



UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

## **Social Integration: Approaches and Issues**

UNRISD Briefing Paper No. 1  
World Summit for Social Development

March 1994

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## Acknowledgements

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Cynthia Hewitt de Alcántara. The collaboration of Dharam Ghai and the comments of participants in internal UNRISD seminars are gratefully acknowledged.

UNRISD work for the Social Summit is being carried out with the support and co-operation of the United Nations Development Programme.

## Summary

The General Assembly of the United Nations has defined social integration as one of the three main agenda items structuring the work of the World Summit for Social Development. This is a broad and ambiguous term, open to a number of different interpretations. The following paper therefore explores alternative approaches to the subject and suggests issues of social integration which could be taken up at the Summit.

**What is social integration?** There are at least three different ways of understanding the concept of social integration. For some, it is an inclusionary goal, implying equal opportunities and rights for all human beings. In this case, becoming more integrated implies improving life chances. To others, however, increasing integration has a negative connotation, conjuring up the image of an unwanted imposition of uniformity. And, to still others, the term does not necessarily imply either a positive or a negative state. It is simply a way of describing the established patterns of human relations in any given society.

**Some hidden assumptions.** When social integration is used in the first sense listed above, as a goal in itself, certain problems often arise. These problems can be summarized as follows:

- (a) It is intellectually easy and often politically expedient to assume that grave problems of poverty and in justice can be alleviated through including people formerly excluded from certain activities or benefits. Yet in many cases, the existing pattern of development may be economically and ecologically unsustainable, or politically repressive. Therefore it is always necessary to ask inclusion in what and on what terms?
- (b) Social integration can be sought without giving sufficient attention to the need for cultural diversity. □ When this occurs, there can be an imposition of uniformity.
- (c) In all too many cases, international discussion of social development is also phrased in terms of integrating those with nothing into the modern mainstream, as though the groups defined as excluded are surviving in a virtual vacuum. Yet even the most impoverished and apparently disorganized have their own forms of social organization. Ignoring the real world of the disadvantaged is a danger associated with inclusionary rhetoric, and it makes for bad policy.
- (d) Finally, there is a risk that narrow concentration on the normative goal of social integration will make disintegration undesirable by definition. In some cases, however, the disintegration of existing systems of social relations can be essential before progress toward

a more just and equitable society can be made. The demise of slavery provides a case in point.

**Anchoring prescriptions in analysis.** Problems of this kind can be avoided by basing proposals for change on a solid analysis of existing patterns of social relations in different concrete situations. Examining real networks of relations and institutions which support or undermine the livelihood of people in given times and places, participants in the Summit can distinguish patterns and processes of social integration which may have positive or negative implications for the well-being of different groups. The policy-relevant question for those who look at social integration in these terms is not how to increase integration per se, but how to promote a kind of integration which favours the creation of a more just and equitable society.

**Patterns and processes of social integration in the 1990s.** A peculiar combination of integrative and disintegrative trends marks the end of the twentieth century. When taken together, these create qualitative changes in the way people are related to each other; and it is of fundamental importance for the success of the Summit that these changes be widely studied and discussed.

- **Globalization and insecurity.** While rapidly expanding boundaries of economic exchange and cultural contact improve the life chances of some groups, the process of globalization proves devastating for many others. New patterns of integration into a world economy are increasing the economic insecurity of most people, as farmers, workers and business people around the globe are thrown into competition for scarce resources in hard times. Trends in science and technology promote longer term structural unemployment, thus compounding inequality, marginality and cultural malaise.
- **Marginalization and identity.** As opportunity is concentrated in certain regions and countries, and in particular economic sectors, people respond in a number of ways. One of the most problematic is migration, whether internally or abroad. Although migratory processes are positive in many respects, the juxtaposition of people who often share neither a common language nor a common religion, and who have very different customs, makes unusual demands on human tolerance and understanding. New arrivals also create unusual strains on existing social services.

Even if people do not leave their homes, barriers between different cultures are falling under the impact of the revolution in mass communications. Local forms of solidarity are often replaced by new values and ties, which link small groups with access to the global consumer culture to others like themselves across the globe, while increasing the gulf between the global middle class and compatriots who cannot join the group.

Feelings of marginality and the disruption of existing forms of local solidarity are two elements exacerbating ethnic and religious conflict, and encouraging participation in illicit and illegal activities in many settings around the world today.

- **Democracy, representation and accountability.** Rapid economic and social , accompanied by far-reaching cultural change, makes unusual demands on political institutions. Economic uncertainty and fear of marginalization encourage electorates in established democracies to favour immediate remedies over long-term policies; and the same fears immensely complicate the task of creating effective democratic régimes in countries where such systems of government are only now being established.

