



Social Cohesion and Democracy

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Abstract

A basis for stable democracy is *social cohesion* – consolidation of plurality of citizenship and reducing inequality and socio-economic disparities and fractures in the society. Social cohesion refers to people’s relationships and interactions in society, including the role of citizenship. Democracy and social cohesion are complementary parts of including in the public decision-making active citizenship with both rights and responsibilities. This chapter argues the necessity of providing the possibility for all citizens to create decent life in a political system which promotes fair social and economic delivery, guarantees basic human rights and provides for political and judicial accountability.

In order to arrive at a balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities for sustainable democratic societies, issues of disparities, inequalities and discrimination must be addressed. Democracy will be undermined in societies with wide-spread poverty and growing gaps between societal groups. Such problems are high on the agenda today in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Extreme inequality is one of the main challenges for policy-makers in Latin America. Latin America and the Caribbean are also characterized by large diversity in terms of political systems among the countries of the region, where there is still a tendency towards authoritarianism in many places. Even where democracy has consolidated, poverty rates and social inequalities tend to increase in the region. State institutions are not properly equipped to respond to these challenges and they are often unable to deliver on the economic and social demands of the citizens. Ultimately, this will undermine citizens’ perception of democracy as a legitimate and useful political system.

The solution is to support more participatory approaches to democracy and institution building. The role of citizens and “citizenship-building” must be recognized. Reducing social inequalities is part of this, ensuring equal access to public decision-making to all societal groups, e.g. by instruments of representation systems and affirmative action.

Summary of Recommendations

The EU and Latin America and the Caribbean must make social cohesion a priority area in their cooperation. It is necessary to reduce disparities both in terms of income and in acknowledging peoples' equal cultural rights. To this end, the EU should be explicit in the political dialogue with Latin America on the necessity of e.g. restructuring the welfare system, and it should incorporate a rights-based approach in the partnership with this region. An action plan that promotes social cohesion should be adopted.

The EU should design cooperation and social cohesion policies within the framework of local realities. Local communities and actors should be mobilized. However, the EU's power of influence should not only be used at a local level but also at the global level. Many objectives for social cohesion in LAC countries will not be achieved without the rich countries implementing policy changes and cooperation actions such as reducing trade barriers, preserving international financial stability, and addressing climate change.

Cooperation on these issues must have a holistic approach. It must address the causes and aggravating circumstances of poverty such as migration flows, volatility of prices for agricultural products, the suppression of human rights, narcotraffic and armed conflicts.

Strategic cooperation should be based on the states' responsibility to define their own policies to face the challenge of cohesion. This implies reforming the welfare systems and adopting an approach based on human rights. There should be a change from a system based on donors' preferences to one where the countries themselves determine their priorities on the basis of bi-regional and internal dialogue.

1. Introduction: Social Cohesion and Democracy

A political society must respect the principles of freedom, justice and tolerance in order to safeguard the peaceful coexistence of its members. Every citizen must acknowledge a good code of conduct that provides freedoms in a legal and institutional framework. The concept of freedom that inspires democracy must be based on the possibility of a decent life for all citizens, in a society where personal and collective life is not dictated by necessity but by a set of human rights.

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What is Social Cohesion?

Social cohesion refers to people's relationships and interactions in society. Social cohesion stems from a democratic effort to establish social balance, economic dynamism and national identity, with the goals of founding a system of equity, sustaining the impulses of uncontrolled economic growth, and avoiding social fractures.

Social cohesion is a social process which aims to consolidate plurality of citizenship by reducing inequality and promoting space for political and judicial accountability for injustice. It is the meeting point of social democracy and political democracy. A cohesive society is a prerequisite for political democracy and social stability.

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democracy, where human beings have the capacity to influence the decision processes that affect their lives.

