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**to the**

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**Social cohesion: A global issue of increasing importance**

## ***Abstract***

The terms “social cohesion” and “social integration” are used interchangeably here, although in English there are some nuances that separate the two. Social cohesion seems to be more compatible with pluralism, while social integration seems to evoke more deliberate and purposeful policies to place people in a pre-existing framework or culture. However, in Chinese, both social cohesion and social integration connote the notion of harmony.

Social cohesion is the fundamental condition for the permanence of any society and is an essential aspect of social development. It is also a condition for sustainable economic growth. However, this essential component of society is being threatened in different parts of the world. Some of these threats are: *First*, the growing sense of insecurity felt by individuals and societies alike, across the world; *second*, the rise of inequalities throughout the world, including inequalities within societies; *third*, the decline of various forms of social protection and social security; *fourth*, the current globalization trend which lacks a more humane content and fails to respond to human needs and aspirations; and *fifth*, a growing claim for individual autonomy.

The United Nations, at its World Summit for Social Development held at Copenhagen in 1995, and its review special session at Geneva in 2000, addressed the issue of social integration in the context of a comprehensive vision of social development. In this regard, a few critical points should be noted: *First* is the attempt to link social integration or social cohesion with respect for the others and pluralism. *Second* is the recognition that equity and equality is a condition for social cohesion. *Third* is linking social cohesion with the protection of human rights and in general with tolerance and respect for the other. *Fourth* is placing social integration, or cohesion, into the overall objective of creating “A society for all”, based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law.

Seven policy areas were identified and recommended by the Social Summit to achieve social integration. They include: Promoting respect for democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and diversity, tolerance and responsibility, non-violence and solidarity and protecting all human rights and fundamental freedoms; encouraging the fullest participation of all people in society; eliminating discrimination and promoting tolerance and mutual respect for and the value of diversity; promoting equality and social justice; responding to special needs of social groups; addressing the problems created by violence, crime, substance abuse and illicit drugs; and strengthening and giving comprehensive protection and support to the family as the basic unit of society.

Further, there are several notions that are key to achieving social cohesion in any given society, and are highly relevant to the Hong Kong society. They are: Maintaining and promoting a humane economy; deepening partnership, responsibility and solidarity; emphasizing the role of education and training; and recognizing the central role of the family.

In conclusion, although social development and social cohesion are still mainly dependent on decisions taken at the community and national levels, global forces are increasingly influencing such decision. Therefore, the role of the United Nations and other international organizations, in

their attempt to shape the international environment, notably the functioning of the global economy, is more and more relevant to social development and social cohesion. The United Nations remains a unique and indispensable forum for the elaboration of common principles and norms that should provide the foundation and framework for international cooperation. Social cohesion has now to be sought at the world level.

## Introduction

I am indeed happy and honoured to be here with you today, and to share with you some thoughts on this very important concept of social cohesion/social integration. The fact that I was born and raised in Hong Kong makes it particularly meaningful for me to participate in this discussion. My presentation today will focus on three areas. First I would like to mention some of the reasons which explain the widespread interest in today's world on the question of social cohesion and social integration. Second, how the United Nations views the same question of social cohesion and social integration, and in particular what conditions are seen as necessary for such cohesion/integration. I will also, in the form of a few concluding remarks, give some personal views on the issue as it relates to Hong Kong.

In the course of my statement, I will use the terms "social cohesion" and "social integration" interchangeably, although in English there are some nuances that separate the two concepts. Social cohesion seems to be more compatible with pluralism, while social integration seems to evoke more deliberate and purposeful policies to place people in a pre-existing framework or culture. I note, however, that in Chinese, both social cohesion and social integration connote the notion of harmony in a society, which is exactly what we are all striving for. Therefore, I will use the two concepts as if they were identical.

### **I. Let me now turn to a brief analysis of the reasons for the widespread interest in the concept of social cohesion in today's world.**

Social cohesion is the fundamental condition for the permanence of any society and is an essential aspect of social development. Alternative to social cohesion is anarchy. Social cohesion is also a condition for sustainable economic growth. For example, few will dispute the fact that the economic successes of many countries in this part of the world have a lot to do with the cohesiveness of their societies. Economists would say that these societies have a great amount of "social capital".

If there is currently great interest in social cohesion, in the way to achieve it or maintain it, it is because this essential component of society is threatened in different parts of the world. I would like to mention a few manifestations of this problem.

