Developing an Analytical Framework on Social Cohesion in Singapore
Reflections from the framing of social cohesion debates in the OECD and Europe

Nurhidayah Hassan
National University of Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Official discourse in Singapore on social cohesion is often framed along the broad parameters of achieving racial and religious harmony. Many policies – formal and informal – and several laws evolved to manage these two aspects of society. Yet, as Singapore developed and with a much more complex socioeconomic environment both domestically and externally, there is perhaps a need to re-look the discourse and framework for discussing social cohesion. This paper takes a critical look at how the issue of social cohesion is framed in academic literature and policy discussions in Europe and the OECD, and tries to develop a broader analytical framework that could be useful in the Singapore context as it struggles with the multiple fault lines in society (beyond race and religion) that have emerged in the last decade or so.

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DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL COHESION IN SINGAPORE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FRAMING OF SOCIAL COHESION DEBATES IN THE OECD AND EUROPE

NURHIDAYAH HASSAN[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding social cohesion in Singapore has rarely strayed far from discussions about its multiculturalism[2] and social integration. Until recently, class divides or other forms of divisions in society did not quite feature in the discourse. It is undeniable that multiculturalism, particularly relating to race or ethnicity and religion, is a defining aspect of Singapore and one of the most important building blocks of the country. The state's management of the various ethnic communities in the country has been arguably rather successful for there has not been any form of ethnic-based violence since it achieved full independence in 1965. This achievement is often reiterated in formal narratives by the state's leaders, a strong reminder to its citizens about the importance of social cohesion which is often framed as racial and religious harmony.

Today, the relevance of social cohesion in the country is greater than before. The ramifications of globalisation, growing visibility of the different cleavages in society and increasing disenchantment with the government can all be

viewed as threats to social cohesion in Singapore. Hence, social cohesion goes beyond integration and racial harmony. There are multiple debates and discussions surrounding the conceptual meaning and practical application of the term 'social cohesion'. One of the primary objectives of this paper is to give clarity to its meaning and assemble an operational definition of the term in Singapore's context. This paper will also analyse the current state of social cohesion in Singapore and the challenges it faces in fostering a more cohesive society. It endeavours to fill a gap in the depth of discussion around social cohesion in Singapore, by bridging the conceptual aspect of cohesion to policy formulation.

Literature Review: Defining Social Cohesion

The intellectualisation of the term 'social cohesion' can be traced back to over a century ago. In his highly influential book, "The Division of Labor in Society" (1893), eminent French sociologist Emile Durkheim postulated that solidarity formed the basis of social cohesion, at the same time acknowledging that the concept of cohesion was difficult to define or measure. He did, however, distil two important factors to social cohesion: shared loyalties and solidarity (Fenger 2012, 40). He theorised that two types of solidarity exist in society; mechanical solidarity, which refers to "the traditional uniformity of collective values and beliefs"; and organic solidarity, which is "the result of modern relationships between individuals who are able to work together while developing an autonomous and even critical personality with respect to tradition" (Ibid.) Over a century later, Durkheim's ideas about the interdependence of people in society continue to stimulate the body of work surrounding social cohesion.

To summarise the wide-ranging discourse on social cohesion, the discussions are divided into two perspectives; academic and policy-oriented (Chan, et al. 2006). The academic community has been able to shed some light on the theoretical underpinnings of social cohesion. In his book "The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies" (1998), Peter L. Berger

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[1] Nurhidayah Hassan is a graduate student at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and was research intern at the EUC in July-August 2013.
[2] This paper espouses the term "multiculturalism" to reflect the diversity of cultures and peoples in Singapore. However, official discourse often uses the terms "multiracialism" and "multiculturalism" interchangeably and do not make explicit distinction between the two. Both have different connotations. Briefly, race is a category based on physical attributes, whereas culture is an "ethnic emblem" associated with language, religion, values and tradition (Lai 2004, 2).

discusses the concept of social cohesion in terms of integration, identity and social stability. He analyses "normative conflicts" in societies (such as ethnic riots and clash of religious beliefs), and the types of formal institutions that can help to manage and resolve these conflicts. He attributes modernisation and "its normative freight" as the source of these conflicts which threaten social cohesion (Berger 1998, 352). Similarly, Gough and Olofsson (1999) made the linkage between social cohesion, integration and exclusion, and studied the relationship between these concepts. Both works by Berger and Gough and Olofsson have been criticised as providing "relatively few hints as to how social cohesion can be defined and operationalized" (Chan et al., 2006, 275).

Social psychologists like Bollen and Hoyle (1990) also wrote extensively on the concept of "perceived cohesion" (in a group context), defining this term as "an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group" (Bollen and Hoyle 1990, 482). They argue that the notion of perceived cohesion is integral to the theoretical understanding of social cohesion. The two dimensions that make up "perceived cohesion", namely sense of belonging, and feelings of morale, are important for the endurance of the group and its members' motivations (Ibid.). Although Bollen and Hoyle's work is geared towards group cohesion, their conceptualisation of the roles of sense of belonging and feelings of morale contribute another dimension to the overall understanding of social cohesion.

While the academic discourse has succeeded in providing rich discussions on different dimensions and understanding of social cohesion, it is still lacking in terms of dealing with the operational dimension of social cohesion. Hence, recent studies have focused more on the policy-oriented aspect of social cohesion. The policy-oriented discourse on social cohesion have recently emerged due to the pressure on policymakers in seeking solutions to problems that have emerged as a result of global socio-economic changes, such as increased population mobility and diversity

(Chan et al., 2006, 278). Easterly, Ritzan and Woolcock (2006) posit that social cohesion is extremely vital for political reforms, in that the citizens need to inherently trust their governments to devise and implement policies beneficial to the country. In addition, they contend that inclusiveness of the country's institutions and communities are the building blocks of social cohesion (Easterly et al., 2006, 2). The Canadian government blazed the trail for mainstreaming social cohesion into policymaking, as a response to immigration and to promote multiculturalism (Spoonley et al., 2005, 89). After a series of "Structured Conversations" between policymakers and the civil society in 2002, the Canadian government released a report titled "A Canadian Roadmap to Social Cohesion" (Canadian Heritage 2002), and defined social cohesion as "based on broad participation and inclusion….one in which diversity is understood as a strength and in which an infrastructure of accessible institutions supports the quality of life of all citizens" (Ibid., 5). The Canadian definition is strongly undergirded by notions of shared citizenship.

