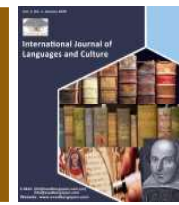




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## Redefining Social Cohesion: Fostering Inclusion and Belonging in Diverse Societies

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### Abstract

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the challenge of maintaining social cohesion and cultivating a sense of belonging and inclusion within diverse societies has become a critical priority. Traditional notions of social cohesion, often centered on cultural homogeneity and the assimilation of minority groups, have proven inadequate in the face of rising social, cultural, and demographic complexities. This article proposes a transformative approach to redefining social cohesion through the lens of inclusion and belonging – an orientation that embraces diversity, promotes equity, and empowers marginalized communities as active agents of change. Drawing on a comprehensive review of interdisciplinary literature, the article examines the theoretical foundations and multifaceted dimensions of inclusive social cohesion. The analysis synthesizes insights from social identity theory, intergroup contact theory, the capabilities approach, and institutional theory to develop a holistic conceptual framework. This framework comprises four interrelated pillars: (1) promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities; (2) facilitating meaningful intercultural exchange and mutual understanding; (3) empowering marginalized communities and amplifying their voices; and (4) strengthening institutional responsiveness and adaptive governance. The article then presents a systematic review of innovative case studies from diverse global contexts to illustrate the transformative potential of this inclusive social cohesion approach. The case analyses highlight how these multi-dimensional initiatives have enhanced belonging, challenged structural inequalities, and fostered more equitable and resilient societies. Finally, the article outlines policy recommendations and future research directions to advance the agenda of inclusive social cohesion and catalyze positive societal transformations worldwide. By redefining social cohesion through the lens of inclusion and belonging, this article offers a groundbreaking contribution to the scholarly discourse and policy debates on managing diversity, promoting social integration, and building more inclusive and sustainable communities.

**Keywords:** *Social cohesion, Inclusion, Belonging, Diversity, Equity, Marginalized communities, Intercultural dialogue, Institutional responsiveness, Adaptive governance*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Imperative of Inclusive Social Cohesion in a Diverse World

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the challenge of maintaining social cohesion and fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion within diverse societies has become a critical priority for policymakers, community

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2788-404X/© 2024. Pitshou Moleka. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

leaders, and scholars alike. Rapid demographic shifts, driven by international migration, urbanization, and the growing recognition of minority rights, have transformed the social, cultural, and linguistic landscape of communities across the globe (Zhang, You, Pundir and Meijering, 2023; Vertovec, 2007; Cantle, 2012). Traditional notions of social cohesion, often centered on cultural homogeneity and the assimilation of minority groups, have proven inadequate in the face of these emerging realities. Rigid models of social integration that emphasize conformity over diversity have led to the marginalization of minority communities, the exacerbation of social tensions, and the erosion of societal trust and collective purpose (Maldonado Valera *et al.*, 2022; Putnam, 2007; Cantle, 2012). In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to redefine social cohesion through the lens of inclusion and belonging – a transformative approach that embraces diversity, promotes equity, and empowers marginalized communities as active agents of change (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Uslaner, 2012). This orientation towards “inclusive social cohesion” acknowledges the inherent value of diversity and seeks to create conditions where all individuals and communities can meaningfully participate in the social, economic, and political fabric of society, while maintaining their unique cultural identities and practices (Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Hickman *et al.*, 2008).

### **1.2. Objectives and Contributions of the Article**

This article aims to provide a ground breaking and impactful examination of the concept of inclusive social cohesion, offering a transformative approach to fostering belonging, equity, and collective purpose within diverse societies. Drawing on a comprehensive review of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence from diverse global contexts, the article presents a holistic conceptual framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing inclusive social cohesion, and highlights its potential to catalyze positive societal transformations. The key contributions of this article include:

1. Advancing the scholarly discourse on social cohesion by redefining the concept through the lens of inclusion and belonging, moving beyond traditional assimilationist models.
2. Developing a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing inclusive social cohesion, comprising four key pillars that can guide policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.
3. Examining innovative case studies from diverse global contexts to illustrate the transformative potential of inclusive social cohesion approaches in empowering marginalized communities and fostering more equitable and resilient societies.
4. Outlining policy recommendations and future research directions to promote the agenda of inclusive social cohesion and catalyze positive societal transformations worldwide. By addressing these critical issues, the article aims to make a ground breaking and impactful contribution to the scholarly discourse and policy debates on diversity, social integration, and the pursuit of more inclusive and sustainable societies.

