

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Meeting of the 2023/2025 Bureau
Cardiff, UK, 9-10 October 2023

Approved

Item III (h) of the Provisional
Agenda

**WORK PLAN
FOR THE TASK TEAM ON SOCIAL COHESION**

Prepared by Statistics Canada

At its February 2023 meeting, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) reviewed in depth the topic of social cohesion based on a paper by Statistics Canada with feedback provided by Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom and OECD. The Bureau decided to establish a task team led by Canada to collect information on how the concept of social cohesion is measured in different countries and to identify good practices. Statistics Canada in consultation with the Task Team prepared the present work plan.

The Bureau approved the work plan.

I. BACKGROUND

1. In February 2023, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) carried out an in-depth review on social cohesion based on a paper by Canada with feedback provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the national statistical offices (NSOs) of New Zealand, Ireland, Poland, and the United Kingdom (document ECE/CES/2023/8). The CES Bureau supported establishing a task team to collect information on how selected aspects of the concept of social cohesion is measured in different countries and to identify good practices. Canada will lead the Task Team.

2. 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. The following 11 countries replied to the electronic consultation: Ecuador, Finland, Hungary, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Russian Federation, Switzerland, Ukraine and United States. The countries welcomed the in-depth review on social cohesion and further work in this area.

3. In June 2023, the Conference endorsed the outcome of the review on social cohesion, and supported further work by a task team in this area, taking into account the feedback from the electronic consultation and the discussion during the CES plenary session.

4. The Bureau is invited to discuss and approve the present work plan of the Task Team on social cohesion.

II. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL COHESION

5. The concept of social cohesion broadly refers to **social bonds or the ‘glue’ that connects societal members**. Societies with higher levels of social cohesion are documented as generally being healthier, more resilient to external shocks and crises, and experiencing higher economic growth (OECD, 2011).

6. Social cohesion is an important concept that can help identify and describe cleavages within societies. The concept of social cohesion has previously been used to study topics such as globalisation, ethnic and group fractionalisation, inequality and barriers to social mobility, and numerous other issues. While social cohesion is not a new concept and has been the subject of several past reviews by other international organisations, this work focuses more narrowly on its **implications with regards to NSOs**, including linking data available in different surveys and facilitating a coherent dissemination of results. The use of alternative data sources is also of interest to diversify and improve the measurement of social cohesion.

7. As a latent concept that is not directly observable or measurable, social cohesion is measured through **key dimensions** of interest. In this context, a dimension refers to a constituent part of social cohesion. Dimensions may include, but are not limited to, confidence in institutions, trust of others, a sense of belonging, shared values, social connections, participation, and socio-economic inequality and social mobility.

8. **Disaggregation** across key population groups of interest is a priority. Society is increasingly interested in the situation of specific population groups such as young people, migrants, or other vulnerable groups. An overall picture on social cohesion that could further provide statistical insights into such groups is desirable.

III. MANDATE

9. The Task Team on social cohesion reports to the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) through its Bureau. The Task Team will present its full report to the October 2024 meeting of the Bureau.

IV. OBJECTIVE

10. The objective of the Task Team is twofold:

(a) Collect information on the **survey questions and other data** that statistical organizations use to operationalize and quantify **selected dimensions** of social cohesion.

(b) For these selected dimensions, to collect information and better understand how social cohesion is being approached by statistical agencies, **identify good measurement practices and data gaps, consider potential advances in survey content** and provide **information on social cohesion among subgroups** in the population.

V. ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

11. The Task Team weighed many considerations when identifying the **aspects of social cohesion upon which to focus its work**. Among these were recent reviews by other organizations of concepts and questionnaire content on related topics such as institutional trust, quality of life, and social connectedness. Other considerations included the features of social

cohesion that make it distinct from other concepts and concerns regarding the prevalence and intensity of between-group conflict in some countries.

12. The intent is not to develop a new, comprehensive conceptual framework of social cohesion. Instead, the focus is on accepting the specificities and richness of different socio-cultural contexts and establishing **conceptual anchor points**. One such anchor point, on which the team will focus is between-group ties, which differentiate social cohesion from similar sociological concepts such as social connectedness or social inclusion. Given existing concerns regarding inter-group tensions and polarisation, between-group measures would complement existing measures of within-group ties (e.g., neighbourhood ties, sense of belonging). This would allow for a more complete portrait of cohesion in cases where there are strong within-group ties, but between-group ties are weak or deteriorating.