On the other hand, the Council of Europe views cohesion primarily in social and economic terms, emphasising how government policies are key to the "tackling of the negative consequences of globalisation, such as the uneven distribution of economic, social and cultural goods within and between communities, and the marginalisation and social exclusion of certain groups within society." (Council of Europe 2000, 12). The Council's understanding of cohesion also sees social exclusion as an undesirable element of society; social cohesion is seen as solution to combat socio-economic disparities such as unemployment, lack of rights and deterioration of the quality of life (Spoonley et al., 2005, 90).

Other inter-governmental organisations have also placed social cohesion high on their policy agendas. The OECD highlighted social cohesion as the key theme in its 2012 report, "Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World", detailing the importance of social cohesion for fast-developing economies. It defines

social cohesion in terms of a "well-ordered society" (OECD 2012, 53), and identifies three main components of social cohesion, namely social inclusion; social capital and social mobility. Through this framework, OECD argues that policymakers can deepen their understanding of social challenges and approach these issues in a more holistic manner, as opposed to treating them as separate matters. For example, instead of providing cash transfers for the poor, policymakers should think about ways of increasing the income of the poor through structured employment.

In reviewing the various definitions and approaches to social cohesion, Joseph Chan et al. (2006) summarises the two perspectives on social cohesion as either employing a means-end approach or a pluralistic one. The authors claim that the means-end approach lacks the empirical evidence to show causality between conditions that supposedly promote cohesion, and social cohesion (Chan et al. 2006, 282). They also argue that the pluralistic approach treats social cohesion as a "catchword" to include all ills in society today, and fails to aid policymaking (Ibid., 288).

Social Cohesion as a Multi-Dimensional Concept

Hence, from the literature review above, it is evident that social cohesion is a multi-dimensional and complex concept that policy makers continue to grapple with. For the purpose of this paper, we will take an all-encompassing definition of social cohesion. It aims to integrate the fundamental ideas that have been addressed in both the academic arena and policy realm. This research will adopt a framework of social cohesion that can be operationalised and be used in a policymaking setting. This particular framework was first proposed by Menno Fenger (2012), who aggregated the different facets of social cohesion and distilled them into four different dimensions:

1. **Economic Dimension**: This dimension focuses on the link between the economic health of a country and its state of social cohesiveness. Fenger states that "in cohesive societies,

disparities are rather low." (Fenger 2012, 44). The logic behind this thinking is that cohesive societies result in better economic growth.

2. **Social Dimension**: This is where the notion of social capital is introduced. Social capital refers to "the networks of relationships that people build to resolve common problems, obtain collective benefits or exercise a certain amount of control over the environment" (Ibid., 45). Spoonley et al. (2005) contend that social capital is a prerequisite to social cohesion (93), because cohesion demands cooperative interaction (that leads to networks) between citizens, which are essentially based on trust.

3. **Cultural Dimension**: The cultural dimension highlights the "ideational component" (Ibid.) of social cohesion, one where society has shared values and a strong sense of belonging.

4. **Political Dimension**: This particular dimension looks at how societies perform as political systems. Fenger believes that citizens in socially cohesive societies feel that they are politically active, and perceive their political involvement as important (Ibid.). The other feature of this dimension is citizens' trust in their government and their perceptions of the system's legitimacy.

2. SOCIAL COHESION: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

The definition of a cohesive society in Singapore has not strayed far from its rarefied notion of multiculturalism as racial and religious harmony, credited for providing the "foundations for meaningful socio-economic and political development" (Tan 2004, 65). However, as this paper's literature review has elucidated the concept of social cohesion runs deeper than notions of successful multiculturalism.

Nevertheless, with the current proliferation of ethnic strife in other parts of the region and the world, the successful management of the different ethnic communities in Singapore is exemplary. Since its colonial days, Singapore, as a trading port, was made up of peoples from Southeast Asia, China, India, Europe and various parts of the Malay Archipelago (Lai 2004, 4). However, there was little social interaction, much less integration, as the different ethnic communities lived in their designated enclaves. In addition, the colonial administration had largely adopted a divide-and-rule policy, categorising the communities based on their labour capacities and assumed traits – for example, during the British Indian Rule era, the Malays were excluded from trading alliances with the British, whereas the Chinese, due to their fluency in various dialects and most importantly in English, were the British's preferred strategic partners (Manap 2010, 50). In spite of this segregated approach, the different ethnic groups lived side by side in relative peace, with no significant conflict disrupting their harmony. These ethnic communities had their respective social structures, leaderships, civic organisations and had stronger political allegiances to their native homeland (Lai 2004, 4). Singapore was merely a place for them to make a living, and the ruling colonial regime did not view them as political nor social threats (Ibid.).

However, post-war developments stirred up political awareness within the respective ethnic communities, and various political movements started to rip through the country. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), which had developed as an underground political organisation during the British rule, garnered significant support from the Chinese and was seen as a subversive force against the state (Lawson 2001). The MCP organised many labour strikes, and the most significant one was the Hock Lee Bus Strike in 1955, protesting against the poor working conditions of the bus drivers.

In 1950, Singapore recorded its first incidence of "ethnic-based violence", involving the case of Catholic-born Dutch girl Maria Hertogh, who was raised by a Malay-Muslim family and became a Muslim convert (Lawson 2007, 68). The custody battle between Maria's biological Dutch parents and her Malay guardian had sparked off riots where the Malays (who protested against Maria's parents' custody rights) virtually attacked any European or Eurasian they encountered. This resulted in 18 deaths and 173 casualties (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the Malays' political awareness only culminated during Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia. Realising that they were a minority in a predominantly Chinese country, Singapore Malays demanded for privileged treatment as what their Malaysian counterparts were receiving from the Malaysian government (Lawson 2001). In 1964, this tension erupted in violent racial riots between the Malays and the Chinese, with the Singapore leaders accusing UMNO of invoking extremist tendencies amongst the Singapore Malays.