*Firstly*, there is **the growing sense of insecurity** that is felt by individuals and societies alike, across the world, albeit sometimes for different reasons. Many societies are currently affected by civil strife, religious, ethnic and other conflicts, and various forms of violence including terrorism. There is also the very precise threat and human cost of old and new pandemics, as evidenced by SARS a few months ago in this part of the world. At another level, there is the general phenomenon of job insecurity. Not only unemployment and underemployment are still widespread, but many workers, employees and even managers have lost much of the security traditionally attached to their jobs. Mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, and the general call for flexibility and mobility are frequent causes of anxiety. Also, there is a related development of part-time work, casual work, and of a parallel or underground economy. These various developments are sources of social disintegration.

A *second* threat to social cohesion is **the rise of inequalities** throughout the world. I am referring to inequalities within societies, in terms of distribution of assets, distribution of income, distribution of opportunities and of influence or power. We all know that inequality is and has always been a feature of society. We also know that attempts at achieving complete equality have led to political and economic impasses, with many undesirable results. But each society has to find a socially acceptable balance between the inequalities produced by the healthy interplay of human initiatives in a market economy and the corrective measures that are necessary to provide everybody with a decent level of living and with the sentiment of belonging to a community where everyone has a role and is respected. Such balances seem to be in great danger of rupture in a number of societies. Many are experiencing the unpleasantness of a disintegrating social fabric with its extremes of wealth and poverty, power and marginalization. Extreme of wealth, when not put to a proper social use, and extreme of deprivation, lived as injustice, are incompatible with social harmony.

*Third*, related to this trend of increased inequalities is the current **decline of various forms of social protection and social security**. In the context of what is often called the liberalization of their economy, presented as the condition for a better integration in the world economy, many developing countries have been told by the international financial institutions that they had to reduce their public expenditures and notably their expenditures on education, health and social welfare. And, in many countries, these sectors were already seriously under-developed. Countries of the OECD also, under the influence of the ideological change that swept the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have put an emphasis on individual responsibility for one's own welfare and have notably reduced the role of the public sector. In matters of social protection and social security, reduction of taxes and therefore reduction of the state's ability to provide for its most needy citizens, and even to provide for the condition that would ensure some degree of equality and opportunities, is still on the agenda of some governments. These trends lead to the marginalization of entire segments of society. They are not conducive to social cohesion.

What is commonly called the **globalization trend** is the *fourth* threat to social cohesion that I would like to mention. Concerns about the threats posed by economic and financial globalization had provided a major impetus for convening the Social Summit in 1995. In June 2000, when the United Nations held a special session of its General Assembly at Geneva devoted to review the commitments made in Copenhagen, the title of the special session was "World Summit for Social Development and Beyond: Achieving social development for all in a globalizing world". Since then, the ambivalence of the globalization process and the problems with the distribution of its benefits and costs have certainly not been alleviated. The Secretary-General of the United Nations stated recently that "many experience globalization not as an agent of progress, but as a disruptive force, almost hurricane-like in its ability to destroy lives, jobs and traditions in the blink of an eye. For many, there is an urge to resist the process and take refuge in the comforts of the local. Globalization may be exacerbating inequality. It may also be disturbing cultural traditions and increasing our sense of spiritual disorientation." The current type of globalization, as it is not accompanied by political processes and institutions that could give it a more humane content, brings insecurity to individuals, groups, countries and the world as a whole. It does so because it rests on competitive values and objectives. It creates concentration of power, winners and losers, and it responds more readily to abstract principles, such as the "law of the market", than to human needs and aspirations. Further, it reduces the capacity of most states to decide on the policies that

will be appropriate to their traditions and circumstances, including the policies that could enhance social cohesion.

*Fifth and lastly*, there is a **growing claim for individual autonomy**. The current dominant culture, in its political and other aspects related to what is commonly defined as a good life and good society is profoundly individualistic. Individual autonomy means essentially individual freedom and it is a freedom seen as the capacity and the possibility for the individual to be liberated from any constraint, external or self-imposed. It is the opposite of freedom conceived as the liberation from one's weaknesses, passions or limitations. It is in fact the license to do as one pleases. With it comes the emphasis on individual rights and the growing rejection of various systems of authority – including parental authority and teacher authority. The consequences, notably for the family, is the greater fragility of family structures, as evidenced by the incidence of divorces, separations, unions not sanctioned by marriages, single mothers, and other signs of weakening of the traditional Western concept of the “nuclear family”; as evidenced also by the comparable weakening of the “extended family”, and by the growing proportion of older people who live alone or in institutions. To constitute a community, a nation, and ultimately a world society, individuals need to be bound by some form of social contract. Cohesiveness of society requires individuals to place limits on their autonomy and to accept to be socially responsible.

