

Measuring Social Cohesion: Conceptual Fragmentation and Policy Consequences

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Acknowledgement and series note

In early 2024, the Australian Resilient Democracy Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and applied research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The network is dedicated to sharing the analysis publicly and to encourage the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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Abstract

Governments, academics, and communities have defined social cohesion through multiple, overlapping lenses, reflecting different policy objectives, disciplinary traditions, and national contexts. Across disciplines and public policy domains, these definitions vary substantially. For instance, sociology emphasises social bonds and shared norms; political theory focuses on institutional legitimacy and fair cooperation; psychology examines group-level trust and belonging; and policy frameworks prioritise inclusion, participation, and mobility. While complementary, these perspectives leave social cohesion conceptually broad, analytically fragmented, and inconsistently operationalised for overlapping decision-making needs.

This paper summarises four international case studies and measurement approaches, including Australia's Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion framework and comparative models from Germany and Chile, highlighting both shared domains and significant variation in focus, methods, and intended policy use. Together, these cases illustrate how definitional choices shape what is measured, how cohesion is interpreted, and which decisions measurement can inform.

Across these approaches, social cohesion is primarily monitored through national surveys of individuals' perspectives and experiences, rather than applied as a system-level framework to guide program design, service delivery, or institutional reform. The paper finds that Australia's dominant approaches rely heavily on surveys of individual attitudes. While valuable for tracking population trends, these instruments are not always sufficiently timely to meet policy needs. They are also under-utilised to diagnose causal drivers of cohesion or fragmentation, and need to be integrated with other data sources to support place-based, programmatic, or anticipatory policy decisions, suggesting a currently unmet need for an expanded measurement framework.

The aim of this paper is to identify tensions in current definitional frameworks. It seeks to inform policy discussions on how to operationalise social cohesion as part of a wider system approach. It is the first of a series of papers produced for and by the Australian Resilient Democracy Network.

1 Introduction and overview

Social cohesion has long attracted interest from researchers and policymakers (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). It is commonly described as the “glue” that holds society together, exemplified in everyday practices of support, collaboration and good-will (British Academy 2019). Social cohesion has been linked to numerous desirable policy outcomes, including economic growth (Sommer, 2019), human development (Dragolov et al., 2016), disaster resilience (Ludin et al., 2019; Townshend et al., 2015), social wellbeing (Fowler Davis & Davies, 2025) as well as physical and mental health (Kress et al., 2020).

Despite substantial theoretical and empirical work, research on social cohesion remains conceptually fragmented (Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca et al., 2019; Friedkin, 2004; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Further, the purpose for different measures has varied, ranging from national monitoring frameworks and indicators, inputs for informing national policy priorities, to frameworks used to assess the outputs or impacts of those policies and services. Conceptual and measurement differences have weakened the evidence base on which claims about the purported benefits of social cohesion rest (Ware, 2024), which makes social cohesion difficult to diagnose in a way that is meaningful for policy. These measures largely focus on individuals, not the networks or systems around them.

The aim of this paper is to identify tensions in current definitional frameworks and to inform policy discussions around how to operationalise social cohesion as part of a wider system approach. It is the first in a series of papers written by and for the Australian Resilient Democracy Network. The paper sets out a pathway for additional analysis that could lead to an expanded, whole-of-system framework for measuring social cohesion in Australia. Such a framework is outlined in more detail in Discussion Paper 18, written by the same authorship team (Vergani et al. 2026).

This current paper is structured in three parts:

- First, it reviews the main approaches used to conceptualise social cohesion, highlighting their shared elements and the tensions that arise when applying them in the Australian context. The comparative review explores both the framework and the assumptions of these approaches which have led to a strong focus on individuals, and less on the dynamics of social networks and institutional conditions.
- Second, it examines key Australian and international institutional research programs on social cohesion, focusing on survey-based measurement frameworks and how they have been designed and used to inform policy in different settings.
- The final section reflects on the implications for policy of adopting different definitions and measurement approaches, and how they affect the design of programs aimed at strengthening social cohesion in Australia.

The paper is intended for multiple audiences. For government agencies and practitioners, the aim is to surface conceptual and definitional tensions in how social cohesion is described in different contexts, as well as to outline the benefits of a system level framework for policymaking and program design. For data collectors and analysts, the aim is to support the design of more robust measurement frameworks and analysis strategies. For researchers, we attempt to move the conceptual literature forward through comparative analysis and provide a series of suggestions for future research directions.

2 Conceptual approaches to social cohesion

Social cohesion is an inherently multidimensional concept that has been described across different disciplines.

In the social sciences, it is generally conceived as the extent to which individuals and groups cooperate, trust each other, and remain integrated within a wider social fabric, particularly in contexts of social, cultural, or economic transformations (Aruqaj, 2023). Sociologists understand social cohesion as a structural feature of societies, reflecting the strength of social bonds, inclusion, and shared values. Some emphasise the importance of a shared morality (Durkheim, 1964) for social cohesion, while others underscore the role of collective rules (codified in contracts and laws) and institutions (Weber, 2013). Within this framework, sociologists understand cohesion as a condition where conflict is managed through legitimate institutions, inequalities are minimised, and citizens feel part of a shared moral community emphasising the collective processes and institutions that sustain social order.

Political theory shares a closely related concern – how civic life can be organised in ways that sustain a stable and legitimate social order – even though it does not always frame this problem in terms of social cohesion. As with social cohesion, a central question in contemporary political theory is how societies manage disagreement and conflict in pluralist and multicultural contexts in which people hold diverse and sometimes incompatible worldviews.

In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls (2001) approaches the challenge of social cohesion by arguing that social order can be maintained through shared political principles (an ‘overlapping consensus’) that define fair terms of cooperation, rather than through shared values, identities, or ways of life. These principles, embodying a liberal conception of justice, are capable of being affirmed by all citizens, even if being differently motivated by their own comprehensive doctrines or worldview. From this perspective, social order and cooperation – central to social cohesion – rest on the fairness and legitimacy of core institutions that protect basic freedoms, ensure equal opportunity, and regulate inequality. Where these conditions are met, citizens can be expected to continue cooperating with one another and to accept collective outcomes, even in the presence of enduring disagreement. Similarly, political science approaches frame social cohesion as a condition for democratic legitimacy and civic trust (Chan et al., 2006).

