Social cohesion in distributive policies and the role of knowledge

Rosalba Casas

IIS-UNAM, Institute of Social Research, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Ciudad Universitaria, C.P. 04510, Coyoacán, Mexico, D.F. México; E-mail: rcasas@sociales.unam.mx

This paper discusses the different meanings of the concept of social cohesion, within the framework of sociology and of public policies related to strategies for development. The aim is to explore the relationship between social cohesion and the decrease in inequity and social inequality on one hand, and the role of knowledge in those strategies on the other, aiming to find alternative models for social development. The meaning of concepts parallel to that of social cohesion in the sociological literature, such as social capital, organized collective action and social networks, is reviewed. The paper systematizes the arguments of international organizations about social cohesion, in particular the approaches of the Economic Commission for Latin America. Finally, some arguments are built on the relationship between knowledge, social cohesion and social development.

Keywords: social cohesion; knowledge-based societies; distributive policies; social development.

1. Introduction

Nowadays knowledge and innovation are widely considered to be key factors in development. This idea has been expanded and it is sustained by the argument that these resources are strategic elements for integral growth and social welfare, as well as for sustainable development. From this argument, a central aspect in the discussion of social cohesion should be the role of knowledge and innovation and their relationship with social development and social equality.

This paper is based on the reflections of the Ibero-American Thematic Network on Public Policies in Science and Technology for Social Cohesion and Governance of the International System (Ibero-American Programme for Science, Technology and Development, CYTED), that looks to establish the necessary basic actions to contribute to human welfare, within an inclusive development model, as well as to improve conditions for sustainable development. Some of the inquiries of this network arise from the Latin American reality and refer to the orientation of the use of knowledge towards inclusion and social cohesion.

Within this framework, this paper explores the different meanings of the concept of social cohesion in those approaches that currently promote this idea, and the role of knowledge that is advocated in these conceptualizations.

Knowledge is reflected, widely and clearly, in productivity and in countries' competitiveness, a trend that is exemplified by the development of Northern and newly industrialized countries. However, as has been widely argued, growth does not automatically generate social development, inclusion or social equality. This aspect has been recognized even by the World Bank (2001) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2001).

In a broad conceptualization, knowledge is a relevant resource from which to build a new development strategy. However, it is not yet clear how to orient the production, exchange and transfer of knowledge to allow a direct impact on the life levels of the population, particularly in food, health, housing, energy provision, and the reduction of inequality.

This paper discusses different meanings of the concept of social cohesion in the sociological literature, as in public policies referred to development strategies, some of which prioritize the role of the State, while others accentuate the role of civil society. The paper also analyses some statements that consider social cohesion as a goal to reach, while others argue that it is a process that would allow a decrease in poverty, thus favoring social inclusion.

The remainder of this paper is divided as follows. Section 2 analyzes the sociological definition of social cohesion and its current uses. Section 3 considers the

revision of statements of social cohesion within the frame of international organizations such as the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC). Section 4 considers the development of some statements to conceptualize the relationships between knowledge, social cohesion and inclusion, from the perspective of science and technology (S&T) studies. Conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2. Social cohesion: Sociological meaning

Social cohesion is a classic concept with a long trajectory in the sociological literature. Durkheim (1933, 1965) used this idea to refer to the mechanical and organic solidarity of society. Within Durkheimian theory, this concept is associated with social integration in simple societies, where there is a limited division of labor, and where individuals are relatively interchangeable. In these societies, everybody depends on everyone else, and everybody shares a collective consciousness that guarantees social cohesion and survival.

Social cohesion in sociology defines the degree of consensus of the members of a social group or the perception of belonging to a common project or situation. It is a measure of the intensity of the social interaction within a group: it can be measured with sophisticated tests or indexes, or simply described. However, from this conceptual perspective, social cohesion could not be considered to be a synonym of social development or social equity.

The question about how societies remain united, or how individuals are joined together for the realization of a common task is fundamental to sociology, and has been studied throughout the development of the discipline, with concepts such as: the division of labor, the social nature on man, affectivity, norms, trust and rationality (Puga and Luna 2008: 17). Likewise, the question how to solve poverty and inequality has been at the center of sociological development in Latin America, particularly in Mexico (Barba 2007; Bayón 2009; Durand 2010; Ziccardi 2001). However, the relationship between social cohesion and equality, from a sociological perspective, is not yet clear. It has received more attention from the policies of international organizations.

