

## Feature Columnist

### Social Cohesion and Inclusion: What is the Research Agenda?

It is ironic that several years of positive macro-economic performance have been accompanied by increased concerns within Canada's policy communities and the general public about social cohesion, particularly issues related to ***inclusion***. The improved aggregate health of the Canadian economy has had unequal distributional effects across social classes and groups. Over these years, we have observed an increase in inequality in both after-tax/transfer incomes and market incomes. Poverty levels of families with children are persistently high. The depth of poverty has intensified in at least four identifiable social categories: single parents, persons with disabilities, single individuals between 45 and 64 and recent immigrants. Poverty rates in Aboriginal communities are unacceptably high. Moreover, in the last decade, we have seen declining access to one of the basic markers of civilized life, a roof over one's head.

Faced with such patterns, international organizations and national governments have turned their attention to the link between social cohesion and socio-economic cleavages. They fear that society's decreased capacity to ensure or foster inclusion poses a threat to social cohesion. Noting the correlation between the inability to ensure inclusion and social cohesion, however, still leaves unresolved the causes of the obstacles to inclusion. A research agenda is needed. If the issues surrounding social inclusion are complex, it is less because the world has changed than because we have not yet agreed upon a diagnosis of the problem.

### Threats to Social Cohesion

Let's look more closely at the way a selection of international organisations analyse the risks for social cohesion.

1. OECD: In the 1997 report *Societal Cohesion and the Globalizing Economy*, the OECD argued that technological change and structural adjustment policies placed "growing strains on the fabric of OECD societies."
2. World Bank: Using the terms *social capital* and *social cohesion* synonymously, the World Bank noted "increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together."<sup>1</sup>
3. Council of Europe: The Council of Europe's Committee for Social Cohesion asserts that social cohesion is an essential condition for democratic security -

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm).

divided and unequal societies are not only unjust, they also cannot guarantee long term stability.<sup>2</sup>

Social cohesion is invoked in these contexts because it is a hybrid concept. As Paul Bernard has demonstrated, it is a quasi-concept that is grounded in data analysis, benefiting from the legitimacy conferred by the scientific method, but also flexible enough to follow the meanderings of everyday policymaking.<sup>3</sup> The concept provides international agencies and governments with an intellectual and political agenda. For example, the OECD was concerned with three aspects of social cohesion: income polarization (including poverty), high levels of unemployment and widespread social exclusion. The Council of Europe also listed a marginalized minority, poverty and social exclusion and high levels of unemployment as challenges to social cohesion. Finally, for the World Bank, dense and crosscutting networks produce economic and social development and reduce poverty more than weak networks, because they incorporate actors into civil society and give them political access. For all three, in other words, future economic and social stability - that is, social cohesion - depends upon fostering inclusion and minimizing marginalization.

But what do we mean by the causes of exclusion? Is a focus on the margins sufficient to end poverty and increase well-being?

### **A Range of Diagnoses**

In a recent study, Ruth Levitas identified three diagnoses of social exclusion,<sup>4</sup> each of which leads to different policy prescriptions. One diagnosis claims that labour force

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participation fosters inclusion because employment remains the key to inclusion in contemporary society. Policy responses, therefore, focus on employability and on creating a labour market that can absorb more workers. A second diagnosis attributes exclusion to the failures of some groups to meet the expectations of “normal” society. This analysis generates policies that seek to end welfare abuse and make welfare programs compulsory.

A research agenda, therefore, involves assessing the success rates and policy challenges for each inclusion remedy. For example, several jurisdictions have withdrawn citizenship rights from those who do not conform to “normal expectations” of society. Ontario’s LEAP program obliges unmarried mothers on social assistance to attend parenting courses and to stay in school; the choices

<sup>2</sup> See *Social Cohesion Developments*, #1, 11/2000 [www.coe.fr/DASE](http://www.coe.fr/DASE).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bernard, *Lien social et Politiques*, #41, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Levitas, *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*, (Macmillan Press, 1998).

available to other citizens are not available to them. In this category, too, is Quebec's policy of differential access to social assistance to youth under the age 25. Do these "tough love" approaches work better than self-sufficiency programs that provide support for employability and skills training?

Both of these diagnoses make inclusion a "boundary problem." Efforts to foster inclusion occur at the margins of society. The goal is to push individuals and social groups away from the margins, including them in the mainstream rather than leaving them out. However, thinking about social cohesion in terms of inclusion, evidence suggests, may be too limited. By focusing on the border between the included majority and the excluded minority, too little attention is paid to the inequalities and differences among the included.

### **Moving Away from the Margins**

The third diagnosis of social exclusion directs attention to the condition of society as a whole. It defines the problem as the failure to achieve equality in the civil, political and social rights of citizenship. The unequal distribution of power and wealth may produce exclusion, while the policy goal is to include everyone in full citizenship. Thinking in this way leads to another research question: what does the majority need to look like in order to foster social cohesion?

Evidence is accumulating that social equality underpins well-being, both of individuals and communities. The World Bank argues "In the same way that rising inequality in one country can put a break (sic) on prospects for poverty-reducing growth, rising inequality in the world inhibits overall poverty reduction."<sup>5</sup> Since the nineteenth century, population health studies have found that a region's health, and therefore its capacity for well-being, is greater when inequalities in income distribution are smaller. Recent studies of human development in Canada and elsewhere send the same message. Even the *Globe and Mail* (30 November 2000) concluded that Canada's improved math and science scores - so important for the future of the new economy - are partially due to the equity embedded in a functioning public school system.

In other words, in the fight against poverty and exclusion, it may not be enough to focus on "including" the poor simply by providing a place in the labour market or social and political institutions. Higher rates of and more lasting success may require a reallocation of resources within the majority, such that there is more equal distribution of economic power and political and social resources.

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<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, "Poverty Growth and Inequality," *Issue briefs*, found at [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org).