



Social Sciences & Humanities 7 COVID-19 Recovery

Inequalities and Cohesion

A series of statements from national social science and humanities bodies in the G7 on one of the greatest challenges we face: the COVID-19 pandemic and our recovery from its impacts.

This statement on inequalities and cohesion focuses on how COVID-19 has affected and highlighted inequalities and relationships between communities of people, and senses of community and belonging.

It outlines some of the key insights from the humanities and social sciences on the importance of social cohesion and solidarity in response to the pandemic and on attending to the inequalities, that were highlighted and deepened by the pandemic. Plans for redevelopment in the post-crisis recovery will need to take account of the inequalities that exist within and between communities.

COVID-19 has exacerbated and accelerated trends in growing inequalities in our societies

COVID-19 and governments' responses have impacted different groups of people, often amplifying existing structural inequalities in employment and in public services such as healthcare and education, including income inequality and poverty, and intergenerational inequalities.

Evidence has demonstrated that local areas which had invested in programmes to strengthen social cohesion and integration in the years prior to the pandemic reported consistently higher levels of neighbourliness, volunteering and positive social action than elsewhere, demonstrating that even a modest investment in social cohesion can yield benefit for community resilience and ability to respond to a crisis.

However, the degree of organisation and mobilisation of civil society is not homogenous and varies in different local contexts. Therefore, people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods, those with less education, younger age groups and those from certain ethnic minority backgrounds experienced greater declines in feelings of cohesion during the pandemic. Reasons for this could include greater economic and social vulnerability among these groups and increases in interethnic divisions, stemming in part from negative and stigmatising rhetoric associating the virus with particular ethnicities.

Community divisions are frequently characterised along lines of ethnicity, religion or nationality, age, gender, occupation, but tensions between 'newcomers' and 'outsiders' in communities are also salient, and existing communities can feel displaced by new residents. Where strong divisions exist, they can create or exacerbate feelings of isolation and leave certain groups feeling marginalised, with some disempowered and ambivalent about participating in their community and contributing to its success.

Geographic and spatial inequalities have widened during the pandemic. Health and wellbeing, local economic risk and resilience, poverty and deprivation and response planning all have an important place and identity-based dimensions that have shaped the impact of the crisis. Health outcomes of COVID-19 have followed patterns of existing health inequalities. A critical component in attending to these inequalities is gaining an understanding of how the combination of geographic location, physical infrastructure and social conditions implies the need for different priorities across local areas. These geographic and spatial inequalities also affect nations and countries differently due to existing differences in social systems to provide public health services.

The inclusion of social infrastructures in the post-crisis recovery

COVID-19 is not a socially neutral disease. While the virus may potentially affect anyone, with underlying health conditions, age and biological sex the biggest risk factors, infection and mortality figures throughout the pandemic have followed existing patterns of structural inequality familiar to both social and health scientists. Early evidence shows that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on income inequality, in those areas where inequalities already existed, including gender inequalities (such as an increase in responsibilities and domestic violence against women), socioeconomic and labour inequalities. There have also been disproportionate impacts on minority ethnic communities.

Due to the changing effects of the pandemic on the labour market, improved digital infrastructure could help mitigate continued these inequalities. Evidence also shows the importance of digital access as a component of social infrastructure and social capital. Levels of available community support and mobilisation have been heavily mediated and affected by digital infrastructure and access. Opportunities that remote working could provide may offset these inequalities but will ultimately rely on improved and more equitable access to digital infrastructure. Access to decent transport and other forms of local and community level support are also an important component of social infrastructure and social capital and should be taken into consideration.

Social infrastructure has been an essential but precarious lifeline in the crisis, and its importance will only grow as we look to respond to and mitigate the long-term societal effects of COVID-19. Less affluent communities with less social capital including women, the elderly, ethnic minority backgrounds, low-income groups and transient people including the homeless, gypsy travellers, migrants and asylum seekers, have had weaker community infrastructures and were more vulnerable to the crisis. These infrastructures must be further supported and enhanced if we are to rely on them in the future.

Furthermore, given the important role that third sector and civil society organisations have played in responses to the pandemic, the social sciences and humanities can also provide valuable insight into the means and conditions that help foster these organisations at the local level. We must consider those policies that can promote growth, both in areas where infrastructure is strong but also in contexts where it is weak or absent, whilst also recognising the vital role for public services alongside these organisations.

We must also look more closely at the critical role of these social infrastructures in establishing and rebuilding trust and cohesion after the crisis, ensuring that the right infrastructures are in place to strengthen trust both within and between different groups, which in turn builds social capital and underpins wider recovery demands for greater economic productivity and resilience. Important civic institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, places of worship, libraries, museums, theatres and sports clubs all need to act as nodes in the underlying structures that support and empower communities.

The key role of social and financial support from central government should also be given more attention to counter economic and social inequalities. It is also essential that plans for urban redevelopment in the post-crisis recovery take account of the inequalities that exist within and between different urban communities. There is also some evidence that rural economies and infrastructure have been adversely affected by the pandemic, in many instances compounding challenges around population ageing and decline.

Finally, the concept of ‘intergenerational justice’ is also key in discussing post-COVID recovery. Younger generations will be impacted differently by the COVID-19 pandemic. They have had, and are having, their education interrupted so are suffering ‘lost’ months of education which it will be difficult to make up, particularly for those already more disadvantaged prior to the pandemic. This will, in turn, impact their employment opportunities, as well as have ongoing and potentially long-term mental health implications. This is being experienced by the same generation that are going to be most adversely affected by climate change, which will also have unequal impacts. Governments should pay extra attention and consideration to this. Special attention should also be directed towards additional benefits such as paying living wages that would help in addressing social care issues.

Recommendations

We ask that all G7 Governments:

- Build multi-level governance structures based on empowering participation, engagement and cooperation to strengthen the capacity to identify and respond to local and community level needs.
- Reconfigure urban spaces as well as rural economies and infrastructure to support sustainable and adaptable local businesses, amenities and lifestyles.
- Consider adopting more place-sensitive approaches to upgrading digital infrastructure, so that the priority needs of local areas are better accounted for and can be more effective in tackling existing inequalities.
- Forge strong, decentralised and inclusive partnerships across multiple sectors and services at a local and community level – with particular focus on tackling inequalities and supporting the most impacted groups (women, people with disabilities, the elderly, ethnic minority backgrounds, low-income groups and transient people).
- Review the implications of the workforce and other societal divides that may emerge between those who can work, learn and engage with society through more digitally enabled means, and those who cannot and the new inequalities that could emerge between these two groups.
- Consider the configuration and focus of public welfare, which would be effective in tackling new social risks related to increases of instability produced by social inequalities.
- Ensure effective cooperation with devolved and local governments and councils in implementing these recommendations.