To this day, the Maria Hertogh incident and the racial riots are frequently used in the official discourse and in school textbooks as a reminder to Singaporeans about the perils of non-integration, and the need to be sensitive and vigilant with regards to racial and religious tolerance. Schools celebrate an official Racial Harmony Day to commemorate 1964 racial riots and to promote inter-racial peace (Ministry of Education 2013).

In the early years of its independence, and after its unsuccessful merger with Malaysia, the new Singapore government, led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, quickly adopted a multiracial principle, emphasising the equality of all races[3] (Tan 2004, 67). Driven by this ethos, the government developed a nation-building framework to instill a "Singaporean Singapore" (Ibid.) identity. Today, the country is made up of 74.1% Chinese, 13.4% Malay, 9.1% Indians, and 3.2% Others (Department of Statistics 2012). This equilibrium has remained relatively unchanged over the years. One of the

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[3] In contradiction to the equality ethos developed by the Singapore government, Article 152 in the Constitution of Singapore recognises the "Minorities and Special Position of Malays" in the country. This is a symbolic move to acknowledge Malays as the indigenous people of the country, and according to Lee Kuan Yew (2009), this serves as a reminder that the government will always bear the interests of the Malays (and other minorities).

policies that falls under the rigorous CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) model is the bilingual policy of the country, whereby English is the chosen language of administration, business and education, and the ethnic mother tongues play a secondary (but necessary) role in official cultural and educational affairs (Tan and Ng 2011). This bilingual philosophy was underlined by the government's drive to keep Singapore relevant in the international scene and to ensure the maintenance of its cultural roots (Tan 2004, 69).

Critics argue that this method of "controlled ethnicity" is problematic as not only does it assume homogeneity under each broad racial category, it fails to see that such demarcation only serves to highlight stereotypical differences between each community (Tan 2004, Lawson 2007, Ooi 2005). However, the government insisted that the unravelling of its controlled ethnicity approach will produce perilous consequences and threaten social cohesion.

In 1999, the government came up with another analogy to describe the Singapore's brand of multiracialism. The overlapping circle conception sees each community being represented by a circle. The four circles representing the CMIO overlap one another and "what we can do is to maximise the overlapping area" (Goh, 1999). He continued, "It is also not the Government's policy to have the four overlapping circles merged into one." (Tan 2004, 74).

While the government's hegemony in framing racial and religious harmony has gone unchallenged in the past, globalisation, as well as a more relaxed immigration policy from 2000 to 2010, has changed the country's social, political and economic landscapes, and added more diversity into its demographic landscape. Old and new fault lines are beginning to emerge, and the increasing divide within each CMIO category plus the rising number of mixed marriages have exacerbated the complexities of Singapore's multiracialism. It is therefore timely to review Singapore's multicultural framework and discourse on social cohesion.

Fault Lines in Singapore: Concealed Fractures Emerging

Over the last forty years, Singapore's rapid economic transformation has gained the Southeast Asian city worldwide recognition. Despite its lack of natural and human resources and land space, it has succeeded to be one of the most globalised cities in the world. The country's swift transformation from a small trading port to a high-income, global business hub has not only affected its economic climate, but also its social and political milieu. The unrelenting pursuit of growth has major ramifications on its society, creating new divergences and deepening some existing fault lines[4] in the country.

Influx of Immigrants

Over the last decade, the thorny issue of immigrants has never failed to strike a chord with Singaporeans. It is possibly one of the most pressing issues now facing the country, as the presence of immigrants greatly impacts the country's social cohesion on various dimensions. The recently published 'Population White Paper' released by the Singapore government[5] triggered waves of anxiety throughout the country as it encapsulates the government's plans to increase the rate of immigrants at 15,000 to 25,000 per year, to make up for the low fertility rate and to maintain the "economic vibrancy" of the city. At this heightened pace, the proportion of immigrants will make up almost half the population by 2020.

In the last two to three years, Singaporeans have grown increasingly vocal about their unhappiness over the influx of immigrants. Their unhappiness stems from various reasons; having to face greater job competition, lack of social integration due to language and cultural differences, and the weakening of national identity (Yeoh and Lin 2012).

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[4] In 2012, PM Lee warned of new "fault lines" in Singapore, highlighting the need to resolve the tensions between new immigrants and Singaporeans (Asiaone 2012).

[5] National Population and Talent Division. 2013. "A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore: A Population White Paper." www.population.sg. Accessed 20 February 2013.

The latest demonstration of their vexation with the government's immigration policies was showcased during a rare mass protest against the Population White Paper (Yahoo Newsroom 2013), organised by the non-governmental organisation Transitioning – Unemployment Support Services (TUSS). This event garnered international media coverage as it is one of the country's largest ever protest, with a massive turnout of around 4000 people (Ibid.).

Growing Income Inequality

Singapore's rise to become the world's most affluent country [6] has come at the cost of increasing inequalities as reflected in the country's Gini coefficient, which currently stands at a high of 0.478 in 2012. (Straits Times 2013).[7] Many in the lower income group also suffered a decline in real income or wage stagnation due to the heavy reliance on low-wage foreign labour. At the same time, the influx of the super rich and wealthy migrants, and the influx of "hot money" driving up property prices create resentment as income gap in the country widens (Asher and Nandy 2008; Tan 2012).