Relatedly, from an economic and public policy perspective, international organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank extend the concept to the governance and development domain. The OECD (2011) defines a cohesive society as one that promotes inclusion, equality, and social mobility. The World Bank’s framework similarly views social cohesion as a sense of shared purpose, trust, and willingness to cooperate among members of different groups and between people and the state (Chatterjee et al., 2023)¹. It stresses both horizontal relations between citizens and vertical relations linking citizens to institutions, identifying inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good as key behavioural manifestations. This approach embeds social cohesion within the broader agenda of social sustainability and resilience, particularly in contexts of fragility and inequality.

In psychology, social cohesion is usually understood at the interpersonal or group level. It concerns the forces that bind individuals together, such as attraction, trust, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging (Friedkin, 2004). Early social psychologists defined cohesion as the desire to maintain group membership (Festinger et al., 1950) or as positive interpersonal attitudes within groups (Lott & Lott, 1961). Research in social and organisational psychology explored

¹ The World Bank’s definition of social cohesion builds on Leininger et al. (2021), whose definition in turn is a synthesis of those put forward by Chan et al. (2006) and Schiefer and van der Noll (2017).

how cohesion shapes motivation, conformity, and collective performance (Carron et al., 1985; Hogg & Turner, 1985). From this perspective, cohesion is less a societal property and more an emergent quality of group dynamics. Public health research connects social cohesion to collective efficacy and population well-being (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000).

Despite disciplinary differences, most frameworks converge on a few shared domains: belonging to or identification with a collective (e.g., defined in geographical or geopolitical terms, or as a social identity), social inclusion and equality, participation and solidarity, and trust in others and institutions.

2.1 How Australian governments have defined and used ‘social cohesion’ in policy

Australian governments and public institutions have defined and described social cohesion in different ways over recent decades. The descriptions used in official documents often reflect the disciplinary definitions outlined above, combining different conceptualisations depending on their context and purpose. Most recently and prominently, social cohesion was described in the terms of reference for the *Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion* (2026) in the following way in the wake of the December 2025 attack at Bondi Beach:

‘...recognising that strengthening the national consensus in support of democracy, freedom and the rule of law (social cohesion) provides the strongest defence against antisemitism and other forms of religious and ideologically motivated extremism.’

Some other prominent examples of national-level social cohesion definitions and descriptions published by Australian Government departments, agencies and public institutions are outlined below (in bold). State, territory and local governments have also provided their own descriptions of social cohesion.

Table 1 Australian government definitions and descriptions of social cohesion

<i>Building social cohesion in our communities,</i> Australian Human Rights Commission (2015)	‘Social cohesion refers to positive social relationships – it is the bond or ‘glue’ that binds people. A socially cohesive society is one which works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility.’
<i>Social cohesion: Identifying and definitional attributes,</i> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005)	‘Social cohesion refers to the interrelatedness and unity between the individuals, groups and associations that exist within society. This unity is established through social relationships based on trust, shared values, feelings of belonging and the expectation of reciprocity. However, given the diversity of values and relationships that exist in a pluralist society, a high degree of unity between some individuals and groups may result in the mistrust or exclusion of others. Therefore, inequalities and exclusion (of self or others) are to be minimised for society as a whole to be truly cohesive.’
<i>Social cohesion and social connection,</i> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025)	‘Social cohesion and social connection are interrelated. Social cohesion is a multi-dimensional concept referring to social connectedness (the ‘glue’ that connects members of a society (AIHW 2005)), solidarity and trust amongst individuals, within and across communities and organisations, and within society at large. Societies with higher levels of social cohesion are healthier, more resilient to external shocks, and experience greater economic growth (UNECE 2023).’ ‘There are many definitions of social cohesion. Cohesiveness is created from connections based on a shared sense of belonging and attachment,

	similar values, trust and a sense of ‘social solidarity’ (AIHW 2005). It encompasses the connections and relationships between individuals, groups and associations. It is influenced by society’s level of trust in government and within society (which, along with happiness and belonging, can be influenced by financial wellbeing), and willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals (UNDP 2020). It is described as being a foundation for achieving peace, democracy and equitable development.’
<i>Measuring What Matters</i> , Australian Treasury (2023)	One of five ‘wellbeing themes’: ‘ Cohesive: A society that supports connections with family, friends and the community, values diversity, and promotes belonging and culture. ’
<i>Safeguarding Our Community Together: Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2022</i> , Department of Home Affairs (2022)	‘ Australia’s strong social cohesion, based on our shared liberal democratic values and inclusive national identity, underpins our security, prosperity and unity. Our cohesion supports civic engagement and trust in democratic institutions and harmonious communities. Community resilience is built by maintaining and strengthening cohesion, and collectively confronting forces that threaten our safety, values and national identity. This includes violent extremist ideologies. All levels of government, communities, individuals, non-government organisations, and business contribute to keeping the cohesion of our liberal democratic and multicultural society strong. Cooperation across society, to keep all of Australia’s communities united, supports our counter-terrorism objectives.’

2.2 Considerations for social cohesion in the Australian context

These conceptualisations of social cohesion in Australia present several issues and tensions that require careful consideration.

First, specific conceptualisations of social cohesion commonly carry normative assumptions. While many conceptualisations no longer presume shared values and a collective identity (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, pp. 590-591), frameworks conceived in a particular geographical or historical context may not translate well to Australia’s settler-colonial and super-diverse society (Vertovec, 2023).² As a state where First Nations peoples continue to seek recognition and treaty (Rigney et al., 2021), and where many communities hold different cultural and historical ties, there is resistance to notions of social cohesion that presume assimilation is required. This paper separates the discussion of shared values from the measures of social cohesion, recognising that although they shape each other, as discussed below, they are conceptually distinct, with values comprising an ‘enabling condition’ for social cohesion.

Second, there is tension around the level of analysis at which social cohesion is conceptualised and measured. Social cohesion is widely conceptualised as a characteristic of groups rather than individuals. Social cohesion is commonly treated as a characteristic of neighbourhoods (Forrest & Kearns, 2001) or countries (Delhey et al., 2018; Dragolov et al., 2016). In practice, however, much of the empirical research measuring social cohesion is based on survey data collected from individuals and aggregated to these levels, raising conceptual and methodological issues (Aruqaj, 2023). This is sometimes referred to as the ‘atomistic fallacy’

² The concept of super-diversity describes societies which are extremely complex, with multidimensional diversity beyond a single dimension (like ethnicity). According to Vertovec (2023) the concept ‘encourages a perspective on difference as comprising multiple social processes, flexible collective meanings, and overlapping personal and group identities. A superdiversity approach encourages the re-evaluation and recognition of social categories as multidimensional, unfixed, and porous as opposed to views based on hardened, one-dimensional thinking about groups.’

(Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2025), the counterpart to the more well-known ‘ecological fallacy.’ The former is a logical error where it is incorrectly assumed that characteristics observed at an individual level can be aggregated to make inference at the group level, without taking into account social interactions or dynamics at that level.

When social cohesion is treated only as an individual attribute, such as attitudes of trust or belonging, it implicitly places responsibility for social cohesion on individuals, overlooking the crucial role of networks, systems, institutions, and the state. A more comprehensive model might recognise that social cohesion operates across multiple, interconnected systems, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This approach highlights that cohesion depends on the interplay between individuals, communities, organisations, and state structures, and should be measured at each level with appropriate data sources.

Third, there is a conceptual and normative tension in how social cohesion is understood as a positive quality of society. Thus, high levels of social cohesion in a society are commonly seen as more desirable than low ones (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). However, non-democratic countries may foster high levels of social cohesion using oppressive or restrictive mechanisms by which ‘to instil trust in the government, cultivate belonging to the country, and nurture a sense of we-ness among the citizen’ (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 149). Furthermore, certain groups, such as extremist or exclusionary movements, may be highly cohesive internally, yet contribute to and coexist with low levels of social cohesion at the societal level. Consequently, some scholars argue that social cohesion should be conceptualised as a (precarious) state of balance (Grunow et al., 2023; Schröder et al., 2022). While we do not agree with this conceptualisation, it reinforces that social cohesion is not value-neutral but carries normative implications about what constitutes a cohesive and inclusive society.

Fourth, there are conceptual ambiguities about what constitutes social cohesion and how it relates to adjacent constructs such as social capital, trust, and inclusion. The lack of theoretical clarity blurs distinctions between domains, concepts, and indicators. For example, some models treat trust as a core domain of cohesion, while others view it as an outcome, which complicates comparisons across studies. These inconsistencies limit the ability to assess predictive validity and to determine how different dimensions of cohesion interact or contribute to social outcomes.

Fifth, in a similar vein there are further ambiguities about what constitutes the opposite, or lack, of social cohesion. Concepts such as polarisation, segmentation, fragmentation, and disunity (and more) are often raised as opposite poles to social cohesion. However, they capture subtly different things, and a unified and shared conceptual framework across literatures does not exist that would allow for the characterisation of a group or society that was not socially cohesive.

In the following section, we review how selected international institutional research programs have navigated these kinds of issues and tensions in developing multi-disciplinary and multi-method innovative research agendas around social cohesion. We discuss their main measures of social cohesion, the strengths and shortcomings for the purpose of this discussion paper, and what learnings we can draw from them.

3 Institutional research programs on social cohesion

This section reviews selected institutional research programs that (a) are ongoing³, (b) explicitly revolve around social cohesion⁴, (c) are informed by a shared definition of social cohesion⁵, and (d) have an empirical component to measure social cohesion⁶. We chose these four criteria deliberately to ensure relevance to the purpose of this discussion paper – to provide an overview of contemporary measures of social cohesion, grounded in contemporary international scholarship, in order to identify a pathway towards an expanded measurement framework (articulated in more detail in Discussion Paper 18 in this series).

These research programs were identified based on the authors' knowledge of the international research landscape as well as non-systematic internet searches. Thus, the review is not intended to be exhaustive. Its purpose is to provide information about relevant research programs on social cohesion that can serve as examples for the development of a comprehensive measurement framework of social cohesion in Australia. Table 2 provides examples of social cohesion measures, discussed in more detail in the remainder of the section that follows.

³ This criterion led to the exclusion of the “Social Cohesion in Africa” project at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (<https://www.idos-research.de/en/research/description/details/social-cohesion-in-africa/>), which was completed in 2023.

⁴ As a result, we excluded the Social Cohesion and Resilience Index (SCORE) developed by the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (<https://scoreforpeace.org/>). SCORE measures conflict dynamics and conflict transformation as a multi-dimensional construct, one of which is community cohesion.

⁵ Because we could not identify a shared definition, we excluded the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion at the University of Oxford (<https://www.cssc.ox.ac.uk/home>). Admittedly though, this is an imperfect criterion given definitions of social cohesion vary in practice across researchers, projects and publications within the same institution. However, given the importance of a shared definition for the development of a coherent research program, we deemed this criterion fit-for-purpose.

⁶ Therefore, we excluded the Cohesive Societies program of The British Academy (<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/cohesive-societies/>). Contributors to the program have produced reviews of academic literature, policy and measurement tools of social cohesion, yet we could neither identify an attempt to empirically measure social cohesion nor a consensus definition of social cohesion.

Table 2 **Examples of social cohesion measures**

INSTITUTION	MEASURE OF SOCIAL COHESION	DEFINITION	CONSTITUTING ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL COHESION	DATA SOURCE
<p>SCANLON FOUNDATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (AUSTRALIA)</p>	<p>Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion</p>	<p>‘The project’s working definition of a socially cohesive society is one in which people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● identify and feel a sense of belonging to Australia and pride in being Australian ● actively participate in political, economic and civic life ● feel included in relation to social justice and equality of opportunity ● respect minorities and newcomers and value diversity ● have trust in other people and confidence in public institutions ● are satisfied with life and optimistic about the future. <p>This definition directs attention to a process, a continuous working towards social harmony, rather than a point in time at which social cohesion may be said to have been attained.’ (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008, p. 26)</p>	<p>(A) Belonging (1) Pride in Australian way of life and culture (2) National belonging (3) Neighbourhood belonging (4) Social isolation (5) Sense of safety</p> <p>(B) Worth (6) Financial situation (7) Life satisfaction (8) Feeling treated with respect</p> <p>(C) Social inclusion and justice (8) Perceptions of economic fairness (9) Trust in institutions</p> <p>(D) Participation (10) Political participation (11) Civic participation (12) Provision of unpaid help</p> <p>(E) Acceptance and rejection (13) Attitudes toward minorities (14) Experiences of discrimination (15) Optimism about the future</p>	<p>Mapping Social Cohesion Survey</p>