A cohesive society is a prerequisite for political democracy and social stability. It is evident that a society with evenly distributed wealth is better able to achieve higher levels of productivity and consequently generate greater economic growth in the long term. By reducing territorial and socio-economic disparities, social cohesion helps reduce class differences through well-functioning institutions and programmes that strengthen social and political control over the economy.

The creation of more social space to enable citizens to develop their own human rights and decent standards of living is the best mechanism for reducing social disintegration.

What is Democracy?

Democracy, on the other hand, implies the existence of a political order created freely, which rests on universal principles that allow for rules limiting the arbitrary use of power and privileges. It is a system of guarantees for citizens to exercise their freedoms in a political order of justice and tolerance.

Democracy must be understood as a process where ‘human rights’ means infusing each and every aspect of life with concrete opportunities. Democracy must create conditions that allow men and women to fully enjoy their rights of citizenship and lead a ‘dignified life’ which will in turn allow them to contribute their own identity to public life.

Social Cohesion and Democracy

If social cohesion and democracy is viewed in the context described above, the relation between them is defined by the fact that the first aims for an equality denied by society to many citizens, and the second is a system of guarantees that allows citizens to exercise their freedoms in a political order of justice and tolerance.

In this way, democracy and social cohesion promote the establishment of citizenship with rights and responsibilities differently but in a complementary manner. While the democratic spirit aims to safeguard public well-being through the power of the people, the logic of social cohesion is to guarantee the well-being that allows the power of the people to exist.

Considering social cohesion as a contributor to democracy, this new model acknowledges the privileges of individual and collective rights, but in a participatory spirit where everyone can shape the laws and norms ruling collective life (economy, exchange, environment) and safeguarding private life (beliefs, values). A new balance between individualism and collectivism is required for human rights today.

Poverty, Democracy and Human Rights

The biggest threat to democracy is any form of disintegration that perpetuates submissive or inferior positions among the poor. Poverty, which undermines democracy, is a matter

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of dignity and rights. It is foremost a social phenomenon, going beyond insufficiency of income. From the perspective of poverty and discrimination, equality is not just a right or fundamental precondition for democracy, but an opportunity to take political action.

Poverty is probably the most serious problem in the Americas. There is a reciprocal causality between the persistence and aggravation of poverty and the violation of human rights. Poverty constitutes a violation since it is derived from a social, political and economic process that prevents the very poor from exercising fundamental freedoms and human rights.

At the same time, however, poverty is a result of political and socio-economic structures that have damaged those rights. These systems concentrate growth, public policies and resources in a higher proportion to those who have already benefited, instead of focusing on social investments and reducing social stigma.

2. Challenges in Latin America

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The political range of Latin America and the Caribbean is very diverse. States which are in favour of globalization coexist with those with a more conservative position. In both cases, however, traditional political and social institutions are losing their power to control regulation and integration.

A tendency towards authoritarianism in some countries is polarizing the actors in civil society, thus undermining the weakest social categories. The political and social void leads to the question of whether it is viable to talk about representative democracy in countries that are governed by an international economic system and where individuals, being marginalized, do not participate in public life, with the exception of exercising their right to vote.

Although dictatorships have largely disappeared from Latin America in the last 20 years, poverty and social inequality have increased. Economic modernization and market development have weakened the state's ability to intervene and have undermined the state's capacity to respond to social demands. Some countries have developed from controlling and authoritarian systems into liberal systems, but this is more a reflection of the triumph of economic liberalism, not democracy.

Latin America and the Caribbean still experience high levels of poverty, inequality and exclusion. Four out of ten Latin Americans are excluded from the most elemental conditions, such as minimum amounts of high quality public services. Neither economic growth nor formal democracy has enabled an effective and sustainable reduction in these social dimensions. This is due to the high concentration of income and the inadequacy of social programmes to promote structural changes in any depth.

Growth and modernization coexist with growing segments of misery. As the state's institutions are weakened, economic demands are coinciding less with social demands.