Although there is no extreme poverty in Singapore, the incidences of relative poverty are much more palpable. According to a recent study on inequality in Singapore, the second and third deciles (bottom 20 and 30 percent) of employed households in Singapore earn between SGD 2,700 to 3,700, less than half of the country's median income, which stands at SGD 7,570 (Bhaskaran et al. 2012). Income inequality impinges on social cohesion, and has grave consequences on society in general. How so? Firstly, income inequality affects social mobility, or an individual's ability to improve his or her lives and status in society. This in turn affects social

cohesion, as the lack of mobility tends to produce groups of permanent underclasses, which can have negative ramifications on social cohesion (OECD 2012). David Chan, Director of the Behavioral Sciences Institute, asserts that such class divisiveness leads to "perceptions of inequity, injustice, alienation, pessimism, envy and conflict" (Chan 2013). He believes that improving social mobility is crucial to Singapore's social cohesion.

Because of the systemic nature of inequality, it is no easy task conceiving solutions to tackle relative poverty, especially when this gap has an inherent class-race dimension to it (Lai 2004, 13). Clearly, more long-term, sustainable and integrated solutions are needed to address the issue of income inequality.

Lack of Conflict Management Avenues

As a society becomes more diverse, made up of several communities with different sets of values, beliefs and practices, conflict is to be expected. There is a greater need therefore to establish various institutions of conflict management, both formal and informal, to mediate and help resolve conflicts. Among many other things, cohesive societies are marked by the distinct presence of conflict management institutions (Lai 2004, 3). Berger (1998) argues that "mediating structures" are essential to "protect the individual from alienation" (363), but also warns that these institutions have the potential to polarise conflicts. There needs to be a balance of both formal and informal conflict management avenues.

The Community Mediation Centre (CMC) was set up by the government in 1998, and the organisation has seen an average of 600 to 700 cases per year, with 70 percent of the cases resolved (Chia 2013). These cases are conflicts which cannot be solved in courts, and are often between family members, neighbours and friends[8].

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[6] In 2012, The Wealth Report, a worldwide study which takes a look at wealth ranks Singapore as the world's richest country. Singapore's per capita GDP stands at US$ 56, 532 (Asiaone 2012).

[7] The Gini coefficient is the most common way of measuring income gaps in countries. A score of 0 indicates zero inequality and 1 indicates total inequality. Hong Kong ranks as Asia's most unequal city at 0.537, and Norway has the lowest, at 0.256 (Shah 2013).

[8] A high profile case under the CMC which involved a Singaporean-Indian family and a China-born family was about the Chinese family's unhappiness with the smell of curry emanating from the Indian family's home. Singaporeans banded together, regarded this case as an undesirable effect

Besides the CMC, there are also a handful of alternative conflict management places, either non-profit organisations such as Eagles Mediation and Counselling Centre or the respective ethnic self-help groups such as Malay organisation, 4PM. Otherwise, these disputes either remain unresolved or end up in courts. Tan (2002) further argues that mediation in Singapore needs to have more "private or community-driven mediation services" because people tend to perceive formal mediation centres as government-linked and this can harm the mediation process and outcomes (Ibid., 299). The lack of alternative conflict management avenues is inextricably tied to the broader issue of weak civic consciousness in Singapore caused by the persistent encroachment of the state into multiple facets of its citizens' lives (Lee 2005, 134). This "strong state, weak society," condition, typical of authoritarian regimes, has impeded the growth of civil societies at large. As such, there is little room to cultivate the establishment of independent mediation centres.

Policy Responses

Since its independence, the Singapore government has conceived various policy solutions in an attempt to make the society more cohesive. This section analyses the government's current and past efforts and identifies gaps between its cohesion aspirations and its policy responses. It utilises the four dimensions identified in the earlier section of this paper. These dimensions are inextricably related and will have overlapping issues.

Economic Dimension

This dimension focuses on the economic health of the country, and establishes that income disparities impact the state of cohesion. While Singapore's economic growth has been admirable, leading it to be one of the most affluent countries in the world, its growth has not been equitable. To assist those who have not benefited from the growth of the country, the Singapore government

has been rolling out various schemes to assist the low-income households.

In response to calls urging the government to increase wages of low-income earners, the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) was introduced in 2006 to assist those earning below S$1900, and above 35 years old (Central Provident Fund 2013). They receive annual payments ranging from S$1750 to S$4200, depending on their age, income and employment period. 40 percent of this payout is in cash, and the rest goes to their CPF accounts (Ibid.). Critics (Tan 2012, Asher and Nandy 2008, Hui 2013) dispute the long-term effectiveness of WIS in addressing the income gap, as it gives firms an incentive to continue to suppress the wages of low-income workers. This scheme has cost the government S$1.2 billion from 2006 to 2010 (Hui 2013, 116).

Other efforts to alleviate the financial burden of the low-income include the GST voucher scheme[9], income tax concessions and various subsidised training programmes[10] to help workers upgrade their skills. Again, the sustainability and effectiveness of these efforts have been disputed, as they do not impact the wages of low-income earners in the long run. This is also an indication that the Singapore government does not intend to change its general position against universal welfare state, but instead would focus on more targeted measures to help those who are in need.

The key concern is that if the country's income gap continues to grow, it will deepen existing class divides, putting the social fabric of our society at risk. Although it is difficult to determine the causal relationship between income inequalities and social cohesion, these two elements are inextricably related. According to the European Commission (in its Third Report on Economic and

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of immigration, and protested by organising a "Cook a Pot of Curry" day via social media (Lim 2011).

[9] The GST voucher scheme aims to aid low-income families by offsetting the Goods and Services Tax (GST) they pay through cash handouts, CPF top ups or rebates (GST Voucher 2013).

[10] The Workforce Development Agency (WDA) has initiated a Workfare Training Support (WTS) Scheme which complements the WIS. It provides grants to employers to train older workers and other forms of assistance to aid older workers upgrade their skills (Ministry of Manpower 2012).

Social Cohesion), "Maintaining social cohesion is important not only in itself but for underpinning economic development which is liable to be threatened by discontent and political unrest if disparities within society are too wide." (Fenger 2012, 44). In other words, it is implied that the smaller the gaps are in society, the more cohesive the society could be. Fenger goes on to argue that GDP growth and productivity tend to benefit from greater cohesiveness (Ibid.). Therefore, the economic dimension is an important one that the government cannot afford to ignore when addressing social cohesion.