### **1.3. Theoretical Foundations of Inclusive Social Cohesion: A Comprehensive Review**

This section presents a comprehensive review of the interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that inform the conceptualization of inclusive social cohesion, drawing insights from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, and institutional theory.

#### **1.4. Social Identity Theory and the Recognition of Diverse Identities**

Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, provides a foundational understanding of the relationship between individual and collective identity, and its implications for intergroup relations and societal cohesion (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, and that they tend to favor their in-group over out-groups, often leading to prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict. However, the theory also recognizes that individuals hold multiple, intersecting social identities, which can include but are not limited to their ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural affiliations (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Verkuyten, 2005; Kish Bar-On and Lamm, 2023). The recognition and validation of these diverse identities, rather than the promotion of a singular or dominant identity, is a critical component of inclusive social cohesion. By fostering an environment where individuals and communities can maintain their unique cultural practices and expressions while also feeling a sense of belonging to the broader societal fabric, inclusive social cohesion can enhance social integration and collective purpose (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Hickman *et al.*, 2008).

#### **1.5. Intergroup Contact Theory and the Transformative Potential of Intercultural Dialogue**

Intergroup contact theory, developed by Gordon Allport and further expanded by scholars such as Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, emphasizes the transformative potential of meaningful intercultural exchange and the cultivation of

positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). This theory posits that under certain conditions, such as equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support, contact between members of different groups can lead to the reduction of prejudice, the enhancement of empathy and understanding, and the fostering of more inclusive and cohesive societies. The integration of intergroup contact theory into the conceptualization of inclusive social cohesion highlights the importance of creating opportunities for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and the sharing of diverse perspectives and experiences (Hewstone and Swart, 2011; Pettigrew *et al.*, 2011). By facilitating these intercultural exchanges, societies can cultivate a deeper appreciation for diversity, challenge stereotypes and biases, and strengthen the sense of shared civic identity and collective purpose (Uslaner, 2012; Cheong *et al.*, 2007).

### ***1.6. The Capabilities Approach and the Expansion of Substantive Freedoms***

The capabilities approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides a critical foundation for understanding the importance of equitable access to resources and opportunities in fostering inclusive social cohesion (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This perspective emphasizes the need to expand people's substantive freedoms and capabilities to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value, rather than focusing solely on the accumulation of material wealth or the achievement of a predetermined set of outcomes. Within the context of inclusive social cohesion, the capabilities approach underscores the importance of ensuring that all individuals and communities, regardless of their social, cultural, or economic background, have equitable access to essential resources, services, and opportunities that enable them to fully participate in and contribute to the broader societal fabric (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This includes access to education, healthcare, employment, housing, and civic engagement, as well as the cultivation of the necessary skills and agency to exercise these freedoms. By integrating the capabilities approach, the conceptualization of inclusive social cohesion highlights the need to address systemic barriers and inequities that prevent marginalized groups from accessing and utilizing these critical resources, thereby fostering a more level playing field and enhancing the sense of belonging and collective purpose within diverse societies (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Hickman *et al.*, 2008).

### ***1.7. Institutional Theory and the Role of Adaptive Governance***

Institutional theory, as developed by scholars such as Douglass North and W. Richard Scott, emphasizes the pivotal role of formal and informal institutions in shaping societal outcomes, including the level of social cohesion and inclusion (North, 1990; Scott, 2008). This perspective underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness, adaptability, and accountability in fostering inclusive social cohesion. In the context of diverse societies, institutional theory highlights the need for public and private institutions to be responsive to the unique needs and perspectives of marginalized communities, to proactively address systemic barriers, and to cultivate inclusive decision-making processes (Cantle, 2012; Hickman *et al.*, 2008). This includes the development of adaptive and collaborative governance approaches that empower diverse stakeholders, foster intercultural dialogue, and enable the co-creation of inclusive policies and programs (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012). By integrating institutional theory into the conceptualization of inclusive social cohesion, this article recognizes the crucial role of governance structures and processes in shaping the conditions for belonging, equity, and collective purpose within diverse societies (Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Uslaner, 2012). This perspective underscores the need for a transformative and collaborative approach to institutional reform and development.

