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What holds Asian Societies together?

Economic development and prosperity strengthen social cohesion in Asia, poverty and discrimination against women weaken it. This is the conclusion of a study commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, which for the first time examined the cohesion of 22 societies in South, Southeast and East Asia (SSEA). According to the study, cohesion is strongest in Hong Kong and Singapore, followed by Thailand and Bhutan.

Asia's economic and political rise is one of the most significant developments of the present age. This world region has become the driver of the global economy. At the same time, however, societal challenges are also increasing in the region. Almost all Asian societies find themselves in a state of upheaval, and are being drastically altered by profound transformation processes. As a consequence of economic and population growth, urbanization is advancing almost everywhere and a new middle class is emerging. Traditions and values are changing due to increasing mobility, education and prosperity, as well as greater interaction with global information and economic flows. In many places, social inequality has become more prevalent. As a result of these developments, there are tensions and conflicts in numerous Asian countries that threaten social cohesion and political stability. The question of how the cohesion of societies develops is therefore becoming increasingly important in Asia.

Against this backdrop, a new study presents, for the first time, comparative empirical data on social cohesion in 22 societies in SSEA for the period 2004 to 2015. To that end, a team of academic experts headed by Prof. Klaus Boehnke (Jacobs University Bremen) and Prof. Jan Delhey (Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg) developed a theoretically and empirically robust index that allows social cohesion to be measured in as many SSEA countries and territories as possible. The index shows the degree of cohesion in the respective societies, depicting its development over time and presenting each society's cohesion-related strengths and weaknesses. It also analyzes the determinants and consequences of social cohesion.

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The Social Cohesion Radar

Social cohesion has become a key policy goal around the globe – not only in the Western Hemisphere, but also in Asia. Despite growing interest in this concept among policy makers and researchers, no generally shared understanding of social cohesion exists. Most importantly, empirical findings are lacking. For these reasons, the Bertelsmann Stiftung developed the *Social Cohesion Radar*, a multidimensional measuring instrument that integrates different facets of cohesion.

Social cohesion is thus understood as the quality of social cooperation and togetherness in a territorially delimited community. Conceptually, it is broken down into three core aspects, called domains: resilient social relationships, a positive emotional connectedness between the community and its members, and a pronounced focus on the common good. Each of these domains encompasses three additional dimensions, each of which is assigned empirical indicators: **Social relations** represent the networks and interactions between individuals and groups within a community, trust in others, and acceptance of diversity. **Connectedness** captures the degree to which people identify with the community, the trust they have in society's institutions, and whether they believe that social conditions are just. Finally, the **common good** describes actions and attitudes that evince people's willingness to take responsibility for others and the community. These include solidarity and helpfulness, the recognition of social rules, and participation in society and political life. Figure 1 illustrates the three domains of social cohesion and their respective dimensions.

This multidimensional concept of social cohesion has now been applied to Asian countries and territories[1] for the first time. Twenty-two societies from the three geographical subregions of South, Southeast and East Asia (SSEA) were studied for the periods 2004–2008 and 2009–2015. For South Asia these were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; for Southeast Asia they were Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam; and for East Asia China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan. The analysis of social cohesion was based on secondary data. The sources used were cross-sectional data from representative comparative surveys conducted for the Gallup World Poll, the World Values Survey, the Asian Barometer and the AsiaBarometer, as well as data from international institutions and expert opinions.

