The Shared Societies Project: Democratic Leadership for Dialogue, Diversity and Social Cohesion

Enabling a world safe for difference
The Shared Societies Project is a Club of Madrid global initiative that provides leaders with greater understanding of the benefits of social cohesion and the incentives and means to act to advance it. The project supports democratic development through leadership for dialogue, diversity and social cohesion.

The program is designed in the belief that societies are most likely to be peaceful, democratic and prosperous when leaders and citizens recognise the value of diversity and actively build a shared society.

Within the global program regional, thematic and country-specific projects focus on issues central to the questions of dialogue, diversity, and social inclusion and participation. These include democratic values and freedom of association in the Middle East/North Africa; women’s political participation; and religion, political leadership and intercultural dialogue.

Through these projects and a series of case-study visits and research, Club of Madrid members, assisted by international experts, will work with leaders to identify existing experiences that have been effective in creating and sustaining social cohesion through dialogue, leadership, and policy and institutional mechanisms. Together, they will design effective leadership strategies for use in situations where securing social cohesion and shared citizenship remains a challenge.

The project will produce a portfolio of practical realistic strategies from which leaders can seek inspiration, analyse alternatives and design, communicate and implement policies and strategies for social cohesion and shared societies in their nations and cities.
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Statement of Commitment*

We, members of the Club de Madrid,

Recognising the threats to the world that are created by the existence in many countries of socially acceptable, habitualised or institutionalised social, economic, and political exclusion on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, language or other signs of difference,

Acknowledging that discrimination and prejudice lead to social exclusion,

Aware of the tremendous costs, human and material, inflicted on a society that does exclude groups - sometimes to the point of fuelling violent conflict,

Concerned that many declarations and programmes to encourage social cohesion have been limited in their application and have often met with implicit and explicit resistance from leaders and communities, and at the same time:

Aware of the benefits of a socially cohesive society that maximises the contribution, creativity and talents of all its members and embraces diversity as a strength,

Believing that a socially cohesive society is essential to allow individuals and identity groups to develop and contribute fully to their society,

Confident that in states and societies threatened by social disintegration, these threats are not reason to postpone efforts to build social cohesion, but rather that policies directed at embracing diversity and cultural identity have a particularly crucial part to play in creating integrated and socially cohesive societies, and thereby reduce those threats,

Confident that social cohesion is an attainable goal and has been attained in many societies past and present,

Having considered the lessons and insights that can be learnt from experience in our own and other countries, and from the work of leading thinkers and policy makers - lessons and insights that indicate possible and effective strategies for promoting and maintaining respect for diversity and social cohesion, mindful that they need to be adapted to local contexts and unique circumstances,

Recognising that progress requires governments and leaders to identify social cohesion as a priority facing modern society and the global community,

Believing that while government must provide leadership, there is also an important role for civil society, which is itself strengthened by the growth of social cohesion,

Welcoming the UN Commission on Social Development’s identification of social integration as its priority for 2009-2010, and the European Union’s designations of 2008 as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue and 2010 as the Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion,

We offer the Club of Madrid Declaration for Social Cohesion, which commits us to basic principles, strategies and possible actions that can facilitate the process of building societies for all, in which everyone can play a full and active part.

We call on all leaders around the world to commit to this Statement - which will inform other initiatives and developments - so that there will be a common identification with these principles and strategies in the international community.

* This brochure presents excerpts from the working documents that comprise a declaration for social cohesion as endorsed by the Members of the Shared Societies Working Group on November 21, 2007. For a full version of the declarations please visit www.clubmadrid.org
Socially Cohesive or “Shared Societies” are stable, safe and just and... 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.

A Shared Society is at ease with itself and the diversity of its members’ cultural, religious and ethnic identities...in which they co-operate and work creatively with each other and with the wider global community to solve common problems and to promote respect for human dignity and release human potential.

