



The Netherlands Institute  
for Social Research

# Society in Flux

A closer look at diversity and social cohesion



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## Summary

*'People don't change people, time does.'*  
The Wombats – *Fix yourself, not the world*

### Society in Flux

The increasingly dynamic nature of society due to digitalisation and globalisation, combined with the uncertainties stemming from climate change, give us reason to wonder how we can continue to live together in a diverse and prosperous society, now and in the future. At times, social cohesion seems to have given way to multiple divides that seem difficult to overcome: between the Randstad conurbation and the rural areas; between public officials and citizens; between people with and without a migration background; between those with only primary education or lower vocational training and those with higher professional or university degrees. Diversity is beginning to be associated more with division and the associated conflicts than with cultural enrichment and social progress. All this is set against the backdrop of a welfare state built on seemingly creaking pillars – a state whose promises are, for many, increasingly diminished. Inequalities are persistently present, as if these are the only constants in a turbulent and uncertain world that can feel less and less social and coherent.<sup>1</sup> Our society is shifting rapidly, yet some things seem to change little (if at all) and the hardened debates the media dishes out to us every day can elicit a rather dim view of the human collectives that inhabit this planet.

When – thanks to all manner of hand-wringing 'where is society headed' messages – we are at risk of losing heart, as it were, it can be a comfort to (like Abram de Swaan) adopt a longer-term perspective and observe a trend towards ever-larger cooperative alliances, driven largely by religious conversion, trade, industrialisation and developments in infrastructure and mass communication (De Swaan 2004, 2007). Important historic results and modern-day social categories, such as the larger global religions, the nation-state, social class, ethnicity and gender, are the result of continuously expanding groups, of ever-larger circles of trust and identification (De Swaan 2001, 2007; Ho 2021). While people might be unable to directly perceive or initiate such changes, time is (in its own way) an actor as well. Although Robert Putnam (2007) asserts that, in the short term, concentrations of ethnic diversity often result in a lessening of social cohesion – a thesis that caused quite a stir in academia and among public administrators – in the same renowned article in which he made that statement, *E pluribus unum*, he also points out the healing effect of time.<sup>2</sup> Within our own borders, we can refer to *Vijf eeuwen migratie* [500 years of migration] by Leo and Jan Lucassen, a historical study in which the principles underlying a pessimistic view of immigration are refuted or put in perspective. This study concluded that a well-considered stance on the impact of migration is possible only when one takes 'the full spectrum of the phenomenon of migration' into account (Lucassen and Lucassen 2018: 280).

This is not to say that 'all in good time' is a motto to which we can optimistically cling. Simply waiting, in the assumption that things will work themselves out in the long run, is another such pitfall: solutions to societal problems generally do not appear out of nowhere, nor do solutions for issues in connection with diversity and social cohesion.

This study focuses on clearly defining the numerous dimensions that make up diversity and social cohesion. Clear application of these concepts is needed for the purposes of research, but also for fruitful political and social debate regarding these themes. Those who will read the whole report can also learn how opinions on diversity and social cohesion are connected with normative frameworks or may be hidden within them. These lessons, too, have been incorporated into the recommendations for the public debate we are presenting here.

## Recommendations for the public debate

Public discussions on diversity and social cohesion can be fierce and polemic. These topics tend to be fraught, which is unsurprising. Roughly speaking, the issue of social cohesion is bound up with three basic questions: what is it that connects and divides people, who gets what and who are we? Discussions regarding diversity are strongly related to questions about who one is or is not, or should be allowed to be, and therefore also to deeply held values that may be extremely personal. As most readers are likely aware, the practice of identity politics is a sensitive topic and may elicit hostility from many corners.

Especially when topics are fraught, it is wise to be precise and unambiguous about what you mean and what you stand for – ensuring that the disagreements discussed are limited to those matters about which the participants actually disagree. In the current debates on diversity and social cohesion, much would be gained if people would think and formulate their opinions more precisely while at the same time adopting a broader mindset. While we realise that the forms and formats of many of today's social media and talk shows do not lend themselves to nuance, we nevertheless wish to recommend the following five *substantive* actions:

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- 1 Be mindful of the 'liquid society' in which we live, in which many people increasingly find roles, positions and identities to be less fixed than in the past, and be aware that there is much more to 'diversity' than ethnic or religious diversity alone.**

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'Culturalising' social problems – i.e., identifying a specific culture or cultures as the primary source of poverty and crime in an underprivileged neighbourhood – speaks of a worldview in which cultures are presumed to be static and roles and identities, once assigned, are permanent. This is untrue and fails to recognise that diversity is equally concerned with other characteristics. Numerous studies have shown that the level of education completed by one's parents is the primary characteristic that distinguishes between people and that is perceived to divide them.