The SSEA societies examined differ significantly not only from their Western counterparts, but also among themselves in cultural, socio-economic and political terms. With regard to religious diversity, there are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian-influenced societies. Many countries are also characterized by great linguistic, ethnic, cultural and/or religious heterogeneity (for example Indonesia, Malaysia and India), while others are more ethno-culturally homogeneous (e.g. Japan, Korea).
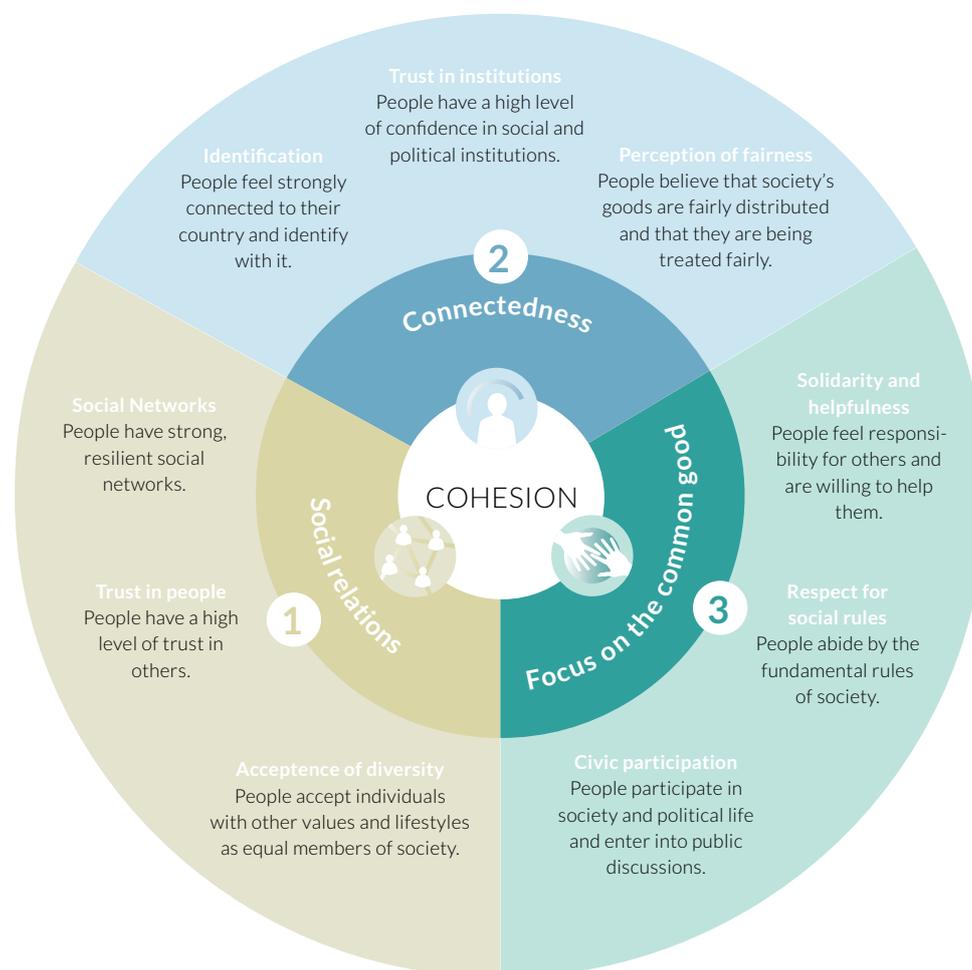
The differences between individual SSEA countries could also hardly be greater when it comes to socio-economic diversity. The region evinces all four degrees of development as reflected in the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI). According to the 2016 HDI, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan all rank in the top group with a very high degree of development. Malaysia, China and Mongolia are described as having a high level of development, while most other countries, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, India and Myanmar, are characterized by a medium level. In addition, Afghanistan is categorized as a low-development country.

The SSEA countries included in the study also exhibit major differences in terms of their political systems. Based on the classification of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), the spectrum ranges from "established" or "consolidating democracies," such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, to "defective democracies", such as India, Indonesia and the Philippines, and "highly defective democracies" like Nepal, to "moderate autocracies," like Bangladesh, Singapore and Malaysia, and "hard-line autocracies," such as China, Pakistan, Vietnam and Thailand.

This extraordinary cultural, socio-economic and political diversity in the SSEA region posed a challenge when it came to analyzing and interpreting the results; at the same time, it provided new insights into the forms and manifestations of social cohesion, the factors influencing it, and its impacts on other developments and areas of life.