The reality and experiences of women, indigenous communities, migrants and communities with extreme poverty levels testifies to the fact that the democratic process does not cure all ills.

The persisting causes of poverty, inequality and exclusion in the region are largely the result of ‘the original sin’ – historically, the political exclusion of the poor in rural areas. Consequently, there is a highly unequal provision of social protection and services. Additionally, the capacity to provide for social services or conduct investments that will benefit the disadvantaged is reduced, partly because it is based on a narrow and volatile tax basis and is exposed to the whims of politicians as well as external impacts. In Latin American societies, in general, policies to increase productivity and free the market are more important than policies to safeguard a minimum standard of living for the majority of people.

However, the social expenditure has increased generally, although insufficiently. In some countries the social approach is gaining vitality through programmes like AUGE, *Plan de Acceso Universal con Garantías Explícitas* (Universal Access to Explicit Guarantees) in Chile and *Hambre Cero* (Zero Famine) in Brazil.

What is Needed to Face the Challenges?

In order to reverse the trends of weakened states and increased social inequality, it is necessary to have institutions that promote plurality and respect diversity of opinion – institutions that respond to the needs and interests of the people without resorting to demagoguery or false promises.

Adopting an action plan that promotes social cohesion is urgently needed in Latin America because the demands of the most disadvantaged population are not only cultural but deeply social. It is necessary to reduce the disparities between those who have and those who have not, both in terms of income (social) and in acknowledging other people with equal (cultural) rights.

It is necessary to abandon the old concept of classic democracy and start building a model of participative democracy from scratch, without pretensions to autarchy, but preserving open economies subject to social control based on efficient norms and with political parties open to their voters.

An integral appreciation to the social dynamics and management of the economy are of great importance for designing cohesion policies in Latin America, because it is necessary for filling in the economic gaps without sacrificing respect for cultural values and identities. Rather than abstract principles of equality, programmes of affirmative actions or positive discrimination are needed. Affirmative action that prioritizes vulnerable sectors is a compliment to representation.

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A cohesion policy would be even more efficient if democracy combined the rights of citizenship (the principle of uniformity) and basic human rights that limit the power of the privileged and the state with a plural representation of interests and opinions (the principle of diversity) framed by respect for the law and public freedoms (universal principle). More than just a fair society is needed: regulating principles, giving everyone more space to act freely and the state room to act *with* transparency, are required.

3. The EU's Efforts to Build Democracy and Alleviate Poverty

It is encouraging that the European Commission's Latin America Regional Programming Document, which defines the cooperation between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean, reflects a positive evolution with regard to social cohesion, both in its conceptualization as well as in the funds allocated for improving social cohesion in the region.

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The Necessity to Incorporate Social Cohesion Concepts to Improve Donor Policies

There is an urgent necessity, however, for making social cohesion a priority area in the strategic association between the EU and LAC that was established after the Summit of Guadalajara in 2004 and the Summit of Lima in 2008.

Two major challenges face the EU in terms of designing policies of sustainable and efficient cohesion: contributing to the transformation of the current welfare systems and understanding the socio-economic, political and cultural differences in the region, between countries and within the various territories in each country.

What should be the approach to – and the components of – the cooperation to make it more effective in terms of eliminating the structural causes of the growing divergence seen in the different countries?

Combining policies and actions supported by the EU to optimize the impact of the creation of socially homogeneous spaces in Latin America and the Caribbean is a crucial move. The socio-economic model based on policies for promoting growth as a foundation for subsequent social development must be subject to verification. Experience shows that economic growth has had a polarizing effect.

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Cohesion must be integrated into three dimensions: i) creating opportunities for the development of human abilities and the social body to increase access to sustainable

livelihoods; ii) empowering communities, municipalities and individuals to give them a say in matters that impact the quality of their lives and on their human rights; and iii)

reducing the structural causes that generate and perpetuate the vulnerability of the disadvantaged.

