Illuminating the Future of Cohesion Through the Megatrends of Today

By Lam Teng Si and Claribel Low

SYNOPSIS

Building cohesive and resilient communities has become increasingly challenging in today's climate of rising conflicts and geopolitical tensions. To mitigate the erosion of social cohesion and trust, organisations across all sectors of society must keep abreast of the most influential megatrends and how they are interconnected in impacting social cohesion. By doing so, societies can be better equipped with the foresight to navigate the scenarios and challenges these megatrends may bring.

COMMENTARY

In our complex and uncertain world, "Futures Thinking and Foresight" is a tool that international, national, and grassroots organisations can use to plan against potential threats and/or to guide current actions to attain desired futures.

It can be understood as "the structured and systematic approach of exploring plausible futures to anticipate and better prepare for change". It is not about predicting the future but about considering the radical changes that could occur and resulting in futures that can take different forms.

By imagining multiple futures, organisations can use "Futures Thinking and Foresight" to develop action-oriented strategies such as policies and programmes that cater to future needs and increase organisational and societal resilience.

Some organisations have already adopted this tool to help them navigate the evolving landscape. One example is Singapore's Harmony Centre. At the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCOS) organised by MUIS on 14-15 October 2024, the Centre shared that it had gathered an Interfaith Futures Workgroup to consider possible scenarios based on current global driving forces. The scenarios
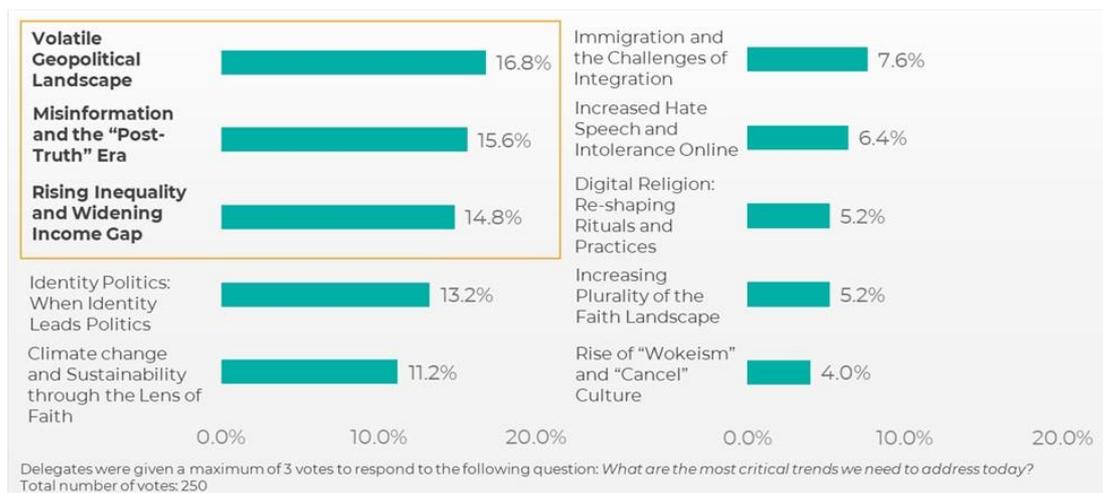
that were developed during this exercise included "No Religion", "1000 Blossoms Bloom", and "Robotic Messiah"; all possible scenarios that interfaith practitioners might encounter and have to address. Knowing these possible scenarios would enable Harmony Centre to focus its efforts on emerging trends that matter.

Pertinent Social Cohesion Trends

At the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) Inter-sessional Event organised by RSIS and held on 24-26 September 2024, we asked 102 local and foreign delegates what they thought were the megatrends that would shape the future of cohesion and why. The delegates included practitioners from faith and civic organisations, researchers and policymakers.

Three out of 10 megatrends provided were identified as most significant, namely, 1) the volatile geopolitical landscape, 2) the impact of misinformation and the "Post-Truth" era, and 3) the widening inequality and income gap, as shown in the table below.

