



**GLOBAL COOPERATION NEWSLETTER**  
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➤ **Featured article. Social cohesion in the Arab world.**

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The Arab world has been evolving in a context shaped by a set of economic, social, political and cultural realities that have an impact on the cohesion of the societies in the region. Apart from a few exceptions, Arab states and societies continue to be affected by the absence of a functioning democracy, a serious social crisis, increasingly outward-oriented economies and a destabilization of cultural and religious frameworks. By undermining states, impoverishing their people and marginalizing entire populations, the current situation exacerbates the crisis in the public confidence in institutions and further complicates existing economic difficulties, which in turn fuels social tensions, perpetuates dependence on foreign governments and augments vulnerability. Such realities are putting to the test the very foundations of social bonding and the ability of people to live together in the Arab societies.

**I - The foundations of social cohesion**

It is very difficult to address such an issue of such great complexity in a few lines. In fact, discussion of the problem began in earnest in the early 2000s, prompted by international and regional institutions, such as UNDP, the World Bank, OECD and the Council of Europe, and by eminent economists and experts, such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, Muhammad Yunus and Lucie Davoine, not to mention the contributions of Moroccan institutions such as the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, which in 2011 adopted the Social Charter that it shares with the Union of French-speaking Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions, the High Planning Commission and the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies.

Grosso modo, the foundations of social cohesion can be reduced in their essence to three types of indicators that describe how individuals and social groups live together and enjoy full rights in society:

- Indicators relating to the fundamental human rights required for the provision of basic human needs in their economic, social, political, cultural and environmental dimensions, which have

material and non-material, and quantitative and qualitative aspects, while maintaining strict adherence to non-discriminatory treatment on the basis of gender, place of residence, worship, language and ethnicity. Those rights allow all members of a national community to achieve two objectives: 1) comprehensive human development that is integrated and sustainable, based on the living standards recognized by the community, and 2) a social protection floor that protects the security of individuals facing various risks during their life courses, such as illness, unemployment, occupational accidents, disability, old age, disabilities of various kinds, and so forth.

- -Indicators based on governance of an institutional nature aimed at ensuring participation, freedom, dignity, security, justice, equity, democratic control of public policies and responsible management of the affairs of the community.
- And finally, indicators of well-being and happiness united in a common vision of a collective future, a national ambition in the form of a contract, and a vision of a shared society.

Such indicators generally provide a measure of the strength of the social fabric and of how well members of a society live together at any given moment and, accordingly, reflect the level and nature of social cohesion.

While the third category of indicators has not been extensively researched, the first two categories provide us with measures of social cohesion against the backdrop of prevalent universal trends and enable us to make scientifically valid comparisons.

## **II - *The situation of social cohesion in the Arab World***

The available data based on empirical observation of social indicators in many countries shows that social cohesion is now weaker than in the past.

This observation can be justified on at least three grounds. The first is linked to an impasse in which the dominant social models around the world find themselves, including the models of the Nordic countries, which have the same high reputation as France and Belgium. That impasse has resulted from the emergence of new generations of poor, unemployed and excluded people. The deep roots of those new realities, which are destabilizing the cohesion of our societies, stem from the crisis in the economic models that currently dominate the global system. Those models have been creating fewer and fewer jobs and fewer resources for finance, economic growth and solidarity against a background of growing social and spatial inequalities between and within nations.

The social consequence of that situation has been the development of new pockets of poverty, the destabilization of what remains of the middle class and saturation in the consumption levels of the affluent classes in society, a phenomenon that has increasingly assumed the form of mindless consumption patterns, including waste, capital flight, and money laundering.

The second reason lies in the growing difficulties in financing social action and solidarity, which includes the provision of health care, pensions, subsidies for basic foodstuffs, unemployment compensation and other components of social policy.

Finally, the third reason relates to the continuous and accelerating collapse of the old networks of family, community, tribal and neighbourhood solidarity owing to the growing predominance of social relations based on market exchanges. The rationality that dictates such market exchanges and the power of the money that they generate create their own logic leading to withdrawal, selfishness and the exclusive pursuit of each individual's particular interests. That rationality is of a systemic nature and is generating isolation, loneliness and sometimes even despair, which in turn destabilizes social bonding and the ability to live together, and thereby social cohesion suffers.

In the Arab World, the tell-tale signs of that situation can be seen in the high level of youth unemployment, the persistence of social inequality and the existence of explosive situations resulting from the deeply-entrenched reluctance to share political power and the wealth produced.