<p>BERTELSMANN FOUNDATION (GERMANY)</p>	<p>Social Cohesion Radar</p>	<p>‘Social cohesion is the quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good.’ (Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)</p>	<p>(A) Social relations: (1) Social networks, (2) Trust in people, (3) Acceptance of diversity</p> <p>(B) Connectedness: (4) Identification, (5) Trust in institutions, (6) Perceptions of fairness</p> <p>(C) Focus on the common good: (7) Solidarity and helpfulness, (8) Respect for social rules (9) Civic participation</p>	<p>Data sources depend on data availability.</p> <p>In Dragolov et al., 2016: (A) Survey data: (1) World Values Survey, (2) European Values Study, (3) Gallup World Poll, (4) European Social Survey, (5) European Quality of Life Survey, (6) International Social Survey Programme, (7) International Social Justice Project, (8) Eurobarometer</p> <p>(B) Expert ratings: (9) Shadow economy in OECD countries (10) Index of democracy</p> <p>(C) Institutional data: (11) International Crime Victim Survey (12) International Country Risk Guide</p>
<p>RESEARCH INSTITUTE SOCIAL COHESION (GERMANY)</p>	<p>No unified measure of social cohesion. The design of the German Social Cohesion Panel allows ‘researchers to construct their own conceptualizations of social cohesion’ (Gerlitz et al., 2024, p. 4)</p>	<p>‘In a formal sense, social cohesion refers to (1) the attitudes and (2) the practices of individuals and groups toward society, (3) the social relations between individuals and groups, (4) the public and media discourses about “good society”, and (5) public</p>	<p>(A) Attitudes, norms and values (B) Behaviours and practices oriented towards others and society at large (C) Social relations and networks (D) Public media and discourse</p>	<p>German Social Cohesion Panel</p>

		infrastructures and the provision of common goods.’ (Gerlitz et al., 2024, p. 3)	(E) Availability, access and perceptions of public infrastructure	
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL CONFLICT AND COHESION STUDIES (CHILE)	VISELSOC	‘Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.’ (Chan et al., 2006, p. 290)	(A) vertical: (1) Trust in institutions (2) Political participation and attitudes (3) Preferences for authoritarianism (4) Distributive justice (B) horizontal: (5) Public safety (6) Neighbourhood connections (7) Social networks	Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL CONFLICT AND COHESION STUDIES (CHILE)	VISLATAM	‘Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations.’ (Chan et al., 2006, p. 290)	(A) vertical: (1) Trust in institutions, (2) Distributive justice (3) Attitudes toward democracy (B) horizontal: (4) Public safety (5) Interpersonal trust	World Values Survey, Latin American Public Opinion Project, Latinobarómetro

Note: Sub-domains and empirical indicators for the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion vary between the original and redeveloped versions. From 2007 to 2018, the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey was based on a national probability sample obtained using Random Digit Dialling. From 2018 onwards, it has been based on the Social Research Centre’s Life in Australia™ national online probability panel. The English-language definitions by Chan et al. (2006) underpinning VISELSOC and VISLATAM are shown in the table rather than the Spanish translation used in the technical documentation; please refer to the technical documentation for the Spanish translations.

3.1 Australia: Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

Established in 2019, the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (SFRI) is an independent research institute that continues the Scanlon Foundation's work on social cohesion. Since 2007, this has included funding the Mapping Social Cohesion surveys, Australia's only multi-year study in this field. The SFRI conceptualises social cohesion as consisting of five domains:⁷

- 'Belonging: the sense of pride and belonging people have in Australia and in Australian life and culture.
- Worth: the degree of emotional and material wellbeing across society, as measured through levels of happiness and financial satisfaction.
- Social inclusion and justice: perceptions of economic fairness in Australian society and trust in the Federal Government.
- Participation: active engagement in political activities and the political process, including through voting, signing a petition, contacting Members of Parliament, and attending protests.
- Acceptance and rejection: attitudes to immigrant diversity, support for ethnic minorities, and experience of discrimination.' (O'Donnell, 2022, p. 94)

The SFRI has developed two major tools to monitor social cohesion in Australia: the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion (Markus & Arnup, 2010; see also O'Donnell, 2022, pp. 93-97) and the Australian Cohesion Index (Markus, 2021; Australian Cohesion Index 2023, 2023). The Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion tracks trends in Australians' attitudes and experiences across five domains: belonging, worth, social inclusion and justice, participation, and acceptance and rejection. Two versions of the Scanlon Index exist: The original index based on 17 questions, which provides a long-term view of how these domains change over time at the national level. In 2021, the Scanlon Index was redeveloped to model person-level scores of social cohesion and its five domains (Markus, 2021, pp. 130-131; O'Donnell, 2022). The redeveloped index can be used to compare socio-demographic groups (Markus, 2021, pp. 130-131), and forms the basis of Local Government Area-level small area estimation of the Scanlon Index (Australian Cohesion Index 2023, 2023).

Building on the Scanlon Index, the Australian Cohesion Index combines data from national statistics and the Mapping Social Cohesion surveys. It broadens the scope of measurement by including both subjective indicators of social attitudes as captured in the Scanlon Index of Social Cohesion and objective indicators such as income and wealth, health, education, employment, and participation. Together, these tools offer a comprehensive picture of Australia's social cohesion, linking people's lived experiences with broader social and economic conditions.

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's measurement tools for social cohesion have several notable strengths. They capture well the key dimensions of social cohesion identified in the literature, and apply them to the Australian context. Their design is grounded in a policy-oriented framework (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007), ensuring strong relevance to public policy and decision-making. The tools are also practical and accessible, providing regular, long-term data that support evidence-based policy discussions.

However, these tools also have some limitations for the purposes discussed here. Their measurement properties are not fully reported publicly, and it is not always clear which kinds

⁷ A working definition of social cohesion put forward in 2007 included a sixth element, life satisfaction and optimism about the future (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008, p. 26), which has not been included in subsequent years.

of measurement properties are relevant to assessing them, particularly given the multidimensional nature of social cohesion and the different purposes for which the measures are used. Moreover, the measurement framework is centred around national-level survey data, which means that extending it to other data sources, such as administrative or digital data, and to smaller scales of analysis might require further conceptual and methodological development.

