



Working Group on Social Cohesion

Stockholm, 5th - 7th of November 2019

1. Introduction

Under the banner of 'A World of Neighbors', the Church of Sweden is seeking to strengthen and envision the work of religious communities – as receiving communities – with refugees and migrants, and to enhance the interreligious infrastructure of Europe in service to the journeys and aspirations of 'people on the move'. As a result of over 150 site visits this past year to receiving communities, their affiliated humanitarian organizations, and partners in the broader civil society in nine countries, a variety of critical challenges and promising opportunities have emerged. Drawing on what has been learned, seven working groups will be convened during the years 2019-2020 to strategize about how to enhance and further this crucial work, on topics such as: strengthening receiving communities, refugee and migrant policy, the role of youth, the role of practitioners, social cohesion, media and narratives, and a vision for Europe.

Reflections and recommendations from these working groups will form the basis for a European strategy to be drafted at a pre-summit early 2020. This strategy will then be presented to a wider European audience of political religious leaders at a summit, called by the Archbishop Antje Jackélen in February of 2021, associated with receiving communities somewhere in Europe. The Church of Sweden is committed to cultivating the evolving network of communities and practitioners growing out of the initiative process, and supporting the efforts and partnerships associated with the strategy emerging out of the 2021 summit.

The working group in Stockholm convened between the 5th and the 7th of November 2019 focused on social cohesion and its role in tackling the crises. These three days of intense work focused around the following questions:

- **What is social cohesion?** - What are the characteristics of a socially cohesive society? What are the conditions that foster it? What are the obstacles that hinder it? How can we assess its presence - or lack thereof - in ways that invite engagement and development?
- **Who is responsible for fostering social cohesion?** - What role do faith-based actors play in the work of welcoming and accompanying 'people on the move', and modeling *convivenz* (living together)? How can we widen the circle of collaboration with other actors? In what arenas and on what issues? Why is their collaboration crucial? What can they learn and draw on from each other?
- **What are effective strategies for fostering social cohesion?** - What concrete steps have been taken in fostering social cohesion? What activities have been used promoted to 'humanize the other' and positively influence the ethos and institutions of a community? How can we equip religious and civil society leaders, grassroots receiving communities and practitioners, to be active agents of social cohesion with crucial actors.

The following report gathers the most important inputs provided by the participants who had different types of expertise in media and communication work. The participants considered what types of problems negative narratives bring with themselves, how to counter them, how to build constructive narratives in their place, and how to come up with efficient communication strategies.

2. Social cohesion – what is it?

Social Cohesion is a term that started to gain traction in the 1990s, as a result of the move from monocultures to rapidly pluralizing societies. While difficult to define, it can be immediately acknowledged when seen. At the beginning of the working group, the following working definition was adapted as the entry point:

The capacity of a community to draw on the assets of all sectors of society - government, business, education, media, the arts, organizations of civil society,

and especially religious and spiritual communities - for its collective well-being, combining realism, openness and creativity in order to create a reservoir of trust, good will and resilience, so as to meet the practical challenges of living together with mutual respect and shared responsibility.

Trust is foundational for interpersonal relations. It allows communities to go beyond their internal power structures and differences in the process of working for common good. Trust provides means of cooperation even where there are disagreements.

Trust is known as the Nordic Gold – it allows societies to operate more efficiently and save on security costs.

Karolis Zibas

Good will is needed for fruitful interactions. The working group discussed the problematic nature of national languages – where there is good will, people always find means to communicate. But language can sometimes become means of separation. This is the case, for example, in those nations that historically used language as an identity keeping tool. For Central European countries language was a way to keep national and cultural heritage alive even in times of mass emigration and lack of statehood. While a source of resilience in the past, language evolved into a tool of separating “the people” from “the others.”

Social exclusion is simply inefficient – it leaves people at 40% of their productivity.

Aida Moayedzadeh

Artificially imposed language barriers may also affect other elements of social cohesion. They can lower levels of trust and increase social exclusion. If, for example, lower level jobs have

a national language requirement, when the higher-level positions lack that, the honest intentions of the job adverts are doubtful.

As the participants noted, social cohesion is a balancing act between the two opposite approaches – either forced integration/assimilation strategies which sacrifice differences for unification, or the policy of separation/multiculturalism, which is disinterested in interactions between different groups as long as they satisfy the basic minimum of civil obedience.

