

SUSTAINING AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AS A COHESIVE SOCIETY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Liberal democracy is a form of government that has evolved to ensure that, while the decisions made by a society may affect its citizens variably, those decisions are assumed to be made by accountable decision-makers such that they are fair and will lead to the greater good of society as a whole. Those who elect the decision-makers are presumed to base their choices on facts and evidence, not misinformation, and to have access to clear information about the policies and values of those they may elect. Such a presumption can no longer be assured.

A modern liberal democracy can only function effectively and act with integrity for the benefit of its citizens if there is trust and accountability between the structures and institutions that perform various governing functions, and those who are governed (referred to as *vertical trust*). Contemporary liberal democratic societies are comprised of individuals and groups with differing histories, identities, values and worldviews, who also need to trust each other sufficiently to cooperate (*horizontal trust*). Vertical and horizontal trust are interdependent, and both are essential for a cohesive democratic society. The challenges of Covid-19 have highlighted the importance of each of these dimensions.

The term social cohesion has been used widely and variably in policy, academic, and other circles.

This paper adopts a broad definition, characterising social cohesion in a democratic society depending on:

- Sufficient levels of trust and respect between those who are governed and the institutions and individuals who they empower to govern them;
- Sufficient trust and respect between all the components of a society (which by inference reflects a diverse set of identities, worldviews, values, beliefs, and interests) to foster cooperation for the good of society as a whole;
- Institutions and structures that promote trust and respect for and between all members of society; and allowing
- Belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy to be universally possible.

Social cohesion is critical to our well-being, both collectively and individually. This is because humans evolved as social animals living in increasingly complex collectives, which came to depend on institutions to sustain their social well-being and cohesion. Social cohesion provides the basic construct of highly functioning and complex societies that work for the benefit of their citizens.

There is a tendency to take social cohesion for granted and to overlook contemporary pressures and rapid changes, including technological developments, that present serious challenges to the behavioural, social and civic institutions that underpin social cohesion. This paper explores why social cohesion is important and why the concept needs both a policy and research focus.

The paper examines the characteristics of social cohesion and the factors that help to strengthen or weaken it, summarising the results of an international study, led by Koi Tū and involving experts from a broad range of disciplines and geographical locations. The importance of each of these factors will vary according to context and to the individuals and groups in question. In the face of the significant challenges ahead, the commonalities and differences across a society in the factors that influence societal cohesion and resilience need to be understood and addressed. We discuss what this may mean specifically in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Societies and their governance structures are confronting challenges including entrenched and growing inequalities, rapidly emerging technologies, environmental degradation, climate change, and other pressures. For New Zealand, we must recognise the unique challenges of the country's bicultural foundations, the manifest inequalities that have deepened over recent decades, and the realities of an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. This includes serious inequalities in education and consequent employment opportunities, as well as unequal access to healthcare. These challenges already threaten to undermine our social cohesion and collective well-being, and must be addressed openly and conscientiously.

There have been significant shifts in the roles of values and emotions in shaping individual political identities in recent times, likely fuelled by the polarising effects of media, technology, and misinformation. The liberal democratic system has traditionally been based on citizens choosing between parties that reflect different ideologies, values and worldviews. However, this alignment of values and preferences is being increasingly replaced by emotion as the basis of political and civic action, at least in some countries. This phenomenon is termed 'affective polarisation'. The emotions of anger, fear, and hatred of others have emerged in the public square, most obviously in the USA, but New Zealand may be trending in that direction, arguably accelerated by some responses to actions taken to address the Covid-19 pandemic.

One major challenge to social cohesion is the rapid emergence of the relatively ungoverned virtual world. On one hand, the internet has empowered some groups by enhancing communication and knowledge access. On the other, it has provided opportunities to cultivate and disseminate misinformation and disinformation, and to increase polarisation. The arrival of powerful and effective ways of anonymously transmitting *ad hominem* attacks has undermined the traditional institutions on which all societies rely to sustain cooperation and respect. The emergence of the Internet of Things, virtual reality, and the metaverse, along with the development of new economies and networks enabled by cryptocurrencies, is rapidly altering the constraints which helped glue societies together.

While the purpose of this paper is not to forecast the future, governments and society would be unwise to minimise the risks ahead. For example, governments need to place the opportunities and challenges of the digital future more centrally and to consider them through the lens of sustaining or undermining social cohesion. Not doing so may threaten democracy itself, seeing it replaced by a more autocratic form of governance. Societies could fracture in ways that undermine their very essence and identity.

The institutions that assure vertical trust between State and citizen may need rethinking in the liberal democracies, including within Aotearoa New Zealand. This potentially involves shifting the traditional exclusive reliance on parliamentary structures to include new forms of deliberative and participatory democracy, which can help to address inequalities and disempowerment, and to create a sense of fairness and safety, especially when used at the local level.

Horizontal trust requires the enhancing of transcultural competencies and understandings, tackling disinformation, and returning civility to the public square. Our analysis of the threats to social cohesion identifies many other areas where proactive measures could help to sustain and enhance our sense of society.

SUSTAINING AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND AS A COHESIVE SOCIETY

Why focus on social cohesion?

We are living in a world of accelerating and unrelenting change. Change has been a feature in the evolution of human societies, particularly since the introduction of agrarian production and settlement, but never has it been so rapid and pervasive across almost every aspect of our lives. Climate warming, ecological degradation, demographic change, global power shifts, the transformation of economies, and trends in technology use and misuse are all placing compounding pressure on individuals, societies, and their governance institutions. Societies only function well when they exhibit a level of cohesiveness that allows them to work for the mutual benefit of all their diverse members, despite differing world views, identities, and values. Societal well-being therefore depends on maintaining social cohesion.

