THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COHESION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CHILDHOOD PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT: A COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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Received: 13 enero 2025
Revised: 17 enero 2025
Evaluator 1 report: 3 febrero 2025
Evaluator 2 report: 17 febrero 2025
Accepted: 20 febrero 2025
Published: mayo 2025

ABSTRACT

This literature review examines the integral role of social cohesion in fostering both economic development and childhood psychological well-being. Social cohesion, defined as the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a community, positively impacts economic performance by enhancing cooperation, reducing conflict, and increasing collective action. Societies with high levels of social trust and networks tend to exhibit stronger economic growth due to better-functioning institutions and higher levels of innovation. Studies suggest that cohesive communities are more resilient to economic crises, with stronger labor markets and more effective responses to social challenges. Moreover, social cohesion is vital for early childhood development. Children in cohesive societies benefit from greater access to quality education, healthcare, and social services, leading to improved cognitive and emotional outcomes. The presence of stable family structures, supportive communities, and inclusive policies ensures equitable opportunities for all children, particularly in disadvantaged communities. The literature further demonstrates that cohesive societies provide a nurturing environment that mitigates childhood stress and enhances academic performance, contributing to long-term economic productivity. Policies aimed at reducing inequality, promoting inclusive governance, and investing in social capital are essential for sustainable economic growth and the well-being of future generations.

Keywords: social cohesion; economic development; childhood psychological development

This study was funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU, Mission 4, Component 2, in the framework of the GRINS -Growing Resilient, INclusive and Sustainable project (GRINS PE00000018 – CUP E63C22002120006).

The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, nor can the European Union be held responsible for them.

DOI: 10.17060/ijodaep.2025.n1.v1.2811

RESUMEN

El papel de la cohesión social en el desarrollo económico y el desarrollo psicológico infantil: una revisión exhaustiva de la literatura. Esta revisión bibliográfica examina el papel integral de la cohesión social en el fomento tanto del desarrollo económico como del bienestar psicológico infantil. La cohesión social, definida como la fuerza de las relaciones y el sentido de solidaridad entre los miembros de una comunidad, influye positivamente en los resultados económicos al mejorar la cooperación, reducir los conflictos y aumentar la acción colectiva. Las sociedades con altos niveles de confianza y redes sociales tienden a mostrar un mayor crecimiento económico debido al mejor funcionamiento de las instituciones y a los mayores niveles de innovación. Los estudios sugieren que las comunidades cohesionadas son más resistentes a las crisis económicas, con mercados laborales más fuertes y respuestas más eficaces a los retos sociales. Además, la cohesión social es vital para el desarrollo de la primera infancia. Los niños de las sociedades cohesionadas se benefician de un mayor acceso a la educación, la sanidad y los servicios sociales de calidad, lo que se traduce en mejores resultados cognitivos y emocionales. La presencia de estructuras familiares estables, comunidades solidarias y políticas integradoras garantiza oportunidades equitativas para todos los niños, especialmente en las comunidades desfavorecidas. La literatura demuestra además que las sociedades cohesionadas proporcionan un entorno propicio que mitiga el estrés infantil y mejora el rendimiento académico, contribuyendo a la productividad económica a largo plazo. Las políticas encaminadas a reducir la desigualdad, promover la gobernanza integradora e invertir en capital social son esenciales para el crecimiento económico sostenible y el bienestar de las generaciones futuras.

Palabras clave: cohesión social; desarrollo económico; desarrollo psicológico infantil

INTRODUCTION

Social cohesion has been a central concept in sociology, political science, psychology, and economics. Initially introduced by Durkheim (1893), it encompasses the bonds and behaviors that integrate individuals into a stable society. Despite its broad usage in political discourse and policy frameworks (Chan et al., 2006), there remains no consensus on a single definition.

A cohesive society is characterized by trust, participation, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to economic stability and social well-being (Beauvais & Jenson 2002). Institutions and governance structures play a crucial role in fostering or eroding social cohesion (North, 1990; Dequech, 2013). Research in psychology suggests that social cohesion is also a key determinant of psychological well-being, as it enhances feelings of security, social identity, and support networks, which in turn improve mental health outcomes (Keyes, 1998; Helliwell, 2004). Individuals living in highly cohesive communities tend to report lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, while fragmented societies are often associated with increased loneliness and psychological distress (Kawachi & Berkman2001).

This literature review explores the intricate relationship between social cohesion, economic development, psychological well-being, and childhood outcomes, providing an in-depth analysis of the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence available.