Social Dimension

Under the social dimension, we need to examine two inter-related issues – social capital and social mobility. Social capital is widely viewed as a prerequisite to social cohesion (Spoonley 2005, 93). Briefly, social capital can be defined as "the resources that people have potential access to from being connected to others possessing those resources" (Chua 2010, 3). These social resources come from relations such as marriage ties, family connections, alumni networks and so on. Harvard professor Robert Putnam established that social capital can only be gained when there is trust between people, who are then committed to sharing resources in common endeavours (Putnam 1995). Trust is necessary for a cohesive society.

Singapore prides itself on being a meritocratic society, where there are equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of their ethnicity or religion (Tan 2004, 77). Each individual has the same chance at being successful based on his merit. While meritocracy in Singapore has been institutionalised as way of governance (Tan 2008, 7), it has many inherent contradictions. In Singapore, the definition of 'merit' is too narrow, and is purely based on one's academic achievements and occupation. In addition, Kenneth Paul Tan (2008) contends that meritocracy tends to obscure how institutions (like the education system) can "reproduce and reinforce class stratification and how people can be systematically and indirectly excluded from

mainstream society, economy and politics because of their race, gender, sexuality, age, and class" (10). Earlier this year, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam admitted that while meritocracy has brought much success to Singapore, it is time to have a broader definition of the term, to recognise diverse strengths and talents (Chan 2013).

Another contradiction of meritocracy is that it discounts the role that social capital plays in determining one's life chances. Meritocracy disregards the fact that one can reach great successes not just by the virtue of his merits, but also through the exploitation of his social capital. Hence, due to the varying degrees of social capital that one possesses, he has a different starting point in a meritocratic environment. For example, parents from low-income households would have less financial and non-financial resources (social capital) to pass on to their children, as compared to wealthier families. The child from the wealthier family would have a greater chance at being successful due to both the financial means and social capital that his parents have provided him with.

In a study assessing the role of social capital and inequality in Singapore, Chua (2010) found that race and gender have tangible consequences on an individual's access to social capital, which in turn affect their social mobility. He concluded that Malays, as a minority group, due to their poor socio-economic status and their perceived negative attributes, do not accumulate social capital as well as the Chinese (Ibid., 20). He also found that women having to juggle dual roles at home and the workplace do not have as much social capital at their male counterparts (Ibid.). These findings strongly indicate the numerous limitations of the country's meritocracy ethos.

Nevertheless, the government does acknowledge the importance of social capital. In particular, bridging social capital, which refers to connections between different groups of people, is often viewed as positive towards creating the sense of social inclusion (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000).

The government has attempted to harvest bridging social capital through various means, to not only maintain racial harmony, but also with the goal of getting each community to share resources with one another.

The oft-debated Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP),[11] was implemented to ensure that no ethnic enclaves were formed (HDB 2013). The government attributed the EIP as an enabling factor of integration and racial harmony. With the EIP in place, Resident Committees (RCs) within each housing estate were then –given the task "to promote neighbourliness, racial harmony and community cohesiveness amongst residents" (People's Association 2009). Today, there are 572 RCs within all housing estates in Singapore.

Along the same vein, the National Integration Council (NIC) was established in 2009 to encourage locals and immigrants to interact. With four distinct platforms (Community, Schools, Media and Workplace) the Council runs socialisation and educational activities to encourage understanding and integration among the various communities (NIC 2010).

All these initiatives have been developed by the government in a bid to boost the society's bridging social capital. Despite these efforts, a recent survey by a local community organisation on racial and religious harmony in Singapore showed that only one in two Singaporeans have friends outside of their ethnic community (Aripin 2013). This signals the need for a deeper understanding of social capital, and how it is being generated, transferred and manifested. Without social capital underpinning the development of cohesion in society, the "cohesion" in Singapore will only exist at a superficial level that may not withstand the test of time.

Cultural Dimension

The cultural dimension is essentially the "ideational component" of social cohesion, emphasizing shared values and sense of belonging of a society. To this end, the Singapore government has laid down five sets of values as guiding pillars for its people: nation before community, and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus not conflict; and racial and religious harmony (Tan 2012). These values, as proposed in 1988 by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, largely emphasised the subordination of individual rights and interests to national interests.

These communitarian values remain relevant in Singapore today, but as society changes, there is a need to reassess what these values have evolved into. Fenger (2012) reiterates that developing shared values is an "ongoing process" (45) that depends largely on trust and hope, and requires active community engagement. As such, the government initiated a large-scale, ambitious project titled "Our Singapore Conversation" (OSC), involving multiple dialogue sessions with over 47,000 Singaporeans over a period of less than a year.

These dialogues aimed at engaging Singaporeans on what their concerns and aspirations are, centred on nation-building themes such as building a caring and compassionate society, providing affordable healthcare and equal opportunities for Singaporeans (Ng 2013). While "naysayers" were skeptical about the OSC and dismissed it as a mere "one-off talk shop", others believed that the OSC had also opened opportunities for citizens to engage each other, and looked towards translating some of these dialogues into action. For example, the Education Minister (also the Chairman of the OSC) Heng Swee Keat, revealed that there will be changes to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which has been a source of

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[11] The Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) espouses the CMIO framework for the allocation of HDB units, maintaining the same proportion of ethnic groups across all housing estates, similar to the national proportion. In practical terms, it means that a Chinese house owner can only sell his flat to a Chinese, and a Malay to another Malay and so on. Property owners see this as burdensome as "buyers will be denied their ideal flat and sellers their ideal price" (Chin and Vasu 2010, 2).

undue stress for Singaporean parents and children as conveyed during the OSC dialogues (Chang 2013).

Hence, in building a cohesive society, it is vital to build a framework of "accepted values and institutions" (Fenger 2012, 45) that is within reach of every member of society. Despite the skepticism surrounding OSC, it is nevertheless a positive starting point in cultivating a stronger sense of Singapore's shared values, as articulated by Singaporeans.