3.2 Germany: Bertelsmann Foundation

One of the longest running research programs on social cohesion in Germany is funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation (Schiefer et al., 2012)⁸. The Social Cohesion Radar (*Radar gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt; SCR*) is at the heart of this research program. The conceptual framework of the SCR was first articulated in Schiefer et al. (2012) and later published in Schiefer and van der Noll (2017; see also Dragolov et al., 2016). Accordingly, the definition of social cohesion underpinning the Social Cohesion Radar is:

‘Social cohesion is the quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective, defined in geopolitical terms, that is expressed in the attitudes and behaviors of its members. A cohesive society is characterized by resilient social relations, a positive emotional connectedness between its members and the community, and a pronounced focus on the common good.’ (Dragolov et al., 2016, p. 6)

This understanding of social cohesion has underpinned empirical research, with both a national (Arant et al., 2017; Boehnke et al., 2024; Dragolov et al., 2014)⁹ and a comparative focus (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018; Dragolov et al., 2016; Delhey & Dragolov, 2016; Delhey et al., 2018). The Social Cohesion Radar measures social cohesion based on the domains of (A) social relations, (B) connectedness and (C) focus on the common good, which are in turn made up of the following nine dimensions:

- A. (1) Social networks, (2) trust in people, and (3) acceptance of diversity
- B. (4) Identification, (5) trust in institutions, and (6) perceptions of fairness
- C. (7) Solidarity and helpfulness, (8) respect for social rules, and (9) civic participation

The measurement of these nine dimensions differs across empirical research using the Social Cohesion Radar framework. In comparative research, these differences in measurement originate in the reliance on secondary data, which means that measurement of social cohesion depends on the availability of suitable data for a large number of countries (Dragolov et al., 2016; Delhey et al., 2018). In national (and state-based) reports, the aforementioned differences primarily stem from the move away from secondary survey data in the first national report (Dragolov et al., 2014) to primary survey data in the first state-based and subsequent national and state-based reports (Arant et al., 2016; Arant et al., 2017). To ensure comparability both cross-nationally and over time, domains and dimensions of social cohesion are validated through statistical techniques, including factor analysis (Arant et al., 2017; Dragolov et al., 2016; Delhey et al., 2018)¹⁰.

⁸ For a list of all publications associated with the research program on social cohesion by the Bertelsmann Foundation, visit <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/social-cohesion>. The webpage in English contains summary documents in English language, whereas the German version contains the full publications in German. Many of the research reports on the webpage have also been published in academic publications. In this discussion, we have cited academic publications instead of their grey literature versions where possible.

⁹ In addition to national reports on social cohesion in Germany, there are also reports on social cohesion in specific states (e.g., Boehnke et al., 2022)

¹⁰ A detailed account of the methodological approach underpinning the Social Cohesion Radar is beyond the scope of this discussion paper due to the heterogeneity in measurement approaches across empirical studies.

The Social Cohesion Radar has various notable strengths. It has a strong conceptual foundation because it is based on a systematic synthesis of definitions of social cohesion. As a result, there is a clear distinction between the dimensions that constitute social cohesion, and its antecedents and outcomes. Upon this conceptual base sits a comprehensive measurement framework that combines survey and curated data, which has been empirically validated.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework of the SCR has also been used in research on local news media discourse (Leupold et al., 2018) and the contribution of civil society organisations to social cohesion in Germany (Neumann et al., 2023). It has inspired other international research programmes, such as the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar (Jerard & Suresh, 2022; Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar 2025, 2025). Beyond research, the SCR framework has proven its relevance to policymakers, underpinning the Final Report to the Advisory Council of Social Cohesion in Chile (Informe Final Consejo Asesor Para La Cohesión Social, 2020).

In the context of this paper, the main shortcoming of the SCR is that to date, there appear to have been no attempts to integrate a wider range of data sources into its measurement frameworks.

3.3 Germany: Research Institute Social Cohesion

The Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC) was founded in 2020 and has since been funded by the Federal Ministry for Research, Technology, and Space over two funding cycles (2020-2024 and 2025-2029)¹¹. About 200 researchers across eight universities and three non-university research institutions across ten states in Germany conduct research on social cohesion across four research areas:

1. Politics of Democratic Cohesion
2. Socioeconomic Orders of Status and Distribution
3. Infrastructures and Public Goods
4. Cultural Dynamics of Cohesion

Researchers at RISC conduct both basic and applied research, with a strong focus on transdisciplinary collaboration, and knowledge transfer, including knowledge co-production with practice partners.

To accommodate various disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches, researchers at RISC have articulated a comprehensive research program on social cohesion (Deitelhoff et al., 2020). At its centre is a preliminary consensus definition of social cohesion:

‘Social cohesion therefore refers to communities whose members possess (to be further defined) positive attitudes toward each other and toward their overall context, in which they are involved as agents in practices and relationships that have a (to be further defined) community dimension and are integrated into complex institutional processes of cooperation and integration that are addressed and evaluated by the members of society. Cohesion exists where these levels exhibit a certain quality and are sufficiently consistent (which also needs to be further defined)—in the *attitudes, actions, relationships, institutions, and discourses* within a society.’ (Founding document of the Research Institute Social Cohesion, cited in

¹¹ General information about the Research Institute Social Cohesion summarised here comes from its website (<https://fgz-risc.de/en/>).

Zick & Rees, 2020, p. 133; italics in original, translated from German using Google Translate)¹².

This definition represents a formal, normatively neutral concept of social cohesion, as opposed to a concrete conceptualization of social cohesion with normative assumptions (Forst, 2020). It suggests that a comprehensive account of social cohesion needs to articulate the relationships between (1) individual or collective dispositions and attitudes, (2) actions and practices, (3) social networks, (4) systemic and institutional contexts of cooperation and integration, as well as (5) societal discourses about the cohesiveness of society (Forst, 2020). The consensus definition is also adaptable to various theoretical perspectives, such as social-psychological conflict theory (Zick & Rees, 2020) or sociological functionalist approaches (Grunow et al., 2023; Schröder et al., 2022).

To support its research agenda, RISC has established four central data infrastructures through its Research Data Centre (RISC-RDC):

1. *German Social Cohesion Panel*: The German Social Cohesion Panel is a longitudinal panel based on a probability-based representative sample of adults living in Germany (see Gerlitz et al., 2024).
2. *Regional Panel*: The Regional Panel is a longitudinal panel based on probability samples of adults living in twelve locations across four German states: within each state, one village/small town, one medium sized town and one large city were chosen in total, with five chosen based on pre-existing collaborations and seven selected at random according to size and federal state (see Sackmann et al., 2024).
3. *Qualitative Panel*: The Qualitative Panel is a longitudinal panel based on a sample of 91 households from five regions in Germany (see Koevel et al., 2023).
4. *Social Media Observatory*: The Social Media Observatory provides the technical infrastructure for collection, storage and computing, processing and analysis, as well as visualisation and export of social media data (see Wiedemann et al., 2023).