Many societies, and especially their core institutions, are struggling to respond to a broad range of transformations and changing expectations. The legitimacy of liberal democracies and their institutions is increasingly being questioned. None are particularly well prepared for the potential radical shifts in the nature of human interactions, nor for the impacts on societal institutions that the evolution of digital and virtual technologies will enable, particularly in the context of issues such as climate change that have increasingly existential significance and impact.

Starting long before SARS-CoV-2 began its race through the global population, societies were confronting an array of interconnected rapid changes. Against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, these major ongoing technological, demographic, economic, social, geopolitical, and environmental changes continue to challenge individual and societal resilience in profound ways. The rapidly changing digital milieu, exemplified by the emergence of virtual reality (the metaverse) and the supranational nature of how large technology companies and platforms operate, creates even greater challenges for societal well-being (Anderson & Rainie, 2018; Arogyaswamy, 2020).

To date, our human experience and capabilities have done little to prepare us for the long-term disruption and uncertainty brought on by these transformations. Nonetheless, the pandemic revealed our remarkable adaptability, as was reflected in the speed at which the world pivoted to new ways of working, socialising, shopping and consuming, accessing healthcare and other services, and other aspects of daily living. But it also highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities, leaving many individuals, communities, and nations struggling to cope.

Beyond semantics: What is social cohesion?

The term social cohesion has been increasingly used over the last three decades and arguably sometimes misused. Different actors and agencies within the New Zealand policy community have used the term variably. Given its centrality to how a society functions, and to policy settings and collective decision-making processes, it is important that we be clear about what the term means. While this may seem to be a semantic matter, it is in fact critical (Chan et al., 2006).

The term has been interpreted narrowly in relation to the terrorist event in Christchurch (Royal Commission, 2020), implying that the actions of a lone actor terrorist against the Muslim community was related to the state of our social cohesion. While political and ideological movements can lead to antisocial violence, the behaviour of lone actors, even if ideologically inspired, is not necessarily

a reflection on society's cohesion or integrity (Gill et al., 2014; Groarke, 2021). It is important to eliminate and minimise the risk of violent extremism, but that is not the primary reason to emphasise social cohesion (Husband & Alam, 2011). Rather, social cohesion should be supported because it is essential to our collective well-being and that of individuals, groups, and communities

The term has been used somewhat differently when discussing New Zealand's growing ethnic diversity in relation to recent rapid immigration (Office of Ethnic Communities, 2016; Spoonley et al., 2005), or when reflecting on the impact of the pandemic or social media on the social cohesion locally and globally (Spoonley et al., 2020). The term is increasingly being used during public discussion of our responses to various catastrophic threats, notably climate change and Covid-19 (Frieling & Warren, 2018; McMeeking et al., 2020; Ministry for the Environment, 2020).

If our collective desire is for a healthy and functioning society, it is critical to have a broad and practical definition of social cohesion which can be used and accepted by both policy-makers and the public. Academic research on social cohesion tends to focus on how to measurably define it, whereas its use in public policy – which this paper focusses on – is broader (Chan et al., 2006). Social cohesion can be described in terms of the desired characteristics of a cohesive society or in terms of the factors that create or undermine it. It is important that we focus not only on the desirable outcomes but also evaluate the drivers and barriers to maintaining or achieving social cohesion. A working definition must encompass and reflect the diversity of interests, sub-groups, and communities in a society. In Aotearoa, it must especially consider tangata whenua ambitions, as well as the population as a whole.

The OECD defines a cohesive society as one that *works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility* (OECD, 2012). The first policy use of the term in New Zealand was in the Immigration Service statement: *New Zealand becomes an increasingly socially cohesive society with a climate of collaboration because all groups have a sense of belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy* (New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004). The definition in Box 1 was developed by Spoonley and colleagues (Spoonley et al., 2005), derived from a Canadian definition by Jane Jenson (Jenson, 1998), and is frequently used in social agencies.

A criteria- and conditions-based definition is extraordinarily valuable in assessing how cohesive a society is, and whether certain groups might feel excluded. It does not, however, identify or point towards the many potential drivers that either strengthen or reduce social cohesion. Thus, it begs another layer of interrogation: the question of what might undermine or enhance any of the five key characteristics of social cohesion (belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition, and legitimacy). As a result, using this framework as the only policy tool could overlook some of the core challenges to social cohesion by underplaying, for example, the importance of trust in the institutions of government. It also does not, or did not, anticipate the impacts of technology on societal well-being or fragmentation.

Chan et al (2006) considered these issues and provided a policy-focused definition that highlighted the two key vectors or dimensions that determine social cohesion: *“Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions between members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and a willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations.”* Integrating this approach with that of Jenson (1998) and Spoonley (2005) provides the basis for an informed discussion about factors that sustain and enhance social cohesion.

Box 1. Defining social cohesion

Social cohesion can be defined in terms of two groups of criteria – the elements of socially cohesive behaviour and the high-level conditions necessary for a socially cohesive society (Peace & Spoonley, 2019).

Elements of socially cohesive behaviour

A sense of **belonging** derives from being part of the wider community, trusting in other people, and having a common respect for the rule of law and for civil and human rights. New Zealand is home to many peoples, and is built on the bicultural ambitions of the Treaty of Waitangi. Ethnically and culturally diverse communities and individuals experience a sense of belonging and their contribution is recognised, celebrated, and valued.

Participation includes involvement in economic and social (cultural, religious, leisure) activities; in the workplace, family, and community settings; in groups and organisations; and in political and civic life (such as voting or standing for election on a school Board of Trustees). All people in New Zealand are able to participate in all aspects of New Zealand life.