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1 The former British Crown Colony of Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, with its own data on social cohesion.

Figure 1: Domains of social cohesion and their respective dimensions

Trust in institutions
People have a high level of confidence in social and political institutions.

Identification
People feel strongly connected to their country and identify with it.

Perception of fairness
People believe that society's goods are fairly distributed and that they are being treated fairly.

2 **Connectedness**

Social Networks
People have strong, resilient social networks.

Solidarity and helpfulness
People feel responsibility for others and are willing to help them.

COHESION

Social relations

Focus on the common good

Trust in people
People have a high level of trust in others.

1

3

Respect for social rules
People abide by the fundamental rules of society.

Acceptance of diversity
People accept individuals with other values and lifestyles as equal members of society.

Civic participation
People participate in society and political life and enter into public discussions.

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018

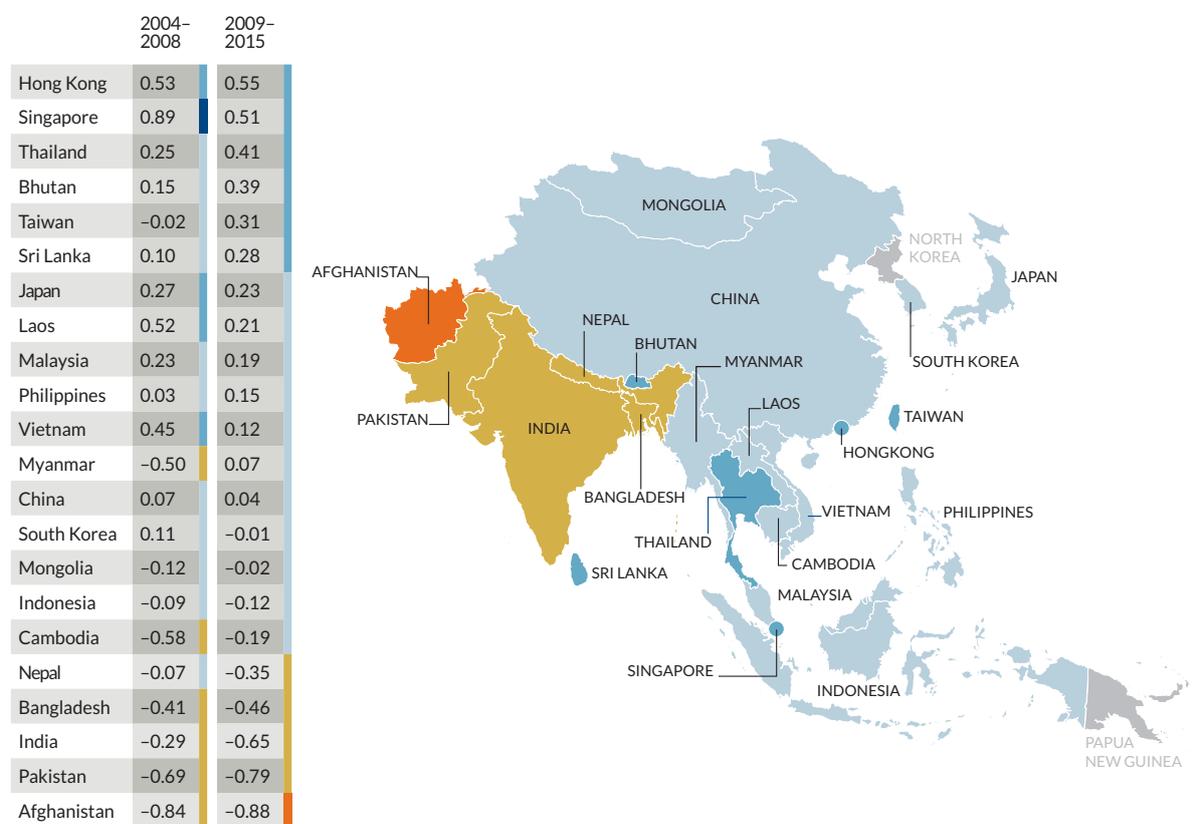| Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

Social Cohesion in SSEA

In the overall index of all societies surveyed over the entire period under study (Figure 2), Hong Kong and Singapore take the lead, followed by Thailand and Bhutan. A moderate level of cohesion was found in most of the countries in Southeast Asia, while the South Asian nations evince the lowest levels.