Given these different threats to social cohesion, there is the risk that a number of societies could disintegrate and fall into various forms of anarchy. And there is also the risk that legitimate foundations of social cohesion could be replaced by very dangerous types of social cement such as aggressive nationalism or religious fanaticism. This is not, as we well know, a theoretical possibility.

Perhaps some of these reasons, although not formulated, were in the minds of those who negotiated the text of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, adopted by the World Summit for Social Development, a text that includes the most elaborate and coherent formulation of what the United Nations understands as social integration or social cohesion.

## **II. Let me therefore turn to the second part of my intervention, which is social integration as seen by the United Nations, notably by the World Summit for Social Development.**

This conference was a landmark event in that not only was it the largest gathering of world leaders in history at the time (117 heads of state and government), it also marked the first time that all members of the international community gathered to establish a strategy to fight poverty, unemployment and social disintegration, and to create a new awareness on social responsibility and solidarity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was a solemn recognition that social development is a basic condition for the betterment of the human condition and for peace, and should receive the highest priority in all national and international policies. Through the choice of its three core issues – poverty, employment and social integration – the Social Summit moved social development beyond an addition of social sectors. It also established that institutions and relations among individuals and groups are fundamental components of social development. It emphasized that the creation of harmonious societies had to be a product of a great variety of efforts from all actors on the social scene. It expressed the conviction that all human beings ought to live in dignity and to

have access to knowledge, virtue and creativity. It also emphasized that social development, as a process, implies the participation and efforts of all individuals, the development and good functioning of a network of institutions, and the constant reference by the main actors – public authorities as well as media, private enterprises and other institutions of society – to the central objectives of social development.

#### **A. Characteristics and objectives of social integration**

How does social integration, or social cohesion, fit into such a comprehensive vision of social development?

One of the commitments made by heads of state and government at Copenhagen was on social integration and reads as follows:

“We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.”

From this statement, I will highlight a few critical points.

*First*, it represents an attempt at linking social integration, or social cohesion, with respect for the others and pluralism. And indeed, as I have mentioned before, there seems to be little doubt that the future of many societies depends on their capacity to reconcile cohesion and cohesion in diversity.

A *second* important aspect of the statement is the link between social integration and equality of opportunities, and also solidarity with disadvantaged groups and individuals. Thus, the Summit recognized that equity and equality, at least equality of opportunities, is a condition for social cohesion.

*Thirdly*, this commitment also relates social cohesion with the protection of human rights and in general with tolerance and respect for the other. This is also important, because many societies of the past, and also of the present, have achieved social integration through the use of coercive means. Let me say, in this regard, that it is indeed essential to keep the idea of “harmony” into our perception of social cohesion.

*Fourthly*, and most significantly, the Social Summit placed social integration, or cohesion, into the overall objective of creating “a society for all”. In such society, every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, would have an active role to play. Such an inclusive society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law. Since the founding of the United Nations, this quest for humane, stable, safe, tolerant and just societies has shown a mixed record at best. Negative developments include the marginalization of people, families, social groups, communities and even entire countries. They include also strains on individuals, families, communities and institutions as a result of the rapid

pace of social change, economic transformation, migration and major dislocations of population, particularly in the areas of armed conflict.

Then, the text of the Summit, reaffirmed in Geneva five years later, outlined a set of policies and measures, national and international, to implement such vision of social integration or social cohesion.

Before summarizing those policies recommended by the Summit, I think it is important to underline the fact that the modalities of individual well being and societal harmony are determined at very concrete and very localized levels. Increasingly, norms and standards have a regional or international origin, but the policies and actions that make these norms succeed or fail occur at the basic level of human institutions and human relations. The implementation of social development takes place effectively in families, enterprises and other institutions that constitute living local communities, whether in urban or rural settings. Not only survival but also social progress depends on good national policies relayed by institutions and processes through which the ingenuity, initiative and sense of empathy and solidarity of individuals can find channels for expression. Social development cannot be simply “imported” or “bought” from some international market of ideas and finances. It is neither a commodity nor the automatic application of universal recipe.