On the other hand, the analysis of inequality and poverty in current social research has focused more on the characteristics that limit equality and the lowering of poverty, than on the process to overcome them (Durand 2010).

Gordon and Millán (2009: 9) argue that:

> . . . after a long time when references to the notion of social cohesion almost disappeared, in recent years the reflection on this idea has recovered relevance. This new impetus coincides with evidence showing some qualities of the social, under features that have been considered dependent on other

dynamics such as economic, or those resulting from State action.

Gordon and Millán also argue that this renewed reference to social cohesion is present in social research as well as in the design of policies that look for more integrative effects in the social sphere. A more cohesive society has greater capacity to solve conflicts, as social cohesion facilitates putting a greater number of normative, cultural and social resources into practice (Berger 1999).

Recent approaches to social research have emphasized the analysis of processes built in society and that result in social solidarity, understood by Elster (1991) as the cement of society. These processes (Puga and Luna 2008: 17):

> . . . happen because of the initiative of diverse actors of civil society that give place to associative phenomena, of collective action and social cohesion, built by actors, themselves, for the satisfaction of common goals and the solution of problems.

However, from the review of some of the analyses on this subject, it is not possible to conclude whether or not such processes of social cohesion allow or facilitate the mobilization of resources for coordinating actions to attend to common problems, contribute to decreasing inequality and favor social inclusion: whether or not, in a situation of greater social cohesion, there will be better possibilities to improve the living conditions of the population.

Current social research has developed several approaches and concepts which are close to social cohesion, such as: social capital (Ostrom and Ahn 2003), organized social action (Luna and Puga 2010: 7), and social networks (Casas and Luna 2011).

Within the analysis of associative processes, the main focus is on the concept of organized social collective action by a group of individuals or groups who share rules, identity, and objectives. In this approach social cohesion is one of the elements of such a process, where the analysis of the level of internal social cohesion reached, as well as the collective mechanisms for decision-making, the negotiation and deliberation, and the capacity to intervene in the process of governance, are also relevant (Luna and Puga 2010: 9–10).

Another issue in the analysis of collective action is the consideration of social networks, networks of governance, and the associative characteristics that produce a more significant participation in such networks. Social network analysis, has been conceived as a central approach in current social research, as such a process reveals dynamic associative forms to reach common goals or the solution of shared problems. Despite this, from our perspective, there are not enough advances in the analysis of the extent to which those social processes have allowed a reduction in social inequality and poverty.

From a general perspective, it could be stated that a central interest of network approaches is the consideration

of the relational patterns between social entities, and the premise that the structure of social relations has a greater explanatory power than the attributes of the members that compose a certain relational system (Casas and Luna 2011).

Sen's approach (Sen 1988, 1997) has also had an important influence in the conceptualization of strategies of international organizations to reduce poverty. One of the central axes of Sen's approach is the concept of capacities that are essential to reach certain levels of living, that is to say, the abilities that an individual should develop, such as the capacity for social interaction, which implies the idea of social cohesion, and social action, referred to the individual and not to the collective level.

In the consideration of all the concepts referred to above, it is necessary to pay attention to the specific traditions and cultural patterns of societies that enable or limit interactive processes and the organized collective actions.

Some European countries have a strong tradition of organized collective action and social cohesion that is not found in other countries. Because of this, current international policies based on social cohesion to reach equality, can be expected not to have the same expression and impacts in countries in other regions.

