

- Academia/Industry Working Conference on Research Challenges CAIWORC'00, 27–29 April, Buffalo, New York;
- [9]. M. Wedel, W. A. Kamakura – (1998) Market Segmentation: Conceptual and Methodological Foundations, Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

Professor Leonica POPESCU, Ph.D

Romanian-American University,
1B, Expoziției Avenue, Sector 1, Bucharest
popescu.leonica@profesor.rau.ro

Lecturer Alina Irina POPESCU, PhD

Academy of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, Sector 1, Bucharest

Abstract:

Social cohesion is one of the aims to be achieved through lifelong learning, together with personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and employability. In the context of rapid change there is a concern that many people would feel marginalized by the digital revolution and globalization. The upgrade of competences, skills and aptitudes becomes a stringent need to maintain employability, to reduce unemployment, or to become competitive on the labour market. This has to be done throughout the entire lifetime of individuals. This article aims to discover how lifelong learning contributes to increase social cohesion. It begins with a theoretical review of the construct of social cohesion, and then it explores the relationship between social cohesion and lifelong learning. In the end, several mini case studies are presented to bring real evidence into the discussion of how social cohesion can be strengthened through learning activities.

Keywords: social cohesion, lifelong learning, European Union

JEL Classification: I00, I24

1. A Conceptual Approach to Social Cohesion

The concept of social cohesion has gained increasing importance over the past years especially in policy making contexts. Efforts made to improve the competitive position of the European Union as a whole in general, and of the Member States in particular, led European policy-makers to focus on several issues that could prevent competitiveness, like: the demographical decrease of European population, climate change, immigrant waves, and economic disparities across European regions. Within the wider

context of the UE Regional Policy, the concept of economic and social cohesion was one of the cornerstones since the Agenda 2000 reforms [COM(97)].

Social cohesion is a complex construct. In the literature, many researchers and public bodies tried to define the concept through the numerous aspects that are included under its umbrella. Social cohesion was considered to be “*an ideal towards which societies have to strive continually... a goal to which they aspire, but never fully achieve.*” (Battaini-Dracconi and Dominioni, 2003, p.5)

The Council of Europe adopted a functional definition of the concept: “*Social cohesion is the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means.*” (European Committee for Social Cohesion, 2004, p.3). Social cohesion is viewed from the perspective of its objective, the guarantee of welfare and of the freedom of individuals to pursue personal development and active citizenship. In other words, all individuals have equal opportunities to improve their situation and are guaranteed basic social rights like adequate health care and decent living standards.

Many authors understood social cohesion as “shared values and sense of belonging”. Maxwell (1996) argues that social cohesion refers to “*the processes of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community*”. This view emerged from the works of the sociologist Emile Durkheim who described “*the interdependence between the members of the society, shared loyalties and solidarity*” (Jenson, 1998).

Social cohesion is defined also through the collaboration relationships between different community members. The Social Cohesion Network from Canada cited by Jeannotte (2003) adopted in 2002 a more behavioural definition: “*social cohesion is based on the willingness of individuals to cooperate and work together at all levels of society to achieve collective goals*” (Jeannotte, 2003, p.3). In the same view is situated the definition of the government of New Zealand, one of the most comprehensive definitions of the construct: “*social cohesion describes a society where different groups and institutions knit together effectively despite differences. It reflects a high degree of willingness to work together, taking into account diverse needs and priorities. Social cohesion is underpinned by...individual opportunities (including education, jobs, health); family well-being (including parental responsibility); strong communities (including safe and reliant communities); and national identity (including history, heritage, culture, and rights and entitlements of citizenship)*” (quoted from Senate of Canada, 1999).

Other comprehensive approaches have attempted to clarify the dimensions of social cohesion. In this regard, six dimensions were identified by Jenson (1998) and Bernard (1999):

1. equality–inequality
2. recognition–rejection (referring to the degree of respect and toleration of differences)
3. legitimacy–illegitimacy (with respect to the institutions that act as mediators of social relations)
4. inclusion–exclusion (as regards the degree of equality of social and economic opportunities)
5. belonging–isolation (involving the extent of shared values, identities, and feelings of commitment), and

6. participation –non-involvement.

