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DIALOGUE FOR SOCIAL COHESION

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION BRIEFS SERIES

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SHORT SUMMARY

Peace Begins with Dialogue!

In an era where geopolitical power struggles disrupt traditional peacebuilding, where identity and misinformation fuel divisions, and where trust in institutions is eroding, UNESCO's *Intercultural Dialogue for Conflict Transformation* briefs series presents an adaptable, culturally grounded, and people-centred approach to peacebuilding.

With 89% of conflicts worldwide occurring in countries with limited capacity for intercultural dialogue, this four-part series draws on firsthand experience, country case studies, and expert analysis to demonstrate the transformative potential of dialogue in fragile and conflict-sensitive settings.

The *Dialogue for Social Cohesion* brief—developed in collaboration with the Berghof Foundation and Search for Common Ground—bridges theory and practice to explore the horizontal (community-to-community) and vertical (citizen-to-state) dimensions of social cohesion and highlights how inclusive dialogue can support both. Case studies from Afghanistan, Germany, Somalia, and South Sudan illustrate how dialogue—whether through theatre, education, local governance, or environmental peacebuilding—can cultivate mutual understanding and trust, bridge identity-based divides, and restore, step by step, the social fabric in fractured societies.

Through actionable recommendations, this brief equips practitioners, policymakers, and civil society with the essential guidance needed to tailor and embed dialogue in their respective contexts, helping to ensure that peace processes are inclusive, locally driven, and enduring.

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"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

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DIALOGUE FOR SOCIAL COHESION

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE FOR
CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION BRIEFS SERIES

Foreword

The erosion of social cohesion isn't just a distant policy issue—it's a reality shaping everyday lives. Across the world, the fabric of community life is straining under the weight of economic hardship, political polarization, divisive rhetoric, and the enduring scars of violent conflict, impunity and injustice. These challenges create ripples of isolation and mistrust, magnified by the relentless pace of change—be it through migration, technology, or shifting cultural norms.

With 281 million people living outside their country of birth in 2020, our increasingly diverse societies face the critical task of building unity amid difference. While diversity brings immense opportunities, it also demands deliberate and thoughtful approaches to cultivating belonging, strengthening community ties, and resolving conflicts peacefully. In a world that is at once more interconnected and more divided, the imperative to learn how to live together stands as one of the defining imperatives of our time—and will likely remain so for generations to come.

Against this backdrop, the release of the *Dialogue for Social Cohesion* brief is both timely and essential. This brief offers actionable insights and practical recommendations into how intercultural dialogue—an approach championed by UNESCO—serves as a powerful catalyst for healing, understanding, and trust building, even in the most fragile and divided contexts. The brief showcases powerful examples of intercultural dialogue in action. In South Sudan, theatre and storytelling are helping communities heal and imagine new narratives of hope. In Germany, peace education empowers young people to navigate diversity with empathy and skill. In Afghanistan, scenario-based dialogues led by civil society actors foster collaboration over access to essential services. Meanwhile, in Somalia, environmental peacebuilding promotes inclusive dialogue and local reconciliation. By creating inclusive and safe spaces for dialogue—rooted in daily realities and practices—and by thoughtfully building skills and competencies, these initiatives show that communities can work together to address their immediate needs and long-term aspirations.

Social cohesion is not a static achievement; it is a dynamic, ongoing process that must be nurtured, adapted, and reimagined to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world. This brief provides a roadmap for practitioners and policy makers alike seeking to leverage intercultural dialogue to strengthen social and institutional trust and nurture social bonds. It reminds us that every conversation, every moment of genuine listening, and every effort to understand another's perspective is an opportunity to weave trust and understanding back into the fabric of our societies. I hope this brief, along with its inspiring case studies supports bold, meaningful, and creative action in our collective endeavour to build peaceful and cohesive societies.

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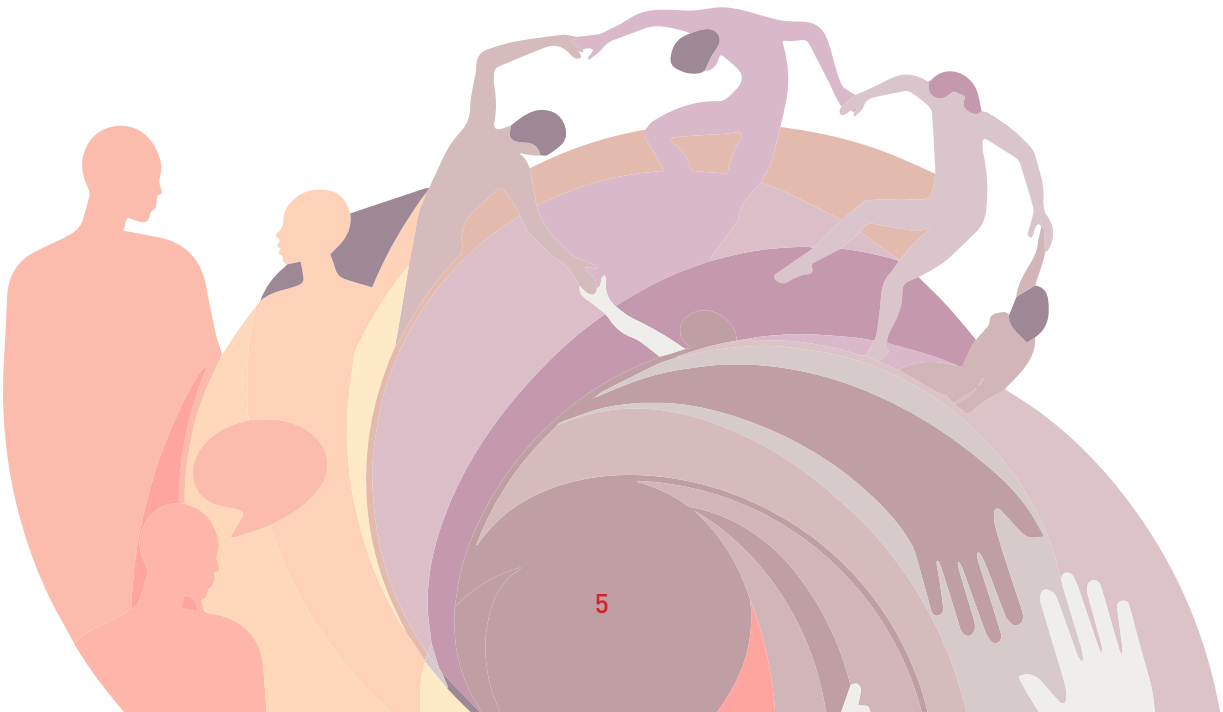


Table of Contents

Summary 1

Foreword 4

Acknowledgements 5

I. Introduction 8
II. Social Cohesion and Conflict Transformation 10
III. Towards Social Cohesion 11
IV. Social Cohesion and Intercultural Dialogue 16
V. Case Studies 24
VI. Conclusion 34
VII. Recommendations 35

Bibliography 38

I. Introduction

Our world is caught between conflicting realities, drawn towards increased diversity, interconnectedness and proximity but also splintered by deepening distrust and division. As we navigate present and future challenges, the case for strengthening social cohesion, which commonly refers to the 'glue' that holds society together, has never been more apparent. UNESCO, in its *Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue*, defines social cohesion as "the process of building trust between communities which in turn supports collective action and cooperation, among diverse groups and individuals, in pursuit of shared objectives" (Foa, 2011; Mansouri and Elias, 2021).

Since the early 2000s, scholars and practitioners have grown increasingly aware of the reciprocal relationship between social cohesion and violent conflict (Rebosio et al., 2013; Fiedler and Rohles, 2021). On one hand, societies with low or declining levels of collective social cohesion are particularly susceptible to violence and conflict, as weakened social bonds create fertile ground for instability. Such societies often exhibit heightened inequity, polarization, marginalization, and institutional fragility, all of which undermine the fabric of societal life (Cox et al., 2023). In these environments, individuals may feel disconnected from other social groups and alienated from decision-making processes (Browne, 2013). This erosion of shared values and diminished sense of belonging further weakens social bonds and deepens societal divisions. Receding unity, particularly in contexts where state or elite actions deliberately discriminate or mobilize identities for political gain, undermines collective support for public policies designed to promote the common good (Browne, 2013). As civic engagement declines and inequities grow, the foundation for institutional growth and legitimacy weakens, leaving disempowered and marginalised groups frustrated and resentful. In such a context, extra-legal mechanisms such as violence emerge as a viable mean to resolve disputes, seek justice and protection, or effect meaningful change.

> "Societies with low or declining levels of collective social cohesion are particularly vulnerable to violence and conflict, as weakened social bonds create fertile ground for instability.