Conditions for a socially cohesive society

Inclusion involves equity of opportunities and of outcomes, with regard to labour market participation, income, access to education and training, social benefits, health services, and housing. All people in New Zealand share access to equitable opportunities and services and contribute to good settlement outcomes in ways that are recognised and valued.

Recognition involves all groups, including the host country, valuing diversity and respecting differences; protection from discrimination and harassment; and a sense of safety. Diversity of opinions and values amongst the many cultures that make up New Zealand today are accepted and respected, and people are protected from the adverse effects of discrimination.

Legitimacy includes confidence in public institutions that act to protect rights and interests; the mediation of conflicts; and institutional responsiveness. Public institutions foster social cohesion, engender trust and are responsive to the needs of all communities.

We adopt a broad definition characterising social cohesion in a democratic society depending on:

- *Sufficient trust and respect between those who are governed and the institutions and individuals they empower to govern them;*
- *Sufficient trust and respect between all members of a society (which by inference reflects a diverse set of identities, worldviews, values, beliefs, and interests) to foster cooperation for the good of the society as a whole;*
- *Institutions and structures that promote trust and respect between all members of society; and allowing*
- *Belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy to be universally possible.*

With this definition of social cohesion, it is possible to dissect, identify, and then focus on structural and other factors that might contribute to or undermine social cohesion. Importantly, this definition respects the inherent heterogeneity and complexity of any modern society.

It is heartening to see that the New Zealand Treasury, in its latest revision of the Living Standards Framework (The Treasury, 2017), has moved to a similar definition (and also one based on Chan et al., 2006). However, the Treasury's definition separates the horizontal from the vertical dimensions of trust, whereas the two are demonstrably intertwined.

The critical importance of societal cohesion

The post-enlightenment emergence of the democratic state was based on the presumption of an implied contract between citizen (although until recently this was a selective and non-inclusive definition) and State. The State came to provide core services to ensure safety to individual members of society by providing organised defence, the rule of law (with its sanctions), and a range of social and economic benefits (Davies, 2019). The citizens, in turn, accepted the State's ability to govern, but to govern with accountability and to embody the accepted norms and values¹ of the society in question. At the core of a liberal democracy is the understanding that this social contract obliges the governing institutions to steward the well-being of citizens, the environment, and the economy, and to buffer these from threats, either external or internal. It would be naïve, however, to think that in any society this is exhibited in a form that is anywhere near perfect. The challenge is that societal members hold different values, even extending to their definitions of well-being, and therefore also differing views on whether this contract is being met in a way that is consistent with those values (Scharfbillig et al., 2021).

Liberal democracies evolved over several centuries, during which the relative separation of emotion and belief from reason and trust in empirical facts has been seen as a desirable element of collective and rational decision-making. However, this is now being confronted by 'post-truth phenomena' characterised by the rejection of facts that do not accord with prior politically inspired biases, and the increasing availability and intrusion of disinformation (Bardon, 2020; Enfield, 2017; McIntyre, 2018).

This confrontation is associated with the recent emergence of the virtual world and a broad range of manipulated influences on information flows and access. The increasing importance of the need to entertain has shifted the focus of some media away from their previously acknowledged role as sources of verified information. Democratic systems have long relied on the fourth estate for accountability and to ensure that the electorate is appropriately informed. However even those media organisations that continue to do so find themselves victim of the algorithmic reinforcement of biases that is inherent in the filtering applied by online search engines and social media platforms. Disinformation abounds, with consequences for the nature and practice of democracy and, as we have seen in the pandemic, direct human costs.

In the face of such upheaval and ongoing uncertainty, it is essential to maximise societal resilience and cohesion. Yet our collective capacity for resilience is being challenged by the very factors driving the changes. These factors interact in multiple, complex ways. At their cores, resilient societies are built on social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2018; Jewett et al., 2021; Larsen, 2014; Townshend et al., 2015), which relies on social structures, processes, and attitudes that promote cooperation among societal members, underpinned by norms of reciprocity and trust.

No modern society allows its members absolute free will. We ban murder, punish those who steal, require seat belts, insist that children go to school, mandate bicycle and motorbike helmets, require people and businesses to pay tax, and punish those who lie under oath. Living in an organised society implies a contract of reciprocal behaviour, or a social contract, between citizens and the society's institutions. We cannot operate outside those bounds and remain functioning and free members of that society. There can be tension around what the bounds are, as we have seen in debates over constraints imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, and as are more generally reflected in differing preferences across various ideologies and value sets (see Scharfbillig et al., 2021 for an extensive discussion).

We also accept that we have different identities, of which the most obvious might be ethnicity, but there are many more ways we are defined by membership of different identity groupings (Scharfbillig et al.,

1 'Values' is a word with multiple interpretations, and societal or national values are not synonymous with individual values. For an in-depth discussion of this distinction and how individual values can be analysed, see Scharfbillig et al., 2021.

2021). Indeed, we all belong to multiple groups simultaneously (see below). Equally, as members of a liberal democracy, we insist that the institutions of a democratic state are honest and only require things of citizens that are either essential for their own well-being (e.g. education), or for the benefit of the stability, safety and cohesion of society as a whole (e.g. the legal framework).

However, democracies do not try to control our personal and communal worldviews, statements, or language (with some limitations, such as punishing libellous statements and limiting hate speech to reduce societal harm and sustain cohesion). This contrasts with autocracies that attempt to control many forms of behaviour or speech from the top down (Møller & Skaaning, 2013). Democracy is designed in principle to allow perspectives to be articulated so that others and institutions can consider them.² Tension emerges when democratic governments forget about the importance of bottom-up engagement or of sustaining transparency. Lack of transparency soon leads to a loss of trust and promotes conspiracy thinking (Connolly et al., 2019; Porumbescu et al., 2017). A healthy democracy also requires an informed population that is politically and digitally literate. There is an unhealthy trend in many so-called democracies in the high-income world to manipulate the audience; the result is declining trust in democratic governments globally (Edelman, 2021). This has been exacerbated in the pandemic (Goldin, 2021).