## **B. Policies to achieve social integration**

Seven policy areas were identified:

1. *Promoting respect for democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and diversity, tolerance and responsibility, non-violence and solidarity and protecting all human rights and fundamental freedoms.* This would include, among others, encouraging educational systems, the media, local communities and organizations to raise people’s understanding and awareness of all aspects of social integration, and strengthening popular political participation and promoting the transparency and accountability of political groups.
2. *Encouraging the fullest participation of all people in society.* This could be achieved, for example, by strengthening mechanisms for the participation of all people, and promoting cooperation and dialogue among all levels of government and civil society as contributions to social integration, and by promoting equality and social integration through sports and cultural activities.
3. *Eliminating discrimination and promoting tolerance and mutual respect for and the value of diversity.* Among actions to be taken would be formulating or strengthening policies geared to the achievement of social integration based on equality and respect for human dignity; ensuring gender equality and equity through changes in attitudes, policies and practices; and encouraging the media to contribution to this end.
4. *Promoting equality and social justice.* Examples of actions are ensuring that all people are equal before the law; expanding and improving access to basic services; and expanding basic education and improving quality of education.



5. *Responding to special needs of social groups*, by, for example, ensuring the protection and full integration into the economy and society of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons; and identifying specific means to encourage institutions and services to adapt to the special needs of these groups.

6. *Addressing the problems created by violence, crime, substance abuse and illicit drugs*. Among the actions to be taken are: Establishing partnerships with non-governmental organizations and community organizations to make adequate provision for rehabilitation and reintegration into society of offenders, especially young offenders; and taking full measures to eliminate all forms of exploitation, abuse, harassment and violence against women, in particular domestic violence.

7. *Strengthening and giving comprehensive protection and support to the family, as the basic unit of society* by recognizing the central role of the family and providing it with an environment that assures its protection and support; helping it in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles in contributing to social integration; and promoting mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation within the family and within society.

### **III. Concluding remarks**

Finally, allow me to offer some thoughts on a few notions which, in my opinion, are key to achieving social cohesion in any given society, and they are certainly highly relevant to the Hong Kong society.

#### **A. Maintaining and promoting a humane economy**

One of the principal requirements for social justice and social cohesion is a more humane market economy. A good economic system, or humane market economy, must provide opportunities for sufficient income to all people, generate enough resources to enable public institutions to fulfill their responsibilities and promote the common good, and permit participation by citizens, national governments and other public and private actors in decisions that affect society as a whole. It should serve human needs and aspirations. Key to a humane and efficient economy is a renewed and active partnership for full employment between the private sector and the state. An essential criteria for assessing the quality of a humane market economy, is economic participation, which means the offering of economic opportunities to a maximum number of people, i.e. availability of jobs and possibilities for entrepreneurship. Problems of economic participation, notably unemployment, pose a threat to social cohesion. In the case of Hong Kong, with its current high level of unemployment, this point is essential.

#### **B. Deepening partnership, responsibility and solidarity**

Social cohesion requires the observance of the rule of law and also partnership, social responsibility and solidarity.

Regarding partnership between the public and the private sector, and social responsibility of the

latter, the growing public demand for such corporate social responsibility has been amplified by the current policy orientation in many industrialized countries, which has reduced the role of the public sector in the economic and social spheres of society.

Overall, liberalization has strengthened the private sector, as the lowering of trade investment and financial barriers has increased the scope and the mobility of transnational corporations. The extent to which transnational corporations now operate outside the regulatory framework of any particular country brings to the fore fundamental questions regarding the obligations or responsibilities of the private sector for promoting general economic growth and social progress, and for maintaining and promoting standards and norms of ethical behaviour.

It could be argued that the private sector has both a practical need and a certain ethical responsibility for the well-being of the environment in which it operates, based on its own needs for economic and social stability in which to operate, its needs for skilled and healthy workforces and the benefits it obtains from reduced governmental regulation. It could also be argued that expanding markets are only sustainable if they are complemented by a social response to ensure a certain degree of equity.

In January 1999, the Secretary-General of the United Nations launched the “Global Compact” a major initiative to increase private sector participation in social development. The initiative contains nine principles derived from globally acknowledged and widely recognized declaration and major United Nations conferences in the areas of human rights, labour and environment. These include the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action (1995) and the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

The Global Compact calls upon the private sector to adopt the principles that the majority of the world’s Governments have already embraced through these instruments. The Secretary-General urged: “Let us choose to unite the power of markets with the authority of universal ideals. Let us choose to reconcile the creative forces of private entrepreneurship with the needs of the disadvantaged and the requirements of future generations.” To date, over 700 corporate partners have signed up, compared to almost 50 at its launch.