Contemporary societies exemplify these dynamics. Across various parts of the world, perceived political and cultural differences have increasingly become polarized, instrumentalized and exacerbated. In fact, every region in the world except Oceania[1] has seen polarization levels rise since 2005 (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022). The entrenchment of identity-based divisions, compounded by efforts from dominant actors to enforce prevailing norms or beliefs, marginalizes minority groups and stifles diverse perspectives (Barbera, 2020). While diversity is a critical driver of cultural enrichment and economic innovation, it is perceived by some as a threat to idealized, more homogenous visions of the past. These beliefs manifest in waves of nationalist and populist backlash, rising anti-migrant sentiments, discriminatory rhetoric and exclusionary policies (Rodrik, 2021) (UNDP, 2020). In fact,

[1] The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset categorizes regions of the world into the following: Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Oceania.

the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights repeatedly sounds the alarm over the rise of racism and xenophobia, noting that culture itself is being instrumentalized to divide societies and communities globally (UN, 2023). Digital and media platforms exacerbate these divisions by reinforcing information silos and facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation (UN, 2023). According to the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, minorities represent 70% or more of those targeted by hate crimes and hate speech online (OHCHR, 2021).

The cumulative impact of these trends has contributed to the steady erosion of social trust between communities and a noticeable decline in public confidence in traditional institutions and political systems, significantly weakening prospects for democratic governance (UN, 2022). Alarmingly, 2023 saw the lowest global score on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index since its inception in 2006, reflecting a marked deterioration in democratic standards worldwide (EIU, 2023).

> "Societies engulfed in violent conflict cannot be cohesive.

While societies with low levels of collective social cohesion are inherently more fragile and susceptible to violence and conflict, societies engulfed in violent conflict, on the other hand, cannot be cohesive (Cox, et al., 2023). Instead, violent conflicts, and the erosion of social cohesion that follows in their wake sharpens divisions between identity groups and deepens distrust in state institutions. As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres stated, "longstanding grievances, inequalities, mistrust, and social divisions do not simply vanish when the fighting stops." (UN, 2021). Civil wars and political violence—whether on a local or national scale—intensify societal fears, reinforcing the tendency for informal organizations, civic groups, and political parties to form along identity lines (Fiedler and Rohles, 2021). This often results in greater physical separation of groups and the establishment of parallel social and political institutions, whereby individuals and communities seek safety and mitigate fear through intra-group bonding and inter-group differentiation. Left unaddressed, pervasive fear and distrust, undermines development and hinders peace prospects long after the direct violence has ceased (Cox and Sisk, 2017).

Contemporary conflicts provide clear evidence of how violence undermines social cohesion and exacerbate identity-based divisions. In Somalia, decades of violent conflict since the 1990s have unfolded along clan lines, with clan identities being manipulated to consolidate power, further entrenching inter-clan rivalries, and deepening mistrust (World Bank, 2009; Mudane, 2018). In Myanmar, the military's violent campaigns against the Rohingya, framed as counterinsurgency operations, have exacerbated the fragile relationship between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority. What began as localized attacks has spiralled into a full-fledged ethnic conflict, leaving entire communities displaced and deepening the animosity between groups (UN, 2024). In South Sudan, the 2013 civil war fragmented the country along ethnic lines, with tribal allegiances forming the basis of parallel systems of governance, exacerbating long-standing intercommunal distrust and hindering national unity efforts (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2013). These cases demonstrate how conflict sharpens identity-based divisions, embeds systemic mistrust, and creates obstacles to social unity and cohesion.

II. Social Cohesion and Conflict Transformation

In light of the above, scaling up collective social cohesion serves as a critical entry point and an overarching goal of conflict transformation. Conflict transformation is a comprehensive approach aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict by reshaping the disrupted relationships, structures, and narratives that sustain it (Kriesberg, 2011). This approach acknowledges that conflicts are often deeply embedded in societal structures, relationships and narratives, necessitating a transformation of not only the visible dimensions of conflict but also the underlying systems, beliefs, discourses and perceptions that sustain it. Specifically, conflict transformation underscores the importance of addressing pervasive social fear and distrust by restoring patterns of individual and collective behaviours conducive to collaboration, engagement and exchange. To further this goal, development strategies in conflict-sensitive countries have increasingly prioritized strengthening the relationship between the state and society (Cox et al., 2023). This approach recognises that fostering social cohesion and reinforcing the social contract are fundamental to achieving sustainable peace, state-building, and socioeconomic development. (Cox and Sisk, 2017). Moreover, it sought to address concerns that earlier peacebuilding efforts lacked sustainability due to their limited understanding of local social dynamics. A recurring issue was that, in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict, humanitarian and development assistance was often channelled through existing local structures, such as ethnic or faith-based civil society groups, to meet urgent needs (Cox and Sisk, 2017). The reliance on such informal institutions and networks, often essential in providing security and support during and in the immediate aftermath of conflict, stems from the weakening of state institutions, and the breakdown or, in extreme cases, the disappearance of civil society organizations that cut across identity lines. As a result, external interventions in post-conflict settings have often unintentionally reinforced ethnic or faith-based service delivery systems and as a result inadvertently weakened collective social cohesion in the long term (Cox and Sisk, 2017; Mousseau, 2021).

> **“ Conflict transformation** is a comprehensive approach aimed at addressing the root causes of conflict by reshaping the disrupted relationships, structures, and narratives that sustain it.

The initial section of this brief has underscored the reciprocal relationship between social cohesion and conflict. Low levels of collective social cohesion heighten the risk of conflict, while the outbreak of violence further fractures the social fabric necessary to sustain cohesion. Consequently, in post-conflict settings, addressing identity-based divisions and intergroup competition by investing in bridging social capital offers a more intercultural and relational approach approach to peacebuilding (Nesterova and Kim, 2024). Likewise, in stable yet fragile settings characterized by marginalization, polarization and asymmetric power dynamics, investing in intergroup trust and inclusive governance structures serves as a form of pre-emptive peacebuilding (Cox and Sisk, 2017). In both contexts, promoting social cohesion that extends across society rather than remaining confined within individual social groups, is key to resolving conflict and fostering institutional and societal resilience.

III. Towards Social Cohesion

Origins of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is a dynamic, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept rooted in economics, sociology, anthropology and political science literature. Early references to cohesion date back to 1377 by the father of sociology, Ibn Khaldun. In his writings, Ibn Khaldun formulated the concept of 'asabiyah' or social solidarity to explain group feeling, which leads to cohesion. In more modern times, political scientists and economics, including Hobbes, Smith and Tönnies, have engaged with social cohesion and related concepts (Moustakas, 2023). Arguably, the most prominent and influential modernist work comes from Emile Durkheim's conceptualizations of social solidarity in the late 19th century. Durkheim argued that maintaining social order rests on one of two forms of solidarity. One is through the mechanical solidarity inherent to traditional and small-scale societies, whereby social cohesion stems from homogeneity as individuals share similar work, personal, educational, and religious backgrounds. The other is via organic solidarity, also known as the collective consciousness, which emerged in capitalist societies and comes from the inherent interdependence of individuals as a result of the division of labour (Moustakas, 2023).

In the post-Washington Consensus era, which began in the early 2000s and signalled a shift from market-centric development policies to more inclusive, socially oriented approaches, development goals have broadened, prompting a renewed emphasis on social policies across diverse contexts (Alfredo, 2011). As a result, social cohesion emerged as a focal point for academics and policymakers, increasingly seen as a crucial element in crafting public policies aimed at addressing deep-rooted issues of social exclusion, distrust, and marginalization (Cox & Sisk, 2017). The concept of social cohesion has been defined in various ways across institutions. The Council of Europe understands it as "the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members — minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization — to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members" (Council of Europe, 2010). Similarly, the OECD characterizes a cohesive society as one that "works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility" (OECD, 2011).

Governments in countries such as Australia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have also developed policy frameworks and initiatives centred on social cohesion (Dobbernack, 2014). UNESCO, in its *Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue*, defines social cohesion as "the process of building trust between communities which in turn supports collective action and cooperation, among diverse groups and individuals, in pursuit of shared objectives" (UNESCO, IEP, 2022).

The concept of social cohesion has undergone significant evolution, shifting from an early focus on group dynamics to a more nuanced understanding that emphasizes individual perspectives, trust, and shared values as drivers of unity in contemporary society (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2018). This progression — from Ibn Khaldun's idea of group solidarity to Durkheim's notion of

collective consciousness — reflects the growing complexity of modern societies shaped by industrialization, globalization, and population movement. The increasing focus on the individual underscores the contemporary recognition of personal beliefs and aspirations as essential components in building trust and fostering social unity (Sahharon, Bolong, & Omar, 2023). Today, social cohesion embodies the investment individuals make in their social contracts: their sense of agency within society, their willingness to engage across diverse groups on pressing issues, and their capacity to participate in shaping collective decisions (Search for Common Ground, 2021).

Measuring Social Cohesion

Despite the strong interest in the topic, a major constraint to understanding social cohesion's patterns, causes and effects is how to appropriately capture and quantify it. Studying the fabric that holds societies together is inherently complex and multifaceted, especially when patterns of cohesion vary widely across different regions of the world (UNDP, 2020). Given that social cohesion is an intangible concept, it is not directly observable and therefore it must be measured through frameworks comprising multiple dimensions (UNECE, 2023). Existing data on social, cultural, political and economic conditions can be combined with analyses of public conversations, or narratives, to examine the nature and dynamics of social cohesion. A straightforward yet potentially useful categorization employs a two-by-two matrix, which classifies dimensions along horizontal (society-centred) and vertical (state-centred) levels of analysis, each further divided into subjective and objective components. This simple framework underscores the importance of integrating the study of various dimensions of social cohesion across multiple levels of analysis. An example of such methods is Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index, an assessment tool designed to measure various components of social cohesion, resilience capacities, and vulnerability factors worldwide. The index boasts over 200 measurement metrics, assessing a wide range of dimensions, from trust in institutions and human security to ethnic group identification and civic engagement. The SCORE index is adapted and tailored to each context and therefore only covers a limited number of countries.