### ***1.8. A Comprehensive Framework for Inclusive Social Cohesion***

Drawing on the interdisciplinary theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, this article proposes a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing inclusive social cohesion. The framework comprises four key pillars that are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

### ***1.9. Promoting Equitable Access to Resources and Opportunities***

The first pillar of the inclusive social cohesion framework emphasizes the importance of ensuring equitable access to critical resources and opportunities, such as education, healthcare, housing, employment, and civic participation. This pillar is rooted in the capabilities approach, which underscores the need to expand people's substantive freedoms and enable them to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Addressing systemic barriers and inequities in the distribution of these essential resources is a crucial step towards fostering inclusive social cohesion. This may involve implementing targeted interventions, such as affirmative action policies, inclusive service delivery models, and community-based empowerment initiatives, to ensure that marginalized groups can meaningfully access and benefit from these critical assets (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016).

### ***1.10. Facilitating Meaningful Intercultural Exchange and Mutual Understanding***

The second pillar of the framework focuses on the creation of platforms and opportunities for meaningful intercultural exchange, dialogue, and the cultivation of mutual understanding. Drawing on intergroup contact theory, this pillar

emphasizes the transformative potential of positive interactions between members of diverse communities, under conditions that promote equality, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). These intercultural exchange initiatives may take various forms, such as community-based cultural festivals, interfaith dialogues, cross-cultural mentorship programs, or collaborative problem-solving workshops. The key objective is to foster a deeper appreciation for diversity, challenge stereotypes and biases, and strengthen the sense of shared civic identity and collective purpose among individuals and communities (Uslaner, 2012; Cheong *et al.*, 2007).

### ***1.11. Empowering Marginalized Communities and Amplifying Their Voices***

The third pillar of the inclusive social cohesion framework focuses on the empowerment of marginalized communities and the amplification of their voices within the broader societal discourse (Moleka, 2024a ; 2024b ; 2024c ; 2024d ; 2024e ; 2024f). This pillar is rooted in the recognition that traditional models of social cohesion have often marginalized the perspectives and experiences of minority groups, perpetuating patterns of exclusion and disempowerment (Cantle, 2012; Hickman *et al.*, 2008 ; Moleka, 2024g ; 2024h ; 2024i ; 2024j). By actively engaging marginalized communities as co-designers and decision-makers in the development of inclusive policies and programs, this pillar seeks to challenge power imbalances, foster collaborative problem-solving, and ensure that the unique needs, priorities, and aspirations of these groups are recognized and addressed (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Bautista, 2018 ; Moleka, 2024k ; 2024l ; 2024m). This may involve supporting community-led initiatives, facilitating participatory governance structures, and creating platforms for the expression and amplification of marginalized voices.

### ***1.12. Strengthening Institutional Responsiveness and Adaptive Governance***

The fourth pillar of the framework focuses on the critical role of institutions and governance structures in fostering inclusive social cohesion. Drawing on institutional theory, this pillar emphasizes the need for public and private institutions to be responsive to the diverse needs and perspectives of the communities they serve, to proactively address systemic barriers, and to cultivate inclusive decision-making processes (North, 1990; Scott, 2008). This may involve the development of adaptive and collaborative governance approaches that empower diverse stakeholders, foster intercultural dialogue, and enable the co-creation of inclusive policies and programs (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012). It also includes strengthening the institutional capacity for data collection, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure that the impacts of these initiatives on marginalized communities are regularly assessed and addressed. By integrating these four key pillars, the comprehensive framework for inclusive social cohesion provides a holistic and transformative approach to fostering belonging, equity, and collective purpose within diverse societies. The pillars are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of inclusive social cohesion.