Social cohesion requires respect for diversity that is combined with inclusive engagement between individuals. At the same time, it needs a degree of celebration for shared values and commonalities. If the right balance is struck, the

If we focus too much on celebrating diversity, without recognizing shared values and commonalities, we risk creating ghettoization.

Abdurahman Sayed -
Bohashem

interactions should happen not on the level of “minorities and majority”, but simply between equal individuals.

Doikayt – a sense of here-ness, in which we all do better, when we all do better.

Zachary Gallant

3. Actors of social cohesion

A significant point in the discussions concerned the question: Who is responsible for social cohesion? As the participants pointed out, social cohesion requires work at all levels of society. It requires an effort both from the grassroots initiatives as from the central governments and church hierarchy. In most situations it requires a collaboration between different levels; on other occasions it might call for one level to stand up to the other.

The work on social cohesion begins in one’s own communities, local and religious. It begins with individuals trying to raise levels of trust, good will and resilience. Common causes may offer a possibility of working between individuals and different communities. Alliances may be built on different lines: between the urban and the rural; between different faiths; between religious communities, academy, business and civil society.

If you are not at the table, you are probably on the menu.

Rebecca Lillian

While change in terms of social cohesion usually comes from below, central authorities can provide support and confirmation, and encourage solidarity. For example, for many believers, the statement from the central church authority may counter their initial gut feeling and invite them to engage in issues that they would be otherwise reluctant about. For others, an encouragement from the prime minister, e.g. about welcoming culture, might be an incentive to engage in helping people on the move. Identifying people with a clear vision is also important, as they can be the catalysts of change.

To support newcomers in the process of settling in, it might be helpful not only to provide them with access not only to administrative help, but also connect them with people who lived through a similar experience of migration. For those with traumas it might offer a relief from the sense of isolation, for others provide a beacon of hope that the integration process can be successful. When many people arrive at a new place at the same time, people with migration experience may also act as mediators between the old

and the new members of the community, easing up the transition into a new cohesive neighbourhood.

4. Unique role of faith-based organizations

The working group discussed also the specific role that faith-based organizations (FBOs) can play in the process of social cohesion. The participants noted that FBOs can speak in the religious language, which is a unique asset in work with believers. Because of that, FBOs can help solve issues that contain religious elements. As participants pointed out, religion is rarely at the core of conflicts, but it might make them much more difficult to solve. In such situations, religious language becomes extremely important, and an ability to engage with religious symbolic - quite crucial.

FBOs combine pan-national structures and availability, extra-national lines of loyalty, and local logistics assets which can allow them to link multiple levels while staying non-partisan, at least to a certain extent. They are able to support individuals and organizations by connecting them with their broad social networks. They have also an easy access to a broad range of volunteers in varied localities.

FBOs can also provide ritual services alongside the accompaniment process. They can provide existential health and comfort, being second to emergency services in times of crisis. They can build trust and interreligious solidarity – instead of being bystanders, they can be upstanders. In all that, they can compliment public sector, engaging with their faith communities, providing source of authority, and getting the message quickly out.

USEFUL TERMS RELATED TO SOCIAL COHESION

Hospitality	Consistency
Encounter	Patience and endurance
Religious language	Impact
Unity in diversity / unity without uniformity / harmony	Pride and joy of showing change
Obligations	Trust & vulnerability

5. Obstacles to social cohesion and how to move beyond them

After considering the questions of what and who, the working group moved to the question of how – How to foster social cohesion? The discussion of that point began with the main obstacles to social cohesion, and the alternative approaches to them.

The participants pointed out that there are inherent risks that power can create. Power may turn things abstract – in such situations, power-structures become imbricated, and are no longer considered at the concrete levels of individuals. They become unconscious, and thereby no longer resisted on a significant scale. Power may also create “the weaker part”, imposing labels and binaries that split society into groups, such as “second-generation”, migrant vs expat, guest and host, black and white. An alternative approach on the part of leaders could be to focus on promoting all-embracing ideas and inclusion, providing unconditional support. Everyone can also contribute by implementing empowering strategies, e.g. using the minority character as a strength and finding power within.

Race is the child of racism, not the father.