Next section outlines the theoretical framework of social cohesion and draws upon existing literature to examine how social cohesion interacts with economic and social structures. The third section examines empirical evidence on social cohesion and economic development, focusing on social capital, inequality, and the role of institutions. The fourth section investigates the impact of social cohesion on childhood outcomes, particularly in early childhood development and social inclusion. The fifth section explores the role of social cohesion in children's psychological development. It highlights the influence of supportive environments on emotional resilience, cognitive growth, and social adaptability, emphasizing the role of family structures, education, and community support. The sixth section concludes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL COHESION

Definition and Dimensions

The concept of social cohesion is framed around trust, inclusion, civic engagement, and shared values (Jenson, 1998; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). The Canadian Policy Research Networks (1998) identifies five key dimensions: belonging, economic inclusion, participation, recognition of diversity, and institutional legitimacy. Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) propose six: social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, equality, and quality of life. Belonging refers to how connected individuals feel to society, often linked to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A strong sense of belonging promotes psychological well-being and civic engagement (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Economic inclusion is crucial, as inequality can fragment society. Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that lower income inequality correlates with higher trust and well-being. Easterly et al. (2006) suggest inclusion reduces conflict. Participation includes political and community engagement; Verba et al. (1995) highlight its role in democracy and decision-making. High participation strengthens governance and shared responsibility (Putnam, 2000). Recognition of diversity ensures all groups feel valued. Multicultural policies enhance cohesion (Kymlicka & Banting, 2006), though lack of integration can cause divisions (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002).

Institutional legitimacy refers to trust in governance; fair and transparent institutions are key (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Rule of law and equity promote legitimacy and norm compliance (Tyler, 2006). Social cohesion buffers economic shocks (European Commission, 2007, 2009, 2010; Council of Europe, 2005, 2010). Globalization influences cohesion in both directions (Hulse & Stone, 2007; Touraine & Macey, 2000). Foundational theories come from sociology (Durkheim, 1893), political science (Lockwood, 1999), and institutional economics (North, 1990). Granovetter (1985, 2005) underscores embeddedness, trust, and networks. Woolcock (1998) and Putnam (2000) stress bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Cohesion evolves over time, influenced by demographics and economic shifts (Kearns & Forrest, 2000), requiring adaptive policies, especially in response to migration and urbanization (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Social Cohesion and Economic Theory

Economic perspectives on social cohesion are rooted in transaction cost economics (North, 1990) and in the role of trust in facilitating exchanges (Osberg, 2003). Mutual trust lowers uncertainty, reducing transaction costs and promoting economic activity (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002). Institutional trust fosters investment and innovation (Osberg, 2003).

Culturally, Bourdieu (1986) contends that social capital influences economic mobility. Similarly, Fukuyama (1995) highlights trust as key to prosperity: high-trust societies perform better economically. Putnam (2000) links civic engagement to prosperity, supported empirically by Helliwell and Putnam (2004), who associate social capital with resilience. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that inclusive institutions foster cohesion and development, while extractive ones erode trust and hinder growth.

Algan and Cahuc (2010) show that generalized trust enhances growth by reducing monitoring costs. Zak and Knack (2001) similarly find trust boosts investment, particularly foreign direct investment. Bowles and Gintis (2002) emphasize how norms of reciprocity and responsibility improve labor productivity and support redistributive policies, enhancing stability and workforce capacity. Rothstein and Uslaner (2005) argue that fairness and institutional quality increase trust and generate virtuous economic cycles.

Innovation also benefits from cohesion. Akçomak and ter Weel (2009) demonstrate that social capital enhances knowledge diffusion and collaboration, leading to more patents and technological progress, and thus growth. However, economic inequality undermines cohesion: Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) show it erodes trust and social capital, weakening cooperation and economic performance. Alesina and Perotti (1996) add that inequality heightens political instability and deters investment.

Social cohesion also shapes labor markets. Blau and Duncan (1967) and Granovetter (1995) reveal that strong networks aid job matching, reduce unemployment, and improve mobility. Informal referrals and community support bolster workforce resilience during downturns.

Finally, trust in financial institutions matters. Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (2004) find that it correlates with credit availability and investment, facilitating entrepreneurship and dynamism.

In sum, these contributions confirm the deep interplay between social cohesion and economic outcomes. Cohesive societies enjoy more stability, innovation, and prosperity. Policies enhancing cohesion—through inclusion, equity, and investment in social capital—are thus essential for sustained economic growth.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON SOCIAL COHESION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Social Capital and Economic Growth

Social cohesion fosters economic prosperity by enhancing cooperation, reducing conflict, and enabling collective action (Knack & Keefer, 1997). Easterly et al. (2006) note that inequality erodes cohesion, harming performance, while strong social networks support innovation and human capital (Osberg, 2003).