Gordon and Millán (2009: 88–91) argue—from the analysis of a survey on social capital applied to several municipalities in Mexico—that from a first approach to the measurement of the degree of social cohesion, a variety of expressions can be observed, related to the degree of development of the municipalities. They argue that a more cohesive society is more sociable and thus has a greater capacity to solve their problems and conflicts, and hence to find solutions. Among the aspects used to measure social cohesion, they consider the following (Gordon and Millán 2009: 91):

- unity guidelines that are present in a community such as trust, reciprocity norms, and the capacity to control the milieu
- social ties provided by participating in formal organizations
- social ties established by means of informal sociability
- social networks, their extent, structure and exchange practices
- cooperation

From the review in this section, it might be argued that one of the current conceptualizations from social research which sustain the new models of social development, is based on the ideas of social cohesion, social participation, organized collective action and social networks. From these processes, more equitable and universal access to social rights and welfare could be envisaged, based on the satisfaction of the main social needs (education, health, work, housing, services, social security, and environmental quality). However, the relationship between social cohesion and social development has not been widely analyzed (Barba 2006, 2009).

3. Social cohesion and knowledge within the frame of policies to diminish poverty and inequality

The idea of social cohesion is central in development strategies and in public social policies, focusing in the creation of programs and spaces that could favor it.

The European Union introduced this idea to the Latin American agenda, in the Guadalajara Summit in May 2004, and other multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank and IDB, have adopted it. For some authors (Mealla 2010: 7), it is paradoxical that those organizations that during the 1980s and 1990s banished discussion of the social and distributive issues are those that currently argue that poverty and inequality hinder development. With respect to this Barba (2007: 212) argues that:

> . . . organizations such as WB [World Bank], have not maintained a rigid proposal related to its initial strategies, although changes in the orientation of the recommendations of this agency with regard to welfare and poverty in the 21st century, have not been in depth but in shade.

Some official documents from countries in Latin America (Government of Chile 2007: 6), emphasize that contemporary societies are facing trends of loss of social cohesion while the traditional mechanisms of social integration have lost efficiency and the capacity to break down the inter-generational transmission of poverty. This document states that besides poverty and economic and social gaps, one must now add: a weakness of the sense of belonging to the community, the perception of social injustice, the perception of low achievement of norms, low trust in institutions whose function is to provide public goods, and low legitimacy of political institutions (particularly political parties, parliaments, and the judicial power). This panorama is compounded by low rates of social participation, political indifference, and a low value placed on democracy. This can be summed up as a crisis in citizenship.

Facing this reality, expressed particularly in developing countries, public policies including the concept of social cohesion are gathering strength as an objective and as a transversal means for social and economic policies to confront poverty and inequality.

The European concept of social cohesion has its reference in the:

> . . . human rights culture that means social integration through guaranteed legal access to different functions and resources provided by the State. Hence, cohesion is not previously given (by means of the nature of individual or civil society), but is created politically through the legal ratification of the

rights the State has the obligation to assure, independently of the natural or traditional tie. (ECLAC 2010)

In this conception social cohesion is a means to reach development. Other governments, as the Spanish one, argued during 2010 that social cohesion is a final goal to be reached by means of knowledge, innovation, and sustainable and inclusive growth.

ECLAC's recent statements (ECLAC 2010), underline social cohesion as a central factor for development, an argument made earlier (ECLAC 2007). For ECLAC, social cohesion is the unitary and harmonic relation among the agents that constitute society. To reach social cohesion, there should be a guarantee of the essential life conditions and the building of stable social relations among citizens living together in a nation.

ECLAC's development approach looks to the structural bases that characterized welfare states after World War II and a claim that the States should play a more active role in the well-being of the population. Some innovative practices and theories have emerged from this framework. The ideas of social capital, social cohesion and security in the face of risk, are in the debate and in the design of public policies.

Within ECLAC's approach the State is called upon to acquire a major strategic weight in the search for solutions to the problems of inequality and well-being (ECLAC 2010: 192).

The issue of knowledge is included in ECLAC's document, within the section on education:

> Education plays a decisive role in the search of equity…knowledge and information are key factors to expand social capital…and are engines of social inclusion and the administration of life projects. (ECLAC 2010: 223)

The document also states that:

> …the process to be built includes knowledge as an important element for the transformation of the productive structure, particularly through the axis of technological policy, centered in the strengthening of the supply side and the articulation with the demand side, to create and spread out knowledge. (ECLAC 2010: 237)

This approach was already included in earlier ECLAC documents (ECLAC 1990, 1997), based on productive transformation with equity, when the investment in policies for human capital creation was central.