The need to focus on poverty from the dimension of rights – at the same time requiring economic and political coalitions to reach consensus about what measures are needed – makes it imperative to develop the state's organizational structure so it can rapidly deliver public services such as education, health, transportation, energy, justice, safety, housing and food.

In conclusion, the proposal aspires to help strengthen political systems in which individuals and groups participate in the definition and exercise of political power. To reduce inequality, the government can adequately satisfy the needs of their citizens, reduce the levels of poverty and social inequality, and work effectively with sufficient budgetary appropriation.

The EU's Experience in Social Cohesion Policies: Lessons for Latin America

Behind budgetary arrangements and community action plans there is a political will to reduce the disparities between the prosperous and the peripheral zones. This can be translated into a set of institutions, financial funds and other programmes and actors whose objectives are solidarity by consolidating economic and social cohesion.

This political will towards equality of opportunities and social justice tends, given the normal levels of difficulties in accomplishing its objectives, to focus resources on territories and the people who need it the most, making a significant impact on consolidating homogeneous spaces, which in turn allow its impulses to spread in the common market.

When examining the objectives and areas of social investments in the renewed cohesion policy, there are parallels to what the doctrine of human rights has tried to include in the political agenda of the governments in Latin America for more than two decades. In fact, the Lisbon Strategy promotes investments that support inclusive growth and quality implementation. This objective is anchored by legislation and regulations that should ensure social protection and inclusion without undermining economic dynamism. In this context Europe has coined the term 'flexisecurity', i.e., competition in the labour market without undermining employment guarantees. Thus, employment programmes are integrated with considerations of social solidarity.

This is the essence of the right to work. In Europe, there is focus on continuous learning, health and work safety, and a constant struggle against discrimination. In Latin America, the economy's dynamics diminish any guarantees that have been achieved in the labour market so far, maintaining pay differences for example on the basis of gender.

In contrast, Europe seeks to adapt to changes in the workplace and to the structure of world trade, as in the case of the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, approved by the European Community in 2006, which helps unemployed professionals re-enter the labour market after being laid off as a result of economic forces.

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European policies are designed to increase the professional skills of European workers through education and research and implementation of new technologies. Parallel to this, there are programmes encouraging entrepreneurship, which means that social development has a leveraging effect on the heritage of human capacities and on economic dynamism as a whole.

Clearly, the parallel between cohesion and human rights is more evident in the sectors dealing with European cohesion policy. Those sectors are youth, longevity and better health conditions, gender equality, inclusiveness and non-discrimination, culture, participation, dialogue and better professional opportunities without sacrificing the commitment to upcoming generations, by proper management of natural resources. This is something for policy makers to keep in mind when considering programmes for Latin America.

To design new approaches to development, policy makers need to study the problems of exclusion and poverty as components of human rights. This process will require research, dialogue, reaching consensus, commitment and political will.

4. Risks of Adopting a Policy of Cohesion

Although economic and social cohesion is already included in the bi-regional dialogue between the EU and Latin America, there are already a number of challenges to its implementation. This comes from both sides of the table:

Political Conditionality, Recession and the Protectionist Spirit

On the Latin American side there are adverse reactions to what might be considered political conditionality imposed by the rich countries, and on the European side, the concern is whether the deepening economic crisis will undermine cooperation initiatives in human rights and social programmes. The highest risk concerns the effects of the global recession. The growth forecast for the EU is pessimistic. A negative growth of 1.9 per cent for 2009 and close to 0 per cent for 2010 is predicted.

The demand for social cohesion internally in the common market will increase as a result of the recession, with unwanted effects on the flow of cooperation. In fact, the expansion of the EU beyond its 27 member states anticipates a budgetary effort of considerable magnitude to keep solidarity an essential component of the European social model.

What is even more significant, however, is the negative impact on the LAC countries due to possible EU protectionist measures regarding trade and migration policies, erected in an attempt to safeguard the employment conditions of Europeans.