One of the objectives of the RISC-RDC is to develop ‘shared conceptual frameworks and indicators for analyzing social cohesion’ (*Research Data Center of RISC*, n.d.). An interactive tool on its website currently allows users to explore survey responses to the RISC pilot study 2020, with further data from the first wave of the German Social Cohesion Panel to be included¹³.

The strength of the RISC consists in its multi-disciplinary approach to social cohesion and its comprehensive research agenda that aims to elucidate the social dynamics that affect social cohesion. This is supported by infrastructure that facilitates the measurement of social cohesion over time across various data sources. The emphasis on longitudinal data collection is particularly notable because it enables more rigorous analyses, including exploration of causal pathways. The development of publicly available interactive data platforms, alongside other

¹² The original definition in German is as follows: ‘Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt bezieht sich folglich auf Gemeinwesen, deren Mitglieder über (näher zu bestimmende) positive Einstellungen zueinander und zu ihrem Gesamtkontext verfügen, in dem sie als Handelnde in Praktiken und Beziehungen involviert sind, die einen (näher zu bestimmenden) Gemeinschaftsbezug haben und sich in komplexe institutionelle Prozesse der Kooperation und Integration einfügen, die von den Gesellschaftsmitgliedern thematisiert und evaluiert werden. Zusammenhalt existiert dort, wo diese Ebenen eine bestimmte Qualität aufweisen und hinreichend (was ebenfalls näher zu bestimmen ist) übereinstimmen – in den *Einstellungen, Handlungen, Beziehungen, Institutionen* und *Diskursen* innerhalb einer Gesellschaft’ (Zick & Rees, 2020, p. 133; italics in original).

¹³ See <https://fgz-risc-data.de/en/interactive-tools/visualisations/>.

knowledge-translation and stakeholder engagement activities, increases the applicability and relevance of RISC’s research to policymakers and the wider public.

A shortcoming of RISC’s approach, from our perspective, is that there is intentionally no proposed composite measure of social cohesion (Gerlitz et al., 2024). On the one hand, this gives researchers the flexibility to construct their own such measures and encourages nuance in how findings related to different aspects of social cohesion are communicated to a range of audiences. On the other hand, however, the advantage of composite measures of social cohesion consists in their reduction of complexity, which can help distil nuanced findings into clear messaging and actionable insights.

3.4 Chile: Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies

The multidisciplinary Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social; COES) was established in 2014 with funding from the Chilean Fund for Research Centers in Priority Areas (FONDAP; COES 2014-2024, 2025)¹⁴. Its research program revolves around social conflict and social cohesion, defining the latter as ‘the ability of communities to coexist and live together peacefully and constructively as families, neighbourhoods, communities and regions’ (COES 2014-2024, 2025, p. 9)¹⁵. COES’s research activities are organised under four so-called research lines, with elites, gender and migration as cross-cutting themes:

1. Socioeconomic dimensions and conflict
2. Group and individual interactions
3. Political and social conflict
4. Geographies of conflict and social cohesion

Over the period of its operation, COES has established dedicated research infrastructure to support its research agenda. These include:

- *Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey* (Estudio Longitudinal Social de Chile; ELSOC): The Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey is a longitudinal panel survey based on a national multi-stage probability sample (see *Methodological Manual ELSOC 2016-2022, n.d.*).
- *Conflict Observatory* (Observatorio de Conflictos en Chile; OC): The Conflict Observatory’s main aim is to analyse the dynamics of social conflict, mainly through the creation of a database of social conflicts compiled based on articles in print media.
- *Labor Strikes Observatory* (Observatorio de Huelgas Laborales; OHL): The Labor Strikes Observatory documents labor strikes in Chile.
- *Social Cohesion Observatory* (Observatorio de Cohesión Social; OSC): The Social Cohesion Observatory provides a data platform for researchers, policymakers and citizens to analyse dynamics of social cohesion in Chile over time, and in comparison to other countries in Latin America.

¹⁴ Unless indicated otherwise, general information about COES summarised here comes from COES (COES 2014-2024, 2025).

¹⁵ Social conflict is defined as ‘situations in which different social actors and institutions interact to satisfy or defend their interests or their class, cultural or ethnic identities, or to promote social, political or economic projects that are challenged by processes of social transformation’ (COES 2014-2024, 2025, p. 9). Social conflict is conceptualised as potentially transformative, with the capacity to bring about social change and redefine norms of social justice (COES 2014-2024, 2025, p. 9).

- *Open Science Laboratory* (Laboratorio de Ciencia Social Abierta; LISA): The Open Science Laboratory is an initiative to promote and provide practical tools and frameworks to practice open science, and to provide access to COES's main datasets.
- *Evidence, Connection, and Impact Unit* (Unidad de Evidencia, Conexión e Incidencia; ECI): The Evidence, Connection and Impact Unit is an initiative in knowledge translation and transfer, especially with civil society actors, to improve the uptake of COES's research in public policy.

The Social Cohesion Observatory has developed measurement frameworks of social cohesion in Chile (Urzúa et al., 2025)¹⁶ and across Latin American countries (*Medición Cohesión Social América Latina*, 2025) based on the definition by Chan et al. (2006). Both these frameworks measure (A) vertical and (B) horizontal dimensions of social cohesion, but differ in the domains. Using survey data from the World Values Survey, Latin American Public Opinion Project and Latinobarómetro, the comparative framework measures social cohesion across five domains:

- A. (1) Trust in institutions, (2) distributive justice and (3) attitudes toward democracy
- B. (4) Public safety and (5) interpersonal trust.

In comparison, the measurement framework for Chile encompasses seven dimensions and uses ELSOC data:

- A. (1) Trust in institutions, (2) political participation and attitudes, (3) preferences for authoritarianism and (4) distributive justice
- B. (5) Public safety, (6) neighbourhood connections and (7) social networks

Like RISC, the strength of COES's approach lies in its multi-disciplinary nature and extensive range of data sources developed and maintained through dedicated research infrastructure. Its knowledge translation and transfer activities, including data visualisation platforms, ensure its research is accessible and relevant to policymakers and the wider public. COES-affiliated researchers have contributed to social cohesion policy in Chile (Informe Final Consejo Asesor Para La Cohesión Social, 2020) and developed national and comparative measurement instruments of social cohesion.