Putnam (2000) links civic engagement to economic well-being, showing that cohesive communities grow faster. Rajulton et al. (2007) emphasize that economic inclusion boosts well-being and social mobility. Beyond macro indicators, social capital influences individual economic behavior, labor participation, and entrepreneurship. Helliwell and Huang (2008) find that cohesive societies report higher job satisfaction and lower unemployment, suggesting stronger networks foster economic stability and mobility.

Bartolini and Sarracino (2015) argue growth alone is insufficient without cohesion: fragmentation breeds inequality and instability. Their findings show social capital accumulation supports long-term development through trust and civic engagement. Alesina and Giuliano (2015) stress the economic role of family and social ties: strong family networks lower labor mobility but improve mutual support and crisis resilience. Different cohesion forms—civic or familial—thus shape diverse economic paths.

Empirical research by Helliwell, Huang, and Wang (2018) shows that countries with higher trust and civic participation recover faster from recessions, due to more effective resource mobilization, policy support, and coordination. Social cohesion also drives innovation. Akçomak and ter Weel (2009) show that regions with dense networks of trust produce more patents and technological advances. Trust and cooperation enhance knowledge-sharing and collaboration, critical for progress in knowledge economies.

Cohesion affects financial access too. Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (2004) find trust in financial institutions increases investment and entrepreneurship. Their work shows cohesive societies with reliable banking systems are more dynamic and innovative.

In sum, social cohesion impacts economic growth across multiple dimensions—stability, innovation, and prosperity. Policies that foster cohesion—through inclusion, equity, and social capital investment—are crucial to long-term economic success.

Inequality, Social Cohesion, and Economic Stability

Economic inequality is widely recognized as a serious threat to social cohesion, with major consequences for economic stability and development. Societies marked by high income inequality often exhibit lower trust, weaker institutions, and greater social unrest (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Inequality undermines cohesion through disparities in resource access, limited mobility opportunities, and declining social trust.

Stiglitz (2012) emphasizes that extreme disparities lead to political instability, harming investor confidence and growth. This is acute in contexts where wealth concentration restricts access to education, healthcare, and credit, perpetuating exclusion. Alesina and Perotti (1996) argue that inequality fuels political violence and volatility, as marginalized groups may resort to conflict to challenge systemic injustice.

Cohesion can mitigate inequality's harmful effects. Cohesive societies display higher collective action, reducing inequality's destabilizing impact (Easterly et al., 2006). Countries with inclusive labor markets and welfare systems are less prone to fragmentation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Progressive taxation and social safety nets enhance institutional trust and resilience (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005).

Empirical evidence links inequality to reduced growth via diminished mobility and human capital. Corak (2013) identifies the "Great Gatsby Curve," showing that high inequality correlates with low intergenerational mobility. In such societies, disadvantaged children face entrenched barriers, reinforcing social divisions and limiting economic potential.

Financial instability also stems from inequality. Rajan (2010) argues that rising disparities fueled the 2008 crisis, as low-income households relied on debt to sustain consumption amid wage stagnation, leading to market collapse. This illustrates the systemic risks of unchecked inequality.

Inequality is further linked to civic disengagement and democratic decline. Solt (2008) finds that greater inequality correlates with lower voter turnout and reduced political participation among poorer citizens, weakening institutional legitimacy and heightening instability.

To address these challenges, policies must pair growth with inclusion. Investments in education, healthcare, and housing can expand opportunity and productivity. Community-driven initiatives and participatory governance enhance cohesion by building trust and cooperation.

In sum, inequality, social cohesion, and economic stability are deeply intertwined. Growth alone cannot ensure harmony; inclusive, equitable policies are essential for building resilient and prosperous societies.

The Role of Institutions

Institutions play a pivotal role in shaping social cohesion (Dequech, 2013). Effective governance and equitable legal systems ensure stability and participation. Council of Europe reports (2005, 2010) show that cohesive societies are more resilient during crises and maintain higher institutional trust.

Rodrik (1999) asserts that strong institutions mitigate economic shocks and prevent fragmentation. Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) stress that inclusive institutions are essential for sustained growth and stability. Rothstein & Uslaner (2005) demonstrate that institutional quality fosters generalized trust, a core element of cohesion.

Institutions contribute to cohesion in multiple ways. Legal frameworks ensuring property rights, contract enforcement, and transparency provide a stable basis for economic activity. When institutions are reliable, individuals are more inclined to trust and cooperate (North, 1990).

