically important is validity, ‘face validity’ and ‘empirical validity’. For this, operationalization needs to be explicitly mentioned because even after reaching agreement on dimensions (as valid for all countries) there might be substantial differences between the sets of indicators/items selected through a multidimensional measurement technique (like FA/PCA).
Page 2 Para. 4	Threats to social cohesion are categorised broadly into three groups: economic, socio-cultural and political.	To be clear about it: both negative (threats) and positive factors –economic, socio-cultural and political – should be treated in a symmetric way, i.e., next to items included in a threat category a ‘positive’ one ought to be mentioned as well. In more general terms, also a lack of social cohesion that relates to the nature and extent of social and economic divisions in society (income, ethnicity, political party, caste, language, etc.). Ought to take into account too. (e.g., Easterly et al. (2006)). Indeed, political factors, and the overall situation in a country, including the state of the economy, may affect attitudes of respondents creating bias in the measurement of the SC.
Page 4 Para. 12	In the field of psychology Sigmund Freud defined social cohesion as the phenomenon of individuals sharing common characteristics forming emotional ties (Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier, 2019).	Not exactly: – ‘emotional commitment’ stressed Petterson and Hughey (2004): Peterson defines <i>social cohesion as a construct linked to community participation with notions of trust, shared emotional commitment and reciprocity</i> (Peterson and Hughey, 2004).-Fonseca et al., p. 237. Since psychoanalysis is not a part of psychology nor other social science, such an imputation (given that Freud did not talk about SC) does not look valid or useful. Instead, alongside Durkheim, Tonnies' famous distinction of communities (<i>Gemeinschaft</i> vs. <i>Gesellschaft</i>) seems more appropriate in this context. As far as socio-psychological literature is invoked, it would make more sense to turn to Sen's capability approach, emphasizing the role of the SC for ‘-social ability’ and well-being.[e.g., D. Lanzi, (2011)].
<i>Selected definitions of ‘social cohesion’</i>		
Page 5 Table1	Select definitions of social cohesion	The constituent dimensions of social cohesion according to Kearns and Forrest (2000) are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • common values and civic culture; • social order and social control; • social solidarity and reduction in wealth disparities; • social network and social capital; • and territorial belonging and identity. This is one of the classic definition of SC and one of the most frequently quoted in social literature– it might be worthwhile

Page para. / line	Issues / quotations	Comments / clarifications / suggestions
		including it in the table since it seems to be helpful (instructive) for the research purposes - e.g., see below – community cohesion (Home Office, 2001).
Page 7 Para. 20	For instance, in their literature review, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) identify <i>social relations</i> , sense of belonging, <i>orientation towards the common good</i> , (in)equality, quality of life, and shared values as six of the most common dimensions of social cohesion in the literature	Omitted here is one of the SC key dimensions, <i>identification with the geographical unit</i> , which is important for localization of SC-related processes. (Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) next to ‘social relations’ and ‘orientation towards common goods’).
Page 7 Para. 22	Social cohesion is a multi-level concept individuals, groups, communities, institutions and nations	Given that SC is not only multi-level (individuals, groups, communities, institutions and nations) but also is multifaceted poses a question regarding the correct assignment of specific features/properties to objects of different categories /units of analysis. It starts with the use of distinction between subjective and objective indicators (like suggested in the OECD framework), No less important is the question of interpreting supra-individual units of analysis, e.g. the local community - either as an aggregate consisting of persons or households/families, or as a class of internally indistinguishable elements. Among the important consequences is the question of whether to measure / assign subjective indicators to units of the second type (e.g., a community). Also, the need to realize the fact that attributes assigned to communities on the basis of deriving (calculating) them from individual values - e.g. <i>sense of belonging to the local community</i> (subjective) or income inequality (objective) - have a different formal status than, for instance, the level of <i>community development</i> or <i>structural risk factors</i> (e.g., related to infrastructure, etc.).
Page 7 Para. 25	Contextualisation is key	Fair point - from the beginning we emphasized the importance of <i>contextualization</i> as a part of the need to clearly define the unit of analysis (in spatial terms).