However, while the research findings across research teams have been synthesised in comprehensive reports (COES 2014-2024, 2025), to date, the relationship between indicators and measures relevant to social cohesion used across data sources does not appear to have been formalised into one comprehensive measurement framework.

3.5 Implications for a shared social cohesion framework

In short, each of these international research programs offers valuable insights – and the building blocks – for developing an expanded social cohesion framework. Some key considerations emerge for such a framework from this analysis:

Data sources

- International social cohesion frameworks to date have relied primarily on individual-level survey data. While these data are well suited to population-level monitoring, they provide only limited insight into the institutional, organisational and discursive contexts that shape social cohesion. These are typically examined in parallel but rarely formalised as indicators or integrated into comprehensive measurement systems.

¹⁶ The measurement framework formalises and expands on prior work by Castillo et al. (2021)

- Survey-based measures are effective for tracking aggregate trends and informing high-level policy design, but they offer limited diagnostic value when it comes to understanding the drivers of social cohesion. On their own, they provide little guidance as to where policy interventions might be most effective, when these might be required, or through which mechanisms they could operate.

Conceptual clarity

- A shared social cohesion framework therefore requires a clear and robust conceptual foundation that specifies what is meant by social cohesion and how its core dimensions relate to one another. Equally important is a clear distinction between social cohesion itself, its antecedents, and its outcomes.

Design and implementation

- Translating this conceptual framework into a measurement framework necessitates careful operationalisation across multiple data sources, including surveys, administrative data, social media and other data sources. In practice, this is likely to involve an iterative process of indicator development, testing and refinement to ensure conceptual alignment, empirical validity and policy relevance.
- Finally, both the conceptual and measurement frameworks need to be developed with practical use in mind and capable of generating insights that are meaningful for policymakers and the broader public. Embedding stakeholder engagement throughout the development process can help ensure that the framework supports real-world decision-making, rather than functioning solely as a descriptive monitoring exercise.

4 Informing Australia's Social Cohesion Community, Policy and Program Decisions

The national case study approaches identified above provide largely analytic tools and data that inform national policy approaches, providing monitoring of changing perceptions and self-assessed sentiments.

The following discussion examines how different definitional and measurement frameworks of social cohesion shape distinct areas of policy decision making. Rather than treating social cohesion as a single monitoring construct, it analyses how alternative conceptual choices influence what governments prioritise, which risks are identified, how resources are allocated, and how interventions are designed and evaluated. It also considers where and how a broadened definition may enable specific decision needs to shape outcomes through more precise information and analysis. By clarifying these policy implications, the discussion highlights the practical consequences of selecting one framework over another.

4.1 Decision needs of Australian stakeholders that require operationalised social cohesion frameworks

Policymakers and program administrators face a constant stream of inevitable, and often urgent, decisions ranging from top-level prioritisation and resource allocation through to tactical level choices around strategic communications and program evaluation. In making such decisions, agencies must rely on the best available data and analytical methods at that moment in time. When these are sub-optimal or not tailored for purpose, it follows that the outcomes of decisions may also be subpar.

Existing national surveys in Australia, such as the Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion study discussed previously, and more general surveys like the Australian Election Study (AES) and ANUpoll, remain valuable for tracking broad attitudes and long-term trends to inform macro-level policy. Such surveys play a crucial role in providing valuable insight into aggregate attitudes, perceptions, and trends over time. They are well suited to monitoring national sentiment and informing public debate.

However, these surveys are not sufficient on their own to support the full range of other decisions and analysis needed to strengthen and sustain social cohesion. Policymakers and service providers require analysis that identifies the causal pathways shaping cohesion and fragmentation across the life course and within social networks. This includes understanding how experiences at different stages of life interact, how interventions reinforce or undermine one another, and how institutional practices shape trust and participation. While current national surveys can provide valuable insights into these dynamics, including over time, they are generally not designed to provide system-level causal insight, spatial or institutional granularity, or attribution to specific interventions that may be needed in all contexts. As a result, they may need to be complemented by other data sources and methods to inform day-to-day program design, service delivery, or adaptive policy learning.

This requires timely, place-based intelligence on how public and community narratives, institutional interactions, and network dynamics are evolving, and how these shifts affect social relationships and trust. Decision-makers need early warning signals that detect when national or global issues translate into local stressors of networks, as well as analysis that supports community-level action. Existing monitoring systems primarily serve government and large

organisations; and are infrequent and rarely accessible to community-based actors. This limits their usefulness for prevention, rapid response, or locally led cohesion-building efforts.

Strengthening social cohesion requires information that reflects how different parts of the system interact, including structural conditions, institutional settings, community dynamics, narrative environments, and emerging stressors. This information supports coordinated action across policy domains, government portfolios and civil society, rather than siloed or program-specific approaches.

The table below sets out a **systems view of social cohesion**: the different layers of social, institutional and informational life through which cohesion is produced, strained, or strengthened. It is intentionally role-agnostic and is designed to support whole-of-government and whole-of-society coordination by clarifying *where* intervention, stewardship and convening can occur across the system.

Table 3 System levels shaping social cohesion and their implications for policy action