Political Dimension

This particular dimension looks at how societies perform as political systems, in particular, the level of political participation by its people, and the relationship between government and people, and the level of trust of public institutions. Under this dimension, a cohesive society is one where the citizens intrinsically trust their government and its system's legitimacy. Singapore, being an "illiberal democracy" (Mutalib 2000), limits most, if not all, of the policy making activities within the aegis of the government. However, over the last two decades, the government has loosened its grip and allowed a certain degree of political liberalisation, giving more space for involvement by civic society (Ortmann 2012, 165).

In the 1990s, the government co-opted members of non-governmental organisations such as MENDAKI, SINDA and Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE) to be part of policy dialogues and processes (Ibid., 175). Even though the government had created these organisations, they were previously distanced from the policymaking process. The government's strategy was clear – the purpose of including these groups in the process is not to challenge the government, but to simply to "promote the idea of the civic sphere" (Ibid.). A Speaker's Corner was also established as an open space where individuals and organisations can voice their political opinions, albeit under tight regulations. In addition, the government still maintains the Internal Security Act (ISA), a piece of legislation that has been accused of being a tool to deter and remove political dissent.

In recent years, largely aided by the advent of social media, policy advocacy and political participation has been more dynamic, affecting the results of the watershed 2011 General Elections, where the ruling party PAP, won by the smallest margin it has ever seen since 1959 (Ortmann 2011). The clamour for more political participation was very much related to the perception that government had failed to address discontent on issues such as the influx of immigrants, rising cost of living and general dissatisfaction with the direction the government is leading Singapore. The Internet has aided in the democratisation of information for Singaporeans, providing them with political views omitted in state-controlled mainstream media. However, the government has taken several steps to keep tabs on online media. It has gazetted socio-political blogs such as The Online Citizen, and has recently issued a new internet licensing regulations. These two moves are extremely unpopular with the online community, and the latest regulation triggered an online and offline protest called "Free My Internet" (Wong 2013). The new Internet licensing regulation requires licensees to put up a S$50,000 performance bond and they would have 24 hours to take down content that the government deems offensive (Ibid.). Nevertheless, the impact these regulations have on the wider electorate remains to be seen.

Still, there is a trust deficit between Singaporeans and the government that could be a cause of concern for the ruling party. In a recent trust survey conducted by the Edelman Trust Barometer shows that only 23 percent of Singaporeans trust their government leaders, but 76 percent trust the government as an institution (Hansen 2013). This trust deficit may not bode well for the incumbent government and its pursuit of a cohesive society.

Discussion of the Four Dimensions in Singapore

As all four dimensions are closely related with significant overlapping issues in each dimension, it is difficult to single out which is the weakest dimension in Singapore. For example, due to the race-class overlap identified in the growing income gap issue in Singapore, the social and economic dimensions are inherently correlated. While these relationships do not imply causality, policy makers need to be fully cognizant that issues under a particular dimension will have ramifications on the other dimensions. This means that the unraveling of one dimension will undoubtedly have a severe impact on society as a whole. This requires greater policy coherence where impacts from policy trade-offs have to be closely monitored and minimised where possible. The following section will elaborate greater on policy coherence and its importance.

3. DEVELOPING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK ON SOCIAL COHESION IN SINGAPORE

Identifying the causality of social cohesion is a complex affair since many social, political and economic issues are inextricably linked to each other. This is not unique to Singapore. It is important to have a systematic way of analysing social cohesion, especially in understanding the impact of policies on social cohesion. Observing the sheer complexities that challenge social cohesion in today's Singapore society, there is a need for policymakers to develop an analytical framework that acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of social cohesion.

The Importance of an Analytical Framework

The existence of a multi-dimensional analytical framework would allow for a more robust analysis of cohesion in Singapore, which thus leads to better policy formulation. It also facilitates the monitoring of policies in order to ensure and enhance their effectiveness. An analytical framework would also boost policy coherence. The

OECD defines policy coherence as "the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies creating synergies towards achieving the agreed objectives" (OECD 2003). This means that all stakeholders involved in reinforcing social cohesion in Singapore must work together to minimise the fault lines in society and come up with sustainable solutions to tackle those issues. The existence of an analytical framework can bolster this process and synergy.

The development of this framework also comes with the acceptance that the government will have to give up a degree of its hegemony and possess the political will to extend the remit of policymaking to its corresponding stakeholders – opposition politicians, academics, entrepreneurs, civil society and even citizens. These stakeholders play a vital role in the process of building the framework. In addition, policy coherence also means that there will be significant trade-offs in the attempt to achieve a unified objective. For instance, should the government decide to implement a minimum wage policy (to address the issue of income gap) to increase the income of local low-wage workers, it would also have to tighten its foreign labour policies to help level the playing field for local workers. This move would nonetheless hurt many SMEs in the short run. Hence, the government could look at tax exemptions or other short-term measures to temporarily ease business costs for SMEs. Policy coherence is a fine balancing act as it manages conflicting interests amongst different stakeholders.

Building a Framework

Before tackling the critical task of developing a framework, the term "social cohesion" needs to be defined, taking into account its multi-dimensional nature, and also considering Singapore's context. While it is not the purpose of this paper to offer a specific definition for Singapore, there are several requirements that policymakers can take note of when defining the term:

1) Trust and a sense of belonging are two major components of social cohesion.
2) Social cohesion is not a system of ideology like liberalism or conservatism. It may not also necessarily imply diversity or tolerance. For example, a society marked by rigid social hierarchies and strict respect for traditions (hence it is neither diverse nor tolerant) could be highly cohesive because its social cohesion is dependent on these values (hierarchy and tradition).
3) Social cohesion is a state of society, and not a process. Therefore social cohesion is not a means to an end and should not be equated to concepts of poverty reduction, inclusion etc. These concepts are interlinked, but not necessarily equivalent.