In the most recent period (2009–2015), none of the 22 SSEA societies achieved the highest of the five possible categories. The index starts with the second category, the mid-top tier, led by Hong Kong and Singapore. In the middle group, Japan, South Korea and China have a moderate degree of cohesion, as do most of the ASEAN countries. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are in the mid-bottom tier of low-cohesion countries. Afghanistan is found at the bottom of the list.

Despite some fluctuations, social cohesion does not change dramatically throughout the study period. The changes that occur always result in a country moving to the next higher or next lower tier. This is evidence that cohesion is a stable feature of all the SSEA societies studied, one that evolves over the longer term and, therefore, only changes significantly over an extended period of time.

In terms of its social cohesion, a country's specific strengths and weaknesses, which partially cancel each other out in the overall index, are particularly evident at the level of the three core domains. The values for the domains social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good not only show considerable deviations from the overall index, but also differ among each other (Figure 3). China, for example, is in the top group in the social relations domain, while lagging behind in

Figure 2: Overall index of social cohesion for 22 societies in South, Southeast and East Asia

	2004–2008	2009–2015
Hong Kong	0.53	0.55
Singapore	0.89	0.51
Thailand	0.25	0.41
Bhutan	0.15	0.39
Taiwan	−0.02	0.31
Sri Lanka	0.10	0.28
Japan	0.27	0.23
Laos	0.52	0.21
Malaysia	0.23	0.19
Philippines	0.03	0.15
Vietnam	0.45	0.12
Myanmar	−0.50	0.07
China	0.07	0.04
South Korea	0.11	−0.01
Mongolia	−0.12	−0.02
Indonesia	−0.09	−0.12
Cambodia	−0.58	−0.19
Nepal	−0.07	−0.35
Bangladesh	−0.41	−0.46
India	−0.29	−0.65
Pakistan	−0.69	−0.79
Afghanistan	−0.84	−0.88

The map shows the values for the period 2009-2015.

● top tier   ● mid-top tier   ● middle tier   ● mid-bottom tier   ● bottom tier

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018 | Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

the domain focus on the common good. The main reason for this is that there are stable social networks in China and trust in others is very high, while solidarity, helpfulness and participation in society and political life are very low.