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- 2 Look a bit more closely and dichotomies are often revealed to be 'multichotomies'. Behind the cities and villages that are presumed to represent the divide between the urbanised Netherlands and its rural areas, many other dichotomies are hidden: rich and poor, young and old, theoretical education or vocational training, and so on.**

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Just as *the* Dutch person does not exist, there is no such thing as *the* urbanite, *the* rural resident, *the* farmer or *the* migrant. Each of these labels hides differences and contradictions that should not be forgotten, especially not by public administrators and policymakers at the national level. Rather, they should identify the vulnerable groups behind the dichotomies and support them. In such instances, distance is a poor counsellor. It is best to gain insights in person, and open a dialogue with practical experts in order to ascertain the best way to deploy your resources.

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- 3 Pointing out threats to social cohesion and being outraged about them is all fine and good, but a few local threats do not constitute a national crisis. Be specific about the groups or problems to which you are referring when highlighting a lack of social cohesion and avoid the temptation to immediately label it a crisis.**

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All participants in the public debate, whatever their position, should at minimum hold themselves accountable to the following standard: do the problems being observed actually pose a serious threat to the social order? Avoid culturalisation (see 1) and show caution and proper care with regard to the labels you use for different groups of people in this context. Even within knowledge institutions like SCP, there is discussion concerning 'standard' labels because such labels may unintentionally stigmatise groups of people.

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- 4 Do not use 'poor social cohesion' as a catch-all term for all manner of societal issues (e.g., unemployment, poverty, crime, discrimination, exclusion, nightlife violence). Doing so will quickly**

**make an impenetrable tangle of the causes and effects of a lack of social cohesion, which does nothing to advance the discourse.**

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Certainly politicians, but those who represent the interests of civil society as well, can be of tremendous benefit to the discussion in this area simply by applying the concept of social cohesion in a clearer way. This will allow scientific insights to be applied more effectively, and expectations regarding the ability to create social cohesion (which are often quite high yet unfounded) to be adjusted to a more realistic level.

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**5 Clearly define what you consider to be ‘good’ social cohesion and ‘poor’ social cohesion, and then think about which values and expectation support these views. In other words: be clear about your own normative framework(s) when talking about social cohesion.**

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Whether, and to what extent, you might consider the sense of mutual connection experienced by people in a society – and the social behaviour by which they manifest that sense of connection – to be sufficient or insufficient will ultimately depend on your perspectives on humanity and the world. What you expect from social cohesion is inextricably linked to a specific view of the societal order and social engagement. It makes a difference whether the philosophical outlook through which you view the world is liberal-cosmopolitan, Christian-communitarian or socialist-collectivist in nature.

In addition to these recommendations, we wish to address *how* people should be participating in the debate. Any effective social debate includes empathy, but empathy that adorns itself with progressive values while simultaneously demonstrating a certain indifference or even disdain toward fellow citizens with fewer societal opportunities is a poor starting point for resolving the urgent societal challenges that lie ahead. With regard to diversity and social cohesion, these challenges relate to 1) the future of our welfare state, 2) a humane approach to dealing with migrants and refugees and 3) the transition to a sustainable economy. These challenges demand that people render accountability for various value orientations that may be at odds with one another (such as urban-global versus rural-local), and that people *empathise* with those in other walks of life in order to see past the actual differences. An important and decisive issue in connection with social cohesion is the extent to which we are willing and able to feel empathy for those who are further removed from our own position, and in particular for those who have less economic, social, cultural or personal capital and who are structurally overrepresented in the old and new forms of social inequality (Vrooman et al. 2023).

