

Report of the Expert Group Meeting
New research on trust and social cohesion – World Social Report 2025
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and UNU-WIDER
Virtual meeting (Zoom)
29 and 30 May 2024, 9:00-12:00 EDT (GMT – 4)

I. Introduction

In 2025, the UN will hold a Second World Summit for Social Development. This is the third in a series of recent summits¹ to address current challenges and ensure that the multilateral system is “fit for the future”.

In preparation for the “social summit”, the UN World Social Report 2025 will explore social challenges hindering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Declining trust is one such challenge drawing global concern. Survey data suggest declining trust in both high- and low-income countries. People around the world also report that they are feeling increasingly insecure and uncertain about their future, despite historically high levels of income per capita. New global trends, such as the spread of misinformation made possible by the massive use of digital technologies, are affecting trust dynamics at a fast pace.

Trust has cascading effects on many aspects of social, political and economic life, and might ultimately affect the strength of social contract. This meeting brought together experts to review recent research on why and how trust matters for well-functioning societies and engage in an open exchange of ideas. The purpose of the meeting was to strengthen the 2025 edition of the World Social Report’s analysis and policy messaging on trust and social cohesion.

The meeting was held virtually during the mornings of 29 and 30 May, 2024. The meeting’s four sessions included short presentations followed by interactive discussions. Participants included experts from World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and researchers from academic and UN entities (see Annex).

¹ It follows the Sustainable Development Goals Summit in 2023 (aimed at reviewing progress and accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) and the Summit of the Future, which will take place in September of this year (meant to reinvigorate the multilateral system and ensure that it is “fit for the future”).

II. Presentations and discussion

Global trends in trust and their measurement

In the first session of the meeting, the keynote presentation, entitled “The Social Contract Under Threat: Social Trust in a Changing World”, by Patricia Justino of UNU-WIDER, provided an overview of trends in both institutional trust and interpersonal trust using data from the [World Value Survey](#) and regional barometer polls. Based on these data, institutional trust in national governments and the United Nations declined in the last two decades, with the sharpest decline observed in low-income countries. While interpersonal trust also experienced some decline, it appeared more resilient than institutional trust. An age gap was observed in both institutional and interpersonal trust, with younger people appearing to be less trusting.

In the discussion, it was recommended that the authors clarify the objectives of the paper and incorporate a clear analytical framework to guide their hypotheses, data analysis and interpretations. For instance, based on the report’s definition of trust, it was reasonable to expect low levels of institutional trust in countries with high levels of inequality, poorly functioning institutions or political turmoil. Similarly, it was to be expected that levels of interpersonal trust would be higher among family members than across more distant groups. The authors could examine whether the data supported these expectations and investigate where data suggested a significant deviation from the expectation. Additionally, understanding the determinants of different levels of trust among different groups of the population would be crucial. An analytical framework would also enhance the understanding of the relationship between interpersonal and institutional trust.

It was also recommended that the paper use all available data for figures rather than relying on averages per wave. This approach could explain why countries with similar conditions showed different levels of trust. It would also be important to unpack results by population group, noting that generally young people's trust varied across countries, and that low-educated individuals and those with financial concerns generally reported lower trust. In addition, the description of trends should be complemented with additional data and analysis, such as case studies and country examples.

Participants drew attention to the importance of constructing trust variables and highlighted the need to incorporate behavioral statistics. Some experts pointed out that binary trust variables might exaggerate levels of polarization.

Overall, the comments emphasized the need for a structured and detailed analytical approach to better understand the complex dynamics of trust in various contexts.

In “Trust Across the Globe and Time”, Eric Uslaner of University of Maryland defined strategic trust, generalized trust and particularized trust, arguing that generalized trust was formed early in life and would not change significantly throughout the life course. The presentation identified inequality as one of the most important determinants of trust and suggested that social cohesion could be

strengthened through not only lower inequality but also better education. The presentation argued that nationalist ideologies in today's politics constituted a significant threat to trust and social cohesion.

Participants stressed the importance of understanding trust, since trust would affect the capacity of collective action in responding to crises, with profound implications on social stability and political engagements. Some pointed out the crucial role played by human insecurity in declining interpersonal trust, and further highlighted the need for governments to address human insecurity to reduce polarization within societies.