Overall, the data analysis shows that social cohesion is strongest in SSEA in the economically most advanced countries. However, there are also less developed countries with a high level of social cohesion. In addition, it is clear that none of the societies studied is strong in all aspects of social cohesion. Each has its specific strengths and weaknesses. No society in SSEA achieves at least average scores in all dimensions, but none can be found in the lower categories alone. For this reason, it is impossible to highlight one country in particular as a role model for strong social cohesion in Asia.
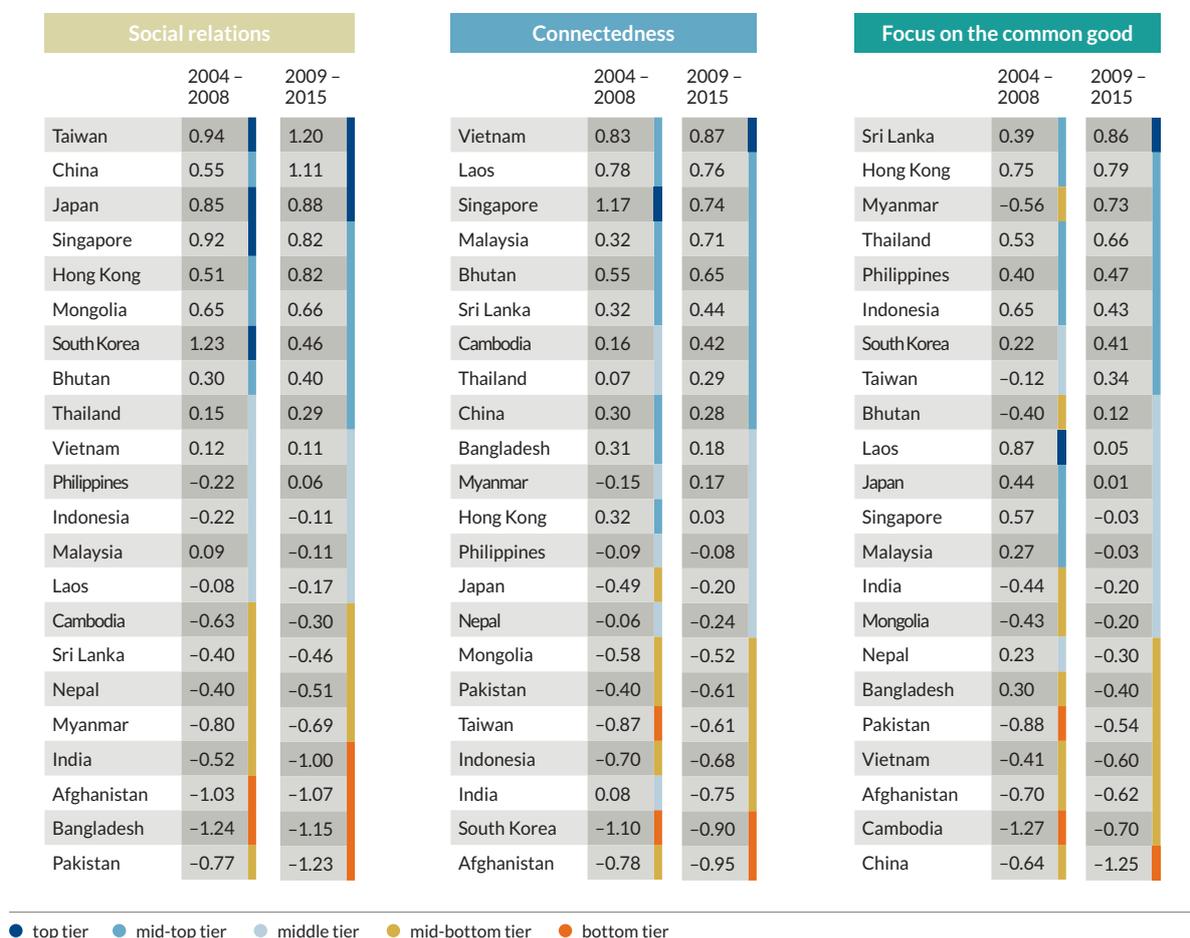
On the other hand, it is possible and instructive to analyze the domains and dimension values in order to iden-

tify different clusters or profiles of countries that have similar patterns of social cohesion. The results of this analysis show that there are three groups of countries with similar cohesion patterns:

1) Sinosphere

This group includes the so-called Asian tiger states of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, as well as Japan and China. It thus comprises those East Asian countries and territories that have been shaped by Chinese culture over the centuries (hence the name Sinosphere). At the same time, these are the economically most developed societies in the region. Overall, this group of societies is characterized by a high degree of cohesion. Key features are strong social networks, a very high trust in people and a very high acceptance of diversity. In addition, the countries of this group achieve very high values with respect to

