

Social Cohesion in the United Kingdom: A Case Report

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Abstract: Social cohesion is defined in, and adapted to, social policymaking in numerous ways. This paper attempts to clarify the definition with regard to the policymaking decisions of the U.K. government. In doing so, it brings to light the efforts of the 1998 Social Exclusion Unit government program that focused on recognizing how poverty grows in individual neighbourhoods, pointing out why neighbourhoods decline and how this could be prevented. The second phase of the program was to establish Policy Action Teams to fast-track policy thinking—including areas such as arts and sports—on the most serious issues within these neighbourhoods. From the Teams' reports, an interdisciplinary approach to social cohesion policymaking evolved. The paper also cites an attempt to benchmark the social impacts of the arts.

Résumé: On peut définir la cohésion sociale et la relier à la formulation de politiques sociales de plusieurs façons. Cet article tente de clarifier la définition en décrivant les décisions politiques du gouvernement britannique. L'article examine donc les efforts d'un programme gouvernemental de 1998 appelé « Social Exclusion Unit » (Unité d'exclusion sociale). Ce programme cherchait à apprendre comment et pourquoi la pauvreté augmentait dans certains quartiers et comment prévenir le déclin de ces quartiers. La deuxième partie du programme consistait à établir des « Policy Action Teams » (Équipes d'action politique)—y compris des domaines comme les arts et les sports—pouvant accélérer la formulation de politiques adressant les problèmes les plus sérieux dans ces quartiers. Une approche interdisciplinaire pour traiter de la cohésion sociale a évolué à partir de rapports rédigés par ces équipes. L'article se rapporte aussi à un effort de souligner l'impact social des arts.

The results from CIRCLE's pre-conference survey of European countries¹ reveal—as one might expect—a considerable variety of interpretations of the term *social cohesion*. Indeed, the United Kingdom is not immune to employing the term in different and sometimes vague ways. A possible reason in the U.K. is that *social cohesion* is regarded more as a desirable long-term aspiration, but policy efforts are principally directed to understanding and attempting to address the causes that result in its opposites: social exclusion or social division. That may be

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why there appears to be greater clarity in recognizing and defining social exclusion than social cohesion.

Even where the notion appears to be firmly rooted, definitions are vigorously contested. One of the obvious dangers is the more it is used, the more it degenerates into one of those multi-purpose expressions that enter the political lexicon at all levels of governance. In common with terms such as *civil society*, perhaps we should accept that social cohesion is an evolving set of ideas.

It would make fascinating research to examine how language—especially that which is in vogue or politically expedient—is interwoven with and influences policy development. In the United Kingdom at least, fashionable terms or expressions build up their own momentum as a result of their usage. *Social cohesion* is becoming just such a fashionable term.

In her paper, Jane Jenson refers to the impacts of social cohesion as being inter-sectoral: this is something which is profoundly important in the context of the U.K. When the New Labour administration assumed control of the national government in 1997, it brought with it a social agenda that was significantly different than the previous government. The Blair government has actually sought to employ cultural pluralism as part of its strategies to address fundamental problems in society caused by social exclusion, and to contribute to the government's other priorities in the fields of employment, education, health, and crime prevention. Key to this have been more integrated approaches to achieve policy objectives—a commitment to what we call in the U.K. “joined-up” government (i.e., a cross-sectoral and cross-departmental approach to the delivery of solutions). Thus the Government established a Social Exclusion Unit and an Active Community Unit to co-ordinate the work of government departments and to link different areas of government responsibility.

In 1998 the Social Exclusion Unit set out a powerful analysis of public policies and emphasized that the worst affected neighbourhood areas suffered from multi-faceted problems that would require action on all fronts, both within and outside the public sector. Over the past 20 years, poverty in the U.K. has become more concentrated in individual neighbourhoods than before, and the social exclusion of these neighbourhoods has become more marked. It is evident that people from ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected. Ethnic minorities comprise around 6% of the U.K. population, but over half live in 29 local authorities which rank among the most deprived areas of the country. In 1998, 13% of working age people from ethnic minorities were unemployed compared with less than 6% of other people; and 15% of ethnic minority households lived in overcrowded conditions compared with 2% of other households. More than 80% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi households have incomes that are less than half the national average, compared to 28% of white households.