In New Zealand, political and civil debate has emerged around the way the paper *He Puapua* surfaced (Charters et al., 2019), and the uncertainty and ambiguity of its status. It spilled over into other political discussions, such as local council wards and the Three Waters reform initiative. Irrespective of the merits of the propositions in *He Puapua*, the paper focuses on a key issue affecting every New Zealander, and therefore needs to be discussed in an informed and mature manner so that a consensus can be reached on what would be an indigenously informed, forward-looking democracy that deals with the issues of defining our bicultural and multicultural future. How that discussion is handled is critical to ensuring or undermining broadly based vertical and horizontal societal trust, and thus cohesion. If New Zealand is to agree to any constitutional change in how its institutions govern, then the outcome of this debate, and its spill-over consequences to social cohesion, will depend on how the conversation is conducted and who participates in it.

The evolution of social cohesion

In thinking about the challenges ahead, there is value in reviewing how we come to be where we are.

Humans evolved under natural selection as social animals (Gluckman & Hanson, 2019; Shultz et al., 2011; Sloan Wilson, 2015), so for our entire history as a species over perhaps 300,000 years we have lived closely with other humans, mostly in extended family groups. Societies much larger than that started to form only about 12,000 years ago. Complex societies then emerged quite rapidly, and large cities already existed some 3000 years ago. Some societies remained more itinerant and some, such as the archeo-Polynesians, followed a different technological path. However, irrespective of their developmental path, once societies grew beyond small family units, all acquired systems and rules to define membership of that society in order to ensure stability and encourage coexistence within these groups (Jordan et al., 2013; Manner & Gowdy, 2010).

Communities scaled to millions of people require very different types of organisation compared to communities scaled to less than 100, which is how we lived for most of our 300,000 years as a species. Larger scale demands more organisation, which generally leads to hierarchies of elites (Perret et al., 2020). Over time, those at the top of the hierarchies (whether priests, chiefs, or monarchs), or

² The term 'institutions' is used in a broad sense to include not just organisational structures such as governments and the fourth estate, but also customs, mores, and practices that support how societies operate.

the group as a whole in smaller and more egalitarian societies, codified those cooperative morals and cohesive rules through strong tribal customs (e.g. tapu), religious means as formal religions evolved (Norenzayan, 2015), or the emergence of civil law (Curry et al., 2019; Wilson, 2003). The boundary between these is not always clear, as seen in the few remaining theocracies.

Beyond rules of homage to a deity, respect to ancestors, or to nature itself in the case of many indigenous peoples, the evolution of societal rules revolved around those elements that sustained cohesion within the society. In both religious and civil law, attacks on people or property within the societal group entity were prohibited, and laws of slander and libel or religious precepts (not to speak ill of thy neighbour) emerged. Such rules did not discourage conflict with other societies (out-groups), and indeed human history as it is generally recorded focuses on periods of tension and conflict between bounded societies (more recently called nation-states) (Boyer, 2020).

Social cohesion and the State

As the nation-state emerged, societies increasingly defined what was allowable and not allowable, with a focus on maintaining internal stability. Until relatively recently, this assumed that social and economic status was largely defined by birth, which had broad discriminatory consequences. There were clear intergenerational hierarchies of elites, while others were condemned to serfdom or peasantry, and social mobility was largely unheard of (Wilkerson, 2020). But as the nineteenth century progressed, technology and education started to undermine these sorts of barriers, and as rights movements emerged (starting with the end of slavery and broader suffrage movements), progress was accelerated. Birth, by and large, is no longer the prime determinant of whether an individual is included or excluded from ascending societal power ladders in a democracy, even though it is much easier if one starts on a higher rung. Sadly in some societies, one's position is still defined by the circumstances of birth, upbringing and indeed gender.

Democracy is meant to provide a feedback loop that gives consent to those societal power ladders. However, as societies grew in scale and complexity, their internal diversity increased, leading to more diverse views and perspectives within societies. Migration fuelled diversity in ethnicity and religion, and neither was without pain: colonisation, slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, and islamophobia all emerged.

Societies in the last 150 years have had to grapple with the issues associated with diversity compounded by the added issues of colonisation and post-colonisation. Tension between in-groups and out-groups emerged, ranging from Australia's decisions regarding the fate of refugees in boats, to manifest racism still apparent in many countries. Isabel Wilkerson highlights how groups within a society perceive their relative positioning and how those perceptions can cause ongoing tension between them (Wilkerson, 2020). For example, the way some groups perceive they have been displaced from their position on the societal ladder by immigrants explains much of the political anger now being seen in the USA (Leach et al., 2007; Cox et al., 2017). This response to migration has echoes in many countries.

Until relatively recently, even people living in large urban conurbations mostly lived in small social groups defined spatially, economically, socially, by employment, and/or by religion. This started to change with the telephone, radio and television, motorised transport, and emancipation, and massive social change followed. Democratic societies, to a greater or lesser extent, adapted to these changes, reflecting and incorporating diverse identities and worldviews. In contrast, more authoritarian societies use fear and force to maintain top-down control, seeing diversity as harmful to the ability to homogenise and control. Indeed it has been suggested citizens prefer strong leadership with autocratic powers when they are fearful or threatened (Davies, 2019).