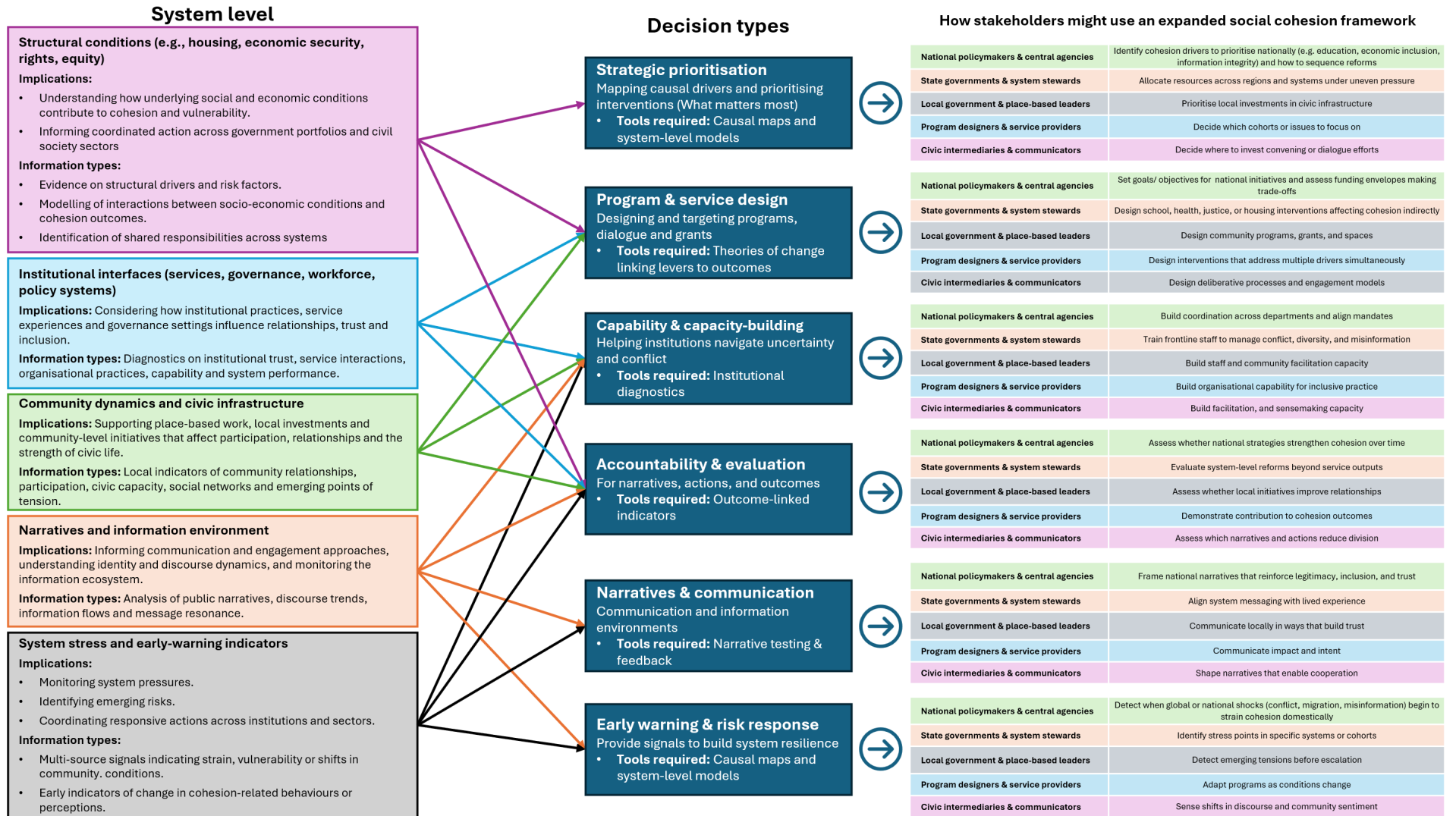
System Level	Implications for policy action and coordination	Relevant Information Types
Structural conditions (e.g., housing, economic security, rights, equity)	Understanding how underlying social and economic conditions contribute to cohesion and vulnerability; informing coordinated action across government portfolios and civil society sectors	Evidence on structural drivers and risk factors; modelling of interactions between socio-economic conditions and cohesion outcomes; identification of shared responsibilities across systems
Institutional interfaces (services, governance, workforce, policy systems)	Considering how institutional practices, service experiences and governance settings influence relationships, trust and inclusion	Diagnostics on institutional trust, service interactions, organisational practices, capability and system performance
Community dynamics and civic infrastructure	Supporting place-based work, local investments and community-level initiatives that affect participation, relationships and the strength of civic life	Local indicators of community relationships, participation, civic capacity, social networks and emerging points of tension
Narratives and information environment	Informing communication and engagement approaches, understanding identity and discourse dynamics, and monitoring the information ecosystem	Analysis of public narratives, discourse trends, information flows and message resonance
System stress and early-warning indicators	Monitoring system pressures, identifying emerging risks and coordinating responsive actions across institutions and sectors	Multi-source signals indicating strain, vulnerability or shifts in community conditions; early indicators of change in cohesion-related behaviours or perceptions

Together, these system levels describe the range of factors that shape cohesion across social, economic, institutional and civic domains, and the **implications for policy action, coordination and information needs**. They reflect the cross-cutting nature of cohesion-related work, which involves multiple policy areas, institutions and community actors rather than discrete or siloed responsibilities.

Table 4 below applies a **decision-oriented lens for stakeholders and decision-makers** to this system view, showing how different actors – operating at different points in the system – make distinct types of decisions, and how improved data and measurement across system levels can inform those decisions.

Read together, the two tables distinguish between **where cohesion operates in the system** and **how different decision-makers use information about those system dynamics in practice**.

Table 4 System levels for social cohesion mapped to how different stakeholders might use an expanded social cohesion framework for different decision types



5 Concluding comments – Australia needs an expanded approach to define and measure social cohesion

This paper has shown that Australia’s dominant approaches to defining and measuring social cohesion rely heavily on surveys of individual attitudes and perceptions. These instruments remain valuable for tracking broad trends in belonging, trust, inclusion, and participation. However, on their own, they do not always support system-level diagnosis of the drivers of cohesion or fragmentation, nor do they routinely inform day-to-day decisions in program design, service delivery, or place-based policy.

An expanded approach therefore requires embedding survey-based monitoring of attitudes within an integrated, system-level measurement framework. Such a framework would treat social cohesion not only as an aggregate of individual perceptions, but as a dynamic property emerging from interactions across social networks, institutions, and information environments. It would combine longitudinal survey data with administrative indicators, spatial data, and behavioural signals drawn from digital and community-level sources. The objective would not be to replace existing national surveys, but to embed them within a broader architecture capable of diagnosing drivers, identifying vulnerabilities, and supporting adaptive policy learning.

In a subsequent paper (Discussion Paper 18 in this series), we build on the analysis presented here to propose a structured framework for measuring social cohesion in Australia. This framework will specify core domains, distinguish clearly between cohesion, its antecedents and outcomes, and outline how multiple data sources can be integrated into a coherent analytic model. Particular attention will be given to network dynamics, institutional interfaces, and narrative environments as measurable components of cohesion. By doing so, we aim to provide a practical foundation for coordinated, evidence-based decision-making that strengthens cohesion across Australia’s diverse communities, and that can be a model for other countries and jurisdictions.

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