Policies to bolster social resilience in the context of more frequent and complex crises: Strengthening solidarity and social cohesion

Michael Woolcock

Development Research Group, World Bank

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

United Nations, New York

Commission on Social Development

12 February 2025

Three key points

For strengthening solidarity and social cohesion, especially in highly complex settings, recognize that development policies...

1. Are only as effective as their implementation

2. Are only as effective as their shared legitimacy

3. Can themselves be part of the problem *and* part of the solution

Beyond *what* social policies seek to achieve, my focus today is on *how* policies are selected, accepted, implemented, and evaluated

1. Policies are as effective as their implementation

- What *kinds* of development problems are social policies seeking to address by building solidarity and cohesion?
  - Most likely problems for which there isn't a clear solution…
  - …and which, when identified, will unfold along non-linear, non-uniform, highly-variable trajectories, depending on context, scale, implementation quality
- Most of our 'policy discussions' center on enhancing technical design characteristics. But policies to build solidarity and cohesion often entail extensive discretion, ongoing face-to-face interactions, and intensive negotiation…
  - i.e., high *relational* implementation capability
- But capability for policy implementation around the world, in the places with the greatest need, is mostly stagnant or declining (Andrews et al 2017). Building it is central to achieving every SDG, but especially those with key 'social' components – health, education, solidarity and cohesion. Yet our most common strategies for doing this mostly fail…
  - We need an alternative.

2. Policies are as effective as their shared legitimacy

- In complex (often conflict-affected) contexts, policies enhancing solidarity and cohesion turn on...
  - The credibility of decision makers;
  - The consistency with which they uphold agreed-upon rules;
  - The extent to which rules align with societal values;
  - Broad participation and transparency; and
  - Perceived benefits for the impacted population.

- ...and credible claims to legitimacy across different groups:
  - The credibility of decision makers;
  - Between societal groups (if absent: fragmented societal legitimacy)
  - Between elite factions (if absent: fragmented elite legitimacy)
  - Between national government and local sources of authority (if absent: challenged elite legitimacy)
  - Between national government and global actors (if absent: challenged global legitimacy).

- Legitimacy of change processes (e.g., elections, gender equality) is crucial for managing contention, brokering trade-offs, forging cohesion and enhancing solidarity.
  - Development policies will struggle where societal groups despise one another; where elite factions use lies and violence to secure power; where there is little coherence or trust between local and national authority; and where governments reject international law and covenants to which they are a signatory.

3. Development policies can themselves be part of the problem *and* part of the solution...

...even (sometimes especially) when they *succeed*

- **Part of the problem?** Achieving 'core' development objectives – e.g., education, maternal health, rising productivity and incomes – can undermine community solidarity and cohesion by:
  - Marginalizing parents/elders/leaders/groups who remain illiterate
  - Challenging long-standing cultural practices (birthing, land, agriculture, 'law')
  - Monetizing established mechanisms of exchange (bartering); enhancing indebtedness
  - Rendering redundant certain skills, livelihoods –> mass migration to cities

- **Part of the solution?** Development actors can better anticipate and proactively respond to inherent changes in social relations by:
  - Creating/protecting safe spaces for deliberation and negotiation
  - Undertaking serious investments to understand local contextual realities
  - Preparing consultation mechanisms for managing wrenching trade-offs
  - Enhancing capability and local legitimacy; respecting prevailing practices
  - Making impact claims in the light of reasoned (context and program-specific) expectations

Further reading…

THE WAYFINDERS

Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World

WADE DAVIS

OXFORD

MATT ANDREWS
LANT PRITCHETT
MICHAEL WOOLCOCK

BUILDING STATE CAPABILITY

Evidence, Analysis, Action

International Development

Navigating Humanity's Greatest Challenge

Michael Woolcock