



Trying Times – Rethinking Social Cohesion 2019:

Challenges and Recommendations for a Social Cohesion of the Future

Living Document

Rethinking Social Cohesion Together

The Trying Times conference 2019 was designed to explore ways of fostering social cohesion in societies facing profound transformation through the dynamics of the three megatrends of globalization, digitalization and demographic change. We brought together 80 international leaders from the fields of civil society, public administration, business, science, media and the arts to discuss how we can take the challenges of the present and transform them into the opportunities of the future. We targeted this goal from a global perspective, because in a world as interconnected as ours, the question of social cohesion in our societies can be answered only through international exchange.

The conference addressed the future of social cohesion through the prism of a variety of themes that we have clustered into eight topics for this summary. The challenges and recommendations associated with each theme and discussed by participants at the conference are outlined below. This document is a “living document”, that is, a work in progress that will evolve with time and further input. Our hope is that by sharing what we have learned from each other, we will spark ideas for concrete action to be taken in different societies.

This living document is intended to serve as a stimulus for our further discussion. If you have any thoughts or comments on the challenges or recommendations below, please let us know by writing an email to tryingtimes@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Understanding Change as an Opportunity for Social Progress

In today’s world, we connect in seconds with people on all continents by a simple mouse click. Algorithms can detect diseases long before doctors can diagnose them.

And the diversity of cultures and religions in our society has become the norm. Over the past ten years, the world has undergone unprecedented change.

The change we're experiencing is being driven to a large extent by the three megatrends of globalization, digitalization and demographic change. In many areas, these trends are having a profound impact on our lives today – how we work, how we think, how we feel and how we interact with each other. This has not left the social fabric of our societies unaffected. How will we live together in the future? Taking a proactive approach to shaping social cohesion is a particularly important task in these challenging times. With our international conference “Trying Times – Rethinking Social Cohesion” in September 2019 in Berlin we have taken a first step in tackling this task.

As has always been the case throughout the human history, today's time of change is, for many, marked by uncertainty. Will the world continue to change at this rapid pace? What changes remain ahead of us? And how, in concrete terms, will these changes affect the life of the individual and the coexistence of the many? Many people live in fear of an uncertain future.

Understandably, concerns and fears play an important role in the public debates on globalization, digitalization and demographic development. “The rich vs. the poor,” “fake news,” “aging societies” and “alienation” are just a few of the buzzwords that fuel a vague sense of threat. The mass media often act as “noise amplifiers”: By echoing and repeating these catchphrases, media outlets help turn anxieties or justified caution into excessive fear.

These fears must be taken seriously. As a society, we must walk the path of change together. We believe that the trends of globalization, digitalization and demographic change not only pose dangers and challenges, but they also bear potential – the potential to make this world, our societies and our lives better, and to strengthen social cohesion. The opportunity for social progress always lies in change.

Whether the megatrends of globalization, digitalization and demographic change will affect our societies in more positive or negative ways is largely up to us. In order to tap the profound potential within these trends, we must understand the challenges of the future and target them with our actions – today. We must shape our future. We must ensure that the megatrends of globalization, digitalization and demographic change strengthen, not weaken, cohesion in our societies.



Challenges and Recommendations

Politics and Public Debate

Challenges

- I. There is often a disconnect between policy-making and public debate.
- II. Digitalization changes the form of political discussions.
- III. Education does not sufficiently equip young people with the skills they need to engage in the political sphere.

Recommendations

- I. We need to “go local”: We must address community needs while educating people on how to get involved and initiate change at the local level. This can lead to policy-making processes at regional, national and international levels that integrate public concerns and needs more adequately.
- II. Facilitating face-to-face discussions is key: While we need to cope with new forms of public debate in the digital sphere, facilitating face-to-face interaction is crucial in order to create trust among people with different opinions and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- III. We need to make political engagement an integral part of education: This can be done, for example, by creating learning environments such as democracy cafés or building networks between young people and local politicians.

The Global Economy

Challenges

- I. The global economy is increasingly being reshaped and determined by digitalization and technology.
- II. Access to the internet remains limited in certain parts of the world, which puts people at risk of being left behind digitally as well as economically.
- III. Tech that is used globally is predominantly designed by white men from the Global North. Thus, the global tech economy promotes a male and Global North-oriented norm that neglects other perspectives.

Recommendations

- I. We need to work on values and a normative framework for the regulation of tech use.
- II. Governments have a role in providing digital inclusion and accessibility.
- III. We need initiatives that increase the number of women and people from the Global South in the tech industry.