The internet, new media and social cohesion

In the last three decades, and especially in the past ten years, societies have had to confront the emergence of the internet and social media, and in the near future will be faced with the increasing use of virtual and manipulated realities in so-called metaverses. The internet has enormously increased access to information, and in that sense can be seen as democratising. However, the information is of variable reliability, and exposure to misinformation and disinformation is greatly enhanced by millions of users being exposed to both unintentional misunderstanding (often through ignorance) and deliberate misrepresentation by bad actors (including agents of foreign states). The internet is also empowering in that it allows people to engage in activities of social affirmation online (Marlowe et al., 2016). But, at the same time, the long-established role of the fourth estate in filtering and providing reliable information has been adversely impacted by newsroom cut-backs that have savagely reduced the ranks of journalists. The diminished state of professional journalism is due to the internet and social media attracting huge audiences and, with it, much of the advertising revenue that previously went to traditional media. This cultural change means that to retain readers or viewers, media outlets must adopt attention-seeking tactics that privilege a desire to be entertained above the need to be informed. This is because the internet and social media have undermined the advertising revenue available to traditional media, and cultural change means that to retain readers or viewers (Harper, 2010), those media now focus on entertaining rather than informing.

The ability for people to self-select online has reinforced identities that are defined by bias and belief rather than being based on face-to-face and real-world determinants. The algorithms that fuel search engines and social media are intentionally designed to promote advertising revenue by delivering audiences to whom specific goods and services can be effectively targeted. As the business model relies on capturing attention, these platforms drive attention towards manipulated and often highly prejudiced world views (Lewandowsky et al., 2021). Negative messages spread much faster and further than positive messages in this viral world, so commercial advantage comes from amplifying messages containing strong negative emotions rather than from offering neutral, informative, or even positive messages (Rose-Stockwell, 2017; Smith, 2018). These algorithmic manipulations reinforce biases and promote encapsulated and disconnected sub-identities that can pull apart what were previously largely cohesive groups.

The anonymity enabled by social media allows commentary of a sort that was previously socially or legally sanctioned. Libel, slander, hate speech and *ad hominem* attacks have become the fuel for both click bait and the ability of social media to project disinformation (Bayer et al., 2019). Behaviour that religion and law deemed uncivil, namely “speaking ill of thy neighbour,” is now common. Trolling, cyberbullying, and general digital hostility are not subject to effective sanctions³ and are deeply embedded in much post-digital societal interaction, and have impacted on social cohesion and promoted affective polarisation.

Disinformation and intentional manipulation of views and identity are not new, but social media, the internet, and algorithm-targeted messaging have taken intentional disinformation to a new level (Anderson & Rainie, 2017; Dutton et al., 2017; Starbird, 2019; Stewart, 2021). Politicians have rapidly adopted social media and its amplifying toolkit. The dangers of politically driven disinformation have been well reported in examples from the northern hemisphere (European Commission, 2018). The issue of where the boundary lies between proper use and misuse of the media in political messaging, as was exposed in the Cambridge Analytica episode (Wong, 2019), will only grow more complex over time.

³ New Zealand has attempted to approach this through the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015, and in the current review of hate speech by the Ministry of Justice.

Some futurists and strategists have started to ask whether the democratic nation state can survive this (Bremmer, 2021). Will individual loyalties shift from those who govern in some form of the real world to those who would hope to govern or control a virtual world? Add the move towards e-currencies to compete with reserve currencies, and these are no longer just the concerns of science fiction writers (Garg, 2018).

Nevertheless, in the real world we still all live within social groupings, societies, and nation-states. These societies are now larger and very diverse in beliefs, behaviours, and identities, and the issues they face are increasingly existential in nature. While the essential purpose of democracy is to create a form of society that ensures social cohesion (as reflected in both dimensions of trust; Cuellar, 2009), the current modes of decision-making in democracies were largely designed for a different world (Altria et al., 2019). Are they still appropriate? How can they withstand the downsides of technological development while exploiting its manifest advantages? What are the consequences for social cohesion?

In diverse societies, diverse factors matter

All societies are diverse, but Aotearoa New Zealand is particularly and increasingly so. In that sense, it is a giant societal experiment that is grappling with marrying both biculturalism and multiculturalism and seeking a smooth path ahead that acknowledges these critical elements of its history, identity, and composition. The nation was founded out of competition for land and resources (that still required in-group cohesion and collaboration to function), including pre-European inter-tribal competition for mana, and then an agreement between Māori and the Crown via Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This sought to acknowledge *tino rangatiratanga*, but ultimately failed to do so appropriately. It is nonetheless generally accepted that Māori have a unique constitutional, historical, and moral position within Aotearoa. In the country's more recent history, there has been a project to strengthen biculturalism and to enhance the mana and position of te ao Māori, while at the same time witnessing and hopefully embracing rapid multicultural shifts (Durie, 2005; Peach, 2018; Stewart, 2018).

Māori and European settlers had differing concepts of identity, family/whānau, social character and organisation, and mechanisms of authority and decision-making. Addressing those distinctions remains at the heart of the New Zealand experiment. It is no longer realistic, and in fact never was, to allow these differences to be subsumed by a singular view of identity and the political power that attaches to that view. That unresolved tension is being added to by the growth of diversity in both Māori and non-Māori populations in terms of ethnic mix, religion, world view, and influence.

There have been rapid shifts in the shape of the non-Māori population, especially in Auckland, where the population of peoples of South, South-East, or East Asian origin far exceeds that of Māori and those of other Pasifika origin, which creates potential demographic and political pressures and tension points if not explored carefully (Spoonley, 2020). Auckland is now one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in the world.

These bicultural and multicultural shifts present conflicts that need to be discussed openly and inclusively. However, there appears to be little political appetite for such a constructive and careful dialogue. One-sided narrative is not a dialogue and, in the end, can only damage both dimensions of trust. It is essential to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Māori worldviews compared to those of Pākehā (Grimes et al., 2015), but it is also wrong to assume that views are uniform either within Māoridom or among Pākehā.