At the international level, partnership implies a fundamental equality among all nations, and respect for human rights, including the various international conventions elaborated by the International Labour Organization. The observance of the provisions of all these international instruments is seen as an objective in itself, pertaining to the respect for international law, and not as an opportunity for the most powerful to exert pressure on the weakest.

An important form of expression of solidarity is through financial assistance. At the national level, there is a call for taxation systems which should be fair, progressive and economically efficient. Public resources are to be used to provide basic social services and ensure satisfaction of the basic needs of people, in a context of transparency and accountability. National budgets and policies are to be oriented to reduce inequalities and poverty. Fiscal systems should be geared towards poverty eradication and should not generate “socially divisive disparities”.

It is imperative that this notion of deepening partnership, responsibility and solidarity be actively pursued in the Hong Kong society.

### **C. Emphasizing the role of education and training**

Education has played a central role in the life and well-being of societies. A nation's progress is intricately linked to the vitality and impact of its education system. Education, while by no means the only door to opportunity, remains one of the principal ways to achieve fuller human development and thus to reduce poverty and exclusion.

Education has also become an economic imperative. Globalization, changing manufacturing and labour market structures, new information technologies and ever-expanding frontiers of research in the life sciences are combining to reshape most aspects of life. Today's information age creates opportunities that hinge on knowledge and skills, making education increasingly an important determinant of a nation's international competitiveness in the global economy. It also demands greater adaptability to rapid and unforeseen change in the organization of life and commerce. In the new millennium or new information societies, education has become crucially important as an economic force and requires life-long learning.

In the Hong Kong context, the emphasis on quality education and its accessibility must remain a priority.

### **D. Recognizing the central role of the family**

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights states that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." The Social Summit recognized that "the family is the basic unit of society and as such should be strengthened." The Geneva Special Session reaffirmed this recognition and further stated that the family plays a key role in social development and is a strong force of social cohesion and integration. However, demographic, socio-economic and cultural forces have redefined traditional notions and structures of families and have engendered changes in family roles. Migration and urbanization have brought about salient and unprecedented changes in family forms and household composition. Whatever its evolving form and the forces of change that shape it, the family has endured as a basic institution central to a variety of human interactions, relationships and development processes. It is both a catalyst for and reflection of the transformation of societies.

The increased participation of women in the work force and their financial independence has also impacted on the family as an institution, particularly when it has not always been matched by a sharing of functions in the family, leading to new stresses and strains in balancing responsibilities at home and work.

The substantial increase projected in the world's older population, combined with other changes in family structures and life, raises crucial questions of housing, insurance, health care and welfare arrangements for older persons, which also means that a small number of working family members will have to support younger and older generations.

Therefore, there is a need to help the family in its supporting, educating and nurturing roles, to the causes and consequences of family disintegration, and to the adoption of measures to reconcile work and family life for women and men, for example, for flexible working arrangements, including parental voluntary part-time employment and work-sharing, as well as accessible and affordable quality child-care and dependent-care facilities.

In Hong Kong, to recognize the central role of the family and to provide it with adequate support and assistance in fulfilling this role is of paramount importance.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that, although social development and social cohesion are still mainly dependent on decisions taken at the community and national levels, global forces are increasingly influencing such decisions. Therefore, the role of the United Nations and the role of other international organizations, in attempting to shape this international environment, and notably the functioning of the global economy, is more and more relevant to social development and social cohesion. The United Nations remains a unique and indispensable forum for the elaboration of common principles and norms that should provide the foundation and framework for international cooperation.

Beyond the difficulties faced by the world at the current juncture, and beyond the many threats that confront humankind, a source of hope is, I believe, in the growing realization that dialogue and pluralism, an attentive, patient and ordered pluralism, based on the conscious sharing of a common humanity, is the only possible path to the building of a viable global community. Social cohesion has now to be sought at the world level.

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## *Notes*

The content of this paper is based mainly on the following official publications of the United Nations:

*Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action* (12 March 1995, United Nations official document symbol A/CONF/166/9).

*Further Initiatives for Social Development* (United Nations General Assembly resolution S-24/2 of 1 July 2000)