<i>Selected countries' frameworks</i>		
Page 8 Para. 28	<p>- Canada: the <i>Quality of Life Framework</i> - social cohesion and connections: <i>sense of belonging to the local community</i>, <i>having someone to count on</i>, <i>trust in others</i>, <i>volunteering</i>, <i>satisfaction with personal relationships</i>, <i>loneliness</i>, and <i>the accessibility of one's environment</i></p> <p>- the United Kingdom, the concept of ‘community cohesion’</p> <p>- New Zealand: <i>sense of belonging</i>, <i>social inclusion</i>,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Canadian SC key indicators are for the most part subjective and largely overlap with subjective ‘community well-being’ (in the literature) – this makes the approach which is adjusted to the idea of inclusion of Indigenous people vulnerable to bias in cross-country comparisons. <p>The Technical Appendix provides interesting details on the identification and measurement of SC components and the analysis of the obtained measurement results. In addition to demonstrating the complexity of the issue, it also shows the limitations of the approach as specific to one's own environment / socio-political context.</p> <p>Omitting a detailed discussion - which this supplement definitely deserves - I will only add that the fifth and further dimensions identified with the exploratory version of FA are usually not very reliable, among others due to</p>

Page para. / line	Issues / quotations	Comments / clarifications / suggestions
	<p>participation, recognition, and legitimacy</p> <p>- Australia: <i>sense of belonging, sense of worth, social inclusion and justice, political participation, views on discrimination, immigration and traditions and optimism about the future</i></p>	<p>the instability of the covariance structures for such residual dimensions (esp. with a few items). I would suggest considering confirmatory versions of the FA/PCA and checking the adequacy of the 1st dimension (or up to three) component) across countries - more on this below.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The UK framework, based on the Cattle Report (HO 2001) involves exactly the same items/indicators as in Kearns & Forrest (2000) definition of SC; it emphasizes the problem of 'parallel life' (of diverse ethnic group in a community). • The NZ approach focuses on preventing ideologies and downstream of violent extremism – also towards inclusion of Indigenous people. • The Australian approach is mixed in terms of SC's indicators – subjective and objective – alongside the community-focused policy towards “building <i>social cohesion within local communities</i>” • Practically all the approaches focus on <i>local community</i> as the central object of both state policy and statistical research, with emphasize being placed on those aspects of their functioning (as a 'cohesive society/community') which are of areas of social concern and may pose (potentially at least) political challenges. Such aspects (or areas) of concern can perhaps be better interpreted as 'risk factors' which can be listed in form of a 'SC risk factors' to be consulted with each country's team for their matching to a country's context. Such a tabulation of items (indicators of risk factors) could be used next for conducting FA/POCA (in a confirmatory version) towards building a multidimensional/synthetic cross-country measure of SC (which however would be country-adjusted) – see below. • <i>Homogeneity vs. heterogeneity</i> in the SC context is not a simple question: there are examples of homogenous populations in some deprived areas where relatively high levels of social well-being run in parallel with lower levels of personal well-being – e.g. public housing may reduce community cohesion, social capital and wellbeing.
<i>Examples of threats – selected aspects of the changing contexts (risk factors)</i>		
Page 9 Para. 34	The concept of social cohesion [important due to] the role that cohesion may play in societies' <i>abilities to respond to challenges</i> , to function effectively, and to support rewarding lives	Social cohesion, along with social behaviors and social norms is important for well-being and prosperity in society (e.g., Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009; others), while a lack of social cohesion relates to social and economic divisions in society (income, ethnicity, politics, caste, language, etc.- e.g. Easterly et al. (2006)).
Page 10 Para. 39	<i>Economic</i> threats to social cohesion: relative deprivation / inequality, absolute deprivation/ poverty, lack of access to services and low social mobility; demographic changes and immigration can influence shared values	It might be useful to explicitly mention (next to economic) demographic threats/risk factors, as for instance 'low social mobility' and its perception is essentially a type of socio-demographic phenomena (e.g., age structure of the society) that affect 'shared value' (mentioned in para. 43).
Page 11 Para. 42	<i>Social and cultural</i> issues: shared values and norms, the	Again, the 'cohesion'/SC attributes clearly resemble the 'community' characterization (in the literature), where the

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	impacts of digital change, and social anxieties.	distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' communities is defined in terms of <i>shared cultural and symbolic meaning</i> - <i>shared ecology</i> , and <i>social organization</i> (Cnaan et al., 2008). Regarding digitization, and the role of social media perceived generally as breaking social relationships, it might be helpful for identifying real risk factors (threats to SC) by including items which reflect the impact of participation in virtual communities (positive vs. negative) on SC of a unit /community.