In UNESCO's *Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue*, the Intergroup Cohesion Index is employed to measure the social cohesion domain. Intergroup cohesion refers to the relationships of cooperation and respect between identity groups within a society (International Institute for Social Studies, 2020). This index includes indicators such as the rating of differences of opinion on major political issues, the level of internal conflict, and the Global Peace Index, amongst others.

The challenge of measuring social cohesion lies in its context-specific nature, necessitating adaptive methodologies that can capture the unique dynamics and context of each country. Nevertheless, these methods are valuable for tracking social changes over time, establishing baselines for cohesion, and identifying trends toward either increased polarization or greater unity.

> “Cohesive societies demonstrate stronger citizenship norms, more responsive and institutionalized governance, and a deeper commitment to democracy and public participation.

In contrast to polarized and fragmented societies, cohesive societies demonstrate stronger citizenship norms, more responsive and institutionalized governance, and a deeper commitment to democracy and public participation (Search for Common Ground, 2021). These societies are better equipped to pursue inclusive development by reducing economic disparities and social inequalities that frequently contribute to unrest (UN, 2020). Moreover, cohesive societies exhibit greater resilience to external shocks, as social solidarity fosters mutual support and trust during crises, enhancing a society’s capacity to manage and mitigate risks effectively. Fundamentally, a cohesive society is one where citizens have confidence in others and in public institutions (OECD, 2019).

It is crucial to recognize that this cohesive energy cannot emerge in isolation. Social fear and distrust, often rooted in experiences of violence, tend to linger over time. When the underlying causes of these fears are not adequately addressed, and when individuals perceive that the state is failing to respond to their needs, fear deepens, and social divisions widen. Persistent mistrust— driven by a lack of human security or the absence of inclusive and responsive state institutions— create significant barriers to the development of social cohesion. For a cohesive social fabric to emerge, it must be nurtured and supported by a combination of structural, economic, political, and sociocultural advancements and safeguards, guided both at the individual and institutional level (UNESCO, IEP, 2022). To gain a deeper understanding of how social cohesion is built, it is essential to first comprehend how it operates. Social cohesion encompasses two key dimensions —horizontal and vertical—and is characterized by both objective (behavioural) and subjective (attitudinal) elements (UNDP, 2020).

Key Dimensions of Social Cohesion

Horizontal social cohesion refers to the trust and relationships among individuals from diverse identities and social groups affiliations. It encompasses the extent to which social organizations, civil society, and various groups cultivate values of inclusion and respect for diversity, foster mutual interdependence, and promote a shared sense of purpose. This dimension incorporates several forms of social capital: bonding, which involves trust within groups that share similar characteristics; bridging, which concerns relationships across different groups; and linking, which refers to cooperation between institutions and leadership (Van der Noll, Schiefer, 2016). Importantly, horizontal social cohesion rests on social trust. Social trust is defined as the ability to trust individuals outside one’s immediate, familiar, or kinship circles. Often referred to as “bridging trust,” it serves as the connective tissue that links individuals across diverse societal divides, including socio-economic classes, ethnicity, religion, and gender. This form of trust emphasizes interpersonal relationships and networks across group boundaries.

Vertical social cohesion concerns the quality of the relationship between the state and its citizens. It reflects the degree of trust citizens place in their governments—whether at the national, subnational, or local levels—and the perceived effectiveness of government processes, such as elections, access to justice, and the provision of public services. A high level of vertical social cohesion is evident when the state delivers services efficiently, facilitates inclusive political participation, and enacts policies that support public trust and legitimacy. This form of cohesion is strengthened by a robust civic identity, which is grounded in adherence to constitutional values, respect for the rule of law, and a collective sense of national belonging (Van der Noll and Schiefer, 2016). Importantly, vertical social cohesion rests on institutional trust. Institutional trust pertains to the confidence placed in the formal, legal organizations of government and state, distinct from trust in the specific individuals currently occupying these roles. Institutional trust highlights the relationship between citizens and the structures of authority that govern them.

While social and institutional trust are conceptually distinct (Putnam, 2001: 137), various scholars have developed theoretical models addressing their interelation (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Nannestad, 2008; Putnam et al., 1994; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008; Zucker, 1986). According to sociologist Lynne Zucker, there are three modes of trust production. First is "processed based trust" which is tied to past or expected exchanges between specific actors whether through direct experience or reputation. The second mode, "characteristic-based trust," arises from social similarities, shared characteristics, and common identities between individuals. The third, "institutional-based trust," is grounded in shared expectations shaped by formal social structures. Zucker further argues that these three modes of trust—relationships, identities, and institutions— are somewhat interchangeable, meaning that a strong presence in one mode can reduce the reliance on others (Zucker, 1986; Packer and Ungson, 2024).

Nannestad futher argues that inclusive and responsive institutions play a crucial role in reducing the risks associated with trusting others by establishing clear rules, laws, and trust-promoting norms of fairness and impartiality (Nannestad, 2008). This is particularly significant in diverse, heterogeneous societies, where populations are too large for individuals to form personal connections with everyone, and where national identity often intersects with other forms of solidarity. In such contexts, effective institutions serve as vital mechanisms for fostering trust across group boundaries. By creating environments that encourage interaction and cooperation among different social groups, strong, inclusive institutions enable individuals to build connections beyond their immediate communities, reducing reliance on parochial networks and pre-existing group allegiances (Packer and Ungson, 2024). Notably, institutional trust and social trust are not merely interchangeable but mutually reinforcing, the strength of one form of trust can actively contribute to the development and sustainability of the other.

TABLE 1 / Vertical and Horizontal Social Cohesion: Dimensions and Elements (UNDP, 2020)

	Objective Components [2]	Subjective Components [3]
Vertical Dimension	- Personal and family safety and security - Legitimate and capable government with a transparent, accountable public administration - Responsive governance institutions that deliver services fairly across social groups - Functioning rule of law with legal frameworks that articulate the rights of minorities and marginalized groups - Inclusive institutions mandated to monitor and enforce norms of inclusivity and rejection of discrimination, exclusion, scapegoating or xenophobia - Civic space for formal engagement, political change, interaction, voicing concerns and demanding accountability in society	- Perceived access to justice - Voice and participation - Citizens acknowledge legitimacy of existing formal and informal structures and institutions through their trust in actors and institutions
Horizontal Dimension	- Inclusive societies: social, economic and cultural (e.g. language) participation - Cross-cutting social networks and relationships - Inter-community ethnic, sectarian, religious, and ethnic group relationships in society: social norms and practices of diversity and inclusivity - Rituals, memorials or cultural icons devoted to inclusivity and multiculturalism	- Inclusive visions of the nation and community, shared norms, values, acceptance and tolerance - Trust in and acceptance of the 'other,' perceptions of belonging - Attitudes: recognition, tolerance and affirmation of minorities and communities, social distance - Symbolic communication: common narratives in culture, music, art and sports that reinforce a sense of commonality and inclusive solidarity

[2] Objective elements are reflected in tangible actions of cooperation and participation, ranging from interpersonal interactions, and economic activities in the marketplace to engagement in organizational, political, and associational life. Networks play a crucial role in shaping these objective aspects (UNDP, 2020).

[3] Subjective elements, centre on the values, attitudes, and beliefs that social actors develop toward the state and other social groups within it. This focus on individual capacities examines how values, norms, and beliefs are formed and influence behaviour (UNDP, 2020).

IV. Social Cohesion and Intercultural Dialogue

Interculturalism

In societies undergoing profound social transformation — whether driven by conflict or increasing diversity — strengthening social bonds is crucial to preventing divisions from emerging or deepening along identity lines. In this context, social cohesion emerges as a cornerstone of sustainable nation-building. Achieving this necessitates an inclusive approach that not only mends societal fractures but also effectively manages diversity and embraces differences. Within this discourse, two prominent approaches have sparked considerable academic and philosophical debate. The first, multiculturalism, advocates for the recognition and accommodation of cultural rights, equality, and justice for all social groups, promoting a pro-diversity framework that seeks to ensure equitable participation in society (Levrau, 2018; Modood, 2014).

The second – and more recent approach – is interculturalism, a contact-based approach to diversity management that emphasizes intergroup interaction, exchange and dialogue (Zapata- Barrero, 2015). Similar to multiculturalism, interculturalism prioritizes the inclusion of diverse groups, viewing them as a collective resource that benefits society as a whole. However, a common critique of multiculturalism is its focus on passive coexistence and its potential to contribute to societal fragmentation, with communities becoming more inward-looking and disconnected from the broader political community. Interculturalism seeks to address this shortcoming by promoting reciprocity, active engagement, meaningful dialogue, and the cultivation of interpersonal relationships between individuals from different backgrounds.