Barba (2007: 234), argues that since 2000 ECLAC has broken with the orthodoxy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund:

> …when the center of the new ECLAC's proposal became the economic, cultural and social rights, putting them in the framework social citizenship…underlining the universality of those rights…and conceiving education, labor and the development of capacities to learn to learn, as the master keys of the new ECLAC's approach.

In 2010 ECLAC gave priority to the development of sectors with a greater content of knowledge—not specifying which these sectors are—and breaking up the vicious circle centered on natural resources.

In 2008, ECLAC proposed agreements for social cohesion that sought to consolidate the social care systems, based on the principles of universality, solidarity and efficiency, clear and lasting rules, an effective administration, the capacity to articulate different institutions, participation and the exercise of population rights, and decentralized actions that combine the public with the private (ECLAC 1990: 257). In 2010, ECLAC proposed social agreements for equity and strategic development, oriented to income and other actives distribution (physical human and social capital), and the overcoming of structural heterogeneity (ECLAC 2010: 257). In the building of those pacts, the agreements between public and private agents and learning processes, sustain the institutional implementation of strategies, programs and policies. It is about social processes, there is plenty of learning.

ECLAC argues that the conceptualization of social cohesion could be compared with the idea of social integration, a polemical idea sustained by ECLAC during the 1950s and 1960s. During those decades, such a strategy was not able to overcome economic and cultural dependency in Latin American countries. Regarding this issue Barba (2010: 17) argues that the idea of social disintegration as a conception of poverty, corresponds to a conservative discourse on social well-being.

Despite the fact that the idea of social integration does not fit the idea of social cohesion in the sociological literature, it is questionable whether or not this renewed idea from ECLA will continue the same rhetoric of the concept of social integration, or of the concept of social capital adopted by the World Bank at the start of the 21st century.

ECLAC's position does not consider the existing social processes within the Latin American region, which are occurring at the initiative of civil society. These result in associative phenomena, collective actions, social cohesion and the building of social networks, processes that have a strong relation with the idea of social cohesion that should be strengthened and consolidated by public policies. These bottom-up processes deserve more attention to integrate them into public policies that guarantee the articulation of actors around the purposes of inclusion and social equity.

From our review of the policy approaches, it is clear that the issue of knowledge is scarcely considered in the statements of international organizations, particularly in ECLAC's documents. During the 1990s ECLAC maintained that a central role of the State was to promote interrelationships among science, technology and the productive sectors. The statements related to S&T which were produced in 2010, are similar to those of the 1990s. With regard to knowledge, the question is how to stimulate

research at universities. For technological development, the issue is the integration between supply and demand in knowledge-intensive sectors. The importance of the systemic approach privileges the interaction between the supply and the demand of technology, having as an objective an environment of rapid learning and structural change in favor of dynamic technological sectors. This means that S&T would impact development through the strength of the industrial sector, a formula that has already shown its limitations for integrating economic and social development.

Although knowledge has been meant to be one of the key factors for social development, ECLAC's document (ECLAC 2010) does not solve the problem of integrating knowledge with social cohesion and the reduction of inequality.

The relations between knowledge, social cohesion and the reduction of inequalities are not elaborated in depth in this document. ECLAC (2010: 145) recognizes that there are four central aspects that limit the future advances in equality:

- income distribution
- distribution of education and knowledge
- unequal capacity to take advantage of education, knowledge, and labor markets
- inter-generational reproduction of inequality

However, the emphasis of the document is on increasing public expenditures, the tax load, and a better distribution of the four central aspects mentioned above. This strategy combines the axis of poverty with the axis of the inequity fight and the promotion of social cohesion. It also emphasizes the idea of networks that imply a major articulation between public and private agents and between them and social actors. However, the document neither presents statements on the more specific role of knowledge in fighting poverty, nor on the fighting of inequity, nor on building social cohesion. That is why the policy statements in ECLAC's document, neither integrate scientific and technological knowledge, nor local knowledge, as substantive factors in the strategies for diminishing poverty and inequality.