(Chan, et al. 2006)

After reaching a consensus on the definition, it is important to now understand the causal links between policies, social cohesion and the outcomes. At this juncture, many pertinent questions ought to surface: What are the inputs and outcomes of social cohesion? Are there intervening factors leading to social cohesion? What are the causal links between policies and social cohesion? What are the consequences of diminishing social cohesion? (Jeannotte et al., 2002). These questions need to be addressed in order to begin drafting an analytical framework for social cohesion. Again, this paper does not intend to formulate a working framework, rather it simply recommends the conception of one. An example of a comprehensive causal framework comes from the Department of Canadian Heritage (see **Fig. 1**).

Fig. 1: Causal Links between Social Cohesion and Social Outcomes
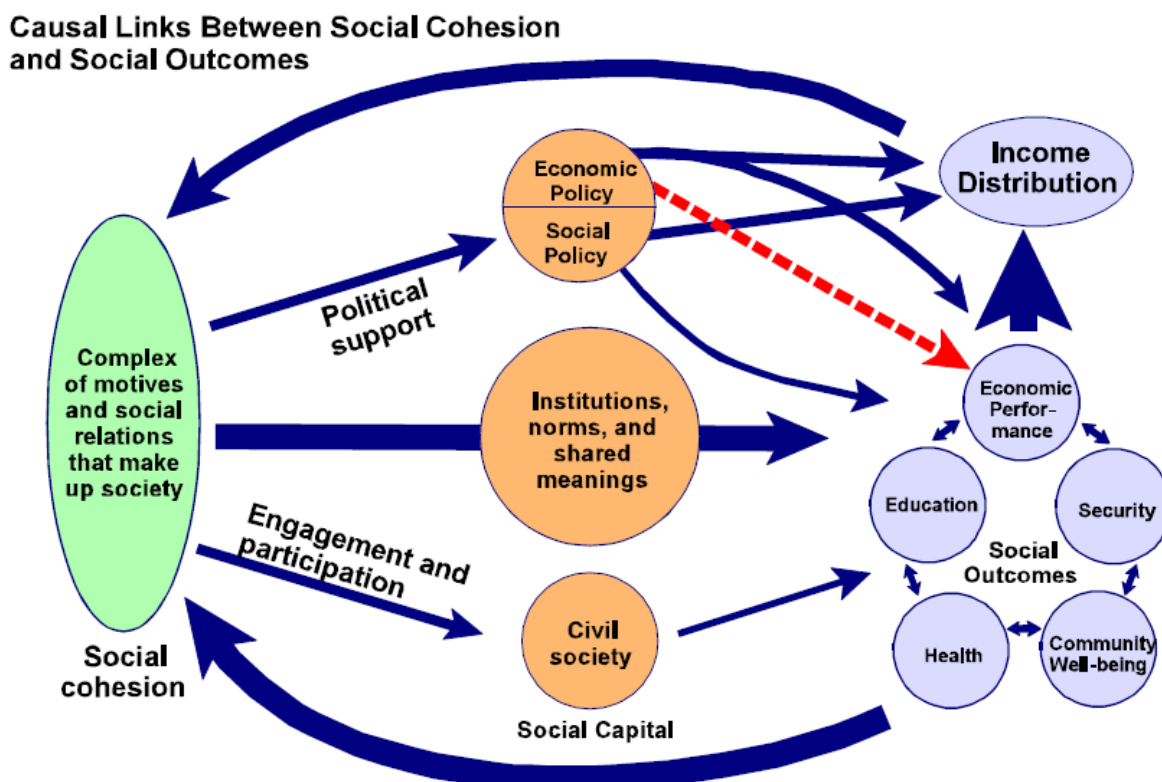

Source: Jeannotte et al. 2002, 25

This model attempts to map the causal links of social cohesion, and demonstrates the impact of social cohesion on various outcomes like economic performance, security and community well-being. It highlights how social cohesion and positive outcomes "reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle" (Ibid., 26). It also shows how a change in one policy can impact another component of the model.

Another analytical model developed by Menno Fenger (2012) also emphasises the multi-dimensional complexities of social cohesion (see **Fig. 2**). This model reflects the four dimensions that were examined in the Singapore context and explains the impact of different types of policies on social cohesion and its correlation to the structural characteristics of a city and indicators that measure the quality of life in that particular city. These indicators could be poverty levels, crime rates, level of integration, etc. It is important to have clarity on what is being measured, as it affects the choice of indicators (Council of Europe 1999).