According to an International Labour Organization report dated 2013, the rate of youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa in 2012 was the highest of all the regions of the world, 28.3% and 23.6% respectively, compared to a world average estimated at 12.4%. This idle youth, which demographically represents a significant component of Arab societies, is also marked by a low level of education and qualifications. The primary school completion rate is only 15%, whereas parity in education reaches only 46%.

Other human development indicators fail to show a positive evolution in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and are far from the global averages, as is the case for the eradication of hunger and access to water and sanitation, with rates of 15%, 31% and 31%, respectively.

That situation hampers efforts to reduce poverty and has a negative impact on education and health. The Middle East and North Africa region has an income inequality rate of 38.2%, with significant intra-regional variation (see *Africa Economic Brief*, vol. 3, no. 7, July 2012). Inequality also has gender dimensions, since women show relatively higher unemployment rates compared to men and very low economic participation rates.

### **III - Recent upheavals in the Arab world and their impact on social cohesion**

The upheavals in the Arab world have actually had an impact on well-being in the region. Indeed, according to the latest global Human Development Report in 2014, the perception of individual well-being in the Arab world shows relatively low scores compared to other regions. Regarding the quality of education, 48% of the population in the Arab world expressed satisfaction (30% in Mauritania, 38% in Sudan, 35% in Yemen, 41% in Morocco, 40% in Egypt, 64 % in Algeria and 44% in Tunisia), compared to 71% in countries with medium-level human development. As for the quality of health care, the scores were 39% in the Arab world and 54% in medium-level countries.

What is worse, however, is that those upheavals have implications for the future of the people of the region. We have already seen in many countries the emergence and development of protest movements, both spontaneous and organized, increasingly supported by the marginalized segments of society and those excluded from the institutional process and economic power. Those social strata, not represented in the traditional political arena, tend to develop their capacity to protest, destabilize or question the political and social systems, often using non-peaceful means.

Aided by the winds of freedom and democracy blowing across the world, including in the Arab region, as well as by the collaborative networking of civil society organizations using the tools of the new digital revolution, those movements could have become a countervailing power, but they remain, unfortunately, easy to manipulate and exploit by obscure or open groups that seek political legitimacy.

All of those changes relating to the evolution of Arab societies obviously have a direct and immediate impact on the crisis in social bonding and the ability to live together. That impact manifests itself in the violent methods used to resolve disputes and conflicts between individuals and groups, in the confrontational nature of the relationship between the state and civil society, in the exacerbation of isolationism, in the search for a return to origins, in the resurgence of ethnic, tribal and religious wars with the concomitant rise in fundamentalism of all stripes, in intolerance and in the development of a culture of death and hatred, as is currently the case in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya.

Social cohesion has, then, been seriously affected. The devastating consequences of those developments have led to the forced migration of entire population groups - a dislocation observed

by the United Nations - the destruction of the civilizational and cultural heritage of the Arab people, which is part of the collective memory and heritage of all humankind, the self-destruction of the developmental abilities of the countries in the region, all of which has contributed to the historical and technological backwardness of Arab societies and will force future generations to pay a very high price and will require much time to recover.

***Opinions expressed in the article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect views of the ICSW Management Committee***

➤ ***Social Protection is a human right: "Embrace the Social Protection Floor Initiative" – UN expert***

On October 24, 2014, a new UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston (Australia), who replaced Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona (Chile) as the mandate holder in June 2014, presented his first report to the General Assembly<sup>1</sup>. The Special Rapporteur urged governments around the world to embrace the United Nations Social Protection Floor Initiative aimed at ensuring guaranteed basic income security and access to essential social services for all; particular emphasis was put on the relevance of the Social Protection Floor Initiative to the post-2015 development agenda. Implementation of the right to social protection through the adoption by all States of social protection floors is seen in the submitted report as "by far the most promising human rights-inspired approach to the global elimination of extreme poverty".

According to the report, "observers who are not familiar with the origins of the Social Protection Floor Initiative, or with the ways in which the concept has developed, might be tempted to assume that it is just another example of pouring old wine into new bottles in order to package the right to social security in a more attractive way". But the social protection floor is novel, and there are at least four reasons why it is important for current development discourse and emerging development agenda.

In the first place, "it achieves a synthesis which gives operational significance to the rights to social security and an adequate standard of living, which had previously languished within the human rights framework. Second, rather than being foisted upon reluctant or resistant States, it reflects a process of reflexive learning between the international policy community and actual practice emerging in and from the global South. Third, instead of assuming a gap or even an incompatibility between human rights norms and economic realities, social protection as a concept has been carefully designed both to take account of affordability and to acknowledge the importance of promoting economic productivity. Fourth, to a greater extent than is the case with any other social human right, the initiative has come largely from outside the human rights field, bringing with it the prospect that a far more broadly-based coalition of actors can be mobilized to promote implementation".