4. On the relationship between knowledge, social cohesion and equity

Reflection on this relationship leads us to the idea of knowledge-based societies. It has been argued that such societies have always existed. However, from a different perspective, it could be considered that the idea of knowledge societies is a goal to be reached and a sort of paradigm to orient the development of our societies (Casas and Dettmer 2008; Sorlin and Vessuri 2007).

Several authors consider that knowledge-based societies are a model to be explored, and the building of such societies will only be possible as knowledge becomes democratized, as it would be socially distributed, as more people benefit from it, and as cultural diversity and social plurality would be considered (UNESCO 2003; Olivé 2007).

According to UNESCO (2003), a knowledge-based society could be characterized by three relevant capacities:

- the creative capacity to generate new knowledge
- the capacity to use already existing knowledge or new knowledge
- the capacity to define the relevance of knowledge for specific needs that change in relation to the type of society

Creative capacity is expressed in the generation of new knowledge, in the widening of existing knowledge and in talent oriented to the satisfaction of specific needs, by means of the development of appropriate knowledge systems. It is important to consider that the mere existence of knowledge does not guarantee its impact on society, unless, the different agents involved in its generation and use have the capacity to absorb, to define its social and economic relevance, based on the definition of objectives and actions, in priority sectors relevant to the development strategy.

From the characterization made by UNESCO (2003), the essential principles for the development of equitable knowledge-based societies are:

- equitable access to education and cultural rights
- access to universal information and knowledge, particularly, that in the public domain
- strengthening of the expression of cultural and linguistic diversity
- freedom of expression and a strong commitment to human rights

Latin America is characterized by countries that build scientific knowledge mainly in universities and public research centers. So this sector is a substantive factor in the transition towards knowledge-based societies and it should be one of the basic sectors in the definition of policies for the generation of knowledge. However, other sectors in the region, have built knowledge capacities in the form of traditional and local knowledge. These should be appraised and put into dialogue with scientific knowledge (Vessuri 2006).

The concept of knowledge is very broad and it does not reduce itself to scientific, technological or intellectual aspects. This is important because until very recently it was generally thought that only science could make original contributions to knowledge. Despite this idea, it has been argued by several authors, that it is important to rescue other types of knowledge that are basic to the building of knowledge-based societies. Among others, one can mention traditional knowledge generated and accumulated by diverse social groups, but it is also

important to rescue the knowledge generated and used by organizations, which has been shown to be useful for the production processes. Such knowledge has a collective character that has been generated by means of communication, interaction and learning among different social agents.

Regarding a broad comprehension of what knowledge is, the idea of Hess and Ostrom (2007), who conceptualize knowledge as a commons, stands out. They understand that commons cannot be limited to the academic environment, but they are also produced by users, designers, taxpayers, and the dealers of common resources that are not part of the Ivory Tower. This means that commons may have academic and non-academic scope. Hess and Ostrom define knowledge as a:

> . . . shared resource, a complex ecosystem that is a commons, a resource shared by a group or people that is subject to social dilemmas. (Hess and Ostrom 2007: 3)

As more people share knowledge it becomes a commons:

> Self-organized commons require strong collective-action and self-governing mechanisms, as well as high degree of social capital on the part of stakeholders. (Hess and Ostrom 2007: 5)

These ideas are relevant to understanding how knowledge could contribute to social development, by means of:

> . . . collective actions that arise when the efforts of two or more individuals are needed to accomplish an outcome. (Hess and Ostrom 2007: 5)

Other ideas and conceptions developed in Latin America are also suggestive, regarding the relationships between knowledge and well-being.

Herrera, one of the main representatives of the Latin American Thought in S&T (PLACTS, acronym in Spanish), during the 1970s and early 1980s argued as follows (Herrera 1983): First, there is a difference between the capacity for technological innovation and the social capacity for innovation. The former means:

> . . . the capacity to create a solution to a technical specific problem of the productive system.

The latter refers to:

> . . . the global capacity of a society to incorporate technological progress with respect to its own development conception.