Page 12 Para. 48	<i>Political perspective</i> <i>/polarisation</i> - two levels: elite polarisation and mass polarisation in society.	In addition to stressing trust in institution / institutional trust (including media) as vital for socio-political polarization hampering SC it might be useful to take into account an opposite direction of influence and consider how SC determines the quality of institutions, which in turn has important impacts on whether and how pro-growth policies are devised and implemented (e.g., Easterly et al., 2006).
<i>Implications for national statistical offices</i>		
Page 13 Para. 54	An objective seems to be rather “searching for “frameworks and measures” allowing for “the prospect that social cohesion warrants <i>national rather than an international</i> approach”.	While (in the light of the above overview) resignation from the search for one-size fits all solution does not require further justification, it should be clearly emphasized that this does not mean resignation from looking for a set of coordinates for the development of a country-specific yet internationally compatible framework characterizing social cohesion in each country. „Coordinates” means dimensions to be operationalized by country-specific sets of observable items (indicators). However, a precondition for developing this kind of country-specific international framework would be to adopt a clearly defined unit of analysis to be used in each country. In my opinion, also taking into account the experience of the most advanced countries in this field (SC measurement), the <i>(local) community</i> would be the most appropriate candidate for such a unit. [A proxy for such a community could be the smallest territorial unit in the finest administrative division in each country - like <i>gmina</i> in Poland].
Page 14 Para. 55	Data from surveys and administrative sources provide information typically available for individuals, households, businesses, neighbourhoods, regions, and nations—that is, across the levels of analysis at which social cohesion is said to operate	In the considerations on data sources, the earlier distinction between objective and subjective indicators should be recalled, focusing on public statistics resources for the first type, and planning special (every few years) surveys according to the international methodology for the second type (as suggested above).
Page 14 Para. 56 Para. 58	“Survey population weights may not be sufficient to correct (bias) particularly if survey non-response is driven by unobserved characteristic “ “ <i>who</i> responds to NSO surveys, <i>how</i> people respond to surveys has implications for the measurement of social cohesion.”	Important observations, which however refer to practically all types of survey research given the recent tendency of diminishing willingness to participate in them. The issue of when a sample designed as a probability one becomes rather nonprobability (given non-random nonresponses) is one of the fundamental issue discussed currently in the statistical literature, and this problem rightly deserve to be under control in further work on measuring SC in the international context.

<i>Page</i>	<i>para. / line Issues / quotations</i>	<i>Comments / clarifications / suggestions</i>
<i>Recommendations for future work</i>		
Page 16 Para. 67	<p>“(a) Explore the operationalisation and empirical applications of the concepts outlined in this review rather than further engage in theoretical debates regarding social cohesion.</p> <p>(b) Identify the dimensions of social cohesion deemed to be most relevant and informative within their national context.”</p>	<p>Since operationalization is meant here as two-stage operation: specification of dimensions of SC in terms of intermediate (latent) concepts, and selection of observable items as indicators for each of the dimensions, the proposed approach – resigning from “theoretical debates regarding social cohesion” - seems to be too simplified.</p> <p>Somewhat alternatively, it might be reasonable to consider an approach alongside the idea proposed above, that is to:</p> <p>1st, make a synergic analysis of sub-concepts/dimensions with their indicators and to attempt to find a common subset appearing in most countries’ outcome;</p> <p>2nd, to conduct confirmatory FA/PCA (instead exploratory FA) using the dimensions and items relatively most frequently appearing in different countries, and to develop on this basis a ‘core framework’, containing empirically selected (and unquestionable) dimensions of SC;</p> <p>3rd, there would be a margin (a <i>degree of freedom</i>) – more or less wide in each country – left for context specific part of the SC framework.</p> <p>Turning back to the conceptualization, this would mean that the SC framework is envisioned here as a two-tier construct ‘core’ framework (essentially the same for all countries), and a larger one, context-specific.</p> <p>“(e) Explore alternative data sources (e.g., web-scraping of publicly available social media data) to diversify and improve measurement of social cohesion.”</p> <p>Such exploration seems promising and prospectively unavoidable, but it exceeds the standard statistical analysis, leading to social data analytics – it perhaps would be more realistic to leave this path for the time being and return to it at the next round of research since such an extension introduces basically new type of methodology.</p>