Furthermore, the global nature of so many of the problems of today reinforces the need for a far more effective system of international governance than that currently available. There is a striking incongruence between patterns of social integration which bind people around the world more closely together than ever before, on the one hand, and the frailty of existing mechanisms for discussing joint problems and promoting joint action, on the other.

**Issues of social integration to be addressed at the Social Summit.** Six such areas of concern are suggested in the concluding section of this paper: (a) the relation between globalization, economic insecurity and declining social welfare; (b) the crisis of legitimacy and accountability; (c) the dynamics of ethnic and religious conflict; (d) problems of internal and international migration; (e) reasons for the expansion of illicit and illegal activities, and the increase of violence; and (f) reform of the international system.

## **What Is Social Integration? Alternative Approaches**

When heads of state meet in March 1995 at the World Summit for Social Development, they will consider proposals for action under three agenda headings: (a) decreasing poverty, (b) reducing unemployment, and (c) enhancing social integration.

Of these three closely interrelated areas of concern, social integration is perhaps the broadest and most ambiguous. In fact, there is some uncertainty about how this third area should be understood and what kinds of issues should be taken up for discussion under such a rubric.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to focus specifically on the theme of social integration, to suggest alternative ways of approaching it and to explore some of the principal issues which could emerge when this agenda item is taken up at the international conference.

Social integration is a complex idea, which means different things to different people. To some, it is a positive goal, implying equal opportunities and rights for all human beings. In this case, becoming more integrated implies improving life chances. To others, however, increasing integration may conjure up the image of an unwanted imposition of conformity. And, to still others, the term in itself does not necessarily imply a desirable or undesirable state at all. It is simply a way of describing the established patterns of human relations in any given society. Thus, in the latter view, one pattern of social integration may provide a more prosperous, just or humane context for human beings than another; but it is also possible for one pattern of social integration to be markedly different from another without being either better or worse.

Let us begin by considering the widely held view that social integration is a positive goal in itself. This is the way the idea was often presented in discussions within the General Assembly leading up to the calling of the World Summit.

### ***Social Integration as an Inclusionary Goal***

Since the General Assembly urged the enhancement of social integration, it is obvious that delegates considered the latter a goal to be attained through various policy means. When the term is used in this way, as is frequently the case in international meetings, it becomes a broad-ranging synonym for greater justice, equality, material well-being and democratic freedom.

Delegates in these sessions recognize that some people or groups in the world already enjoy these precious benefits, while others do not; and they hope that, if adequate policy can be designed,

progress will be made toward lessening these distinctions. In this sense, the opposite of social integration is exclusion.

There is, however, a further concern underlying the call of the General Assembly to promote the enhancement of social integration.

### ***Social Integration as Heightened Solidarity and Mutual Identification***

Because our century ends with the collapse of numerous states and the sharpening of ethnic strife around the world, there is particular interest at the moment in searching for ways to create or reinforce common identities which lessen the likelihood of violence and provide a groundwork for co-operation. This is true not only at international and national levels, but also within local societies, where a number of developments are weakening basic bonds of mutual support and accountability and encouraging violent behaviour.

The call for enhancing social integration grows out of a generalized feeling that fundamental institutions of society, like the family and the community, are functioning badly; that children and young people are too often abandoned or brutalized; that criminal activities and corruption are on the increase. It also reflects concern over the weakening of public institutions, and a perceived decline of civility and tolerance in day-to-day social relations.

In this context, enhancing social integration can be understood as promoting harmonious interaction and solidarity at all levels of society. When this dimension of the concept is given priority, it becomes the opposite of a process of disintegration.

### ***Furthering the Goal of Social Integration: Some Hidden Assumptions***

Although no one doubts the importance of denouncing the unacceptable trend toward greater polarization, and launching an urgent call for greater solidarity, it is important to point out some of the hidden assumptions which often underlie an exclusive emphasis on social integration as a goal or end in itself.

1. If not carefully thought out, a call for greater inclusion in the benefits of development can be made without questioning the nature of the current process of development itself. It is intellectually easy and often politically expedient to assume that grave problems of poverty and injustice can be alleviated through including people formerly excluded from certain activities or benefits. Yet, in many cases, the existing pattern of development itself may be unviable or unjust.

Would it be advisable, for example, to suppose that all people around the world, who are currently unable to reach the very high levels of consumption characteristic of a few developed countries, can be included in the existing system without placing intolerable strains on the ecosystem of the earth? A more equitable form of inclusion in fact requires fundamental alteration of existing patterns of consumption.