Perhaps one of the clearer images of the social cohesion construct one develops is by picturing a puzzle, with pieces of different colours and sizes. Social cohesion refers to the nature and the extent of social and economic divisions within societies due to differences of income, ethnicity, political party, caste, language, or other demographic variable. Nevertheless, Easterly et al (2006) argued that “*socially cohesive societies are not necessarily demographically homogenous, but rather ones that have fewer potential and/or actual leverage points for individuals, groups, or events to expose and exacerbate social fault lines, and ones that find ways to harness the potential residing in their societal diversity (in terms of diversity of ideas, opinions, skills, etc).*”

Efforts were made to bring together various approaches to social cohesion. In this regard, Berger-Schmitt (2000) identified two main societal dimensions in the concept of social cohesion:

1. The reduction of disparities of opportunities, inequalities, and social exclusion – dimension that synthesizes contributions to social inclusion / exclusion.
2. The strengthening of the “density and quality of relationships and interactions between individuals or groups, their mutual feelings of commitment and trust due to common values and norms, and a sense of belonging and solidarity...” – dimension that embraces the views on social capital.

The complexity of the construct raised many challenges when it comes to its measurement. Various attempts aimed to measure social cohesion **directly** with the use of several indicators like: *membership rates of organizations and civil participation* (Narayan and Pritchett, 1999; Krishna, 2002; Knack, 2003); *measures on social relations and trust* (Knack and Keefer, 1997; World Values Surveys); *performance measures of public and private institutions*; and **indirectly** by using: *income distribution measures* like Gini coefficients and share of income to middle 60 percent (Rodrick, 1999); *ethnic heterogeneity* (Easterly et al, 2006); and *measures of gender discrimination in education, income, and health*.

Social cohesion was positively linked with economic growth. Building social cohesion has been a major task for not only for countries wrestling with development, but also for developed countries fighting for competitiveness.

2. Enhancing Social Cohesion through Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning (LLL) is a new paradigm that emerged in education, as a response to the rapid changes that have occurred on the labour markets due to the rapid adoption of technologies and globalisation.

European Commission (2001) defines lifelong learning as: “*all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within a personal, civic, social and / or employment-related perspective.*”

Briefly, lifelong learning is about:

- Learning throughout lifetime (“lifelong”)
- Valuing of forms of life-wide learning (formal, non-formal, informal)
- Personal development
- Active citizenship
- Employability
- Social inclusion

Several points for discussion emerge from this definition. Firstly, lifelong learning

refers to **all learning activities** carried on by individuals across **all ages**, and in **all learning contexts**: formal, non-formal and informal. Formal education and training includes structured programs that are recognized by the formal education system and lead to approved certificates. Non-formal education and training includes structured programs that are not formally recognized by the national system, such as apprenticeship training programs and structured on-the-job training. Informal education and training includes unstructured learning, which can take place almost anywhere, including the home, community, or workplace. It includes unstructured on-the-job training, the most common form of workplace learning. Individuals are required to learn continuously to become “lifelong learners”.

Secondly, **lifelong learning is about active citizenship**. Little attention has been given so far to what lifelong learning for active citizenship means and how it can be achieved. It is stressed the need for individuals to become “learning citizens”. Thus, they are ‘placed’ in community context, emphasizing their role as active citizens, meaning citizens that become empowered to exercise their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. This empowerment of individuals in the lifelong learning context leads to their involvement in community networks, increasing thus the social cohesion of the community.

The concept of active citizenship provides the premises to overcome the challenges within the society which may develop into conflicts. Keeping constructive differences together is an important factor of social cohesion and is possible in societies where people are not categorised according to their ethnic, religious or other backgrounds.

Thirdly, **lifelong learning ensures personal development of individuals**. They are able to continuously update and upgrade their skills and competences, fact that ensures their personal development and employability. The lack of work may create an isolation of the individual from the society. Thus, the employability status reduces the chances of social exclusion. Also, personal development ensures recognition from others.

Fourthly, **lifelong learning combats social exclusion**. For different kind of reasons (e.g. disability, age, racism, and social class) several categories of people do not participate in society; through learning activities and with learning outcomes they become easier to integrate in societies. Social inclusion refers to giving all individuals equal opportunities to be a part of local communities and to contribute to making it better. Here we need to stress the shared responsibility of individuals, organisations, central and local governments and regions in providing and engaging in lifelong learning.

On the fifth place, lifelong learning means **providing opportunities to learn for everybody**. The concept of “lifelong learning for all” was adopted in 1996 by the OECD ministers of education, acknowledging the need for flexibility in the learning offer. The European Commission acknowledged the importance of engaging all individuals in learning activities, and signalled in a *Memorandum of Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2000) that a shift in the paradigm of education had started to take place. The document was based on the decisions taken at the Lisbon European Council (March 2000) that remarked: “*Lifelong learning is no longer one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for the provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts.*” (European Council, 2000). Also, they assigned Member States the role “*to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all*” (European Council, 2000).