### ***1.13. Systematic Review of Innovative Case Studies***

This section presents a systematic review of innovative case studies from diverse global contexts to illustrate the practical application and transformative potential of the proposed framework for inclusive social cohesion. The case studies highlight the multifaceted impact of the framework's key pillars and the challenges encountered in the implementation process, while also underscoring the importance of contextual factors and the need to address power dynamics and structural inequalities.

### ***1.14. Case Study 1: Promoting Equitable Access to Resources and Opportunities in Montreal, Canada***

The city of Montreal, Canada, has been recognized for its efforts to enhance equitable access to resources and opportunities as a means of fostering inclusive social cohesion within its diverse population. One key initiative is the city's affordable housing program, which aims to ensure that low-income residents, including recent immigrants and marginalized communities, have access to decent and affordable housing. The program involves strategic investments in the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing units, as well as the implementation of rent supplement and housing allowance schemes (Belley *et al.*, 2019). These interventions have helped to address the housing affordability crisis and mitigate the risk of displacement and segregation among marginalized communities. Additionally, the city has adopted inclusive zoning policies that require new residential developments to include a certain percentage of affordable housing units, thereby promoting economic and social integration within neighborhoods (Bouchard-Bastien and Hamel, 2018). Alongside these housing initiatives, Montreal has also invested in improving access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for its diverse population. This includes the establishment of community-based resource centers, the provision of language training and skills development programs, and the implementation of targeted hiring and procurement policies to support minority-owned businesses and organizations (Germain and Radice, 2006; Reitz *et al.*, 2009). These multifaceted efforts have contributed to enhancing the capabilities and substantive freedoms of marginalized residents, fostering a more equitable and inclusive society.

### ***1.15. Case Study 2: Facilitating Meaningful Intercultural Exchange in Malmö, Sweden***

The city of Malmö, Sweden, has pioneered innovative approaches to fostering meaningful intercultural exchange and mutual understanding among its diverse communities. One notable initiative is the “Dialogue Cafés,” which bring together residents from different backgrounds to engage in guided discussions on topics ranging from cultural traditions to shared civic values (Nieminen and Ruuska, 2020). These Dialogue Cafés are designed to create safe and inclusive spaces where participants can share their experiences, ask questions, and challenge stereotypes in a spirit of openness and respect. The sessions are facilitated by trained moderators who ensure that all voices are heard and that the dialogue remains constructive and solution-oriented (Hickman *et al.*, 2008). By emphasizing principles of equal status, common goals, and institutional support, the Dialogue Cafés have helped to build trust, empathy, and a stronger sense of collective identity among Malmö’s diverse communities (Uslaner, 2012; Cheong *et al.*, 2007). In addition to the Dialogue Cafés, Malmö has also invested in cultural festivals, intercultural mentorship programs, and collaborative community projects that bring together residents from different backgrounds to work towards shared objectives (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2011). These initiatives have not only fostered meaningful cross-cultural interactions but have also provided platforms for the amplification of marginalized voices and the co-creation of inclusive policies and programs (Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Bautista, 2018).

### ***1.16. Case Study 3: Empowering Marginalized Communities and Amplifying Their Voices in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil***

The city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has implemented a comprehensive approach to empowering marginalized communities and amplifying their voices within the broader societal discourse. One key initiative is the “Participatory Budgeting” program, which enables residents, particularly those from low-income and historically underrepresented neighborhoods, to directly participate in the allocation of a portion of the city’s budget (Avritzer, 2006; Baiocchi, 2001). Through this program, community members convene in regional and thematic assemblies to identify their collective needs, prioritize investment proposals, and negotiate with the municipal government to ensure that the final budget reflects their priorities (Wampler, 2007). This process not only strengthens the civic engagement and political agency of marginalized communities but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and collective responsibility for the city’s development (Baiocchi, 2003). In addition to the Participatory Budgeting initiative, Rio de Janeiro has also supported the establishment of community-based organizations, provided training and capacity-building programs, and created platforms for the amplification of marginalized voices in the media and policy-making processes (Bautista, 2018; Moser, 1989). These efforts have empowered residents to advocate for their rights, challenge power imbalances, and collaborate with city officials to co-create more inclusive and responsive governance structures (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016).