The existing state of affairs may sometimes be not only ecologically unsustainable but also politically repressive. It is useful to remember that strongly authoritarian or totalitarian societies do in fact include everyone in elaborate structures of managed participation. In such cases, the problem of improving the quality of life for most people is not one of exclusion or inclusion, but of reform.

In sum, when promoting the goal of social integration, it is always necessary to ask the additional question: inclusion in what and on what terms?

2. A problem can also arise when social integration is sought without giving sufficient attention to the need for cultural diversity within most societies. The excluded can be included in ways which attempt to promote an unacceptable degree of homogeneity; and, when this occurs, the search for social integration becomes synonymous with the imposition of uniformity.

The issue of how to assure equal rights and opportunities for all, while respecting diversity, is one of the central policy questions of the twentieth century. It is also one of the most complex.

Because this is the case, social integration can be considered a negative goal by some groups.

3. When the goal of social integration is posed in terms of drawing the formerly excluded into national society, there can in fact be a tendency to forget that the latter have their own forms of social organization. In all too many cases, international discussion of social development is phrased in terms of integrating those with nothing into the modern mainstream, as though the groups defined as excluded are surviving in a virtual vacuum. This is simply not true.

Those who are excluded from some areas of modern society - even those who are most impoverished and apparently disorganized - are included in other forms of social organization. Good policy cannot be made if it fails to take the real world of the disadvantaged into account.

4. If social integration is explored exclusively from a prescriptive standpoint, so that emphasis is placed on improving certain indicators of opportunity or consumption (like nutrition, school enrolment, voter registration and so forth), it is possible to encourage some improvement through increased public expenditure without looking further into the structural bases of exclusion. Any improvement in the condition of the least advantaged is of course to be welcomed. But for integration (in the sense of more equal life chances) to be furthered over a longer term, and in a sustainable way, it is necessary to ask why problems of immiseration and polarization have arisen in the first place and why they seem to be growing worse.
5. Finally, there is a risk that narrow concentration on the normative goal of social integration will make disintegration undesirable by definition. In some cases, however, the disintegration of existing systems of social relations is essential before progress toward a more just and equitable society can be made. The demise of slavery during the nineteenth century provides a case in point.

### ***Anchoring Prescriptions in Analysis: The Uses of an Alternative Approach to the Subject of Social Integration***

One way to avoid the pitfalls just outlined above, and to orient discussion at the Social Summit toward consideration of central problems of social development in the 1990s, is obviously to base proposals for change on a solid analysis of existing patterns of social relations in different concrete situations. And here an alternative way of approaching the subject of social integration comes into play.

In this view, often held by social scientists, social integration is a vital area of concern for the world conference, not because integration in itself is intrinsically good (some forms of integration may be good and some bad), but because the term invites analysis of the concrete networks of relations and institutions which support or undermine the livelihood of people in given times and places.

No one goes through life alone. All of us are created within, and influenced by, networks of social relations which provide us with our identity and establish a framework for our actions. We survive and pursue our goals within a structure of institutions ranging from our families or households, clans or neighbourhoods or communities (where we seek primary support and protection), to the schools, associations, street gangs or video parlours (in which we are trained); and the small holdings, plantations, factories, sweatshops, stores and offices (in which we work). On a more general level, our opportunities or life chances are affected by larger political and economic structures ranging from tribal councils or municipal governments to the nation state, and from non-monetary exchange relations among friends to the Tokyo stock market. The United Nations system is one of the international elements in determining the options available to an increasing number of people around the world.

Observing this real world of human interaction, we can use the term social integration in several ways:

### **Patterns of social integration**

At any given moment in time, it is possible to take a snapshot of the way a certain society is organized (for example, Wall Street in New York, the squatter settlements of Rio de Janeiro, a peasant village in India, or indeed the emerging world society of the 1990s). What are the values and rules which shape peoples actions in each of these contexts? What kinds of behaviour, within what sets of relations among people, allow them to survive or get ahead? How is power held and exercised, for example, and how is wealth created and distributed? What relations between man and nature are predominant? In each context, there is a pattern of social integration, or network of social relations and institutions, regulated by specific ideas concerning what is right and wrong, which bind people to one another under certain conditions. These, in turn, are intimately related to the way different groups make use of their natural environment.

To understand how very different these arrangements can be, one could compare the pattern of social integration characteristic of feudal England with that to be found on the Amazon frontier in 1990.

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