Education is seen as a means to reduce inequalities within society. Several aspects need to be discussed here. **Gender inequality** was proven by the greater rise in educational attainment at both upper-secondary and tertiary levels for women than for men over the

past decades, and by specific sectors which are ‘dominated’ either by men or by women. The **socio-economic background** has the most powerful impact on educational attainment, at all educational levels. The pattern that emerged was that the educational attainment of children is directly correlated to the educational attainment of parents, pattern that creates a vicious circle. Another problem when it comes to inequalities within society refers to **minorities**. From various reasons that vary from the lack of financial resources to the lack of knowledge of the language, minority groups have lacked equal access to learning resources or even have been denied learning rights. **People with special needs** represent another vulnerable category, and many European countries have implemented special measures to integrate them. Inequalities in society can also be created by **the digital divide**. In the present-day societies, technological competences or the so-called ‘digital literacy’ are critical. Individuals without these competences are disadvantaged when it comes to accessing better jobs. Studies showed that the acquisition of technological competences is linked to social advantage, ethnicity, environment (urban / rural), and/or educational background (OECD, 2000).

To conclude, in the European Union lifelong learning was seen since its inception as a policy that contributes to strengthening social cohesion across Member States. In A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (EC, 2000, p.4) policy-makers recognize *“Two equally important aims for lifelong learning: promoting active citizenship and promoting employability... Both employability and active citizenship are dependent upon having adequate and up-to-date knowledge and skills to take part in and make a contribution to economic and social life.”*

3. The Contribution of Lifelong Learning to Social Cohesion: Case studies from the European Union

The implementation of the EU Lifelong Learning Policy is currently made under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2007-2013. The current programme is the successor to the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci and ICT / Open and Distance Learning (2000-2006). The European Commission has initiated debates for the design of the new LLP, as of 2014. The Lifelong Learning Programme offers financial support for individuals and organisations for meeting the objectives of the Lifelong Learning Policy. It is structured on several sectorial sub programmes that focus on different stages of education and training and continuing previous programmes:

- Comenius for schools
- Erasmus for higher education
- Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training
- Grundtvig for adult education

Also, transversal programmes aim to complement the sectorial sub programmes, aiming to promote European cooperation in fields covering two or more of the sub-programmes.

Several case studies were selected to identify and discuss the contribution of lifelong learning to strengthening social cohesion.

The **social integration of immigrants** through learning was aimed by a programme called “Individual 2000”. The programme was developed by the municipality of Botkyrka (Sweden) to reach inhabitants with low levels of education, especially immigrants, and to encourage them to resume their studies. The development of an infrastructure for adult learning aimed to enhance each individual’s knowledge, interests and experience. The challenge was represented by the reach of the target groups. Information and guidance was given to selected target groups at: club and union meetings,

in shopping centres, by knocking on doors, at an educational fair, at local events such as markets and cultural events, via advertisements in local press and on internet websites. Three adult learning centres were established: *Botkyrka Learning Centre* (responsible for guidance, admission to upper secondary education, flexible learning activities in vocational subjects, orientation and motivation courses, organization of educational workshops, development of teaching methods, and cooperation with public authorities and administrations); *Tumba Adult Education* (responsible for the provision of secondary education and college education for adults in core and general subjects); and *The Slagstad Strand Adult Education and Introduction Division* (responsible for the implementation of basic adult education for newly arrived refugees and immigrants).

A best practice example on the *integration of different ethnic and social minorities* comes from Latvia. The programme called “Development of Social Competencies and basic Skills for Adults” was implemented in 2002 by the Latvian Adult Education Association (LAEA) in co-operation with 10 regional adult education centres. The project had had two major objectives: to foster social integration of ethnic and social minorities and to raise their social and basic skills in order to raise their employability. Within this project, seminars were organised in 10 municipalities, mainly from the rural areas to improve the competences of ethnic and social minorities to better integrate them on the labour market and in the Latvian society.

As mentioned previously, the *digital divide* can ‘divide’ societies. To combat social exclusion that might occur due to the lack of digital competences, BBC Learning launched The BBC First Click project in UK. The main objective was to equip adults over the age of 55 that had no access to the Internet with computer and Internet literacy. Basically, by calling a free advisory telephone line, individuals are directed to the closest local computer and web literacy course provider. Trainers are encouraging them to overcome their fear of technology and lack of skills, by engaging them in non-formal web and computer learning courses available free of charge. Courses are organised by a range of partners: learning centres, adult learning organisations, libraries, schools, charities and community associations. A BBC First Click beginner’s guide was prepared and handed over to the adult learners.

