What Distinctive Contribution Can Social Cohesion Make to Development Theory, Research and Policy?

Michael Woolcock, World Bank

OCED Conference
Paris, 20 January 2011
Overview

• Why social cohesion matters
  – Opening examples
• Why social cohesion (and not something else)?
  – Social concepts: a brief overview
• What key issues should social cohesion inform?
  – Social bases of collective action
  – Management of risks, shocks, opportunities
  – Legitimacy of change processes
  – Taking context seriously
  – Inequality (in its various forms) and inclusion
• Implications for policy and practice
Why social cohesion matters

• Collective response to challenges and change; inclusion of all, equally and without discrimination
  – Australia (last month)
    • Response to recent floods...
    • 25% of its population not native-born (next is Canada, 12%)
  – Canada (most of the time)
Why social cohesion matters

• *Collective response to challenges and change; inclusion of all, equally and without discrimination*
  – Australia (last month)
    • Response to recent floods...
    • 25% of its population not native-born (next is Canada, 12%)
  – Canada (most of the time)
  – Indonesia (post 1998)
    • Management of ‘triple transition’
    • (Unlikely demographic, historical conditions)
  – Estonia, Latvia (last year)
    • Largely peaceful response to falling wages, rising unemployment (“internal devaluation”)
Social ‘something’...

…clearly matters, has always mattered
– How/why has interest in it waxed and waned?
– But what to call it? How to distinguish it? How to ‘measure’ it? What to do about it? By whom?
Social ‘something’...

...clearly matters, has always mattered
  – How/why has interest in it waxed and waned?
  – But what to call it? How to distinguish it? How to ‘measure’ it? What to do about it? By whom?

• **Social capability**

• **Social capital**
  – ... Hanifan (1916), Bourdieu (1972), Coleman (1986), Putnam (1993, 2000) ...
Social ‘something’...

...clearly matters, has always mattered
– How/why has interest in it waxed and waned?
– But what to call it? How to distinguish it? How to ‘measure’ it? What to do about it? By whom?

• **Social capability**

• **Social capital**
  – ... Hanifan (1916), Bourdieu (1972), Coleman (1986), Putnam (1993, 2000) ...

• **Social exclusion / inclusion; Collective efficacy**

• **Social cohesion**
  – Albert (1953), Jensen (2010)
  – Same as ‘harmonious society’? (China)
  – The liberal democratic state by another name?
Citation counts, 1985 - 2009

Social Capital
Human Capital
Social Cohesion
Civil Society
Social Exclusion
Social cohesion

• Core idea
  – Capacity of societies (not just groups, networks) to peacefully manage collective action problems
  – All included, treated equally, non-discrimination

• Central claim
  – Expanded sense of ‘we’ + pro-social norms + inclusive social structure = foundations of effective institutions = ...
  – Strong intrinsic concern: cohesion valuable in its own right
Social cohesion

• **Core idea**
  – Capacity of societies (not just groups, networks) to peacefully manage collective action problems
  – All included, treated equally, non-discrimination

• **Central claim**
  – Expanded sense of ‘we’ + pro-social norms + inclusive social structure = foundations of effective institutions = …
  – Strong intrinsic concern: cohesion valuable in its own right

• **Empirical referents**
  – Inequality, ethnic/religious diversity, norms of reciprocity, civic participation, employment, citizenship, crime, SWB
  – Societal responses to adversity (case studies)

• **Implications, applications**
  – Reduce inequalities, enhance opportunities, promote mechanisms for enhanced (meaningful) participation
To what issues should SC speak?

1. **Social bases of collective action**
   - Beyond interests, incentives, ‘values’, group size...
   - ... to *mechanisms* that enable/constrain capacity to work together
     * Who or what determines ‘us’ / ‘them’ boundaries, and their sense of permeability?
   - Forging of ‘intersubjective meaning’ (Taylor), citizenship and pluralism (Kymlicka)
2. **Management of risks, shocks, opportunities**
   - Key to sustained growth (Rodrik 1999)
   - Both development success and failure alters how groups interact, who has more/less power
     - Huge potential for conflict
   - Important role for ‘leadership’
To what issues should SC speak?

3. **Legitimacy of change process**
   - Whether driven by endogenous or exogenous factors
   - *Indigenous debate* (‘good struggles’) central to shaping the content and legitimacy of institutions for engaging social/political change
   - Externally introduced institutions (‘best practices’) often fail on this score (Scott 1998)
   - Means don’t justify the ends
     - Unity via suppression/repression of dissent is not unity
To what issues should SC speak?

4. Taking context seriously
   - Beyond “One size doesn’t fit all”, etc to...
   - History
     • Hugely important in shaping the narrative of who ‘we’ are, what we stand for, how ‘they’ have treated us, etc
     • ‘Legal pluralism’, ‘Rule of law’
       – To what extent has an overarching set of rules emerged?
       – What is the ultimate source of authority?
   - Anthropology
     • Esp. micro political economy
     • Much of which is statistically ‘unobservable’
       – So adequate knowledge may take years to acquire
       – Policy responses may take decades to bear fruit
To what issues should SC speak?

5. **Inequality and its discontents**
   - Increasing evidence of its pernicious effects
     - World Development Report 2006
     - Wilkinson on health; Milanovic on growth, etc
   - Perceived and actual injustice, unfairness
     - Expanding experimental evidence
     - Salience of difference (Hoff et al on cognitive tests)
Virtues, limits of ‘measurement’

• More, better data, yes. Identification, of course.
• But...
  – Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted (Einstein)
  – It’s better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong (Einstein)
  – If you ever could figure everything out, if you could have a social science that really is a science, then we would be the first ones to be disappointed. We would be dismayed because if man becomes like that, he could be figured out. And that means that he is not worth as much as we think... Were we ever to succeed, then mankind would have failed! (Hirschman)
Going forward

• Learning from the rise, fall (?) of other social ‘somethings’
  – Need coherent story, theory, evidence, practice (STEP)
  – Don’t carry a bigger burden than you can bear
  – Keep the ‘social’ in social science
  – Most social concepts are “essentially contested” (Gallie 1956)

• Help solve problems, don’t sell ‘solutions’
  – Social cohesion often needed to determine
    • what the key (‘binding constraint’) problems actually are
    • what responses are politically supportable
    • what responses should be prioritized
    • how ‘losers’ will be compensated (if at all)
Selected references