### ***1.17. Case Study 4: Strengthening Institutional Responsiveness and Adaptive Governance in Auckland, New Zealand***

The city of Auckland, New Zealand, has made significant strides in strengthening institutional responsiveness and adaptive governance to foster inclusive social cohesion within its diverse population. One innovative initiative is the “Auckland Design Manual,” which provides a comprehensive framework and set of guidelines for the design and development of the city’s built environment (Auckland Council, 2020). The Design Manual emphasizes principles of inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness, requiring city planners, developers, and architects to actively engage with local communities, particularly marginalized groups, in the design process (Christensen, 2015). This collaborative approach has enabled the integration of diverse perspectives, needs, and cultural expressions into the physical fabric of the city, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership among residents (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016). In addition to the Design Manual, Auckland has also implemented adaptive governance structures that empower diverse stakeholders, including community organizations, private sector actors, and local government agencies, to collectively address complex urban challenges (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012). These collaborative platforms facilitate intercultural dialogue, co-create inclusive policies, and promote the responsiveness of institutions to the evolving needs of the city’s diverse communities (Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Uslaner, 2012). The case studies presented in this section illustrate the transformative potential of the comprehensive framework for inclusive social cohesion, highlighting the multifaceted impact of interventions that address equitable access to resources, meaningful intercultural exchange, community empowerment, and institutional responsiveness. By drawing on these innovative examples, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can gain valuable insights into the design and implementation of inclusive social cohesion initiatives tailored to diverse societal contexts.

### ***1.18. The Role of Digital Technologies and Social Media in Inclusive Social Cohesion***

The rapid advancements in digital technologies and the ubiquity of social media platforms have had a significant impact on the dynamics of social cohesion within diverse societies. On the one hand, these technological tools have the

potential to facilitate intercultural exchange, amplify marginalized voices, and strengthen institutional responsiveness (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Castells, 2015). On the other hand, they can also exacerbate social divisions, perpetuate misinformation, and undermine collective purpose (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011).

### ***1.19. Leveraging Digital Tools for Inclusive Dialogue and Collaboration***

Recent studies have highlighted the ways in which digital platforms can be harnessed to create new spaces for meaningful intercultural dialogue and collaborative problem-solving (Ala-Fossi *et al.*, 2018; Abdel-Basset *et al.*, 2021). Online forums, virtual community-building initiatives, and social media-based campaigns have provided marginalized groups with amplified opportunities to share their narratives, challenge stereotypes, and forge connections across diverse communities (Kaun an Uldam, 2018; Dencik and Leistert, 2015). Moreover, the use of collaborative digital tools, such as participatory mapping, crowdsourcing, and virtual co-creation workshops, has enabled more inclusive and responsive governance approaches, where diverse stakeholders can collectively identify and address local challenges (Poplin, 2012; Foth *et al.*, 2015). By integrating these digital interventions with the other pillars of the inclusive social cohesion framework, policymakers and practitioners can leverage technology to enhance equity, empowerment, and institutional responsiveness within diverse societies.

### ***1.20. Mitigating the Risks of Digital Fragmentation and Polarization***

However, the proliferation of digital technologies has also given rise to new challenges that can undermine social cohesion, such as online echo chambers, filter bubbles, and the spread of disinformation (Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011). These dynamics can exacerbate social divisions, erode trust in institutions, and hinder the development of a shared civic identity and collective purpose (Bode, 2016; Dubois and Blank, 2018). To address these risks, scholars and policymakers have emphasized the need for digital literacy initiatives, algorithmic transparency, and the regulation of social media platforms to promote more inclusive and resilient online spaces (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017; Gorwa, 2019). Moreover, the integration of digital tools with offline community-building efforts and inclusive governance structures can help to bridge the online-offline divide and foster a more holistic approach to inclusive social cohesion (Foth *et al.*, 2015; Castells, 2015).

