



Social Sciences & Humanities 7 COVID-19 Recovery

Community Engagement

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 community engagement focuses on how context specific to place, culture, social and economic factors, shape people's responses to COVID-19.

It outlines some of the key insights from the humanities and social sciences on how to build on the opportunities and strengths the pandemic has shown across communities. The pandemic brought out some of the best features of compassionate, cooperative and innovative societies, driven by the shared purpose of responding to the crisis. However, with this statement, we recognise that now is the time to turn these pockets of purpose-driven cooperation during a crisis into a solid strategy for recovery across economies and societies.

Community engagement, a valuable support for recovery from COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, in many places community solidarity and cohesion grew. There was also a parallel increase in people's belief in the power of community. Although there is considerable variation in the presence and activity of local and hyper-local charity, voluntary and mutual aid groups, many have responded creatively to the pandemic.

Local communities have become more important than ever during the pandemic. However, there are inequalities within and across communities based on the strength of local infrastructures. The fight against the pandemic has demonstrated the lack of investment and/or development of local and regional settings at critical times.

National capacities to respond to changing circumstances and challenges require effort to sustain strong communities and community engagement at local levels. The pandemic experience points to a fine-tuning of competences and powers between central and local governments, as well as a better integration between political actions and autonomous community actions sustained by civil society.

Community-led 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. These infrastructures must be further supported and enhanced if we are to rely on them in the future. As we start a phase of social reconstruction, it is necessary to recognise the valuable contribution of social engagement and initiatives, especially through local and self-organised societies. At the same time, it is important not to underestimate the importance of sound economic and welfare policies at national level.

Community engagement, challenged by longstanding and weakened social fractures

Evidence suggests that specific local and community knowledge and responses are crucial to recovering well from epidemics. But doing more locally, and doing that well, requires local data, and people at a local level who can use it. Without intervention, reliance on charity and voluntary groups will lead to very different levels of provision given variations in wealth and local government funding.

The pandemic has also laid bare the inequalities that exist between different communities, and how some communities have struggled to meet even the most basic needs of their members. This forces us to confront the place-based weaknesses in support provision and how these weaknesses tend to align with longstanding geographical patterns of socio-economic inequality.

Although people are often strongly connected to virtual or geographically distributed communities, the most stable and continuous social reality is likely to be where they live or work. We must look more closely at the critical role of these communities in establishing and rebuilding trust and cohesion after the crisis, ensuring the right infrastructure is in place to strengthen trust both within and between different groups and communities, 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, and sports clubs - all need to act as nodes in the underlying structures that support and empower communities.

Cooperation and solidarity are vital ingredients of social cohesion and our collective capacity to achieve shared goals. Preventing and repairing social fractures is not just desirable but essential for a prosperous and successful future. Building and consolidating relationships and collaborations between central and local governments could significantly help with cohesion and trust and should be made a priority.

In many places, the pandemic has further exposed the precariousness of the provision of support in times of crisis. For some countries, research suggests that the needs of different groups may be best met by decentralising public health provision and improving local health services, fixing complex and inefficient governance and regulation in health and social care, and rethinking the structure and funding of social care. For others the answers will be different, but there will be challenges for all related to the significant risks of overall declines in funding for those groups who can help at the most local levels, including charities, communities and those in local government.¹

Trust is a key contributor to the creation of social capital and plays an important part in generating economic productivity. However, despite an initial crescendo of national solidarity early in the pandemic, many intergroup divisions and tensions are re-emerging and require attention, and there is evidence that community engagement tends to wane over time. The pandemic also generated a form of regressive individualism, where rules were no longer respected because they were judged illiberal and over-burdensome, such as with mask wearing with no consideration for the harm done to others. In several circumstances, these attitudes have triggered conflicts between different groups, grafted onto pre-existing economic, cultural and political cleavages.

Social cooperation can be motivated by trust or by fear, and in democracies the former is preferable to the latter. Thus, cooperation is a vital ingredient of social cohesion and our collective capacity to achieve shared goals. Preventing and repairing social fractures is therefore not just desirable but essential for a prosperous and successful future and, for this reason, an important avenue for policy.

Finally, the economic recovery will necessarily rely on technological and organisational innovations. Humanities and social sciences will have to be at the forefront of the project for building new institutional and organisational structures, capable of generating innovative networks of trust and cooperation. In this way it would be possible to avoid new economic and social cleavages and conflicts. Leading voices in the humanities and social sciences should call for further support for interdisciplinary research on the road to recovery from COVID-19.

1 Morrison et al. (2020), *The social implications of COVID-19 on Communities*.

Recommendations

We ask that all G7 Governments:

- Empower a range of actors, including business and civil society, to work together with a sense of social purpose to help drive a solid strategy for recovery across economies and societies.
- Consider an extended period of targeted transitional funding that will support local civil society organisations while they address deficits in their revenues caused by COVID-19.
- Create accessible mechanisms for local communities to engage meaningfully and deploy their local knowledge in decision-making, with emphasis on empowering underrepresented voices and improving public trust. This implies interplay between civil society and political institutions, and also requires recognising that local proposals are in addition to and not an alternative to economic and social support measures from national government: an effective strategy consists of good coordination between the two levels of action.
- Improve mechanisms for the voices of groups often marginalised in policymaking, such as children, young people and the elderly, to be meaningfully heard in the development of community services.
- Explore options for establishing and maintaining structures that build positive relationships within and between groups and communities, equipping and motivating all to cooperate and provide mutual support.
- Consider creating national recovery participation schemes focused on harnessing the skills and time of the population for the recovery.
- Find ways to further incentivise commitment to principles for purposeful business² in the private sector to drive recovery-oriented innovation and encourage even stronger and more targeted contribution to social and environmental solutions.