Figure 3: Domain scores over time

Social relations				Connectedness				Focus on the common good		
	2004 – 2008	2009 – 2015			2004 – 2008	2009 – 2015			2004 – 2008	2009 – 2015
Taiwan	0.94	1.20		Vietnam	0.83	0.87		Sri Lanka	0.39	0.86
China	0.55	1.11		Laos	0.78	0.76		Hong Kong	0.75	0.79
Japan	0.85	0.88		Singapore	1.17	0.74		Myanmar	–0.56	0.73
Singapore	0.92	0.82		Malaysia	0.32	0.71		Thailand	0.53	0.66
Hong Kong	0.51	0.82		Bhutan	0.55	0.65		Philippines	0.40	0.47
Mongolia	0.65	0.66		Sri Lanka	0.32	0.44		Indonesia	0.65	0.43
South Korea	1.23	0.46		Cambodia	0.16	0.42		South Korea	0.22	0.41
Bhutan	0.30	0.40		Thailand	0.07	0.29		Taiwan	–0.12	0.34
Thailand	0.15	0.29		China	0.30	0.28		Bhutan	–0.40	0.12
Vietnam	0.12	0.11		Bangladesh	0.31	0.18		Laos	0.87	0.05
Philippines	–0.22	0.06		Myanmar	–0.15	0.17		Japan	0.44	0.01
Indonesia	–0.22	–0.11		Hong Kong	0.32	0.03		Singapore	0.57	–0.03
Malaysia	0.09	–0.11		Philippines	–0.09	–0.08		Malaysia	0.27	–0.03
Laos	–0.08	–0.17		Japan	–0.49	–0.20		India	–0.44	–0.20
Cambodia	–0.63	–0.30		Nepal	–0.06	–0.24		Mongolia	–0.43	–0.20
Sri Lanka	–0.40	–0.46		Mongolia	–0.58	–0.52		Nepal	0.23	–0.30
Nepal	–0.40	–0.51		Pakistan	–0.40	–0.61		Bangladesh	0.30	–0.40
Myanmar	–0.80	–0.69		Taiwan	–0.87	–0.61		Pakistan	–0.88	–0.54
India	–0.52	–1.00		Indonesia	–0.70	–0.68		Vietnam	–0.41	–0.60
Afghanistan	–1.03	–1.07		India	0.08	–0.75		Afghanistan	–0.70	–0.62
Bangladesh	–1.24	–1.15		South Korea	–1.10	–0.90		Cambodia	–1.27	–0.70
Pakistan	–0.77	–1.23		Afghanistan	–0.78	–0.95		China	–0.64	–1.25

● top tier ● mid-top tier ● middle tier ● mid-bottom tier ● bottom tier

Quelle: Bertelsmann Stiftung │ Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

perception of fairness and respect for social rules. Solidarity and helpfulness, on the other hand, are only average. The countries' deficits include a very weak identification with the community, low trust in institutions and a low level of civic participation.

China, in a sense, constitutes a special case within this group and is characterized by a distinct cohesion profile. It not only achieves high scores with respect to trust in other people, but also with respect to trust in institutions, which sets it apart from other countries in the group. The same applies to its very low levels of solidarity, helpfulness and civic participation.

2) ASEAN plus

The second group of countries includes the ASEAN countries Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines, as well

as Bhutan, Mongolia and Sri Lanka, thus giving it the name ASEAN plus. Overall, this group has a moderate degree of cohesion. Characteristic strengths are a high degree of identification with the community, strong social networks, strong trust in institutions and a high degree of solidarity, helpfulness and civic participation. Weaknesses include a low level of trust in people, a great sense of injustice and little respect for social rules.

3) South Asia

Most South Asian societies have a similar cohesion profile. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India therefore constitute the third group of countries, which is generally characterized by weak cohesion. Only with respect to identification with the community and civic participation do these countries achieve average values. For all other dimensions, their values are low or very low.

The analysis of the cohesion profiles does not reveal a clear development path leading to consistent cohesion in all domains and dimensions. All three profiles have specific strengths and weaknesses, regardless of the level of cohesion, so that none can be considered an ideal-typical role model. On the other hand, clear statements can be made as to which factors shape social cohesion in SSEA and what impact it has on other developments.