Fig. 2: Analytical Framework for Studying Social Cohesion Policies
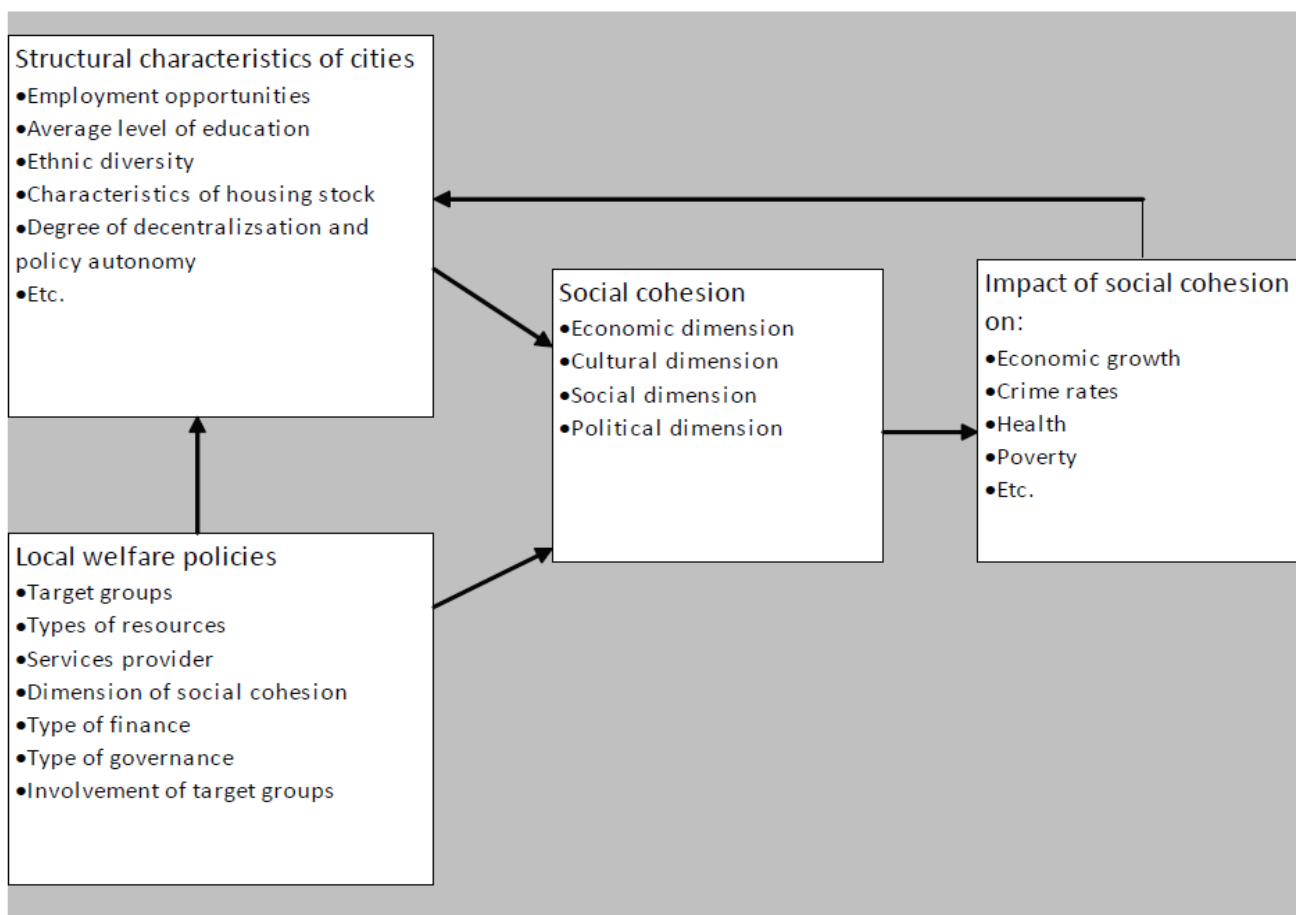
Source: Menno Fenger, 2012, 52

One could also look at the efforts of other societies in trying to operationalise the concept of social cohesion. The European Commission financed a project to develop an analytical tool to measure social cohesion in the European Union (EU) countries (Berger-Schmitt 2000). Taking the EU's context into account, the two goal dimensions of social cohesion are to reduce disparities, inequalities and social exclusion, and to strengthen the social capital of a society (Ibid., 8). With these goal dimensions identified, the concept of social cohesion is measured using the European System of Social Indicators, which is currently being developed (Ibid., 7). These indicators cover 14 life domains, such as population, housing, transport, education and social security. The dimensions are then divided into sub-dimensions which will be measured by different indicators. For a brief snapshot of this process, see **Fig. 3**.

Fig. 3: Dimensions and Indicators of Social Cohesion in a European System of Social Indicators – A Snapshot

GOAL DIMENSION	MEASUREMENT DIMENSION	SUBDIMENSION	INDICATORS
1. Reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion			
- Social exclusion	Social isolation	Objective social inclusion	Percentage of people with rare social contacts outside the household
		Subjective social inclusion	Percentage of people who feel lonely
2. Strengthen social capital			
- Availability of social relations	Existence of personal relations	Relations to relatives	Existence of close relatives

Source: Berger-Schmitt 2000, 12

Since there are existing national-level datasets in Singapore, the EU indicator approach can be adopted to operationalise a social cohesion index for the country, based on the four dimensions identified earlier – economic, social, cultural and political. These existing datasets include, but are not limited to:

Information	Source
Population Census	Department of Statistics Singapore
The Singapore Social Health Project (under development)	National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre
Labour Wages Report	Ministry of Manpower
Labour Force in Singapore	Ministry of Manpower
National Health Survey	Ministry of Health
Annual Crime Brief	Singapore Police Force
Indicators for Racial and Religious Harmony	Institute of Policy Studies, Onepeople.sg
Social Markers of Integrations	Institute of Policy Studies

Limitations and Other Issues

One of the key strengths of having an analytical framework is that it aids evidence-based policymaking, as opposed to crisis-driven policies (Jeannotte et al., 2002, 30). However, having a sound analytical framework, no matter how robust, is not a silver bullet for the myriad of issues present in society.

Also, a host of capacity issues can arise throughout the process of developing this framework. While there are existing datasets that can be sourced, these large bodies of information require skilled analysts to fully "harvest" them. Moreover, as

mentioned in previous sections, this development requires the cooperation and synergy of various government and non-government agencies, which in itself is a complicated and expensive undertaking. Nevertheless, quality research deserves deep commitment, especially since such an investment is dedicated towards building a more cohesive society

4. CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to take a critical look at the state of social cohesion in Singapore, and to recommend the development of an analytical framework to assess policies that can foster cohesiveness. Through its strategy of "controlled ethnicity", Singapore has managed to avoid ethnic-based violence after experiencing a series of racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s. However, its rapid economic growth, coupled with the impact of globalisation has caused certain fault lines in the country to deepen. The growing income gap and the influx of immigrants are some key cleavages in the country that call for deeper understanding of their roots causes and implications.

This paper has also studied the government policy responses to these issues based on four domains – economic, social, cultural and political. It is concluded that it is hard to single out the weakest dimension in Singapore since all the dimensions are inter-related. The unraveling of one dimension could have a significant impact on the others. Therefore policy coherence becomes an important pursuit of policymakers, and the existence of an analytical framework can aid this objective. There are several existing frameworks being used by the European Commission, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and other governments. The Singapore government can adopt one to suit the country's context and priorities, and tap on existing data to further understand the state of social cohesion in the country.

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