Interculturalism, described by Zapata-Barrero as a "post-multicultural period," calls for the reimagining of a new civic culture grounded in a "culture of diversity" (Zapata-Barrero, 2015, 2017). This approach views diversity itself as a culture to be promoted, shaping knowledge and reducing prejudice, and as a tool to counteract xenophobic discourse (Zapata-Barrero, 2011, 2014). The distinguishing feature of the intercultural approach lies in its relational emphasis on social contact—a concept rooted in social psychology—which highlights the role of interpersonal and intergroup relations in shaping societal dynamics (Donati, 2009; Levrau and Loobuyck 2013; Ngada and Zúñiga 2003).

> "Interculturalism does not seek to homogenize or immediately resolve differences, but rather to create a space where they can be discussed, understood, and integrated into a more cohesive social fabric.

Central to this perspective is Intergroup Contact Theory, developed by social psychologist Gordon Allport in the 1950s. The theory posits that positive engagement between members of different groups can reduce prejudice, cultivate more favourable attitudes, and foster greater tolerance (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2005; Bouchard and Taylor 2008; Zapata-Barrero, 2016). At the heart of this approach is a deliberative process that respects and negotiates cultural differences, rather than seeking cultural conformity or consensus.

In this context, interculturalism does not seek to homogenize or immediately resolve differences, but rather to create a space where they can be discussed, understood, and integrated into a more cohesive social fabric (Ganesh and Holmes, 2011). It is worth noting that in the context of this brief, diversity extends beyond cultural and ethnic distinctions, encompassing the varied life experiences shaped by gender, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic class, political affiliation, disability, and age. In highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in an increasingly multi-lingual and multi-cultural world, culture is understood as the diverse and overlapping identities that people assume in different settings. UNESCO defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO, 2002).

Intercultural Dialogue

> **"Intercultural dialogue is a process undertaken to realize transformative communication that requires space or opportunities for engagement and a diverse group of participants committed to values such as mutual respect, empathy and a willingness to consider different perspectives.**

While interculturalism is an approach aimed at fostering cross cultural contact, intercultural dialogue is "a process undertaken to realize transformative communication that requires space or opportunities for engagement and a diverse group of participants committed to values such as mutual respect, empathy and a willingness to consider different perspectives" (UNESCO, IEP, 2022). Intercultural dialogue, referred to 'an instrumental part of interculturalism' (Cantle, 2015: 84), seeks to foster deeper understanding, respect and acceptance of different perspectives and practices through meaningful dialogue. At the individual level, intercultural dialogue emphasizes behavioural transformation and cultural attitudinal change that seeks to challenge existing hierarchical relations between groups and build integrative affinities within diverse societies (Cantle, 2015; Bouchard and Taylor, 2008; Barrett, 2013). The Centre for Social Relations (2013) outlines nine principles allowing intercultural dialogue to be effective: it needs to (i) be underpinned by human rights, promoting equality, (ii) go beyond the superficial level, as one one-off events do not tend to create lasting behavioural changes, (iii) be a targeted well planned and outcome-focused dialogue, (iv) be an interactive communication process, enabling empowerment or the development of self-confidence in individuals and a sense of collective responsibility, (v) be based on social action or geared towards tackling division allowing for greater participation and ownership of outcomes (instead of being a dialogue for the sake of dialogue), (vi) be a learning experience for those participating, especially where there has been non-dialogue and engagement is within a context of hostility, division and difference, (vii) not be a one-size-fits-all approach (delivery of ICD should be based on local priorities, have relevance to the region), (viii) take into account that good practice in one place may not be transferable to another but may inspire other areas to adapt practice to fit their context, (ix) recognize the wider benefits of intercultural dialogue to individuals, groups, communities and society as a whole (Centre for Social Relations, 2013) (Ratzmann, 2019). In alignment with these principles, intercultural dialogue can be fostered both by creating a supportive environment for its emergence and strengthening the capacity for its practice.

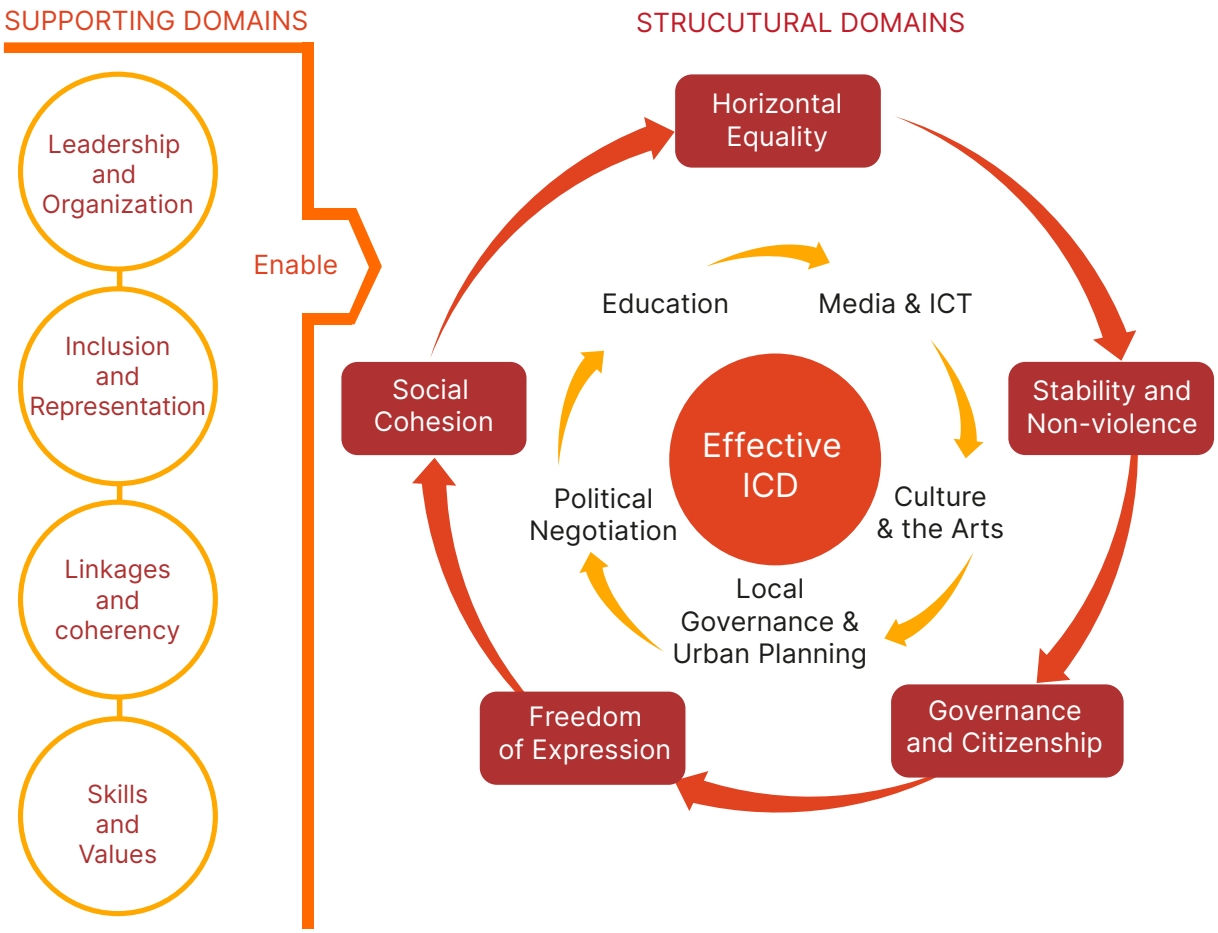
Enabling Intercultural Dialogue

Fostering open, empathic and meaningful dialogue requires first and foremost the creation of an environment that enables and encourages dialogue across society. In a context where 89% of ongoing conflicts occur in countries lacking capacity for intercultural dialogue, this process is key for transforming and preventing conflicts, maintaining peaceful societies, and upholding human rights (UNESCO, IEP, 2022). In the *Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue*, UNESCO outlines the conditions necessary to nurture this dialogue, offering an integrated approach to assessing the strength of the structures, processes, values, and skills that sustain dialogue as a continuous process of interaction and reinforcement. The Framework is built on two interconnected levels essential for effective intercultural dialogue:

Structural domains operate on the macro-level and encompass policies and legal frameworks that shape societal systems. These include: Freedom of Expression; Governance and Citizenship; Horizontal Equality; Social Cohesion; Stability and Non-Violence.

Supporting domains operate on the micro-level and represent the principles, values and competencies that impact actions, policies and activities and shape individual engagement. These include: Inclusion and Representation; Leadership and Organization; Linkages and Coherency; Skills and Values.

FIGURE 1 Architecture for the UNESCO Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue



Drawing on data from 160 countries, the Framework reveals compelling positive correlations across its various domains, underscoring their interconnectedness. The findings highlight the Framework's systemic nature, indicating that higher performance in one domain is typically associated with higher performance in others (UNESCO, IEP, 2022). When multiple domains show strong outcomes, they collectively contribute to significant achievements such as effective diversity management, proactive conflict prevention, and the promotion of sustainable peace.

Notably, evidence from the country database indicates that the Social Cohesion domain consistently performs the strongest across all regions, with robust correlations to outcomes like conflict prevention and reduced societal fragility (UNESCO, IEP, 2022). This suggests that fostering collaboration and resilience within society not only reinforces social cohesion but also serves as a catalyst for strengthening other domains (UNESCO, IEP, 2022).