Dynamism and Democratization of the Market

To be sustainable, the market model must embrace a new balance between economic efficiency and social policy. Profitability and dynamism of trade must be supported by effective regulations on the behaviour of the actors, and supplement itself with institutions and policies for social inclusion. Therein lies the importance of global measures to strengthen a sensible supervision of the market and its actors to guarantee stability and openness.

In order to benefit from the efforts of a cohesion policy, of equal importance are the measures that must be taken by the LAC countries to democratize the markets. It is not about substituting the market with the state, but reconfiguring the balance to allow them both to function fully, while guaranteeing peaceful coexistence and human development. Cohesion needs resources and the state must reform tax policy to finance cohesion programmes.

Other specific democratization measures must also be taken. One is to develop a new generation of public policies – ideally with an approach based on the human rights perspective – to deal with the disparities, such as Zero Famine in Brazil or the Explicit Health Guarantees in Chile to universalize health services.

It is also necessary to educate people and communities on human rights, starting at primary school level, with special attention to the mandate of Articles 13 and 13.2 of the Protocol of San Salvador (Organization of American States, 1988).

Justice and Enforceability

Market democratization and the effective implementation of the cohesion policy is a matter of the rule of law. Neither public policies, transparency rules, social responsibility, accountability nor the sensible management of economic affairs can materialize if there is no legal framework to guarantee due process and enforceability by society as a whole.

Latin American citizens must have access to effective justice and be educated on their rights. Effective cohesion policies such as these build democratic societies with vibrant and supportive economies.

5. Proposals for the EU

1. The EU should be explicit in the political dialogue with Latin America on the necessity for restructuring the welfare system, and it should incorporate a rights-based approach in cooperation with Latin America. Cohesion is not just a matter of investing money.
2. The EU should pressure the governments into committing to public policies on human rights.
3. The EU should support technological development through programmes that generate opportunities of productive and decent work for the poor.
4. The EU should design cooperation and social cohesion policies within the framework of local realities. Activate local communities and actors; avoid universalist views and unilateral relations with the states.
5. The EU's power of influence should be used at a global level, not only at a local level. Many objectives for social cohesion in LAC countries will not be achieved without the rich countries implementing policy changes and cooperation actions such as reducing trade barriers, preserving international financial stability, and addressing climate change.

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7. Strategic association should be based on the states' responsibility to define their own policies, based on national consensus, to face the challenge of cohesion and in complying, as a first step, with the Millennium Development

Goals. This implies reforming the welfare systems and adopting an approach based on human rights.

8. The EU should strengthen the institutional climate and public policies that prioritize reducing poverty. Design the architecture of cooperation on the basis of incentives to support those countries that best create programmes and utilize resources to improve social cohesion.

9. There should be a change from a system based on donors' preferences to one where the countries themselves determine their priorities on the basis of bi-regional and internal dialogue.

10. The EU should create indicator systems that allow beneficiaries to monitor the progress of projects.

11. The EU's capacity should be utilized to influence the states' compliance with international commitments in matters of human rights. This framework must prioritize investment in people; democratic governability; empowering the poor and their communities to achieve a high level of political participation; and reducing the vulnerabilities to which especially the poor, women and ethnic groups are exposed.

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There is no democratic spirit without social cohesion, just as there is no sustainable development without freedom and respect for diversity and the rule of law. Disintegrating forces can be eliminated by strengthening the existing conditions for democracy in the region. Achieving this is not just a matter of cooperation; although without the cooperation

being committed to eliminating poverty it would not be possible to incorporate a clear and complete approach from the human rights dimension.

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Dr Cuéllar is a member of the International Council of Americas Watch, and chaired the international conference of Amnesty International on the protection of human rights defenders (Bogotá, 1996). For 14 years he worked for various IIHR programmes and directed both its civil society and research and development departments. He has received several awards for his contributions to human rights work, including the Letelier Moffitt Human Rights Prize.