Helene Egnell

In terms of narratives, there are three main obstacles. The first one relates to the monopolization of media – there are whole media groups that are either privately owned or introduced by the public governments in a manipulative manner. In that way, a small group of people controls most of the narrative streams and can create divisions where there should be none. Second, the political left is divided in a way that puts minority rights in opposition to other questions, e.g. socioeconomic. This creates stumbling blocks, before the advocacy process can even begin. Third, there is a deficit of trust in the public sector which makes it impossible to create a proper common space. There is no single actor with a mandate to put all groups at the table. At the local level, an alternative approach may include creation of local open spaces that cannot be claimed by anyone. At the regional level, we could fundraise journalists to present a wide range of narratives and offer critiques of the dominant ones. At the central level, there is a need to reform educational programs which should include not only national, but also global perspective.

Identity can be an incredible source of resilience. Strong sense of shared identity can be an asset in community building and roots in a religious tradition can help in recognising others as neighbours despite their differences. However, as exemplified by the above discussion of language, it can create obstacles to social cohesion as well. The question is how identity is presented, and how it is perceived. Identity is always contextual, and its perception reliant on good will. It has collective elements and it is deeply personal. There are open and hidden aspects of identity; there are those that we are blind to, and those that remain at the unconscious level. Contemporary individualism may be a result of lack of trust and the fear of being judged. It is easier to simply put up the façade, than to show vulnerability and open oneself to the others. Thus, there is a radical need of conversion – of societal structures, communities and individuals – a turn to mutuality. There is a need to be transformed from hosts and guests to neighbours. There is also a need to strengthen the knowledge of the other, e.g. via increased religious literacy.

We need to foster spaces of calmness.

Benjamin Ulbricht

Contemporary collective identity is often based, among others, in nationalism. Nationalism can be comprehended in a number of ways, not necessarily bad. The way to define a nation may be both inclusive and exclusive. However, with its long history, nationalism is charged with xenophobic and populist connotations, and thereby can be easily hijacked. By employing the discourses of othering, in its extremes, it can also dehumanise people. Thus, there is a need to actively maintain inclusivity of the notion of a nation. Nationalism must be presented as a part of a bigger picture – a nation can be viewed as a community that is a small part of the world that can, however, make a difference. Moreover, there is a need to keep things concrete – people should always be recognised as concrete individuals. And while an idea of a nation is one of the principal organisational forms of the modern world, maybe social cohesion could be strengthened by looking for other forms of communal identity – for example, maybe the form of free cities could be a template for future consideration.

6. How to work with social cohesion initiatives

As the participants of the working group noted, social cohesion will be a necessary factor in the process of tackling major global challenges to come - global migration and climate change. Only social cohesion can create human solidarity, that will be at the core of solving them. Thus, there is a need to actively create and maintain specific initiatives to foster social cohesion. A fair share of the discussions concerned strategies and factors in creating successful projects

Failing fast is about making more adaptations to strengthen resilience.

Kaia D. Schultz Rønsdal

To test ideas, projects should be allowed to fail fast – there should be an ability to try out things without the social stigma of failing. Such failing should also be allowed by the funding organizations, and there should be support for those who are willing to generate ideas and take the risk of implementing them.

Initiatives need to be grounded in the local context and the local needs, but they should aim at securing the support of the higher levels. At the outset, it might be important to recognise what is negotiable, and what is not. It might be useful to set specific universal principles and rules of conduct. Initiatives need to include the social and ideological aspects in their work. Projects need to have more than one leader, grounded in the different stakeholder groups. They should gather people around particular, real, and shared needs, providing them with other reasons to stay at the table even when there are difficult differences between them. Power inequalities should be carefully guided to relations of solidarity, rather than domination.

Work for social cohesion needs to be inclusive. Thus, two principles were proposed: (1) there needs to be a mutual commitment to listen to each other; (2) diversity is always an asset, even when it hurts. A set of questions should be considered in the process of outreach to different parts of society: Who are “we”? What is belonging? What does it take to engage with this work? Who is doing the inviting? Who is the host and who is the guest?

The ways to fund social cohesion initiatives may also create problems. External funding can have strings attached, and often comes with significant constraints in terms of possibilities, assets and time. The complete lack of funding may result in burnout and considerably diminishes long-term

sustainability. At the same time, if there are internal/communal sources of income, it might increase credibility of the project, and provide a source of resilience for the community engaged in it.

Five Steps of Hacking Change Management

1. Find the pain
2. Define a vision
3. Connect the pain to the vision
4. Define the mission
5. Create process and make choices