Key Factors for Social Cohesion in SSEA

Overall, the study shows that economic development, prosperity, human development (especially education and life expectancy) and gender equality are key factors fostering social cohesion in SSEA. Conversely, extreme poverty has the strongest negative impact, followed by discrimination against women. On the other hand, cultural diversity, meaning linguistic, ethnic or religious heterogeneity, exhibits no discernible effect on social cohesion. Only a very high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity seems to reduce social cohesion.

Social cohesion itself affects a number of important developments. One of its positive effects in SSEA is that it promotes economic productivity, reduces unemployment and provides prospects for a better life in the future. Moreover, cohesive societies are more effective in allocating resources to promote public goods. Here we observe a cycle of mutual reinforcement. Societies that are more prosperous are, on the whole, more cohesive, and more cohesive societies are more economically productive.

These findings confirm the importance of the material factors underlying social cohesion. Economic prosperity, educational opportunities, health care and gender equality are essential for a high level of cohesion. In other words, including human development strengthens social cohesion. In this respect, the societies in SSEA are no different from those of the Western world. For the Asian societies investigated it is also true that economic and social modernization and social cohesion are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, successful modernization strengthens social cohesion. Where modernization works, social cohesion grows. However, there are also less developed, relatively isolated countries like Bhutan with a high degree of social cohesion. At the same time, successful modernization in SSEA is usually accompanied by a weaker national identity.

An interesting finding derives from the analysis of the relationship between social cohesion and the political system. The correlation analysis shows that a lower level of political freedom and fewer opportunities for participation correlate with a higher level of social cohesion. Conversely, social cohesion promotes the restriction of civil liberties and can strengthen the stability of authoritarian regimes. This finding makes it clear that cohesion does not necessarily have (only) positive consequences, but can have different effects in different political and social contexts.

Cohesion is a universal characteristic of societies. Even non-democratic and authoritarian regimes, which were examined for the first time in the study, have their own mechanisms for creating social cohesion. Civil liberties and opportunities for participation are, therefore, not necessarily prerequisites for high social cohesion, as the examples of Hong Kong and Singapore show. Rather, what matters is whether people regard the respective political regime as legitimate and effective.

In addition, democracy promotes political pluralism and the articulation of specific competing interests. In some circumstances, this can lead to societal polarizations that are detrimental to social cohesion, especially when there are no intermediary institutions that can successfully mediate these conflicts. This is exactly what is happening in many of Asia's young and still unstable democracies, which are struggling with political and social instability, widespread corruption and the failure of state institutions. At the same time, many citizens in the established democracies of East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, appear to be more critical of their governments than people in authoritarian regimes. They have higher expectations of their governments and are, therefore, more likely to be disappointed, even though these governments tend to perform better than those of non-democratic countries in terms of economic development and social justice.

No Silver Bullet for Social Cohesion

As the study as a whole shows, there is no silver bullet that leads to consistently strong social cohesion in SSEA. Rather, different constellations and factors contribute to a more or less cohesive society. This should not come as a surprise given the great socio-economic, cultural and political diversity in the region. Against this background, however, the results reveal the opportunities different countries have to develop their own strategies and measures for strengthening or maintaining social cohesion. In principle, policy approaches promoting inclusive economic development, poverty alleviation and gender equality offer the greatest prospects of success.

At the same time, the study's results point to the Janus-faced nature of social cohesion in SSEA: Depending on the political and social framework, it can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it can function as the glue that holds a society together, allowing for economic progress and an inclusive development policy. On the other hand, social cohesion can serve as a foundation for authoritarian political systems. This ambivalent quality is an important finding that can help us better understand social cohesion in Asia and non-Western societies.

Further Reading:

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) (2018). *What holds Asian Societies together? Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar.* Gütersloh.

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