There are also many other ways we can dissect our society, including by gender, by rural or urban location, by socioeconomic status, by ethnic and religious identity, by values, or by age (Norris

& Inglehart, 2019). These groups will have different views and priorities. For example, there are important age-cohort effects when it comes to an issue such as climate change (Milfont et al., 2021). In addition, the levels of administrative control that have been put in place over Covid-19 for collective well-being have exposed sharply differing group interests and priorities. These differences in views reflect a range of personal and communal influences and understanding, which is made more complex by the fact that we occupy multiple identities and interests that influence our thinking in nuanced and sometimes highly contradictory ways.

Thus, while Aotearoa New Zealand's social cohesion has been described as relatively strong in the recent past by a number of commentators (Tukuitonga et al., 2021), the country cannot be complacent (Gillespie, 2021). Given the extraordinary complexity of our fast-changing and diverse society, it is important to better understand the dynamics underpinning social cohesion. That is, we need to understand the degree of trust in government and our institutions (vertical trust) on one hand, and the respect and trust between different components of society (horizontal trust) on the other.

Key questions include who gets to design, build and run those institutions of control, and how variable perceptions of the system's fairness will affect how groups relate to one another. Within the policy community, it is currently unclear whether there is a common understanding of which factors are most important in ensuring individual and communal resilience and cohesion amongst different societal groups. It is likely that the significance of different factors will vary according to social and cultural characteristics.

Values, emotion and politics

Social cohesion relies on trust and cooperation between people with different values and identities. Democracies are based on the presumption that decisions are made in a direction considered beneficial to society overall, even though they may have uneven impacts that may not appeal to everyone. Further, what is perceived as beneficial will vary between individuals because of their identity, values, worldviews, and context. The complexities of values and identity have recently been reviewed (Scharfbillig et al., 2021).

A central issue is the perception that societal structures and institutions are designed to suit a particular history, culture, and tradition, but by definition not all members of the society share those same features. This can lead to tension, and post-1840 Aotearoa is still finding its way through this Gordian knot. We live our lives built around our social identities, which are based on who we interact with (in both the real and virtual world), how we identify by religion, our personal and societal goals, and our work and recreational interests, among other things. The internet and social media have fundamentally changed the way people group and congregate, and how they identify themselves. In this digital milieu such identities are continually strengthened and reinforced (Kaakinen et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2017).

A subset of values has traditionally defined people's political affiliation, which in recent decades has been generally described rather one-dimensionally on an economic spectrum of conservative (right) or liberal (left), and around this, positions on other issues coalesced. It is now manifestly more complex, however, as issues other than economic structures, such as the environment, or social values like attitudes to criminal justice, have become dominant in defining partisanship. As has been particularly apparent in the USA, voting patterns are often less defined by political ideology than by emotional attachment to one's self-identified in-group. Political sectarianism, with its potentially violent accompaniments, is no longer based on disagreement over policy but based on attitudes of one in-group to another – anger, fear, aversion, and hatred now define how one political group sees the other, and this appears to be bidirectional (Mason, 2016; Finkel et al., 2020). This phenomenon is called affective polarisation, and together with the loss of civil discourse it is shattering societies, with

the language of anger and hate becoming more common. Worryingly, a recent analysis suggests that political and emotionally based sectarianism is emerging in New Zealand, defined by feelings towards co-partisans and opposing partisans (Boxell et al., 2020).

This may surprise many New Zealanders, but recent events highlight an extraordinary amount of anger and dislike. The anti-vax parliamentary protest of November 11, 2021, brought together a very diverse group of actors who would not normally coalesce, as they would not have aligned ideologies (Manhire, 2021). Rather, they were united by rage against the system for a wide range of reasons. The language used that day was of hate and violence, and spread well beyond the alleged issue of vaccination to include anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, the media, and individual political leaders. Such a coalition is created by multiple factors including disinformation, but it should lead to deeper reflection.

In Europe and elsewhere, there is an inverse relationship between trust in government and Covid vaccination rates (Graeber et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2021). The same relationship exists between trust in government and belief in and acceptance of conspiracy theories (Mari et al., 2021; Van Prooijen et al., 2021). Achieving population-wide vaccination requires both vertical trust (in the institutions of governance and scientific expertise) and horizontal trust (between members of society agreeing to do something for collective benefit). A loss in vertical trust can extend beyond distrust in politicians to other elites such as the media and scientists. In New Zealand, much of the resistance to vaccines comes from members of society who, for historical and other reasons, have low trust in government or in other elites such as medical scientists, and this has been a frequent sentiment expressed by vaccine-resistant people.

The dangers in this trend are not trivial. Security and public safety threats in New Zealand are more likely to arise from individual actors rather than organised groups based on faith or identity (CTAG, 2021). The analysis suggests that the conditions of the recent past – greater social isolation, much-increased and widely shared misinformation, and exposure to extremist content and conspiracy theories – could lead to individual actors taking their cue from such politically or issue-based hate messaging, increasing the risk of violent acts (CTAG, 2021).

Factors affecting social cohesion: A study

Individuals' identities are formed partly by family and peers, partly by circumstance, partly by the institutions and people they interact with (Scharfbillig et al., 2021; Singh, 2018), and partly by whom they interact with online (Gündüz, 2017). These individual identities are reflected in different value sets and worldviews. Such differences mean that no singular approach or understanding can address everyone's priorities. Democracy works to find solutions that appear fair and practical to a majority, but these solutions only succeed when they adequately look after the needs of minorities as well.

These different identities and worldviews of sections within society must be taken into account when analysing factors that might cause social cohesion and resilience to be undermined or enhanced ('causal factors'). In our work since 2019, we have taken a formal approach to exploring factors influencing social cohesion working with a broad range of global experts in disciplines ranging from evolutionary anthropology to terrorism studies.