The government acknowledges that the state's response hitherto has often been ineffective. Too much reliance has been put on small-scale, short-term regeneration programs in only a few areas. Nothing has been done to remedy the chronic failure of mainstream policies in thousands of neighbourhoods.

Underlying these policy failures has been a lack of awareness of why neighbourhoods decline and how this decline could be arrested. Deprivation was too often regarded as essentially a housing problem that could be ameliorated by investment in new buildings. This overlooked a number of significant dimensions:

1. The economic ghettoization of some neighbourhoods;
2. The need to help unemployed people help themselves;
3. The erosion of social capital—the contact, trust, and solidarity that enables residents to help rather than fear each other;
4. The failure of core public services in deprived areas; and
5. The lack of clear strategies or concentrated joint action at neighbourhood, local, regional, and national levels to ensure that services work together to fulfil common goals.

Because deprivation is deeply rooted, the government gave the Social Exclusion Unit responsibility to develop a framework for producing integrated and sustainable solutions for the worst affected areas. In late 1998 the Social Exclusion Unit established 18 Policy Action Teams to fast-track policy thinking on some of the most intractable problems, such as unemployment, the lack of skills, neighbourhood management, anti-social behaviour, community self-help, schooling, and better information. Policy thinking in these areas was intended to complement other government policies, as well as other initiatives, such as the experimental Health Action Zones, and regeneration programs, such as the New Deal for Communities. The goal was to develop a long term National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, and the consultation report on this was issued in April 2000 by the Social Exclusion Unit.

One of the Policy Action Teams was asked to consider how to maximize the impact on poor neighbourhoods of government spending and policies on arts and sports. The aim was to draw up an action plan with targets that would promote neighbourhood regeneration and increased local participation. Its report, published in 1999, claims that the arts and sports can address not only the symptoms of social exclusion, but also its causes. Arts and sports activities, it says, can make a significant difference to health, education, jobs, and crime levels—the four key indicators of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Citing a number of case studies and best practices, the report appears to have found ample evidence that the arts can:

- Develop the individual's potential and self-confidence;
- Relate to community identity and stimulate collective effort;
- Help build positive links with the community; and
- They are connected with rapidly growing (cultural) industries.

The Policy Action Team's report also identifies a number of principles that, it says, help to unlock the potential of the arts and sports to build social cohesion. These are:

- Valuing diversity—recognizing it as a strength and rich source of ideas and practice;
- Embedding local control—developing locally led models as these are likely to have a deeper impact on the community, even when such control is exercised in partnership with funding agencies, local authorities, and others;
- Supporting local commitment—acknowledging that the most effective initiatives are those where local enthusiasm and voluntary commitment can be matched by support, whether financial or in kind, by local government and partners in the voluntary, cultural, educational, and business sectors;
- Promoting equitable partnerships—ensuring each partner has an equal stake in the decision-making and outcome of a project;
- Defining common objectives in relation to actual need—bringing together all the stakeholders and seeking to avoid misunderstanding or manipulation;
- Working flexibly with change—recognizing that policy must adapt in response to social change;
- Securing sustainability—developing programs that will ensure longer-term commitment and financing by government at all levels, rather than the current emphasis on one-off project funding;
- Raising quality—ensuring community development work is not lower in quality in ways that are condescending to those in neighbourhoods; and
- Connecting with the mainstream—ensuring that arts and sports community development initiatives are not isolated from the rest of policy on the social inclusion agenda nor from arts and sports developments generally.

What is most striking about the interdisciplinary approach adopted by the U.K. government is that the conclusions of the report are intended to feed into the work of other government departments. So it recommended the Department of Education and Employment (as it was then known) to encourage schools to use creative activities to support the drive to raise standards of literacy and numeracy. The same Department was expected to work with the department responsible for social security to ensure the benefits system did not penalize volunteers involved with community-building activities. The Home Office was expected to further incorporate arts and sports projects into programs to rehabilitate offenders of crime. The Department of Culture, Media and Sports was urged to tighten social inclusion objectives and targets in the funding agreements it has with the cultural funding agencies, while the Arts Council of England was requested to recognize

explicitly that sustaining cultural diversity and using the arts to combat social exclusion can promote community development.