Social policies also strengthen cohesion by reducing disparities and providing safety nets. Welfare systems, public education, and universal healthcare increase institutional trust and reduce fragmentation (Esping-Andersen, 1990). For instance, Scandinavian countries with robust welfare states score high on cohesion indices (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Democratic institutions foster political participation and inclusivity. Robust democracies show greater civic engagement and trust (Putnam, 2000). Their ability to mediate conflict and ensure fair representation enhances both social stability and economic resilience (Lipset, 1959).

Corruption severely undermines cohesion. Mauro (1995) and Rose-Ackerman (2001) find that corruption erodes public trust, discourages investment, and heightens inequality. Treisman (2000) shows that corrupt systems foster polarization and hinder development.

In post-conflict contexts, rebuilding institutions is vital. Collier (2007) highlights the need for inclusive political structures to prevent renewed violence and ensure lasting stability. Transitional justice, reconciliation, and community development promote restored trust and cooperation (Elster, 2004).

Financial institutions also shape cohesion by enabling inclusion. Access to credit, fair banking, and financial literacy enhance participation and reduce inequality (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Levine, 2007). Inclusive financial systems support entrepreneurship and mobility (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011).

Thus, institutions—legal, political, social, and financial—are central to cohesion. Strong, transparent, and inclusive frameworks build trust, reduce inequality, and underpin sustainable development. Institutional reforms should prioritize good governance, anti-corruption, and inclusive policies to strengthen the foundations of social and economic stability.

SOCIAL COHESION AND CHILDHOOD OUTCOMES

Early Childhood Development

Social cohesion positively influences childhood development by improving access to education, healthcare, and social services (Rajulton et al., 2007). Community support networks enhance cognitive and socio-emotional skills, contributing to educational success (Osberg, 2003). Heckman (2006) emphasizes that early-life interventions in cohesive environments yield high economic returns via increased lifelong earnings and productivity.

Research confirms that early development is shaped by the quality of the social environment. Children in cohesive societies with strong support systems display better social skills, academic performance, and fewer behavioral problems (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Stable families, supportive peers, and engaged communities foster emotional well-being, which is vital for cognitive growth (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Healthcare access is also crucial, and cohesion plays a key role in its equity. Children in cohesive contexts experience better health outcomes, including lower infant mortality and higher vaccination rates (Marmot, 2005). In high-trust communities, health initiatives are more effective at preventing childhood diseases (Putnam, 2000).

Education is significantly affected by social cohesion. In cohesive societies, parental involvement, extracurricular participation, and strong teacher-student relationships are more common (Coleman, 1988). Moreover, cohesion leads to greater public investment in education, enhancing infrastructure, teacher quality, and inclusivity (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007).

The long-term economic benefits of early support in cohesive settings are well documented. Heckman et al. (2010) find that children receiving early care earn more, are likelier to be employed, and contribute to economic growth. Cohesion also strengthens safety nets for disadvantaged children, reducing disparities and fostering upward mobility (Chetty et al., 2014).

Conversely, low cohesion and high inequality hinder development. Children from poorer backgrounds face barriers to quality services, reinforcing cycles of poverty (Blanden, Gregg, & Macmillan, 2007). Addressing this requires policies for integration, equitable resource distribution, and community-driven programs (Esping-Andersen, 2005).

Overall, the literature highlights the deep impact of social cohesion on early childhood. From health to education and economic potential, cohesive societies provide environments where children can thrive. Policymakers should thus prioritize cohesion to promote childhood well-being and long-term sustainable growth.

Social Exclusion and Child Poverty

Economic disparities affect children disproportionately, leading to exclusion and reduced mobility (Beauvais & Jenson, 2002). Children in fragmented communities show lower academic and social outcomes (Rajulton et al., 2007; Jenson, 2010). Blanden et al. (2005) find that early disadvantage hampers long-term mobility. Low-income households limit access to quality education, nutrition, and healthcare, reinforcing inequality (Esping-Andersen, 2005). Corak (2013) links high income inequality to low intergenerational mobility. Social exclusion causes stress, low self-esteem, and reduced academic motivation (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Social cohesion mitigates this through community initiatives and school support (Putnam, 2000). Interventions like conditional cash transfers and universal pre-K improve mobility and child well-being (Heckman & Masterov, 2007).

The Digital Age and Social Cohesion

The digital age offers both promise and risk for social cohesion. While it enhances connectivity, it can also foster isolation (Błachnio et al., 2016). Increased screen time among youth is linked to lower social skills and reduced face-to-face interaction (Twenge et al., 2018a). Social media may fragment ties by creating echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001) and reduce civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). Yet, it also enables collective action and support, especially for marginalized groups (Castells, 2012). Economic inequality deepens digital exclusion; unequal access limits disadvantaged children's educational and social participation (Van Dijk, 2020). Addressing this requires broadband expansion, digital literacy in schools, and inclusive online spaces (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). If equitably implemented, digital tools like online learning, telemedicine, and e-governance can enhance participation and cohesion (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Policymakers must balance connectivity's benefits with strategies to protect civic life.