After preliminary work, a meeting was held in London in January 2020, organised by Koi Tū, with a group of experts who were diverse in terms of academic discipline and geography. Some 65 factors were identified that might positively or negatively influence social cohesion and societal resilience. Through an iterative ranking process, these were reduced to a priority list and statistical techniques were used to cluster them into the 14 core factors shown in Table 1. It must be emphasised that this process reflected perspectives of the global and largely developed world, not local ones. To establish what matters most to groupings within New Zealand, further empirical work is needed.

Table 1. Major factor clusters that can affect social cohesion, as viewed through a global lens

Factor clusters	Component factors
1. Environmental change	<p>Future effects of climate change – concern about the real world effects, scale and impacts of climate change, and what needs to be done to moderate its negative impacts.</p> <p>Eco-anxiety – growing concerns about the impacts of environmental degradation; feeling powerless to achieve change.</p>
2. Technological change	<p>Rapidity of change and technological emergence – ethical, regulatory and social frameworks not keeping up with technological development; emergence in relation to complex systems and synergistic effects of new technologies, leading to significant disruption and wide-ranging impacts.</p>
3. Inequalities	<p>Inequality based on wealth – income and wealth inequality resulting in greater socioeconomic divisions and power differentials.</p> <p>Inequality of income – unequal flow of money; income earned by the rich has increased compared to most others;</p> <p>Inequality of opportunity – based on demographic factors such as family, gender, age, and access to education, health etc.</p>
4. Identity and demography	<p>Post-colonial and indigenous issues and grievances (In New Zealand the issues are reflected in the justified and only partially resolved grievances of many Māori, and in the ongoing contention of what Te Tiriti now means in practice and how it is implemented.)</p> <p>Impacts of changing demography – ageing population, low fertility, changing ethnic/cultural mix, age-cohort differences, ageism.</p> <p>Formal migration</p>
5. Economic insecurity and instability	<p>Job insecurity – changing labour markets, precariousness of work because of increasing rates of casualisation and automation.</p> <p>Housing quality/affordability in cities – jobs centred in cities but cities' liveability declining.</p> <p>Forced migration and reactions – international and refugee migration; cross-border movements that result in ethnic and religious co-location, sometimes in ways that escalate anxieties; increased flow of refugees displaced by climate change, war; destabilisation of neighbouring regions.</p>
6. Economic policies	<p>Impacts of government economic policies – taxation, redistribution; macro issues of wealth change within and between generations.</p>
7. Influence of foreign and non-government institutions	<p>Power of non-governmental actors – influence of wealthy political donors; influence of tech companies who control data; influence of lobbyists.</p> <p>Technocratic plutocracy and the influence of organised disinformation</p> <p>Decreasing trust in knowledge institutions – suspicion of knowledge elites, scepticism about scientific and other experts.</p> <p>Geopolitical stress – rising military tensions, economic and commercial disruptions, changing international relations, intra-state conflict.</p>
8. Information and public discourse	<p>Changing role of traditional media – decline in the institutional role of the fourth estate; increasing reliance on gut feelings over facts; preference to act on feelings over reasoning and logic or factual data.</p> <p>Social media impacts – impact on personal and group identity, narcissism, sense of opportunity, unrealistic expectations, change in expectations of transparency and accountability.</p> <p>Erosion of norms of discourse – the emergence of anonymity online, ad hominem in electronic discourse.</p> <p>Declining information reliability – destabilised information environments resulting in difficulty identifying reliable information.</p> <p>Information targeting and bias reinforcement – algorithmic identification of personal interests, information targeting, and creation of echo chambers.</p>

Factor clusters	Component factors
9. Social boundaries and norms	<p>Compliance with civic values – willingness to acknowledge and action shared values; respect for norms.</p> <p>Sense of collective responsibility – efforts to find group or local solutions; not assuming top-down solutions.</p> <p>Threats to rule of law – decreasing ability of society to uphold established laws that are deemed to be fair and just.</p> <p>New social group structures and group identity – influence of online communities and world views to define individual and group identity, often in problematic ways.</p>
10. Psychological states and stresses	<p>Sense of personal security and safety – real or perceived criminality or threats; increased awareness of conflict via media.</p> <p>Emotional and psychological stress – societal and personal strains experienced as a result of modern lifestyles and work patterns; mental health status affecting the ability to adapt and recover from adversity.</p>
11. Trust in institutions of government	<p>Trust in representative democracy – mistrust that democratic/electoral processes are fair; declining public trust in government accountability and integrity; perceived lack of voice in process.</p> <p>Trust in government institutions – public trust in government accountability and integrity; trust in the justice system, in the agencies of central and local government, and that government will meet individual and community needs.</p>
12. Perceptions of unfairness	<p>Economic grievances and expectations – growth in anxiety and anger about changes to economies and labour markets; economic expectations not being met.</p> <p>Perceived corruption of power elites – decline of trust in elites as a result of perceived corruption and arrogance.</p>
13. Inclusion and community	<p>Perceptions of minorities – blame and stereotyping of ‘out-groups’; characterising defined groups in negative terms and problematising them.</p> <p>Strength of community groups – strength and availability of (non-state) institutions of communal support such as community social groups, sports clubs, religious groups.</p> <p>Sense of nationalism – trend towards populism and exclusion of the ‘other’.</p>
14. Polarisation and extremism	<p>Support for authoritarianism – desire for order and hierarchy, desire for strong political leadership, loyalty to strongman leaders who protect from ‘outsiders’.</p> <p>Political polarisation – increasingly entrenched divisions between different political world views with little room for compromise.</p> <p>Normalisation of extreme views – shift of mainstream views – changes to what is considered ‘normal’; spread of extreme views, radicalisation.</p> <p>Perceived threats to group norms/values – sense that long-held societal/group norms and values are under threat from actions for minority rights, gender, etc. (also known as cultural backlash).</p>

Individuals in any high-income society will have various and diverse views on the relative importance of each of these 14 clusters of factors. Ideally, any assessment of the state of social cohesion in a society would first explore the importance of each of these factors to different groups. This would help reveal which factors are important to us all, which factors invite a diversity of views, and which factors are particularly important to a distinct group or community.