In the autumn of 2001 the new Minister for the Arts, Baroness Blackstone, indicated that a top priority for her ministry in the re-elected Labour Administration would be to encourage community arts projects with young people, elderly people, and those institutionalized in care or custody. Opportunity, access, social inclusion, and participation would remain the foundations on which much of the government's policy would develop.

Of course, social cohesion is dependent on establishing where the boundaries lie between members of the community and those on the periphery or outside. Culture has a role to play in breaking down these barriers and fostering civil bonds. It allows people to retain contact with their roots, enhancing feelings of community and self-esteem. At the same time, by a process of self-invention, the arts can create fruitful fusions of old and new cultures. Cultural practices can also help to build inclusive and participatory societies that are contingent not only on economics and social policy, but a sense of belonging.

The Council of Europe project "Education for Democratic Citizenship" has carried out some interesting work on participatory democracy and measures to combat exclusion in an area it calls "sites of citizenship." The concept has been devised to find new or innovative forms of management of democratic life. A "site of citizenship" could be an institution, neighbourhood, town, city, or, indeed, any space utilized to implement principles of modern participatory democracy. Should we be surprised that culture and the arts feature less as models than might have been expected? Perhaps not! Policymakers may perceive instances where culture is contributing to fostering social cohesion. However, with little systematic analysis of the impacts of culture on civil society processes, perhaps we are in danger of speculating on the real importance of the relationships between culture and social cohesion. Can we begin to develop benchmarks that will enable us to express the value of cultural processes in moulding civil society values in a tangible way? Indicators may be fashionable, but they remain difficult to apply in the domain of culture and social cohesion and, in the U.K. at least, there is not a great deal of precedent to guide us.

A few initiatives in the U.K. have attempted to come to grips with the challenge of developing indicators that could be used to address the impact of the arts in community development. For example, in his 1997 report, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, François Matarasso has sought to demonstrate that the arts and culture can have wide-ranging social impacts and, though complex, they can be planned for, both in their own right and as a contribution to areas of social policy. In particular, the report suggests that the arts contribute to empowerment and social cohesion. It claims that the cultural process helps to build self-confidence, enabling individuals to take more control of their lives. It strengthens individual and collective capacity, and can help re-connect people with the political processes that shape their lives. The importance of participation in the arts, according to Matarasso, "is not just that it gives people the

personal and practical skills to help themselves and become involved in society . . . but that it opens routes into the wider democratic process and encourages people to *want* to take part. Participation is habit-forming” (p. 82).

Matarasso’s report produced about 50 social outcomes of participatory arts projects. For example, it suggests that the arts can:

- Reduce isolation by helping people to make friendships;
- Develop community networks and sociability;
- Promote tolerance and contribute to conflict resolution;
- Provide a forum for intercultural understanding;
- Promote intercultural contact and co-operation;
- Develop inter-generational contacts;
- Provide a route to integration. (pp. 27-37)

Admittedly, there are researchers who remain sceptical about how such impacts can be objectively measured. Nevertheless, these indicators provide a start on which cultural researchers can build. It will be interesting to see the outcomes of work being undertaken by the Arts Council of England and regional councils (formerly the Regional Arts Boards), who are testing different research models for work on social inclusion. This includes the development of an evaluation guide which can be used by arts organizations involved in social inclusion-related initiatives.²

Notes

1. In preparation for the round table, CIRCLE surveyed members representing 14 different European countries on the prevailing definitions, policies, and other activities related to social cohesion in each country. The results of this survey were published as “Country Reports” in the Conference Reader, which is available for free from the CIRCLE Web site: URL: <http://www.boekman.nl/circle>. Appendix B in this volume outlines the contents of the Conference Reader.
2. The Arts Council of England social inclusion research program runs until December 2002. It is to include an independent evaluation of social inclusion initiatives.

Reference

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