Projects were developed also at European level, not only at country or local levels. For instance, *For Diversity, Against Discrimination* was a pan-European campaign organized by the European Commission’s General Directorate for Justice. Main objectives of the campaign were: to increase understanding of existing EU laws which protect all citizens from discrimination based on the grounds of sex, racial/ethnic origin, religion/belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; to make people more aware of their rights and responsibilities; and to fight against stereotypes and promote the benefits of diversity in society. Three target groups: young people aged 16 to 25, who are at risk of facing discrimination; employers and media. The main message was that a diverse Europe is something to be valued, message that comes out also from the motto ‘unity in diversity’ or ‘unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation’, in other words – cohesion.

Learning for improving *language competences* is also a way to promote social cohesion. Lire et Ecrire Communauté française is one of the largest civil society organisations involved in adult literacy, active in the French speaking part of Belgium. The organisation focuses on training adults with low or no literacy levels in French (both Belgians and immigrants), and training other trainers for such instruction. Each year, between 5000 and 6000 learners are trained to improve their literacy. Also, Lire and Ecrire

Communauté française develops campaigns to promote a more positive image for the individuals with low or no literacy skills.

Assessing the impact on social cohesion of lifelong learning actions is a difficult task. A study conducted to discover stakeholders' opinions provides useful information in this respect. The survey was made available in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Polish and Spanish throughout the EU-27, EEA countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Turkey, and was completed by over 1800 respondents in 2011. People felt that there is a demonstrated monetary return on investment in learning (score 4.14), and that learning activities throughout lifetime are essential to keep on top of changes in the present day environment (score 3.92). Personal development and independence, employability and job prospects are other positive outcomes of learning. But, learning was not perceived as a tool for enhancing social cohesion as much as it was for individual development and prospects (Figure 1).

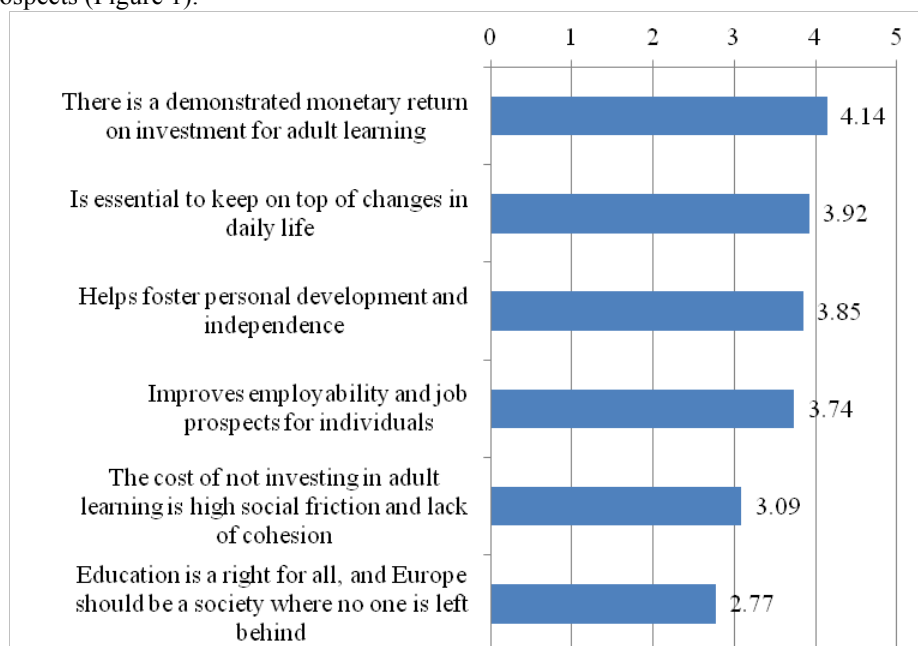


Figure 1. Stakeholders' opinion on several aspects related to LLL
Source: EC, 2012

4. Conclusions

The construct of social cohesion is viewed as a way to ensure competitiveness at international level. An analysis of the literature reveals numerous attempts to define it: some more comprehensive, others more brief; some from a technical perspective, others referring to the aspects that form the concept. In any way, the definitions do not contradict, but complement one another.