Table: Top social cohesion trends that need to be addressed as voted by delegates

The Volatile Geopolitical Landscape

With global affairs frequently marked by conflict, geopolitical security is not a given. Against the backdrop of geopolitical competition, the major powers vie for influence, and one means by which they accumulate power is by sowing discord using disinformation campaigns to gain the mindshare of the masses. In this age, conflicts are fought not only through military wars but increasingly through "information wars".

With the growing prevalence of digital media, social media platforms have become de facto spaces for "epistemic proxy wars", facilitating the emergence of a "post-truth era". Such misinformation easily takes root in the minds of the disenfranchised, who deem many democratic and neoliberal public institutions as "culprits of rising inequalities". Such perceived deprivation between groups will impact social cohesion by eroding institutional trust.

Misinformation and the "Post-Truth" Era

Misinformation, defined as the [unintentional spread of false or inaccurate information](#), has become a significant threat to social cohesion. While [misinformation is not a new phenomenon](#), its potential to incite large-scale harm is concerning. It can rapidly trigger collective action around contentious issues, possibly leading to violence against minority groups and vulnerable communities.

In times of conflict, heightened emotions arising from fear and moral outrage can overshadow rational thinking and cloud judgment in what information to believe. Misinformation can be dangerous as it offers simplistic or incorrect information that scapegoats individuals or communities, and these can be based on ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

In the Southport riots in the UK in July 2024, the perpetrator of the fatal stabbings that triggered the riots was [wrongly identified](#) as a Muslim asylum seeker. He was neither Muslim nor asylum-seeking. The misinformation was further propagated [by far-right activists and conspiracy theorists](#), fueling violent attacks on a local mosque that resulted in injuries to [53 police officers](#). By capitalising on pre-existing social divisions, disinformation can easily destroy trust between groups, incite violence, and widen societal divides.

Rising Inequality and the Widening Income Gap

Rising inequality and the widening income gap worldwide were also identified as critical in shaping the future of social cohesion. A study examining the effects of inequalities on social cohesion revealed that people experiencing economic difficulties tend to feel more socially excluded or isolated. Specifically, their lack of economic resources could negatively impact their ability to participate fully in communal activities. This gradually erodes their trust in institutions and [impedes their efforts to form the social connections](#) needed.

Interestingly, in some instances, *perceived* rather than actual inequalities have a more significant bearing on social discontent. In other words, social cohesion could remain strong even as inequalities are great so long as they [are perceived to be fair](#).

Given the "multiplier effect" that inequality has on other aspects of our lives – such as education and [health outcomes](#) – not addressing these gaps risks further stratification in multiple areas. These entrenched disparities could lead to widespread social discontent, contribute to political polarisation and populism, and erode citizens' trust in institutions, boding poorly for social cohesion.

A Comprehensive Approach is Needed

"Futures Thinking and Foresight" is one way practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can navigate societal shifts to build more socially resilient communities.

While this tool can be effective for organisations and communities, greater value is gained through cross-sharing and/or brainstorming between them. This helps align the key megatrends that will disrupt social cohesion, as was done during the ICCS Inter-

sessional Event. By doing so, organisations and communities can lay out the potential challenges and opportunities and then develop multi-actor interventions that proactively mitigate the forces that threaten to erode cohesion, as no actor alone can address such megatrends.

For instance, the megatrend of misinformation potentially increases the risk of religious radicalism. In this case, a multi-actor approach might look at addressing it from the individual level (who are most vulnerable to radical content?), then the interpersonal level (are faith leaders or parents more effective in reaching out to radicalised teenagers?), followed by the communities one belongs to (such as schools and other interest groups).

By keeping abreast with emerging trends and possible futures through "Futures Thinking and Foresight", all actors active in the social cohesion space can better anticipate and prepare for future challenges.

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