Enhancing the structural and supportive capacities for intercultural dialogue, therefore, serves a dual purpose: it fortifies social cohesion, creating fertile ground for transformative dialogue and meaningful engagement. In turn, intercultural dialogue reinforces the bonds that uphold social cohesion, paving the way for peaceful coexistence and a resilient social fabric.

Practicing Intercultural Dialogue

Alongside efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for intercultural dialogue, it is equally important to reinforce the practice of dialogue itself. Dialogue becomes critical in contexts undergoing significant social transformation, such as societies emerging from violent conflict, or societies characterised by high levels of heterogeneity. In these settings, meaningful engagement and exchange between various social groups or between society and the state are often limited, or insufficient. The lack of dialogue can emerge for instance between migrants and host communities, politically polarized segments of society, younger and older generations, rural and urban populations, people across various gender identities and sexual orientations, as well as minority and marginalized groups.

Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions

In line with the vertical and horizontal dimensions of social cohesion, intercultural dialogue similarly operates along two axes:

Horizontal intercultural dialogue occurs in the formal and informal everyday interactions between members of society. It is instrumental in building social capital and trust, reducing prejudice, and cultivating a shared sense of community. Scholars argue that these grassroots exchanges are vital for dismantling stereotypes and promoting solidarity around inclusive social narratives that transcend identity-based differences (Zapata-Barrero, 2017; Cantle, 2012). This form of dialogue manifests in various forms, from everyday conversations and artistic expressions to interfaith and intergenerational dialogues, to local community initiatives.

Vertical intercultural dialogue refers to interactions between governing institutions and citizens. This type of dialogue is essential for shaping inclusive policies, governance structures that promote representation and equity across diverse social groups. Scholars have emphasized the role of policies grounded in interculturalism and minority rights in fostering institutional trust, as these policies assure individuals that their cultural identities and needs are acknowledged and respected by the state. (Vertovec, 2023; Modood and Mansouri, 2020). Notable examples of vertical intercultural dialogue

include cultural advisory boards, civic participation programs, multicultural education curricula, and state-sponsored consultations with cultural groups.

> **“ Without strong vertical frameworks, horizontal efforts may lack the recognition and support necessary to effect lasting change.**

Crucially, vertical and horizontal intercultural dialogues are interdependent. Vertical structures lay the foundation for effective horizontal engagement by providing institutional support and legitimacy, while grassroots-level dialogues offer essential feedback to shape inclusive policies that reflect the lived experiences of diverse populations. Without strong vertical frameworks, horizontal efforts may lack the recognition and support necessary to effect lasting change. When institutions and communities work together through both forms of dialogue, they create a synergistic process that addresses representation and asymmetric power imbalances, enabling more inclusive and equal societies.

Actors

Intercultural dialogue, as both a process and a practice, engages all segments of society, with governments and civil society playing pivotal roles in providing support, resources, and spaces for such exchanges. Governments must collaborate across local, regional, national, and international levels, working in tandem with civil society to foster the policies and practical resources needed to support dialogue. Civil society on the other hand provides a platform for identity formation and renegotiation, often reaching parts of the community that government agencies cannot reach. Importantly, civil society organizations act as human rights watchdogs and are indicative of socially dynamic societies (Manonelles, 2012). Broader community actors—including religious organizations, community leaders, and families—are equally vital in cultivating the skills and environments conducive to intercultural dialogue. Engaging these groups through holistic, inclusive approaches fosters positive shifts in attitudes and perceptions.

Objectives

Intercultural dialogue can take various forms. A review of roughly 100 practices identified five main types of intercultural dialogue projects: (i) arts and culture, (ii) physical/sporting activities, (iii) physical and virtual exchange programmes, (iv) capacity and skills-building measures, (iv) empowerment initiatives, and (v) research (Ratzmann, 2019). Additionally intercultural dialogue practices can be characterized by their objectives, as outlined in the typology proposed by Kaur-Stubbs (2010). Importantly, many practices serve multiple objectives simultaneously:

- Outreach: Community arts, sports, and school-based programs aimed at engaging marginalized groups.
- Confidence-building: Empowerment initiatives designed for single-identity groups, often targeting minorities or marginalized communities.
- Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Efforts to address tensions between hostile or extremist groups.
- Inclusion: Cross-sectoral projects focused on improving access to education, employment, and public services.

- Respect and Understanding: Educational exchange programs, art exhibitions, and performances that introduce different aspects of less familiar cultures.
- Celebration: Events designed to showcase and embrace specific traditions and festivals.
- Civic Participation: Initiatives involving museums, performing arts, democratic and political structures, and public services that engage with and accommodate diversity.

Intercultural learning

> **“Intercultural dialogue allows participants to critically reflect on cultural frames and references, to examine and interpret information from multiple perspectives and angles, and to recognize biases in their own perceptions.**

By enabling both a supporting environment and the practical capacity for dialogue, societies broaden their individual and collective intercultural understanding. Intercultural learning through dialogue suggests that individuals, through communication, create meanings that did not exist prior to the interaction, moving beyond monologues rooted in singular identity narratives (UNESCO, 2013). Engaging in intercultural dialogue allows participants to critically reflect on cultural frames and references, examine information from multiple perspectives, and recognize biases in their own perceptions. This process underscores the active role individuals play in the attribution of meaning to the actions, thoughts, and ideas they encounter, to shape their understanding of the world around them.

“Identity, in relation to culture and the many other dimensions that identities have, is constantly ‘under construction’ – a lifelong process of role-taking and role-making that is mediated by extrinsic (societal, political) as well as intrinsic (psychological, emotional) aspects” (Ohana and Otten, 2012: 187). This reflects a shift from a static, essentialist view of culture to a dynamic, constructivist one. Intercultural learning deconstructs the notion of “having an identity,” framing identity instead as a “movable feast,” continuously formed and transformed by the cultural systems in which we are immersed (Hall, 1992: 277).

Engaging in dialogue not only broadens intercultural understanding but also develops intercultural competences. As Friedman and Berthoin Antal assert, “intercultural competence involves overcoming the constraints embedded in an individual’s culturally shaped repertoire, creating new responses, and thereby expanding the repertoire of potential interpretations and behaviours available in future intercultural interactions [… which] entails reframing intercultural situations as learning opportunities” (Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005). Intercultural competences encompass cultural awareness; critical thinking about difference; confidence around cultural references; cultural empathy; linguistic ability; good interpersonal skills; tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; ability of self-critical awareness; commitment to equality and human rights; willingness to learn, flexibility; strong sense of self, and conflict resolution skills (Anderson, 2010; UNESCO, 2021; Menon, 2001; The Centre for Social Relations; Razmann, 2005).

Social Transformation

Importantly, intercultural learning has the potential for social transformation by equipping individuals to move beyond simplistic cultural narratives toward the recognition of multiple identity affiliations. Intercultural dialogue helps reconstruct social identities in more inclusive ways by offering individuals the opportunity to feel simultaneous or successive affiliation with diverse values and cultural references, fostering a renegotiation of belonging. This cognitive process deepens the understanding of cultural nuance and internal heterogeneity, highlighting culture's fluid and multifaceted nature (UNESCO, 2013).

> **"Dialogue promotes perceptive taking whereby individuals are invited to challenge stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination towards outgroups.**

Beyond facilitating the understanding of how identities are shaped and adopted, dialogue promotes perceptive taking whereby individuals are invited to challenge stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination towards outgroups. Stereotypes are generalized, oversimplified or exaggerated beliefs about a person due to their affiliation to a certain group (Georgescu, et al., 2018). A stereotype is 'an image in our mind' born from the need to categories the social world into clear and simplified concepts. Yet this simplification for the world leads to a partial and inadequate understanding of it (Georgescu, et al., 2018). Prejudices, on the other hand, are negative attitudes of rejection towards individuals, based solely on their affiliation with a group or based on certain perceived characteristics.

Both stereotypes and prejudices, are mental shortcuts, filters, or mediators that lead to selective interpretation whereby based on an individual pre-definition about a group, individuals will unconsciously choose to see the aspects that confirm their stereotypes and prejudices. While stereotypes are cognitive structures and prejudices are attitudes rooted in judgments, discrimination is the unfair treatment of individuals within a group, driven by the prejudices held against that group (Georgescu, et al., 2018). Discrimination can manifest in various ways—directly, indirectly, or structurally. However, it often operates on multiple levels simultaneously, resulting in intersectional discrimination (Georgescu, et al., 2018). This type of discrimination arises when overlapping identities, such as race, gender, ability, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, social status, and sexual orientation, combine to produce unique and compounded disadvantages. When individuals experience multiple forms of bias—such as racism, sexism, or classism—these overlapping prejudices create compounded barriers that limit access to essential resources such as education, housing, employment, and healthcare. This cycle of exclusion reinforces social hierarchies, making it harder for marginalized individuals to overcome systemic obstacles and fully participate in society.

The impact of intersectional discrimination extends beyond those directly affected. When entire groups are excluded from opportunities and treated unfairly, it breeds resentment and distrust, and contributed to social marginalisation, segregation and fragmentation. By undermining equal opportunity and limiting society's collective potential, discrimination threatens not only individuals but the resilience and cohesion of society as a whole (Georgescu, et al., 2018).