In the light of the Lifelong Learning Policy of EU, learning throughout lifetime becomes a duty of the Europeans. If in the past education was considered a right, now, in the light of the emergence of the knowledge society learning becomes a duty. This shift in the paradigm acknowledges the advantages of learning, many of which lead to strengthening social cohesion.

Lifelong learning improves personal competences and generates personal improvement, independence and employability. These help people integrate better on the labour market and in society. Also lifelong learning has the power to integrate disadvantaged groups. Although efforts have been made to reduce disparities, inequalities still remain (based on ethnicity, gender, social status, disability, or even digital competences).

Several case studies were selected to illustrate how learning activities promote social cohesion. Projects for a better integration of immigrants, for improvement of literacy skills among individuals (locals and immigrants), for fostering the awareness of the equal rights within EU societies and avoidance of discrimination in the case of young people, and for increasing digital literacy of older people are just several notable examples. Many other cases are surrounding us every day, and it is everybody's job to contribute to greater cohesion within the EU and to respect the rights of others.

Acknowledgment: This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/1.5/S/ 59184 „Performance and excellence in postdoctoral research in Romanian economics science domain”.

Bibliography:

- [1]. Battaini-Dragoni, G., and Dominioni, S. (2003): The Council of Europe's Strategy for Social Cohesion, *Conference on Social Cohesion*, <http://www0.hku.hk/socsc/cosc/Full%20paper/BATTAINI-DRAGONI%20Gabriella%2025.11.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2012).
- [2]. Berger-Schmitt, R. (2000): Social Cohesion as an Aspect of the Quality of Societies: Concept and Measurement, Centre for Survey Research and Methodology (ZUMA), *EU Reporting Working Paper No. 14*, Mannheim, Germany.
- [3]. Bernard, P. (1999): Social Cohesion: A Critique, *CPRN Discussion Paper No. F/09*, Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc., Ottawa, Ontario.
- [4]. COM(97): Agenda 2000 For a stronger and wider Union, Brussels.
- [5]. Council of Europe (2004): *A New Strategy for Social Cohesion*, revised version 31 March 2004, Brussels.
- [6]. Easterly, W., Ritzen, J., Woolcock, M. (2006): Social Cohesion, Institutions, and Growth, Center for Global Development, Working paper, http://www.cgdev.org/files/9136_file_WP94.pdf (accessed 14 June 2012).
- [7]. European Commission (2000): *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels.
- [8]. European Commission (2001): *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, Brussels.
- [9]. European Commission (2012): *Strategies for Improving Participation in and Awareness of Adult Learning*, Luxembourg.
- [10]. European Council Lisbon (2000): Presidency Conclusions.
- [11]. Ferroni, M., Mateo, M., Payne, M., (2008): Development under Conditions of Inequality and Distrust, Social Cohesion in Latin America, International Food Policy Research Institute, *Working paper*, <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/ifpridp00777.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2012).
- [12]. Jeannotte, M.S. (2003): Social Cohesion: Insights from Canadian Research, Presented at the Conference on Social Cohesion, Hong Kong, November 29.
- [13]. Jenson, J. (1998) : Les contours de la cohésion sociale: l'état de la recherche au Canada, Étude des RCRPP, N°F/03, Ottawa.

- [13]. Knack, S. and Keefer, P. (1997): Does Social Capital Have an Economic Payoff?: A Cross-Country Investigation, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 112, No. 4, pp. 1251–1288.
- [14]. Knack, S. (2003): Groups, growth, and trust: Cross-country evidence on the Olson and Putnam hypotheses, *Public Choice* 117: 341-355.
- [15]. Krishna, A. (2002): *Active social capital: Tracing the roots of development and democracy* Columbia University Press, New York
- [16]. Maxwell, J. (1996): *Social dimensions of economic growth*, Eric John Hanson Memorial Lecture Series, Volume 8, University of Alberta.
- [17]. Narayan, D., Pritchett, L. (1999): Cents and Sociability: Household Income and Social Capital in Rural Tanzania, *Economic Development and Social Change*, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 871–897.
- [18]. OECD (2000): *Schooling for Tomorrow: Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide*, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, Paris.
- [19]. Rodrik, D. (1999): Where Did All the Growth Go? External Shocks, Social Conflicts, and Growth Collapses, *Journal of Economic Growth*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 385–412.
- [20]. Senate of Canada, The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. June 1999, *Final Report on Social Cohesion*, Senate of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.
- [21]. World Values Survey: www.worldvaluessurvey.org/