What is social cohesion? Why does it matter?

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Why are we talking about social cohesion?

- **Social cohesion is critical to addressing today’s development problems**, which require coordinated and collective actions across society and government.

- **It is particularly important in contexts of fragility, conflict and violence**, where government capacity is constrained and social cohesion allows states to tap into collective action capacity of communities.

- **But social cohesion is also under strain**, in ways which we are only starting to understand.
  - One-third of people globally would not recommend their community as a place to live to a friend or relative (Gallup, 2022).
  - Disaffection in government and distrust in neighbors are both on the rise.
Is social cohesion real?

Can it be defined?

Measured?

Changed?
Defined? Yes. Social cohesion is...

“a sense of shared purpose, trust and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state.”
Measured? Yes.

• With indicators at national and subnational level
• Existing sources—such as Afrobarometer—can offer a first layer of information.
• Dedicated data collection processes are often required
Changed? Yes. But not always.

- Literature is rich with examples of project interventions that measurably improve social cohesion.
  - But also with lots of cases where interventions had no impact.

- What does it take?
  - Sound diagnostics – what particular aspect of cohesion are we trying to address?
  - Quality implementation – good design will take you only so far
  - Careful M&E – scale up what’s working, fix what’s not

- This is a new and emerging field – **getting things right at the pace we need will require collaboration beyond institutional boundaries**
There have already been exciting collaborations around measurement

The evidence base is growing, and promising approaches have been identified.
Charting next steps across a broad set of possible categories of interventions

- Intergroup contact & dialogue
- Mediation
- Dispute resolution
- Pedagogical/Perspective taking
- Inter-Group Joint Projects
- Media-based interventions
- Reconciliation
New measurement tools are being tested and deployed

- Behavioral games
- Digital innovations & high frequency data collection
- Indicators defined through participatory approaches
Social cohesion is not an unambiguous good, and interventions should be guided by "do no harm" principles

- Communities can be cohesive yet organized around hierarchical or exclusionary norms
- In some contexts, social cohesion can contribute to conflict escalation
- Following “do no harm” principles require that we deploy effective tools for detecting the potential adverse effects of interventions that affect social dynamics
Cross-cutting questions underpinning today's discussions

1. How do we ensure that the "social cohesion agenda" reflects communities' priorities?

2. How can we continue to identify and test innovative interventions that may mitigate some of the most pressing or difficult social cohesion challenges societies face? How can we scale up promising interventions?

3. How do we design assessment and measurement strategies that offer evidence that is credible, but also timely and actionable?

4. How do we identify opportunities for collaboration that build on our organizations' respective strengths and experience?
Thank you!