### ***1.21. The Political Economy of Inclusive Social Cohesion***

The pursuit of inclusive social cohesion is inherently a political endeavor, as it involves the negotiation of power dynamics, the allocation of resources, and the integration of diverse interests within a given societal context (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Hickman *et al.*, 2008). Understanding the political economy of these transformative initiatives is crucial in order to identify the enablers, barriers, and potential trade-offs that can shape their implementation and impact.

### ***1.22. Addressing Power Imbalances and Vested Interests***

A key challenge in fostering inclusive social cohesion lies in addressing the power imbalances and vested interests that perpetuate structural inequalities and marginalization within diverse societies (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Cantle, 2012). Dominant groups, whether based on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or political influence, may resist efforts to redistribute resources or challenge the status quo, leading to conflicts and resistance to change (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008). To navigate these political dynamics, inclusive social cohesion initiatives must be designed and implemented with a keen awareness of power relations, and must actively engage marginalized communities as empowered stakeholders in the decision-making process (Bautista, 2018; Hickman *et al.*, 2008). This may involve supporting community-led advocacy efforts, fostering cross-sector collaborations, and leveraging legal and policy frameworks to hold institutions accountable to equity-focused outcomes (Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016).

### ***1.23. Aligning Inclusive Social Cohesion with Broader Societal Agendas***

Another critical consideration in the political economy of inclusive social cohesion is the need to align these transformative initiatives with broader societal agendas, such as sustainable development, climate change adaptation, and conflict resolution (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016). By integrating inclusive social cohesion as a central pillar of these interconnected policy domains, policymakers can leverage synergies, mobilize cross-cutting resources, and amplify the collective impact of these efforts (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Cantle, 2012). For example, inclusive social cohesion can contribute to the development of more resilient and sustainable communities, where diverse stakeholders collaborate to address shared environmental challenges and foster a sense of collective responsibility (Fung and Wright, 2001; Emerson *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, the principles of inclusive social cohesion can inform peacebuilding and conflict resolution strategies, by promoting intercultural dialogue, challenging power imbalances, and empowering marginalized groups as

agents of change (Lederach, 1997; Bar-Tal and Rosen, 2009). By navigating the political economy of inclusive social cohesion and aligning these transformative initiatives with broader societal agendas, policymakers and practitioners can enhance the long-term sustainability, scalability, and societal impact of these efforts, ultimately contributing to the creation of more equitable, resilient, and inclusive communities worldwide.

#### **1.24. Policy Recommendations and Future Research Directions**

Building on the theoretical foundations, case studies, and analysis of the political economy of inclusive social cohesion, this article offers the following policy recommendations and future research directions to advance this agenda and catalyze positive societal transformations worldwide:

##### **1.25. Policy Recommendations**

1. Adopt a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to fostering inclusive social cohesion, incorporating the four key pillars of the proposed framework:
  - (1) Promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities;
  - (2) Facilitating meaningful intercultural exchange and mutual understanding;
  - (3) Empowering marginalized communities and amplifying their voices;
  - (4) Strengthening institutional responsiveness and adaptive governance (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016).
2. Invest in targeted interventions and inclusive policies that address systemic barriers and inequities, such as affordable housing initiatives, inclusive education programs, and affirmative action measures, to enhance the substantive freedoms and capabilities of marginalized communities (Wolbring and Nguyen, 2023; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Reitz *et al.*, 2009).
3. Create platforms and opportunities for meaningful intercultural dialogue, collaboration, and the sharing of diverse perspectives, in order to challenge stereotypes, build empathy, and strengthen the sense of shared civic identity and collective purpose (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Cheong *et al.*, 2007; Uslaner, 2012).
4. Empower marginalized communities as active agents in the design, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive social cohesion initiatives, ensuring that their unique needs, priorities, and aspirations are recognized and addressed (Bautista, 2018; Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Moleka, 2024n; 2024o).
5. Reform public and private institutions to enhance their responsiveness, adaptability, and accountability to the diverse needs and perspectives of the communities they serve, fostering collaborative and inclusive governance structures (North, 1990; Scott, 2008; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012).
6. Leverage digital technologies and social media platforms to facilitate intercultural exchange, amplify marginalized voices, and strengthen institutional responsiveness, while also implementing measures to mitigate the risks of digital fragmentation and polarization (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Castells, 2015; Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011).
7. Align inclusive social cohesion initiatives with broader societal agendas, such as sustainable development, climate change adaptation, and conflict resolution, to leverage synergies and amplify the collective impact of these transformative efforts (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Cantle, 2012).