Participants shared concerns about various challenges in measuring trust, particularly using short-term data to measure long-term changes in trust. Yet, participants recognized that value surveys and opinion polls still provided important information and consistent results on trust and social cohesion, despite their many shortcomings. These sources were commonly used to measure trust, especially interpersonal trust.

Trust and social cohesion

In his presentation on “Operationalizing Social Cohesion”, Patrik Barron of the World Bank highlighted the importance of trust and its positive effects on the capacity of collective action in response to crises and conflict. He defined social cohesion as a sense of shared purpose, trust, and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state. Based on a recent [World Bank publication](#), he presented a conceptual framework of social sustainability consisting of four components: social cohesion, inclusion, resilience and process legitimacy, which would determine the credibility and perceived fairness of proposed policies. The presentation also highlighted the need to include behavioural data when constructing trust variables.

In “Measuring social cohesion: evidence from Africa”, Francesco Burchi of IDOS defined social cohesion along three dimensions: inclusive identity (that is, a stronger sense of belonging to a shared national identity than to a group-based identity), trust, and cooperation for the common good. Data from opinion surveys ([Afrobarometer](#) and [V-dem](#)) suggested that, in Africa, overall trust was driven by horizontal trust (interpersonal trust), with the strongest correlation observed between trust and an inclusive identity. Trust and inclusive identity had declined over time, but cooperation for the common good remained mostly stable. There seemed to be some trade-offs between trust and identity, on the one hand, and cooperation for the common good, on the other. In conclusion, the presenter stressed that social cohesion was a multidimensional phenomenon and, therefore, should not be measured by a single component.

Other participants acknowledged that social cohesion was a multidimensional concept both affecting and being affected by other social processes, and ultimately essential for healthy, resilient, and sustainable societies.

Trust was seen as one important dimension of social cohesion. The question, therefore, was whether research for the World Social Report should be focused only on trust; would social cohesion be the

more natural lens for the report? And a related point: should we expect social cohesion to be correlated with levels of economic development as they were with trust?

Trust and inequality

In “Inequality, its profile and trust toward governing institutions: Evidence from international databases”, Flaviana Palmisano of Sapienza University explored the relationship between income inequality and institutional trust, demonstrating that while the relationship between institutional trust and overall vertical inequality is positive, different components of aggregate inequality affected institutional trust differently. On the other hand, while the relationship between interpersonal trust and overall vertical inequality is negative, inequality within income groups, especially at the top, had a positive effect on institutional trust, while inequality between groups had a negative effect. Also, a distinction was made between institutional and interpersonal trust, which, while correlated, had different origins and consequences. In sum, the study provided a detailed analysis of how different forms of inequality impacted trust in governing institutions and suggested enhancing institutional trust through targeted inequality reduction and digital engagement initiatives.

In “Fairness perceptions and political trust in Europe”, Licia Bobzien of the University of Postdam emphasized the importance of understanding how people’s perceptions of inequality and fairness impacted their trust in political institutions. A significant fairness gap, where perceived inequality surpassed preferred levels, led to a decrease in political trust. Misperceptions and biased information could distort people’s views on inequality, affecting their sense of fairness and trust in political systems. There were notable differences in how various socio-economic groups perceived inequality and fairness: fairness gaps were smaller among individuals with higher levels of education, primarily because their perceptions of actual inequality were more aligned with reality. To address the fairness gap and improve political trust, policies should aim not only at reducing actual income inequality but also at enhancing public understanding and perceptions of inequality through accurate information. This dual approach could help restore trust across different demographic groups.

In “Social unrest, trust and inequality: findings from the Panorama of Social Cohesion in Latin America”, Carlos Maldonado of UNECLAC argued that social unrest in Latin America was often triggered by specific economic policies such as the elimination of fuel subsidies, rises in public transport costs and proposals for regressive fiscal reforms. Trust in institutions across Latin America was generally low. Despite dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, most citizens (58%) still considered democracy the best form of government. The study highlighted the importance of equitable policies, including universal social protection systems, labour market policies, affirmative action measures and participatory governance mechanisms, and the need for a framework to promote social cohesion and trust in institutions.