## Findings of this study

When we reflect on diversity as a historical phenomenon, we can conclude that a great deal of diversity existed 100 years ago as well. A crucial difference is that the positions, roles and social identities of yesteryear have now become more liquid. The old institutions of social control have ceded power thanks to the processes of secularisation, individualisation and emancipation (Bovens et al. 2014: 22), as well as (it is safe to add) thanks to the digital technologies that have altered our social relationships and organisational forms. For many people (and groups), individual freedom of movement has increased and the positions, roles and social identities of the past have become more liquid. As an extension of this, if we look at the phenomenon of social cohesion in modern societies, the crux of the matter here is group relationships: how various groups relate to one another and the extent to which these groups combine (despite their differences) to make up a society. While these relationships have always been complicated, in recent decades, the processes of individualisation, migration flows and growing inequality seem to have made them even more unpredictable and complex.

The extent to which people experience or observe a shortage or excess of social cohesion as a result of these processes will depend on the forms or ideals of social cohesion on which those people base their standards (whether consciously or not) and on their perspectives on humanity and the world. The normative expectations (implicit or otherwise) that people have with regard to social cohesion or diversity can vary greatly. Where one person needs close contacts with fellow residents in their neighbourhood in order to feel

at home, another may feel more at ease if those relations remain at a cordial distance and they are free to 'do their own thing'. In a diverse society like the Netherlands, social cohesion is every bit as much about the things that divide us as those that unite us. Tolerance or forbearance is an important precondition for social cohesion when there are growing differences between citizens or groups of citizens. Based on that general normative framework, policy to promote social cohesion can be thought of as the art of forging connections – an art that allows for the myriad situations in which people feel at home.

### **Conceptual findings with regard to diversity**

Diversity, we conclude, in principle refers to all the ways that people (either individually or groups) may differ from one another, with the characteristics considered to be relevant or significant for our purposes being connected to relationships of power and social norms. While people may differ in connection with numerous characteristics and aspects, not all characteristics and aspects are perceived to be equally salient or significant. Briefly put: saliency is about what people consider important, how they perceive or are perceived, as well as how they respond to one another. It is the 'lens' through which people view reality and their fellow humans – and the refraction of that lens has been determined by social norms. How salient characteristics are assigned depends on the power of articulation: the power that parties possess (to a greater or lesser degree) that enables them to define a *difference* as a distinctive *characteristic*. Because this power of articulation is never absolute and the boundaries of culture and community are – as anthropologists teach us – often drawn in more than one place, we experience a certain ambiguity in our everyday reality with regard to characteristics and differences that are significant. People should pay attention to (among other things) the fact that the specific groups to which individuals may feel they belong (internal classifications) are not always the same groups to which others would assign them (external classifications). Another complicating factor is that diversity may be linked to very subtle forms of exclusion: people may experience oppression or exclusion in multiple ways and the cumulative effect of these may be greater than the sum of the parts. This phenomenon is also referred to as 'intersectionality'.

The more recent emergence of the concept of 'superdiversity' can be viewed as a reaction to the social and geopolitical changes and new migration patterns that have been become increasingly visible since the 1990s. This concept refers to a whole series of factors and characteristics that, due to the classifications being used, remained invisible (or largely so), so that people failed to see all manner of new forms of diversity. Stephen Vertovec (2007, 2019), who had a hand in defining this concept, also wrote about the emergence of new technologies that have expanded all kinds of communication possibilities, so that the extent to which migrants are able to maintain cross-border contact with families, friends or acquaintances has increased (this is referred to using the term 'transnationalism').

While the concept of diversity is often linked to discussions of ethnic and cultural diversity, the concept is in principle subject to much broader interpretation, encompassing gender, sexual orientation, age, health, appearance, educational background, social position, religious or political convictions, and so on. Both the extent (actual or perceived) and the forms of diversity are important and when we additionally take the general mutability of the 'liquid society' (Van den Brink 2020: 59-83) into account, this puts the (over-simplified) contradictions that are often put forth in discussions of social cohesion in a different light as well. Our society is characterised not by one or several static dichotomies (rich versus poor, those with theoretical education versus those with vocational training, urban versus rural), but by a diverse spectrum of dichotomies that can be quite mutable.

### **Conceptual findings with regard to social cohesion**

Judging by the numerous discussions in the media, many people in the Netherlands are experiencing a lack of social cohesion and are, as a result, increasingly ill at ease. In academic terms, social cohesion can also be seen as a sensitising concept: a concept subject to multiple interpretations and therefore one that will always be hotly debated. Anyone hoping to see the 'whole picture' in terms of social cohesion, a picture that combines all knowledge and offers insight into the phenomenon in all its facets, will need to prepare for disappointment. Social cohesion is, metaphorically speaking, an everlasting puzzle that is constantly rearranging itself and changing colour, and where the final pieces can never be put in place. The reasons for this can be found in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of social operating processes and the simple fact that there are limits to the means of social science research. In other words, more modest expectations are

in order here – although it is certainly possible to attain more integral knowledge.