The Role of Social Cohesion in Children's Psychological Development

Social cohesion significantly shapes children's psychological development, enhancing emotional well-being, cognitive growth, and social adaptability. Studies show that children in cohesive environments display greater resilience and better emotional regulation than those in fragmented contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Putnam, 2000; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). This section examines how cohesion influences psychological outcomes across disciplines.

Social Capital and Emotional Well-Being

Social cohesion fosters children's emotional well-being by providing security and belonging. Attachment theory highlights the role of stable relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). High community trust reduces anxiety and depression (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Algan and Cahuc (2010) find children in trust-rich environments report greater happiness. Cohesion also lowers exposure to adverse experiences (Felitti et al., 1998).

Cognitive Development and Educational Outcomes

Social cohesion supports cognitive development by improving access to educational resources. Children in cohesive communities benefit from parental involvement and richer learning environments (Coleman, 1988; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Bridging social capital expands knowledge exposure (Putnam, 2000). Cohesion leads to better outcomes and earnings (Heckman, 2006; Chetty et al., 2014) and lowers dropout rates (Durlauf, 2002; Rajulton et al., 2007).

Social Adaptability and Prosocial Behavior

Early social interactions shape prosocial behavior and adaptability (Spinrad et al., 2006). Children in cohesive communities develop empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills, reducing antisocial tendencies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Experimental economics shows that those in high-trust settings are more collaborative (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Gächter et al., 2012), indicating that cohesion fosters lasting cooperative norms.

The Buffering Effect of Social Cohesion Against Socioeconomic Adversities

Children in poverty face stressors like insecurity and poor healthcare. Social cohesion buffers these effects through community support (Putnam, 2015; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Welfare systems in cohesive societies reduce poverty and build resilience (Esping-Andersen, 2005). High-cohesion areas show lower child stress (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993), and policies like universal healthcare improve psychological outcomes (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Implications for Policy and Future Research

Social cohesion is key to childhood psychological well-being. Policies should enhance community bonds through education, equity, and revitalization. Social-emotional learning in schools amplifies these benefits (Durlak et al., 2011). Future research should assess long-term effects and the role of digital socialization, as online interactions may reshape cohesion and development (Twenge et al., 2018b).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The literature analyzed confirms the crucial role of social cohesion in fostering economic development and childhood psychological well-being. Empirical and theoretical evidence highlights how strengthening institutional trust, reducing economic inequalities, and promoting community inclusion are key factors in maintaining cohesive and resilient societies.

Economies characterized by high levels of social cohesion exhibit more effective institutions, greater innovation, and enhanced resilience to economic crises. The research reviewed demonstrates that social cohesion fosters economic growth through social capital and conflict reduction, increasing cooperation among economic actors. Conversely, social fragmentation, driven by inequalities and institutional distrust, can hinder sustainable economic development.

The impact of social cohesion on childhood development is equally significant. Children raised in socially cohesive environments benefit from greater emotional security, improved academic performance, and enhanced social adaptability. A stable support network reduces anxiety and depression, fostering a sense of belonging and security. Access to high-quality educational resources and parental involvement in schooling significantly improve academic achievement and future economic prospects. Moreover, cohesive communities facilitate the development of empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills, reducing the likelihood of antisocial behaviors.

To maximize the benefits of social cohesion, public policies should focus on ensuring equitable access to quality education, supporting community-based initiatives, and promoting inclusive welfare systems. Educational policies that reduce disparities and foster integration are essential in strengthening social bonds. Community support programs, such as mentoring initiatives and parental engagement in schools, enhance social capital and contribute to childhood well-being. Inclusive social protection mechanisms, including conditional cash transfers and public healthcare, mitigate economic inequalities and reinforce social cohesion. Additionally, with the increasing digitalization of social interactions, responsible management of digital technologies must be encouraged to prevent social isolation and strengthen community ties.

Future research should further explore the long-term impact of social cohesion on childhood psychological development and examine the role of digitalization in shaping social interactions. As virtual interactions become more prevalent, it will be essential to understand their effects on social cohesion and the psychological well-being of future generations.

Investing in social cohesion not only promotes economic growth and institutional stability but also serves as a fundamental pillar for the well-being of future generations. Evidence-based policies centered on inclusion and the strengthening of social networks are crucial in building more resilient and prosperous societies.

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