Participants highlighted that the relationship between inequality and trust should be analyzed in detail to reflect its nuances. For instance, various components of inequality, such as within and between income groups, would exert varying impacts on institutional trust. Also, the finding that inequality between income groups generally eroded institutional trust, whilst inequality within income groups

might improve institutional trust, especially at higher income levels, suggested that perceptions of inequality among peers differed from broader societal views. This discrepancy pointed out the nuanced relationship between inequality and trust; and highlighted the need for governments to address disparities observed between different social segments.

Experts drew attention to the crucial role played by perceptions of inequality, which might differ from the actual level of inequality. Trust appeared to be influenced by the gap between public expectations and perceptions, and a widening gap was usually caused by a lack of perceived public agency in government decisions. Further to the discussion on public perception and trust, experts pointed out that information integrity and media transparency could also play an important role in building trust.

Policies and strategies to rebuild trust and foster social cohesion

In “What governments can do to enhance trust: evidence from OECD countries”, Monica Brezzi of OECD outlined findings from the OECD Trust Survey, focusing on levels of trust in national governments across 30 OECD countries. On average, 4 out of 10 people in OECD trusted their national government. Trust in public administrations was driven by the perception that governments reliably provide services. Public perceptions of government accountability and integrity were low, with many believing that political favours could be exchanged for private sector jobs. A significant portion of the population felt excluded from policy-making processes, which negatively impacted trust. Financial concerns and socioeconomic conditions significantly influenced levels of trust in government. The presentation also highlighted various initiatives by countries to improve trust, such as the Republic of Korea's incorporation of trust measurement in its National Innovation Strategy, Finland's institutionalization of national dialogues, and Norway's trust reform in public service delivery.

In “Rebuilding trust: experience from Latin America and the Caribbean”, Carlos Scartasini of IADB defined trust as the belief that others would not act opportunistically and argued that trust was often low due to information and power asymmetries. The presentation emphasized that trust should be a key objective of public policy and outlined strategies to rebuild it, including increasing transparency, reducing information asymmetries, strengthening institutions, and empowering citizens. The presentation provided evidence that transparency and fulfillment of promises increase trust, citing surveys and case studies from various countries in the region. Additionally, it discussed the importance of the rule of law and fair enforcement of laws to bolster trust.

In “The role of trust in collective action and achieving global goals”, Heriberto Tapia of UNDP emphasized the importance of addressing human insecurity, closing agency gaps, correcting misperceptions, and recognizing the interconnectedness of trust in institutions to overcome the current political gridlock and promote inclusive and cohesive social development. He noted that rising authoritarianism and protectionism were causing divisions, even in countries with high levels of human development. These divisions hindered the ability to address shared challenges and created social tensions. The presentation stressed that perceptions of insecurity were linked to lower trust in institutions and higher polarization, driving people toward extreme views. Significant gaps in individuals' perceived ability to influence political systems undermined trust in both national and

international institutions as well. Trust in national governments was correlated with trust in global institutions like the UN, highlighting the link between local and global trust. Correcting misperceptions about others' willingness to act on issues like climate change could foster greater cooperation and collective action.

Participants agreed that trust should be a fundamental goal of public policy, achievable through government transparency, quality public services, and effective redistribution to address inequality. They also stressed the need to reduce information asymmetries by providing clear, accessible information about government actions and outcomes. Noting that trust in government and other public institutions was influenced by the perceived reliability and responsiveness of public services, accountability of officials, opportunities for public participation, and socioeconomic conditions, participants insisted that enhancing trust can be achieved by increasing public participation in decision-making, fostering a sense of agency and involvement among citizens.

In conclusion, the meeting provided valuable insights into the global trends of trust and social cohesion. The decline in both interpersonal and institutional trust, as evidenced by opinion polls and survey data, poses challenges for well-functioning societies. As we prepare for the UN World Summit for Social Development in 2025, understanding the links between trust and social cohesion becomes crucial. The meeting emphasized the need for clear analytical frameworks to guide research and policy messaging on trust, especially in the context of a changing world marked by digital technologies and misinformation. Younger generations, in particular, appear to exhibit lower levels of trust, highlighting the importance of addressing this issue for a stronger social contract.