##### **1.26. Future Research Directions**

1. Expand the empirical evidence base by conducting longitudinal, comparative, and mixed- methods studies to further explore the long-term impacts and contextual factors that shape the effectiveness of inclusive social cohesion initiatives (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023; Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016).
2. Investigate the intersections between inclusive social cohesion and other pressing societal challenges, such as climate change adaptation, sustainable development, and conflict resolution, to develop holistic and integrative approaches (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Cantle, 2012).
3. Explore the role of digital technologies and social media in both facilitating and potentially hindering inclusive social cohesion, and develop strategies to harness the transformative potential of these tools while mitigating potential risks (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Castells, 2015; Sunstein, 2017; Pariser, 2011).
4. Analyze the political economy of inclusive social cohesion, examining the power dynamics, resource allocations, and vested interests that can either enable or constrain the implementation of these transformative approaches (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Cantle, 2012).

5. Engage in cross-disciplinary collaborations to further refine and operationalize the conceptual framework for inclusive social cohesion, incorporating insights from fields such as urban planning, community psychology, and public administration (Hickman *et al.*, 2008; Bernardo *et al.*, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2013).
6. Investigate the intersections between inclusive social cohesion and other contemporary social phenomena, such as the rise of populism, the changing nature of citizenship, and the impacts of global migration, to develop a more holistic understanding of the societal challenges and opportunities at hand (Cantle, 2012; Castles *et al.*, 2013; Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008).
7. Examine the role of community-based organizations, grassroots movements, and civil society actors in shaping and implementing inclusive social cohesion initiatives, and explore how these efforts can be effectively supported and scaled (Bautista, 2018; Moser, 1989; Wampler, 2007).
8. Investigate the intersections between inclusive social cohesion and the spatial dimensions of urban planning and design, exploring how the built environment can foster a stronger sense of belonging and collective purpose within diverse communities (Christensen, 2015; Auckland Council, 2020; Germain and Radice, 2006). By addressing these policy recommendations and future research directions, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners can work collaboratively to redefine social cohesion, foster inclusive and belonging-centered societies, and catalyze positive societal transformations worldwide.

## 2. Conclusion

In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, the challenge of maintaining social cohesion and cultivating a sense of belonging and inclusion has become a critical priority. This article has proposed a transformative approach to redefining social cohesion through the lens of inclusion and belonging, drawing on a comprehensive review of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and innovative case studies from diverse global contexts. The comprehensive framework for inclusive social cohesion presented in this article comprises four interdependent pillars:

- (1) Promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities;
- (2) Facilitating meaningful intercultural exchange and mutual understanding;
- (3) Empowering marginalized communities and amplifying their voices;
- (4) Strengthening institutional responsiveness and adaptive governance. This holistic and equity-focused approach offers a ground breaking contribution to the scholarly discourse and policy debates on managing diversity, fostering social integration, and building more inclusive and sustainable societies. By redefining social cohesion through the lens of inclusion and belonging, this article has highlighted the transformative potential of these initiatives in enhancing the capabilities and substantive freedoms of marginalized communities, challenging systemic barriers, and cultivating a shared sense of civic identity and collective purpose. The policy recommendations and future research directions outlined in this article provide a roadmap for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to advance the agenda of inclusive social cohesion and catalyze positive societal transformations worldwide. As societies continue to grapple with the complexities of diversity and the imperative of building more equitable and resilient communities, the conceptual framework and evidence presented in this article offer a powerful and inspiring vision for redefining social cohesion in the 21st century.

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