This idea continues to be relevant in the current context of our region. Second, Herrera (1983) developed a very interesting idea during the 1980s, referred to technological self-determination that was based in the conception that there are alternative models to development. In the search described by that model, developing countries do not have to repeat the path of developed nations, but they need to orient it to the well-being of individuals and the satisfaction of the basic needs of the population. The idea of self-determination meant that the solution to

underdevelopment corresponds to developing countries, which need to search for creative solutions, by means of the use of their own resources. This idea should be up-dated within the context of the current globalization and interdependence of countries and regions. Instead of thinking of natural resources, as was the implicit idea in Herrera's thought, it is necessary to think in terms of the creation and use of knowledge capacities and how to orient them towards the social well-being of the population.

As has been argued in Section 2, the current conceptions on how to face poverty and inequity are at the center of the debate on research agendas in the social sciences, and in the debate about new policies within the context of national and international organizations. However, knowledge has not been considered to be a central factor.

From the statements and arguments already reviewed in this paper, some considerations are now developed on how to build a direct relationship between knowledge, social cohesion and social development:

- In the first place, the approach that emphasizes the importance of the development of capacities, and the role of commons is very relevant (Hess and Ostrom 2007). This focus suggests thinking about the relationship between knowledge, social cohesion and social development. The basis of this approach would be the building of capacities and the ability to integrate them, by means of social processes for the generation and social distribution of knowledge that allows a better access to knowledge for the entire population.

- Regarding the idea of the promotion of economic, social, and cultural rights, a new right should be added: the right to knowledge and information, as these two resources have already generated a type of social exclusion.

- A third aspect to be considered in this relationship between knowledge, social cohesion, and social development, is local and regional development. This geographical perspective becomes relevant for the generation and distribution of knowledge at the local and regional levels. From this approach it would be possible to guarantee a stronger social cohesion by means of knowledge networks and through interactive learning among several social agents (Casas 2001). Interactive processes and social cohesion among different actors to generate, distribute, and share knowledge, will certainly have an important impact on the developments of capacities at the local level, and the success in sharing goals to improve the social conditions of populations. The building of social capital becomes evident in the local setting, which facilitates the generation and diffusion of tacit knowledge, learning, innovations, and overall local development. Socio-cultural factors, linked to the territory, condition the learning capacities and the possibilities for sustainable local development.

- Within this scheme, the building of knowledge networks by means of interactive processes between individual and institutional actors, learning activities, trust building, norms and values, and the interchange of knowledge (Luna 2003), are processes that strengthen social cohesion at the regional and local levels, through which social capital is built in favor of social inclusion. Therefore, social interaction and social coordination among the actors are relevant social processes that should occur on the basis of public policies for science, technology and innovation.
- The fifth aspect in this perspective is to recognize that social issues should be at the center and not at the periphery of the discussion of development. As Barba (2009: 28) states, this approach has considered social development to be a central issue, being a factor in economic development, and giving rise to alternative social policies. The social factor should be at the center of the definition of knowledge, S&T public policies in Latin America, combining with the perspective of regional and local development. The idea of social technologies, developed by several authors in the Latin American region acquires vital importance in this perspective (Dagnino 2004; Thomas and Fressoli 2007).

5. Conclusions

The new world crisis has again placed the population in developing countries in a situation of loss of employment, income deterioration and negative effects on human capacities. This panorama reiterates the challenge for scholars in the study of science, technology and society to make contributions to overcome the situation. Some questions remain unsolved:

- How to proceed to make S&T work in favor of poor and marginalized people (Cozzens and Santos Pereira 2008)?
- How could knowledge work against poverty and inequality?

The introduction of concepts such as social cohesion in the discourse of international organizations and in the political agendas of some governments in Latin America, has apparently placed the social factor in the center. However, an alternative social approach is still in the process of being defined.

Social studies of S&T should solve the question of how to integrate knowledge in a new agenda for social development, and how knowledge could be translated into the solution of the enormous gaps caused by poverty and inequality. Is knowledge an important capacity to build social cohesion, or is only a certain social cohesion in societies the one that would allow a better social distribution of knowledge?

To conclude, it is relevant to underline some of the statements of the International Social Science Council (ISSC/ UNESCO 2010). It argues that social and humanistic disciplines could contribute to reinforce the dialogue with public policies, by means of providing support to the formulation of policies in S&T, putting into practice programs in that field emphasizing that the access to the benefits of scientific progress is a question of respect for human rights.

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