"The Global North has often been accused of imposing human rights norms on the Global South, but Social Protection Floors will not run that risk, because their origins lie in path-breaking initiatives by Southern countries like Brazil and India," said the UN human rights expert during the presentation of his report to the UN General Assembly. "Regrettably, the World Bank, a distinctly 'Northern' institution, has not backed this Initiative in a serious way, and this is consistent with its refusal to engage meaningfully with human rights in other contexts as well," Alston said. "The World Bank continues to back the much more limited notion of social safety nets, which are only targeted at specific groups and are a recipe for bureaucratic power grabs at the domestic level."

"The Social Protection Floor Initiative seeks to implement existing international human rights law, calls for States to define their own approach consistent with human rights principles and through

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United Nations. General Assembly, A/69/297

consultation, is universal rather than selective, envisages a right which is to be guaranteed in national law, and is affordable by all States as long as international cooperation is available where absolutely necessary," explained Alston.

In his statement to the UN General Assembly, the UN human rights expert drew attention to what he termed the systematic avoidance of human rights language in the discussions on the post-2015 development agenda and in other key development forums. "The use of human rights language does matter", stressed Alston. "Let me apply this to the plight of those living in extreme poverty. Recognition of their human rights acknowledges their dignity and agency, empowers them and their advocates, and provides a starting point for a meaningful debate over the allocation of societal resources."

"We need to acknowledge the extent to which governments and the international community are intentionally avoiding the language of human rights in the context of development debates, and to ask ourselves why this is happening. Perhaps it is precisely in order to avoid all of the positive consequences of using human rights language," said the UN Special Rapporteur.

For the statement please go to:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15219&LangID=E>

The full text of the report can be read here:

<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/501/65/PDF/N1450165.pdf?OpenElement>

#### ➤ **Leadership for shared society**

The **Club de Madrid**, the world's largest forum of former Heads of State and Heads of Government who assumed office as a result of election through a democratic process, has, through its *Shared Societies Project*, been working for more than seven years to promote policy approaches that generate safe and prosperous shared communities, and a productive and dynamic environment to maximize the economic contributions of all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, or other markers of identity. Providing a response to the set of proposals produced by Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, the Club de Madrid representatives convened a side-event on October 8 at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Among the key messages outlined at the above meeting was the importance of political, social and economic inclusion in society and the creation of "shared societies"; it was stressed that the inclusion of all sections of society and particularly marginalized identity groups has a significant impact on economic and social well-being. Therefore, it is proposed that not only the inclusion of all identity groups be embedded in the new goals and new post- 2015 development agenda, but that a specific target on social inclusion and relations between identity groups be established. Another suggestion is to ensure that the problem of poor inter-community relationships is addressed, and effective channels of communication between identity groups and also with Government and other sectors of society are created, aimed at mutual understanding, prevention of conflicts and facilitation of crisis management when conflict arises.

It was also proposed that additional targets should address the impact of global financial policies on specific identity groups, and an assessment of the impact on identity groups and inter-group relations of all new global financial policies and programmes be carried out. It is expected that such a practice would not only deal with any of the specific challenges in relation to building a shared sustainable world but the publication of reports with results of such assessments would provide a monitoring system on the impact of policies and programmes on specific communities and would encourage more careful development of such programmes.

For more details, please go to:

[http://www.clubmadrid.org/en/noticia/shared\\_societies\\_perspective\\_in\\_the\\_post\\_2015\\_development\\_agenda](http://www.clubmadrid.org/en/noticia/shared_societies_perspective_in_the_post_2015_development_agenda)

➤ **Useful resources and links.**

***How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014***

This publication, edited by James G. McGann, Anna Viden and Jillian Rafferty, explores the relationship between policy institutes (or "think-tanks") that research or advocate for economic and social development, with particular emphasis on policy success stories in developed and developing countries. The examined case studies, drawn from a range of political and economic systems worldwide, aim at providing a detailed understanding of how think tanks can have an impact on issues such as education policy, infrastructure, environment and sustainable development, economic reform, poverty alleviation, agricultural and land development, and social policy.

For more details please go to: <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15244.html>

➤ ***The Social Cohesion Policy of Viet Nam. OECD, Paris, 2014***

This OECD publication represents the result of an extensive empirical analysis based on household surveys as well as consultations with international and local experts. The report aims at providing policy recommendations across sectors that will improve policy coherence and coordination with government and ultimately help the country implement a policy reform agenda that promotes social cohesion.

For additional details:

<http://www.oecd.org/dev/social-cohesion-policy-review-of-viet-nam-9789264196155-en.htm>

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