We identify four key elements which are necessary ingredients if individuals or groups are to feel that they have a place in society:

- **Democratic participation** – the opportunity to take part in decision-making and the capacity and skills to do so effectively.

- **Respect for diversity and the dignity of the individual** – recognition of the value of difference and diversity in society. This means accepting (but not necessarily agreeing with) the individual’s original and chosen identities, values and aspirations, and his or her chosen representatives.

- **Equality of opportunity** – equal access to economic and material resources and encouragement of social mobility, ensuring that individuals and communities have the capacity to take advantage of that access in order to satisfy their own social, physical and economic needs and also play an active part in the social and economic development of the society.

- **Protection from discrimination** – mechanisms and forms of redress if the individual and his or her community are deprived of their rights and opportunities to play a full part in society.

Either we co-exist or we co-destruct. People need to feel at home, respected and safe.

- **Alan B. Slifka**
  - Alan B. Slifka Foundation
Social exclusion and mismanagement of diversity within societies are among the major challenges facing the world today because they create enormous threats to the stability of our world and consume enormous resources in dealing with the consequences of inequality and exclusion, which include war, violence, community breakdown and alienation. Our failure to co-operate in managing the world’s resources, locally and globally, leads to natural disasters and destruction of the environment.

How nations, individually and collectively, approach the issues of social cohesion and cultural diversity will have implications for political and economic development, human security, social stability, and peace throughout the 21st century and beyond. More than ninety percent of all nations in existence today have a minority population of at least ten percent and current trends of economic mobility, displacement and globalisation will increase the levels of diversity across the world. The failure to proactively and positively manage diversity has the potential to produce tangible negative consequences.

We believe that averting ethnic, religious and cultural conflict in and among communities and nations is an urgent priority for many cities and states. We believe that societies are most likely to be peaceful, democratic and prosperous when leaders and citizens recognise the value of diversity and actively develop means to work together to build a shared society based on a set of shared goals and common values.

We believe a socially cohesive society will be more stable and productive. Its members will be positive and confident of their role in society and their talents and contributions will be recognised, nurtured and applied in the further development of the society and the global community. The well-being of individuals and communities leads to the well-being of the nation, and among nations.

Rationale for promoting Social Cohesion

PM Wok with Nigerian civil society organizations
When states recognise the need to take steps to deal with social division and social exclusion they normally either attempt to create a homogeneous society or a pluralist society.

Experience suggest that seeking homogeneity where it does not naturally exist creates disintegrative tendencies and reinforces difference and resistance, while recognising pluralism has integrative tendencies that promote social cohesion.

Secondly, we recognise that the processes of implementing any policy or programme are complex. The problems of social conflict and the absence of social cohesion are the result of many factors, and as such they require multiple interventions balancing and complementing each other to build a critical mass of energy and influences that can enhance the achievement of a cohesive society. However, initiatives may have both positive and negative impacts and consequences. We therefore do not set out a model on how to achieve social cohesion but principles that should be followed and suggest specific steps which need to be adapted to local circumstances.

Thirdly, the most direct threats to a national framework for coexistence and social cohesion are not interpersonal but institutional: the exclusion of groups from the economic life of a country; the proscription of cultural expressions such as customs or language; inequalities and inequitable treatment related to identity; or the lack of representation or participation at all levels of governance and in the social networks, that are essential to the shared ownership of a national project for development.

Consequently and finally, we believe that national leaders have a key part to play in any efforts to promote social cohesion.
The Club of Madrid is an independent organisation dedicated to strengthening democratic leadership around the world by drawing on the unique experience and resources of its members - 70 democratic former heads of state and government. In partnership with other organisations and governments that share its goals, the Club of Madrid provides peer to peer counsel, strategic support and technical advice to leaders and institutions working to further democratic development.

To contribute to the Club of Madrid please contact us at clubmadrid@clubmadrid.org or call our offices at +34 911 548 230

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Background photos courtesy of 6 Billion Others project
www.6billionothers.com