> “Intercultural dialogue fosters the very bonds that sustain social cohesion, while cohesive societies, in turn, create the conditions for meaningful and transformative exchange.

Intercultural learning takes a clear stand against discrimination and other forms of intolerance and social injustice.

A key objective is to strengthen individual's ability to recognize stereotypes and understand the impact of prejudices on both their own lives and the lives of others. Dialogue fosters inclusive attitudes and behaviours, enabling individuals to better comprehend how they are shaped by their dominant culture, identify with diverse cultural characteristics, and create their own mosaic of identity. By participating in safe spaces for dialogue, individuals can collectively uncover shared values, beliefs, and goals (Razmann, 2005).

This section has illustrated the deeply symbiotic relationship between intercultural dialogue and social cohesion, with each acting as both a catalyst for and an outcome of the other. Intercultural dialogue nurtures the bonds that sustain social cohesion, while cohesive societies, in turn, create conditions for meaningful and transformative exchange. When intercultural dialogue is embedded within the social fabric — guided by norms of respect, empathy, and a commitment to continuous learning and competence building — it cultivates trust, emotional resonance, and cooperation, key elements of social capital that underpin resilient societies.

Social cohesion, fostered through continuous dialogue and flexible engagement with diversity, equips societies to navigate the complexities arising from shifting societal expectations and realities. This adaptability, achieved through sustained interaction and negotiation inherent in dialogue, enables societies to remain resilient in the face of challenges, shocks, and crises, and more resistant to political manipulation and exploitation along identity lines.

V. Case Studies

In observing social cohesion, it is essential to situate it within the distinct cultural, historical, and geographic contexts of individual societies. This section will explore social cohesion through a series of case studies from different countries namely, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Germany and Somalia. By doing so, it will provide readers with a more nuanced understanding of how social cohesion is defined, experienced, and strengthened through dialogue in diverse settings across the world. Importantly, efforts aimed at fostering social cohesion through intercultural dialogue must be attuned to each society's unique social structures, traditions, local histories and cultural norm, ensuring that strategies are not only effective but also respectful and context sensitive.

Case Study: Fostering Collaboration through Inclusive Dialogue in Afghanistan

Search for Common Ground (Search) is a peacebuilding organization founded in 1982, operating in 35 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. Since 2018, Search has been active in Afghanistan, working to foster social cohesion and promote resilience across the country. These efforts recently led to the creation of informal safe spaces for dialogue between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and civil society actors, addressing community needs while ensuring continued civil society participation in public life. In Afghanistan's complex political landscape, such engagement is essential for building trust and safeguarding critical services.

In August 2021, the Afghan Republic government collapsed, and the Taliban regained control, establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. A mass exodus of professionals followed, and many formal and informal civil society organizations ceased operations. Additionally, several key governmental institutions were dissolved, and laws and regulations were repealed. These disruptions, coupled with the departure of many civil society figures, severely impacted the prospects of social cohesion in the country. Search's initiatives address these challenges by empowering local leaders and civil society representatives to engage in dialogue, preserving a critical space for civil society's role in shaping Afghanistan's future. These dialogues focus on practical issues affecting communities, enabling participants to explore ways of maintaining access to essential services and fostering participation in local governance.

IMPACT

Search's initiatives in Afghanistan have strengthened both vertical and horizontal cohesion through dialogue-driven approaches. By equipping community leaders with essential engagement skills, fostering networks, offering psychosocial support, and providing funding, Search empowers leaders to deliver vital services to their communities. These efforts have promoted meaningful interaction between civil society and the de facto authorities while encouraging collaboration within communities historically divided by ethnicity, gender, and political affiliations.

Vertical cohesion has been reinforced by enhancing communication and trust between civil society, represented by community leaders, and the current government. For instance, leaders from sectors such as business, media, education, and health held constructive meetings with government bodies and international organizations. These engagements led to tangible outcomes, such as the renewal of journalists' licenses, reduced processing times for business licenses in Kabul and Herat, and increased access to national exhibitions. Additionally, safe spaces for dialogue between civil society and the de facto authorities enhanced personal agency, with the majority of participants reporting a greater sense of influence over decision-making processes. Notable outcomes included the reopening of educational institutions in Herat and improved working conditions for journalists in Badakhshan.

Horizontal cohesion was strengthened through community-led dialogues in six provinces, which brought together leaders from diverse backgrounds. These dialogues fostered collaboration and problem-solving across sectors, helping to dismantle barriers related to ethnicity, gender, and political affiliation. Cross-sector coalitions emerged to address shared challenges in business, media, and education. Psychosocial support workshops further reinforced community resilience, with participants reporting increased adaptability in the face of adversity.

Moreover, these initiatives empowered community leaders to advocate for their communities while establishing networks that bridged provincial and international divides. Engagement with diaspora communities enhanced horizontal cohesion by linking local efforts with global support, amplifying the impact of these dialogues.

CONCLUSION

Search's work in Afghanistan demonstrates the transformative power of dialogue in fostering resilience, building trust, and addressing conflict. Through scenario-based dialogues, Afghan communities and civil society leaders explored practical steps toward good governance and social cohesion, even in challenging circumstances. The resilience-building components empowered participants to continue advocating for change, helping them recognize their potential to shape their communities' future. These initiatives not only bridged divides between civil society and the Taliban government but also connected Afghan leaders with the global diaspora, creating pathways for long-term collaboration and support.

Case Study: Likikiri Collective – Rebuilding Social Cohesion through Storytelling in South Sudan

The Likikiri Collective, founded in 2016, is a multimedia arts and humanities organization based in Juba, South Sudan. The word "likikiri" means "stories" in the Bari language, reflecting the organization's commitment to storytelling as a tool for community building and education. Likikiri seeks to elevate the role of culture and imagination in nation-building, using creative projects to explore the life, realities, and concerns of South Sudanese people. Its mission is to foster intercultural dialogue, empower marginalized voices, and promote social cohesion and reconstruction in a country still grappling with the aftereffects of civil war.

©Likikiri Collective - Theatre Season: Planting Possibilities.

APPROACH

Likikiri Collective is driven by the belief that culture is a vital resource for social and economic development. By drawing on South Sudan's rich oral traditions, the organization creates community-based projects that reflect the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of local communities. It works inclusively with a diverse range of participants— from students and scholars to professionals, amateurs, community members, and leaders —to ensure that diverse voices are heard and empowered. Likikiri employs intercultural dialogue as an approach to all its projects, leveraging participatory methodologies, collaborative memory work and media-making, critical pedagogy, grounded theory, and the Story Circle Methodology. These approaches are key for documentation, dialogue and demonstration, inspired by a mix of literary theory and qualitative research methods, decolonial and indigenous practices, and transformative justice approaches.

KEY PROJECTS

As part of the Collective's Art Program, the Theatre Season: Planting Possibilities is an annual initiative running since 2016 that combines theatrical education with civic engagement. Drawing on South Sudan's agricultural traditions, the project is structured into three phases: Tilling the Soil, Planting the Seed, and Harvesting.

©Likikiri Collective - Theatre Season: Planting Possibilities.

The project begins with intensive workshops on theatrical techniques, followed by performances where participants receive feedback from community leaders and experts. The final phase involves community-based performances. The first edition involved working with 10 community theatre groups in Juba to adapt South Sudanese folktales to address contemporary issues facing South Sudanese communities, such as tribalism, interethnic marriage, and corruption. This edition resulted in 10 street theatre performances, reaching over 1,000 people. By providing a platform for artistic creation, the Theatre Season seeks to revive South Sudanese creative expression, foster dialogue, raise awareness of social issues, and encourage collective problem-solving within communities.

©Likikiri Collective - Women's Song Heritage in Refugee Settings.

Likikiri's Intercultural Dialogue Program is another initiative composed of diverse interventions such as research projects, participatory media projects, exhibitions, and performances. In 2017, the workshop Intercultural Dialogue and Participatory Theatre, supported by UNESCO, Search for Common Ground, and the European Union, involved displaced individuals from the Protection of Civilians (PoC) camp, university students,
and residents of the Gumbo suburb. Participants partook in a five-day workshop consisting of exercises such as "Earliest Memories," "Where I'm From," and "The Story of My Name", concluding in collaborative storytelling and participatory mediamaking. By engaging in these exercises, participants explored personal identities and shared cultural experiences and narratives through the use of artifacts, dances, and songs.

ReStorying South Sudan is another ongoing initiative initiated in 2018 that seeks to promote intergenerational dialogue on social issues through participatory research, documentation, and cultural production. The first edition, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, involved 15 students from Sadaka Primary School who were brought into dialogue with different stakeholders, including chiefs. The project adopted a story-based approach to understanding gender norms and gender-based violence. After a series of six Story Circles, students co-created a radio drama and an anthology of stories, sharing their insights with the broader public.

©Likikiri Collective - Art Heritage and Resilience Story Circles.

©Likikiri Collective - Community Oral History and Memory Program.

