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What Holds Asian Societies Together?

Social cohesion has become a key policy goal around the globe – not only in the Western Hemisphere, but also in Asia. Despite growing interest in the concept among policy makers and researchers, no generally shared understanding of social cohesion exists. Most importantly, empirical data are lacking. For these reasons, we developed the Social Cohesion Radar, whose findings for the societies of South, Southeast, and East Asia have been collected in a new study.



Dr. Peter Walkenhorst

Asia's economic and political rise is one of the most significant developments of the present age. This world region has become the driver of the global economy. Many Asian economies are expanding rapidly and growing ever more complex. At the same time, however, social problems are also increasing in the region. Virtually all Asian societies find themselves in a state of upheaval, and are being drastically altered by profound transformation processes. In many places, social inequality has become more prevalent. As a result, tensions and conflicts are now present in numerous Asian nations, threatening social cohesion and political stability.

Against this backdrop, the new study of the Social Cohesion Radar series presents, for the first time, scientifically sound and comparable empirical data for 22 countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia (SSEA) for the years 2004 to 2015. To that end, a team of scientific experts headed by Prof. Dr. Klaus Boehnke (Jacobs University Bremen) and Prof. Dr. Jan Delhey (Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg) developed a theoretically and empirically robust index allowing social cohesion to be measured in as many SSEA nations as possible. The index shows the degree of cohesion in each country, depicts the development over time and presents each nation's cohesion-related strengths and weaknesses. Social cohesion's determinants and outcomes are also analyzed.

Key factors for social cohesion

Overall, the findings show that social cohesion in SSEA is most pronounced in the most economically advanced countries of the region. This means that economic development, prosperity, human development (especially education and life expectancy) and gender equality are key factors promoting social cohesion. At the same time, however, several less developed countries exist which also exhibit a high level of togetherness. Extreme poverty has the strongest negative impact, followed by discrimination against women. Cultural diversity – meaning linguistic, ethnic, or religious diversity – on the other hand shows no clear discernible effect on social cohesion. Only a very high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity seems to reduce social cohesion.

In the overall index of all countries surveyed over the entire study period, Hong Kong and Singapore take the lead, followed by Thailand and Bhutan. A moderate level of cohesion was found in most of the countries in Southeast Asia, while the South Asian countries evince the lowest levels. Moreover, several clusters of countries were identified on the basis of the countries' similarities on social cohesion. They, too, are described in detail in the study.

Overall Index of social cohesion for 22 countries in South, Southeast and East Asia.

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Among the positive outcomes of social cohesion in SSEA is that it contributes to promoting economic productivity and reducing unemployment. At the same time, the results of the social cohesion radar for Asia also point to the possible Janus-faced nature of cohesion: Depending on the political framework, it can serve as the glue that holds a society together, allowing for economic progress and enabling "benevolent" political leaders to embrace inclusive development policies, but it can also serve as the foundation of authoritarian regimes.

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The Social Cohesion Radar

The Social Cohesion Radar

With the Social Cohesion Radar (SCR) we offer an empirical, international comparison of social cohesion in various countries worldwide. The SCR is based on a broad set of indicators drawn from comparative international surveys and other data sources. The current study includes 22 countries from South, Southeast, and East Asia (SSEA) with data for the years 2004 to 2015. The SCR breaks down the concept of social cohesion into three domains— social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good. Each of these domains comprises three measurable dimensions: social networks, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perception of fairness, solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation. For more information see: www.social-cohesion.net.

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