

Research Briefing N°

What holds different societies together and how is social cohesion affected by the economic crisis?

This research analyses the mechanisms that hold different societies together and how these are withstanding the strains of the current crisis.

Key words: social cohesion; diversity; civic attitudes; tolerance; trust; participation; conflict.

Key findings:

Ways of thinking about society and the social order have varied historically in different parts of the world. We can identify in contemporary societies different 'regimes of social cohesion' with distinctive sets of values and underpinned by different institutional arrangements.

- In liberal societies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, social cohesion has traditionally relied on the triple foundations of market freedoms, an active civil society, and core beliefs in individual opportunities and rewards based on merit. A wider set of shared values has not been regarded as essential for a cohesive society. Nor - in the British case at least - has a strong, or tightly defined sense of national identity. The state was not, historically, considered the main guarantor of social cohesion, beyond its role in the maintenance of law and order.
- The social market regime, associated with countries in north-west continental Europe, by contrast, has relied on a strong institutional embedding of social cohesion. Solidarity has depended relatively more on the state and less on civil society, and rates of civic participation have generally been lower. Maintaining a broad set of shared values - and a strong national identity - has also, historically, been considered important for holding societies together.
- The social democratic regime, associated with the Nordic countries, also institutionalises social solidarity. However, here, egalitarian values and high levels of trust make a greater contribution to social cohesion.

All countries face challenges to social cohesion arising from the pressures of globalisation and, most recently, from the economic crisis. However, despite convergent pressures, societies are not all responding in the same ways. Whilst social and political trust have declined substantially in most of the regimes, the Nordic countries remain exceptional in maintaining high levels of social trust and relatively low levels of conflict.

Implications:

Social cohesion in the different regimes is vulnerable at different points which are most critical for their own regimes. Social market countries faces major challenges from increasing value diversity which they find it hard to accommodate. Social democratic societies face strong pressures on the welfare regimes which underpin their form of social cohesion. Liberal societies are particularly vulnerable to the decline in individual opportunities and perceptions of fairness which have been central to what holds them together.

The research

This research used interdisciplinary and mixed method approaches to understanding the different ways in which societies hold together.

Research design

- The study surveyed the different traditions of thought on social cohesion within philosophy and political economy in Europe, East Asia and the USA.
- Drawing on historical sociology it analyses the origins and evolution of these different traditions in different regions of the world in the period up to WW2.
- A further stage in the analysis surveys the comparative research in political economy and welfare studies to ascertain the distinctive institutional bases of contemporary 'regimes of social cohesion'.
- The quantitative analysis, using administrative and survey data on institutional characteristics and social attitudes for 30 plus countries, seeks to test whether these putative regimes can be identified empirically across contemporary societies. Cluster analysis, factor analysis and composite indicators are used to ascertain the characteristics of different regimes and to explain the differential trends in value-diversity across the different groups of countries.
- The final part of the analysis looks at the recent trends across countries on a variety of social cohesion measures and seeks to understand where the different regimes of social cohesion are most vulnerable at the present time.

Further information

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Contact

Andy Green

Email: andy.green@ioe.ac.uk

Phone: +44-(0)20 7 612 6760