In 2024, Likikiri launched Storytelling as Safeguarding: Protecting South Sudanese Women's Cultural Heritage in Refugee Settings in Uganda and Kenya, funded by the British Council. Likikiri is working with South Sudanese communities displaced to Uganda and Kenya due to conflict and climate change. The project addresses the disruption of intangible cultural heritage, such as languages, rituals, social practices, and song traditions, caused by displacement. Through their induction into the Likikiri Heritage Lab, 20 young women from four communities—Kakwa and Avokaya in Uganda and Dinka and Nuer in Kenya—have become storytellers, scribes, and custodians of elder women's songs through the making of a multimedia archive and a 12-episode podcast. These young women have explored, curated and preserved songs from five moments in their elders' life, working with 20 elder women from the same four refugee communities.

The Community Oral History and Memory Program, launched in 2016, documents and shares South Sudan's collective memories and histories. In partnership with the Rift Valley Institute and Catholic University of South Sudan, Likikiri has conducted 10 oral history courses, covering themes such as customary authorities, educational histories, family histories, conflict histories, and climate change. Each course enrols 20 participants, ranging from early career researchers, civil society actors, women leaders, university students and faculty, and community-based organizations such as Juba Massacre Widows and Orphans Association. Through training in oral history interviewing and memorialization, participants have collectively created oral history exhibits (both physical and virtual), drama performances (oral history or verbatim theatre) and radio programs. Through this programme, Likikiri encourages reflections on past lessons and collective memory, with the goal of sparking a national dialogue on identity, belonging, and shared history.

©Likikiri Collective - Community Oral History and Memory Program.

IMPACT

Likikiri strengthens social cohesion through both horizontal and vertical engagement. On a horizontal level, it creates safe, creative spaces where individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including marginalized voices, can share stories of resilience and hope. Storytelling workshops, performances, and media productions allow participants to move beyond ethnic labels, breaking down prejudices and stereotypes that often perpetuate conflict in a post-war society. By reflecting on their shared histories and cultural identities, participants can see one another as fellow South Sudanese. On a vertical level, Likikiri strengthens social bonds and trust by connecting individuals with institutions, community leaders, government officials, and civil society organizations.

CONCLUSION

The Likikiri Collective represents a powerful force for peace and social transformation in post-conflict environments. Drawing on South Sudan's rich tradition of storytelling, its projects and programs not only document the country's cultural heritage but also empower South Sudanese to take ownership of their narratives in their own language, leading to a more united and resilient approach to nation-building.

Case Study: Cultivating Peace and Social Cohesion in Germany's Diverse Classrooms

As Germany's society grows increasingly diverse due to migration and the arrival of refugees from conflict- affected countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine, the educational system faces significant challenges in promoting social cohesion. Teachers, in particular, are tasked with creating inclusive and supportive environments in heterogeneous classrooms, many of which include students who have experienced the traumas of war. The Berghof Foundation, with over 40 years of experience in peace education, has taken a proactive role in addressing these challenges by fostering dialogue, peace education, and conflict resolution in schools.

APPROACH

The Berghof Foundation has recognized the need for innovative approaches to peace education, particularly in light of ongoing global conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and the Middle East, which resonate deeply within Germany's diverse student population. In response, the organization has created spaces in schools for students to openly discuss and express emotions related to war and peace. These workshops, led by experienced facilitators, provide a non-judgmental platform for students to share their personal experiences and emotions. This participatory approach not only validates their voices but also fosters empathy and understanding among classmates, helping to build a sense of community.

To institutionalize peace education, the Berghof Foundation played a key role in establishing the Service Center for Peace Education in collaboration with the regional Ministry of Education, the Regional Center for Civic Education (lpB) and peace organizations. Founded in 2015, this center supports schools in systematically promoting a culture of peace through workshops, teacher training, and long-term programs. Schools that participate in these programs report reductions in bullying and a marked improvement in the sense of belonging and community.

©Berghof Foundation - Interactive school class workshop in Germany.

ADDRESSING DIGITAL CHALLENGES

The rise of conspiracy theories, hate speech, and disinformation in the digital sphere presents new threats to social cohesion. Recognizing this, Berghof has expanded its peace education work to address these phenomena, facilitating intergenerational dialogues where young people and adults discuss the impact of social media on public discourse. These initiatives promote media literacy and encourage critical thinking, helping to restore trust in information systems.

INNOVATIVE MEMORY WORK

The Berghof Foundation also addresses social cohesion through historical memory. In its “ErinnerungsZeit” project, marginalized communities, including persons from Sinti and Roma communities, persons of Jewish background or heritage, persons of colour, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, collaboratively created a visual novel that highlights the experiences of these groups during the Nazi regime and the ongoing struggles against discrimination today. By focusing on themes of courage, solidarity, and nonviolent resistance, the project promotes a deeper understanding of Germany’s complex history and encourages intercultural dialogue.

CONCLUSION

The Berghof Foundation’s work in peace education is a multifaceted approach that not only addresses immediate classroom dynamics but also fosters broader societal change. By creating platforms for dialogue, addressing digital misinformation, and promoting diverse historical perspectives, the foundation strengthens social cohesion in Germany’s increasingly diverse society. The long-term impact of these efforts is evident in the reduced bullying in schools, the rebuilding of trust in institutions, and the cultivation of a culture of peace and inclusivity.

Case Study: Consolidating the space of dialogue in Somalia

" The conflicts that happened in the land of the Somalis
The misery and massacres of those wars!
When I reflect on these painful feelings
I ask the elders, the youth and the women
In the firm belief that only through dialogue can answers be found
I'm expressing my feelings in poetry…
I leave no stone unturned to understand our problems
The root of the trouble is beyond us...
Where are we heading and where will we settle?
People, ask yourself these questions!"

Source: Only through dialogue: The Somali way to peace, Responding to Conflict, 2010

Somalia, often depicted through the lens of poverty, violent conflict and instability, is home to a rich oral tradition and a deep-seated culture of dialogue, as reflected in the poetry of Ismail Aw Adam Jama. His words highlight the country's capacity for introspection and communication, qualities that Berghof Foundation's peacebuilding efforts aim to harness and enhance. In Somalia, where societal fractures are compounded by environmental challenges, Berghof strives to support inclusive dialogue, bringing together all sectors of society—particularly marginalized groups— to create a shared, systemic understanding of the effects and root causes of violent conflict and to envision a peaceful future.

LOCALLY DRIVEN PROCESS

The core of Berghof's approach in Somalia is to contribute to a locally owned and -driven dialogue process. Key components of this approach include supporting a network of local peacebuilders, comprising key societal pillars: elders, women, and youth; drawing from traditional, cultural, and religious resources; and ensuring comprehensive inclusion of actors and issues in the social, political, economic and environmental spheres. This approach allows working towards the goal of not just resolving existing disputes but nurturing the social bonds conducive to sustainable peace.

ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

A unique aspect of the Berghof's work in Somalia is its integration of an environmental peacebuilding approach. Conflicts in Somalia are often linked to resource scarcity, exacerbated by climate change and environmental degradation. Framing dialogue through a regenerative and systemic lens allows communities to acknowledge the environment as a key stakeholder and develop holistic strategies for healing and restoring both interpersonal and people-nature relationships.

MULTI-TIERED DIALOGUE SPACES

In consolidating the space of dialogue, Berghof nurtures several interconnected formats that are inclusive and intergenerational:

- Large-Scale Dialogue Assemblies (Shirarka): Over five days, fifty community members from diverse backgrounds create shared understanding of community issues and identify collaborative opportunities for addressing the issues.
- Climate Security Dialogue: Through a series of dialogic consultations, communities share their lived experience of the implications of environmental and climatic changes on livelihood and conflict and contribute to developing action plans to adapt to and mitigate these vulnerabilities.
- Sustained Dialogue: Through a structured process of intra- and inter-clan dialogue, communities continuously monitor the development and implementation of their action plans, while furthering relationship building and pursuing collaborative opportunities.
- Mass Media-based Dialogue: In radio programs broadcasted bi-monthly, experts, peacebuilders, government representatives and community listeners deliberate on current and recurrent issues, which raises mass awareness and inspires broader community dialogue and action, particularly in remote areas. This is further consolidated through regular in-person community dialogue on the content of each radio programme.
- Strategic Dialogue: The insights from all the above are brought into a vertical dialogue space where key conflict stakeholders, community leaders, and government officials strategize community engagement and formulate necessary institutional policies.

©Berghof Foundation - Dialogue in Adado, Somalia, among elders, women and youth, facilitated by Insider Peacebuilders Network (IPN) members.

©Berghof Foundation - Breakout group dialogue during a Shir in Mahaday, Somalia.

©Berghof Foundation - Moderator of Berghof's Galkayo radio programme Garasho-wadaag (Sharing of Knowledge) in dialogue with an expert guest during the episode 'A cleaner and healthier environment for peaceful coexistence'.

CREATIVE METHODOLOGY AND CONFLICT-SENSITIVE FACILITATION

In facilitating dialogue, Berghof employs a range of creative methods, including storytelling, drama, roleplays and group exercises. This helps elevate reflective capacity and foster empathy, enabling engagement on a deeper emotional and intellectual level. Safe space is created for open and honest exchange, through which trust and social cohesion are strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Berghof's peacebuilding work in Somalia takes a multifaceted, systemic approach to addressing the root causes of conflict. Through inclusive, locally driven dialogue that incorporates environmental concerns, social cohesion and trust are strengthened and sustainable peace is promoted, while keeping nature at the centre. The various interconnected dialogue spaces help consolidate horizontal relationships between communities and vertical connections with institutions, enhancing societal capacity for prevention of violent conflict. This reinforces other ongoing negotiation and reconciliation processes in Somalia, by providing a long-term framework for conflict transformation that strengthens resilience and adaptability for dealing with the complex challenges confronting the country.

