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ICCS 2022 Post Conference Commentary

The Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar: Enhancing Data-Driven Research

By Jolene Jerard and Vishalini Suresh

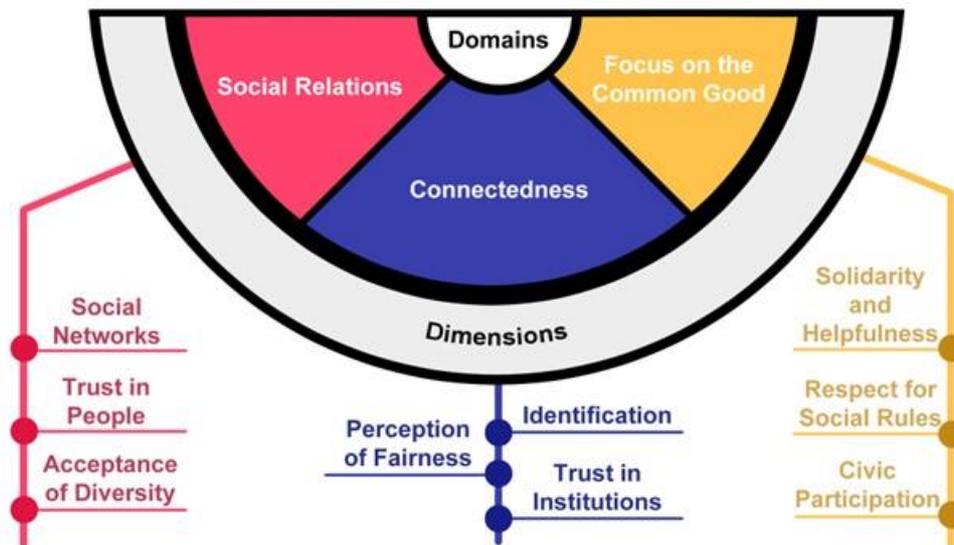
SYNOPSIS

The Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar research study conducted by RSIS was an important milestone in building knowledge to better understand the dynamics and nature of social cohesion in the region. Future research will need to explore drivers such as economics, class, education, gender and other demographic variables to enhance data-driven research on this important subject.

COMMENTARY

On 6 September 2022, the report of the [Southeast Asian \(SEA\) Social Cohesion Radar](#) research study was launched during the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022 ([ICCS 2022](#)).

Conducted by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the research study examined social cohesion based on the three domains specified in the [Bertelsmann Stiftung framework](#): *social relations, connectedness and focus on the common good*. These three domains were sub-categorised into nine dimensions: *social networks, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perception of fairness, solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules and civic participation*.



The 3 Domains and 9 Dimensions of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Framework as [represented in the SEA Social Cohesion Radar](#)

The study found that, overall, 69 per cent of thought leaders among Southeast Asians were of the view that social cohesion was strong in their respective countries. Within the region and in each country, there was considerable variation in opinions how people felt about the three social cohesion domains. Of these domains, thought leaders opined that social relations had the strongest influence. As such, the quality of relationships among members of the community mattered most in efforts to strengthen social cohesion. As for the nine dimensions, there was strong respect for social rules within the region, with *social networks*, *trust in people*, *acceptance of diversity*, and *identification* considered relatively equal in importance.

The insights presented in the *SEA Social Cohesion Radar* report reaffirmed the need for more data-driven research on *faith*, *identity*, and *cohesion*. This could be a starting point to consolidate regional research and investigate unexplored drivers of social cohesion in future editions of this research study. The distinctive attributes of Southeast Asia can enhance our understanding of how the research constructs can be better assessed, which would lead to a better understanding of their contribution to social cohesion. They would also help us to investigate unexplored drivers of social cohesion that could be included in future studies.

Re-evaluating Assumptions on Social Cohesion

This study is just one part of a picture that can be used to re-evaluate long-held assumptions. Although the social cohesion radar has been used to assess social cohesion across Europe and many parts of Asia, there are significant differences in assumptions held regarding the formal and informal structures, and the values and beliefs systems between societies in the two continents. One key difference lies in the greater focus Asian societies give to collective identity, whereas European societies tend to be more focused on individual identity.

The study also found that the domain of *focus on the common good* appeared to have the least impact on social cohesion in Southeast Asia. The dimension of *solidarity and*

helpfulness under this domain seemed relatively less influential, compared with other dimensions, in determining social cohesion among the regional countries. The construct arguably underscored the importance of caring for the welfare of society.

Diverse Drivers of Social Cohesion

This modest first attempt at understanding the dynamics and nature of social cohesion in Southeast Asia has achieved its objective of sparking conversations on the subject. Nonetheless, the lack of data-driven research highlighted the need for further studies to be conducted to facilitate the building of a longitudinal study to further assess social cohesion in the region.

As societies evolve over time, the various drivers of social cohesion will also evolve. Hence, the study of social cohesion in society is [a constant work in progress](#). Future editions of the study could explore other drivers of social cohesion that function in concert with *faith*, *race* and *identity*. These macro and micro level factors include economics, class, education, gender, and other demographic variables. Data-driven research would strengthen theoretical and empirical studies on social cohesion.

Fostering Understanding, Breaking Barriers

When we share our collective experiences, we can learn and find new and better ways to build stronger, more resilient and socially cohesive societies. We need to raise and increase the level of our conversations. As we work to blur or eliminate the fault lines in our respective societies, it is important that we recognise the various facets that can increase our social cohesion quotient further.

The study sparked positive reactions among ICCS 2022 participants who agreed that conversations can translate into practical actions. From this point onwards, we can judiciously decide what needs to be explored further and what can be done to learn more from each other's experiences to build social cohesion.

In seeking to foster social cohesion, we also need to "create space" for conversations on the common barriers to social cohesion. This includes expanding the conversation beyond that of faith to include divisive stereotypes, inter-individual relationships, and a focus on the relationship between the individual and the state in order to better understand the dynamics of social cohesion.

ICCS 2022 has reaffirmed the unequivocal importance of social cohesion. The voices from all walks of society that contribute to this important space are not only advocates for social good but, perhaps more importantly, will lay the foundations for defining the conversations of the future.

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