Threats to social cohesion

New Zealand is generally seen as a cohesive society, but it is not immune to division, and there are warning signs. Matters to consider include:

- **The potential for constitutional change**, constructively resolving how Te Tiriti is embedded into New Zealand society.
- The inherent dissonance between **bicultural and multicultural identities**.
- The sense that transparency and inclusiveness of our **central and local government democratic processes** has been declining.
- **The potential for regional conflict** in the Indo-Pacific region and/or economic and climate challenges for our Pacific neighbours.
- **The long-term consequences of Covid-19**, which has amplified many existing inequalities (e.g. the digital divide), issues of trust in government, and the role of disinformation. There is anger and frustration over the consequences of government-imposed controls. The impacts on mental health and on education will exacerbate the consequences of the pandemic. Indeed, the International Covid Scenarios Project (ISC, 2021; Skegg et al., 2021) has specifically highlighted the pandemic's long-term threats to social cohesion and to the government-citizen relationship.
- **Climate change** will have real impacts on coastal communities, on agriculture, on water excesses and drought. Pacific neighbours will be especially impacted by rising sea levels. The needed national responses to climate change will cause considerable debate around the required trade-offs, and these will unevenly impact different parts of the community, both economically and socially.
- **The changed nature of social discourse** given the state of New Zealand's fourth estate and the role of social media. Discussion of politically important topics is increasingly problematic due to the fragmentation of the media and sources of public information, and changing behaviours in terms of media consumption, with a tendency to operate in information, political, and social siloes.
- **The long-term impact of disruptive technologies** such as immersive and pervasive computer systems and quantum computing. This comes on top of the major impacts of technology on the way we work and access employment.
- How the **discourse over national governance versus regional government** evolves, a tension which has been highlighted recently in the discourse over the Three Waters proposal.
- **Growing economic and persistent educational and health inequalities**.
- **The failure to resolve longstanding social issues** of intergenerational poverty traps, housing costs, aged care, etc.

These challenges, along with many others, need to be continuously subject to risk analysis, reflection, and action in order to protect New Zealand's greatest asset – its people and their relative cohesion. How do these various changes and factors impact on social cohesion? How should they be factored in when considering changes to our political, economic, and social systems and policies? Some responses will need to be targeted to specific sections of the community while others will need a collective mandate.

In the context of the range of risks listed above, we need to explore and find solutions to these issues that are specific to Aotearoa New Zealand, for example by:

- Ensuring a true plurality of voices in discussing and agreeing upon solutions. The superficial nature of most central and local government consultation is compounded by the shallow nature of aspects of our democracy with a single parliamentary chamber, a very short electoral cycle, a strong party whip, and a lack of a select committee process of the type that upper houses generally bring. There is a danger, in such institutional arrangements, of political partisanship and short-termism.
- Strengthening participatory democracy with new, more inclusive deliberative approaches.
- Strengthening the capacities of the responsible fourth estate and addressing the challenges of disinformation, especially in relation to the influences of social media.
- Promoting a more open and informed approach in Aotearoa New Zealand to conversations on a range of complex issues including climate change transformation and environmental sustainability, discrimination, the use of life sciences technologies, our bicultural and multicultural future, and constitutional change.

CONCLUSION

Societies around the world are currently experiencing a number of disorienting shifts that are so discontinuous with their history that the strains on individuals, families, communities, institutions, and governments are manifesting in profound disequilibria at many levels of societal activity. We are experiencing a ‘perfect storm’ of multiple significant transformations and transitions. How do societies remain resilient in the face of these changing realities? Every society and sector within society will experience these changes in different ways. The experience of societal sectors will depend greatly on how they identify themselves in relation to others in society, their resource base, their level of participation in core institutional processes, and their level of trust in such institutions.

The problems facing societies are ‘collective action problems’. They cannot be resolved by individuals acting alone, but rather require cooperation founded on trust, which underpins social cohesion. Social cohesion does not require a unanimous voice. In fact, willingness to challenge ideas and openness to different views is critical as it enables the system to continuously improve, adapt, and self-correct. Vertical trust and cohesion are maintained by transparent institutional checks on those who govern by those who are governed. Indeed, the institutions of democracy will likely have to evolve in this context (OECD, 2020). Horizontal trust among citizens requires people to understand other viewpoints and agree on processes that are seen to be fair and transparent, so that even if they disagree about the solution, there are mechanisms and processes to arrive at a decision that can be accepted collectively. There are many new initiatives in deliberative democracy, such as citizens’ juries or citizens’ assemblies (Elstub & McClaverty, 2014; OECD, 2020), that New Zealand might consider, especially when problems are highly contested and have a high values component.

New Zealand prides itself on its level of vertical trust (Edelman, 2021), but that can, on occasions, translate to complacency. While there is relatively high trust in the institutions of government, the pandemic has illustrated that trust is not universal and can be eroded. Aotearoa New Zealand, especially Auckland, is already amongst the most ethnically diverse societies in the world. The nature of our populations has changed rapidly. The issues we confront have become clearer but also more challenging. The resolution of what it means to be a ‘Kiwi’ is still evolving – it is certainly no longer (and

should have never been) defined by rugby, racing and beer. In this context, strong horizontal trust, and therefore cohesiveness, cannot be assured unless we collectively understand what might undermine it and what we can do to enhance it.

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