Social cohesion refers to the glue that hold communities together, to the need and compulsion to belong to a certain community, to the feeling of being at home that transcends the self-interested economic relationships that people are obliged to maintain with each other. For a (descriptive) definition and corresponding framework that provide effective tools for conducting empirical research into social cohesion, we can look to Chan et al.:

*Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.*

(Chan et al. 2006: 290)

The two-by-two framework that goes along with this definition distinguishes between subjective experience and objective behaviour on the one hand, and between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion on the other. Briefly put, the horizontal dimension relates to the trust and sense of mutual connection that citizens or groups of citizens feel, while the vertical dimension has to do with the mutual trust and relationships between citizens and the government. Even more succinctly, based on the preceding definition and this framework, social cohesion can be defined as the extent to which people or groups of people feel connection with one another and with all sorts of institution, and to which they demonstrate this sense of belonging through their behaviour.

**Table S.1 Measuring social cohesion: a two-by-two framework**

	<b>subjective component (people’s state of mind)</b>	<b>objective component (behavioural manifestations)</b>
<b>horizontal dimension (cohesion within civil society)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• general trust with fellow citizens</li> <li>• willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from ‘other’ groups</li> <li>• sense of belonging or identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• social participation and vibrancy of civil society</li> <li>• voluntarism and donations</li> <li>• presence or absence of major inter-group alliances or cleavages</li> </ul>
<b>vertical dimension (state-citizen cohesion)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trust in public figures</li> <li>• confidence in political and other major social institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• political participation (e.g., voting, political parties etc.)</li> </ul>

Source: Chan et al. (2006: 294)

For those who wish to gain more detailed knowledge of the various types of connections, levels of analysis and research methods that can be distinguished with regard to social cohesion, please refer to chapter 3. In that chapter, we apply four lines of research (‘attitude and behaviour’, ‘bridging and bonding’, ‘strong and weak connections’ and ‘formal and informal ties’) to provide an impression of the tremendous body of existing knowledge regarding social cohesion. It appears that a new line of research is currently taking shape around the impact of digitalisation: under the heading of ‘affective polarisation’, we are seeing more and more attention for the polemic effects of the earnings models being driven by the internet economy and the associated social media, as well as for the influence these models exert on institutional and political trust.

Explanations for social cohesion (why it occurs to a greater extent in one society than in another) range from institutional, cultural and structural explanations to resource-related explanations and psychosocial explanations. As a general rule, institutional explanations look at how a state (such as a welfare state) is organised, for instance all kinds of legal powers (and the enforcement thereof) that may determine or influence the possibilities, limitations and preferences of its citizens. Cultural explanations focus on the question of how individuals socialise within groups and how they adopt all kinds of values, standards, habits and customs. These factors in particular seem to determine the extent to which people tend to connect with others. Structural explanations, on the other hand, direct their attention to the fact that if people are to forge connections with others, they must first have the opportunity to encounter other people. For example:

children who attend schools in underprivileged neighbourhoods will not generally encounter many children whose parents have completed higher professional/university education. Resource-related explanations hold that entering into and maintaining social connections is dependent on all manner of resources: economic resources but also cultural resources that provide an individual with knowledge of social norms. Psychosocial explanations focus on the interaction between personal factors and environmental factors, how people derive their identities from groups and how they interpret their living environment through the lens of the social group, leading them to develop a shared sense of connection.

These five clusters of explanations are by no means mutually exclusive: the research shows that in practice they may complement and overlap one another. One thing is especially vital: while the explanatory theories shed light on or contribute to sensibility for a wide range of contexts and environmental factors that can influence social cohesion, we must not confuse these defining contexts and factors with the phenomenon itself.

## Notes

- 1 Certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods remain disadvantaged despite all the historic changes that occur in them. See as an example Talja Blokland's (exemplary) ethnography of the urban Rotterdam neighbourhood Hillesluis (1998).
- 2 'In the long run, however, successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities' (Putnam 2007: 137).



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