13. **Between-group relationships** offer a helpful perspective on social cohesion. Cohesion itself is defined as “the act or state of sticking together tightly”, highlighting the bond or the distance between two units. In social terms, the ‘distance’ between groups may be defined in various ways, such as trust of out-group members, feelings towards out-group members, and opinions and values relative to out-group members. The groups between which social distance is estimated can be identified in various ways. Between-group distances may be defined along social and demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, language, religion and sexual orientation. Between-group distances may also be defined along political or opinion-based lines, such as opinions/positions on issues such as climate change, abortion or vaccination, as well as traditional measures such as political affiliation and ideology. Between-group distance identified in economic terms is a third approach. One example is economic grievance or marginalization articulated in terms of the opposition of ‘the people’ to institutions, elites, or ‘the establishment’. Overall, these measures of social distance and this broad categorization of groups provide a conceptual anchor point for the Task Team.

14. In contrast to between-group distances, **within-group ties** emphasize the connections that individuals have with other people, groups and communities. These ties are often captured on household surveys using questions about contacts with family and friends, having people to count on, participation in groups and activities, feelings of loneliness and other experiences and characteristics. An early assessment suggests that questions regarding between-group distances are far fewer in number.

15. In September 2023, the Task Team will commence **an inventory of survey questions** fielded by their respective organizations. The types of questions deemed to be in-scope to this exercise will be identified. This will include direct questions about between-group distances (e.g. how much do you trust people who have a different religion than you) as well as other questions deemed to be relevant to this initiative. The wording of questions and the response categories provided will be compiled, along with information about the survey itself (e.g. survey year, survey mode, geographic coverage, in-scope population, sample size).

16. The between-group distance questions compiled in the inventory will be tallied, offering perspective on the extent to which a data gap exists in this area. Further, the collected questions will be categorized in terms of the measures of social distance used (e.g. trust, affect) and the groups juxtaposed. Differences in the types of between-group questions fielded in different countries will be noted and discussed.

17. The survey information (i.e., paradata) compiled in the inventory will be assessed. Survey mode is one feature of interest—particularly the extent to which respondents who

complete surveys on-line offer more negative assessments of out-group members than respondents who complete surveys through an interviewer-led telephone questionnaire, as social desirability bias would suggest. The availability of multi-mode surveys in the inventory would provide an opportunity to test this hypothesis.

18. Instances where the same (or comparable) between-group questions are fielded in more than one country will be identified and research opportunities will be assessed. This could include cross-national comparisons for specific subgroups in the population, such as youth or immigrants, providing descriptive information on between-group distances within and across countries.

19. Beyond household surveys, information on **other sources of data** (e.g., social media) that statistical organizations are using to measure between-group distance will be compiled and discussed.

20. Highlights and results from the activities described above will be presented in a written report.

VI. TIMETABLE

21. The following timetable is foreseen:

May 2023	Launching the Task Team's work – identifying the countries and organizations interested to participate in its work (completed)
May-Jul 2023	Discussion of conceptual anchor points and the aspects of social cohesion upon which to focus its work (completed)
Oct 2023	Approval of work plan
Sep-Dec 2023	Collection of national practices and inventory of survey questions relevant to measuring social cohesion within the Task Team
Nov 2023	Progress report at the 2023 meeting of the Group of Experts on Measuring Poverty and Inequality
Jan-May 2024	Analysis of measurement practices and data gaps, considering potential advances in survey content and in providing information on social cohesion among subgroups in the population
Jun-Jul 2024	Discussing and drafting the recommendations and conclusions
Aug-Sep 2024	Editing the report
Oct 2024	The CES Bureau reviews the full report and decides on next steps

VII. METHODS OF WORK

22. The Task Team is expected to work via email and online meetings and using a common online workspace on the UNECE wiki platform.

VIII. MEMBERSHIP

23. The following countries and organizations indicated interest in participating in the Task Team: Canada (Chair), Finland, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, United Kingdom, Eurostat and OECD. Membership is open to additional countries or organizations. UNECE will provide the secretariat.

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