Algorithms

Challenges

- I. There is a lack of transparency on how codes work and which goals their producers aim for.
- II. A large portion of the population in many countries is uneducated about algorithms. For example, 50 % of Germans do not know what an algorithm is.
- III. Politics is unprepared vis-a-vis the impact of coding on society. Politicians, who are often less aware of the opportunities offered by algorithms, often focus much more on the risks they pose to society.

Recommendations

- I. We need initiatives that render transparent how codes function and make underlying interests and objectives more transparent.
- II. Fostering digital literacy and skills are crucial to preserving our individual autonomy and capacity to design algorithms that benefit humankind.
- III. We must raise awareness of algorithms' potential in connecting people and thus fostering personal interaction and social cohesion.

Social Networks

Challenges

- I. While digital social networks significantly influence relationships in today's world, not everyone has equal access to them.
- II. Social bonds are under threat by the erosion of trust caused by fake news and hate speech in social media.
- III. Political communities and public opinion are strongly affected by the discourse in social networks.

Recommendations

- I. We need to work towards establishing equal opportunities for participation in social networks.
- II. We need to develop effective measures to counter fake news and hate speech.
- III. We need to find ways to contain the harmful effects of social networks on political communities without, however, curtailing their potential for political empowerment.

Diversity in Local Communities

Challenges

- I. Cultural diversity is a permanent feature of our communities.
- II. Diversity raises questions of belonging for both newcomers and established citizens.
- III. Integration of newcomers will remain a long-term task for communities.

Recommendations

- I. We need to promote acceptance of diversity as a normal feature of everyday life in the community.
- II. Communities need to cultivate a local identity that allows newcomers and established citizens alike to feel connected to the community. This includes a shared understanding of basic rules.
- III. To cope with the task of integration in the long term successfully and sustainably, local governments need to work closely together with civil society, reach out to minority communities, and foster linkages between minority groups and the larger community.

The World of Work

Challenges

- I. Artificial intelligence (AI) will transform the world of work profoundly in ways that are not yet fully foreseen and understood.
- II. The digitalization of the working world and the progress of AI bear the risk of creating a new class of precariously employed workers. Some 47 % of young people from the G20 states fear that they will have no access to permanent jobs as a consequence of AI.
- III. The rapid and complex changes in the world of work in the course of digitalization can cause alienation, overload and exhaustion.

Recommendations

- I. More research and knowledge are needed on future developments of AI as well as their social and ethical implications.
- II. We need to strive for a future world of work in which the progress of digitalization and AI does not come at the expense of basic social standards. This should be an important focus with new jobs emerging in tech.
- III. It will be important to provide regular training for employees to cope with the complex and rapidly evolving working world of the future. “Agility” is a key concept here.

Demographic Change and Loneliness

Challenges

- I. Decreasing family size and increasing geographic mobility means less carers for each older person in many industrialized countries with increasingly aging populations.
- II. Loneliness is a growing problem. In the United States, 22 million of 50 million elderly adults suffer from loneliness. Loneliness is also epidemic among young people but is rarely taken seriously as an issue. These developments are already affecting the health system today and likely to have a growing negative impact.
- III. While existing care services focus primarily on the elderly's bodily health, there are insufficient services catering to the need for meaning, recognition and a sense of purpose in life.

Recommendations

- I. While technological innovation will never be able to replace human contact, we should nonetheless explore the opportunities provided by "silver tech" in making life easier or more joyful for the elderly.
- II. Loneliness needs to be recognized as an important public health issue that is also harmful to social cohesion. It needs to be given high priority on the political agenda.
- III. We need to support new services that do not address old people as passive receivers of care but which seek to create a social network for people of different ages who actively share their skills and capacities for the benefit of all.

Global Solidarity

Challenges

- I. Historically, solidarity was mainly defined in terms of religious faith or citizenship. An understanding of universal solidarity on a global scale remains a future challenge.
- II. The welfare state, which is the classical institutional form of solidarity, is challenged by the realities in a globalized, transnational world.
- III. The concept of solidarity is in danger of being hijacked by the rising political Right in many countries.

Recommendations

- I. While both citizenship and religion will remain important parameters for solidarity, we will increasingly have to shape additional understandings of solidarity on a global scale. Climate change could become a driver for developing such new understandings of global solidarity.
- II. We need to adapt our institutions to accommodate the growing diversity of transnational affiliations and interconnections of the populace.
- III. We need to work on a convincing and powerful redefinition of solidarity in (social) democratic terms.

What Do We Need for Social Cohesion in the Future, in One Word?