VI. Conclusion

In an era marked by increasing uncertainty, diversity, and complexity, societies are facing a cascade of simultaneous shocks that challenge their stability. This evolving landscape demands new approaches to stimulate adaptation, solidarity and social sustainability. The "Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace" states that "Responses have to be inclusive, people-centred, and conflict-sensitive and build opportunities to increase social cohesion and trust in government, including through participatory dialogue mechanisms" (UN Security Council, 2020). This brief has shown that intercultural dialogue and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing. By enhancing the enabling environment and the practical capacity for intercultural dialogue, societies can strengthen social bonds, forge trust, and cultivate a shared sense of belonging. This transformational process is foundational to cultural literacy by providing the tools, skills, and competences needed to actively engage with differences and navigate complex identities and multiple affiliations, fostering unity and cohesion in plural societies. Cohesive societies weave values of cooperation, empathy, and inclusiveness into the very fabric of their societies. In doing so, they invest in their collective socio-emotional resilience, essential for withstanding the inevitable shocks that arise. Resilience encompasses the capacity to cope with adversity, the ability to learn from them, and the power to support practices and networks that strengthen capabilities against future challenges. Resilience is not merely about surviving stress but about adapting positively and collectively to disruptive changes. The foundation of societal resilience lies in social structures, narratives and attitudes anchored by norms of reciprocity and trust. At its core, resilient societies are built upon strong social cohesion. Insights from the various case studies underscore the importance of intercultural dialogue as an inclusive, culturally resonant and creative approach and practice. By creating spaces that resonate with the personal and emotional life of individuals and where diverse voices are implicated in the design and implementation, intercultural dialogue can foster collaboration, ownership and empowerment, even in conflict-sensitive environments. When dialogue is enabled and practiced, societies can move beyond mere tolerance of differences, to fostering environments where diversity is embraced and celebrated, where conflicts can be addressed through dialogue rather than violence, and where social cohesion becomes a living, breathing reality.

> "Resilient societies are built upon strong social cohesion.

VII. Recommendations

Establish Security and Stability as Preconditions for Dialogue – Ensure that intercultural dialogue initiatives take place in environments where fundamental human needs — such as food security, livelihoods, and physical safety — are adequately addressed. In unstable contexts, prioritize humanitarian assistance and basic service delivery before initiating dialogue activities to ensure long-term impact.

> In North-East Nigeria, GIZ simultaneously addresses developmental challenges and humanitarian needs while strengthening local institutions for long-term service provision. The program promotes self-reliance by enhancing the resilience of internally displaced persons (IDPs), host communities, returning IDPs, and local populations. Through Community Development Planning (CDP), dialogue forums, large scale citizen sensitization, and the rehabilitation of essential services, the program strengthens relationships between local communities, leaders, government institutions, and civil society. These efforts not only empower communities to better address their needs but also foster vertical and horizontal social cohesion, creating a shared vision for sustainable community development.

Strengthen Vertical Cohesion to Build Horizontal Cohesion – Focus on strengthening inclusive governance systems that address identity-based fragmentation and exclusion. This lays the foundation for sustainable horizontal social cohesion.

> The International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (ICCAR), founded by UNESCO, assists local authorities in combating racism, discrimination, exclusion, and intolerance in areas such as education, employment, housing provision, and cultural activities. This approach enhances trust between formal structures and communities, paving the way for greater horizontal cohesion.

Leverage Living Heritage – Incorporate culturally rooted traditions, knowledge, and practices to increase community buy-in and engagement. Tailor interventions to reflect local realities, ensuring dialogue is meaningful and resonates with participants.

> In Somalia, the Berghof Foundation leverages the country's rich oral tradition, including poetry and storytelling, to create spaces for dialogue. Local elders, women, and youth engage in facilitated discussions based on traditional cultural practices, allowing them to address historical grievances and foster community engagement and trust.

Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces for Dialogue – Ensure that intercultural dialogue initiatives are inclusive and representative of diverse social, ethnic, and cultural groups. Safe, respectful, and non-judgmental spaces, along with diverse participation, foster mutual understanding, reduce stereotypes, and enhance the legitimacy of dialogue outcomes.

> In Germany, the Berghof Foundation creates safe and inclusive spaces in schools where students from diverse backgrounds—many of whom had experienced trauma—can share their personal experiences. Through peace education and structured workshops, these spaces allow students to engage in dialogue without judgment, fostering mutual understanding and empathy.

Encourage Collaborative Community Projects – Focus dialogue on practical, community-driven concerns like education, healthcare, security, and governance, as well as joint projects that unite diverse groups around common goals, such as community development, cultural festivals, or environmental conservation. Rather than starting with the most contentious issues, identify areas with the greatest potential for progress and leverage existing networks of support.

> In Afghanistan, Search for Common Ground focuses dialogue on practical, community-driven issues such as education, healthcare, and local governance. These conversations help participants from different backgrounds find common ground on everyday concerns, fostering cooperation across ethnic and political divides. By addressing concrete, shared challenges, these dialogues build momentum for longer-term social cohesion and trust.

Support Youth Engagement and Education Initiatives – Actively involve young people in dialogue processes and community decision-making, empowering them to share their perspectives and contribute to shaping their communities. Governments should design educational programs and curricula that foster intercultural understanding and equip youth with essential skills and competencies for meaningful engagement.

> In South Sudan, the Likikiri Collective leverages informal spaces, grassroots education and media training to empower communities with the tools and skills to take ownership of their narratives and address their challenges in their own language. In the European Union, the Erasmus + programme supports education, training, youth and sport through life-long learning, for the educational, professional and personal development of participants in Europe and beyond.

Integrate Conflict-Sensitive Approaches – In conflict-affected settings, adopt conflict-sensitive methods that account for power dynamics and historical grievances.

> In Somalia, the Berghof Foundation has incorporated environmental peacebuilding as a strategic entry point for dialogue. By addressing climate challenges alongside social conflicts, the organization effectively engages a diverse range of stakeholders—including marginalized communities—to stimulate comprehensive discussions on sustainability, resource management, and peace. This holistic approach ensures that dialogue remains attuned to both social and environmental dimensions, ultimately strengthening community bonds.

Create Dedicated Spaces for Continuous Dialogue – Establishing and maintaining both informal and formal safe spaces for ongoing dialogue is crucial for fostering social cohesion. These spaces should be designed to encourage continuous engagement, promote diversity, and address emerging grievances effectively. Regular, structured dialogues within these environments can significantly strengthen community bonds over time.

> Examples of such spaces include the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda, the Ghetto Biennale in Haiti, the Kibera Town Centre in Kenya, the Kulttuurikeskus Caisa in Finland, and the Casa Amarela in Brazil.

Prioritize Long-Term, Locally Led Engagements – Addressing deep-rooted intergroup grievances and marginalization requires sustained, community-driven efforts. Ensure the long-term success of dialogue initiatives by strengthening local ownership, building institutional capacity, and securing consistent policy and financial support. Locally led initiatives are more adaptable, relevant, and sustainable in fostering trust and cohesion.

> Since 1996, Berlin's Karneval der Kulturen (Carnival of Cultures) has served as a platform for celebrating multiculturalism and fostering dialogue among diverse communities. Originally established in response to the social changes following Germany's reunification, the annual festival features processions, theatrical performances, and music events, reinforcing cross-cultural connections. By showcasing the positive contributions of immigrant communities to Berlin's social and cultural fabric, the festival strengthens intercultural cohesion and inclusivity.

Implement Comprehensive Evaluation and Monitoring Frameworks – To effectively assess the impact of intercultural dialogue initiatives on social cohesion, it is essential to implement robust evaluation and monitoring frameworks. Collecting and analyzing relevant data enables the identification of best practices, informs future strategies, and demonstrates the effectiveness of these efforts.

> The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Index is an example of a comprehensive assessment tool designed to measure various aspects of social cohesion, resilience capacities, and vulnerability factors globally. With over 200 metrics, it evaluates dimensions such as trust in institutions, human security, ethnic group identification, and civic engagement, providing valuable insights into societal cohesion across diverse contexts. The SCORE Index has been applied in countries like Ukraine and Liberia to inform peacebuilding and development efforts with robust evidence.

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DIALOGUE FOR SOCIAL COHESION

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE FOR
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At a time where division threatens the fabric of societies, dialogue offers a path forward. The Dialogue for Social Cohesion brief, developed by UNESCO in collaboration with the Berghof Foundation and Search for Common Ground, blends real-world case studies with practical recommendations, offering policymakers, practitioners, and civil society essential guidance to harness intercultural dialogue — an approach championed by UNESCO — to build resilient, cohesive societies. From theatre in South Sudan to classrooms in Germany, discover how communities are using dialogue as an adaptable, creative, and culturally rooted approach to mend fractured relationships, rebuild trust, and strengthen social bonds.

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