

# Social Cohesion Post-Pandemic in Brunei Darussalam: Strengthening Bonds in New Normal

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## Abstract

*The perspective on social cohesion as a crucial element in societal stability has been the primary focus of this article. This research employs a qualitative research method by conducting a literature review to comprehend the changes in social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam post-COVID-19 pandemic. The research findings identify alterations in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion during the pandemic, which are subsequently utilized to formulate strategies and initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion in the post-pandemic era. In education, it is evident that a combination of face-to-face and online learning approaches is considered relevant during the "new normal." Furthermore, the role of communities in supporting changes in social interaction patterns remains significant, particularly through ongoing volunteer programs and social campaigns. The government of Brunei Darussalam also plays a pivotal role with effective control strategies, a "whole-nation" approach, equitable economic fund allocation, and consistent public services. Efforts to address economic disparities are also an integral part of the strategy to reinforce social cohesion in the post-pandemic period..*

Keywords: Post pandemic, COVID 19, Social Cohesion, Brunei Darussalam

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which originated from the coronavirus and is believed to have started in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Sohrabi et al., 2020; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020), has infected the international population and become a global pandemic that has claimed thousands of lives around the world. Governments worldwide have swiftly implemented public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus (Fong et al., 2020). But it is undeniable that the pandemic has changed how we live, work, and interact in recent years. The pandemic has also raised important questions about how humans can strengthen social bonds, especially when facing drastic lifestyle changes. For this reason, this paper will explain the importance of understanding social cohesion in the post-pandemic context, especially in Brunei Darussalam.

As Brunei Darussalam is known to have a social structure that is viewed as a pyramid (Ahmad Kumpoh et al., 2017), it still allows

social, economic, and political transformations that cause social changes in the community, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pyramid-like social structures can be a decisive backdrop in social cohesion, as they affect the distribution of power, resources, and access to services. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges that stimulate changes in Brunei's social interactions, mobility, and the distribution of resources and opportunities. In this context, understanding how existing social structures can adapt to these changes is essential for understanding and strengthening social cohesion in the post-pandemic period.

Similarly, social cohesion is a strong foundation for the stability and development of society. It includes healthy interpersonal relationships and a degree of trust in governing institutions and leaders (Fan et al., 2022). During the significant changes caused by the pandemic, it is essential to understand how social cohesion can be maintained, strengthened, and even enhanced in a new context that still needs to be clearly defined.

For this reason, the basic concept of social cohesion and its relevance in facing post-pandemic challenges need to be explored in more depth.

## **Method**

This research uses a qualitative approach that begins with choosing a topic (Cronin et al., 2008; Timmins F, 2005), namely social cohesion after the COVID-19 pandemic in Brunei Darussalam. Data were collected through the library research method, namely by examining related literature in scientific journal articles, books, documents, and works that discuss the topic. This research aims to trace the traces of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brunei Darussalam and the concept of social cohesion. The data collection technique in this research is complete sampling, which involves searching and retrieving data from national journals, international journals, reference books, and reports. The tool used is a documentation instrument, which means that this research utilizes holistically and universally primary and secondary data sources (Arikunto, 2006; Subakti et al., 2021).

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Definition and Components of Social Cohesion**

Schiefer & van der Noll, (2017) note, "Social cohesion is not a contemporary construct but is rooted in a long history of theoretical debates about the question of what constitutes social order in a society and why that social order can be maintained even in times of social change". Sociologist Emile Durkheim first used the concept of social cohesion to characterize the order in a society where everyone's well-being is guaranteed, inequality is minimal, and marginalization is far away (Jenson, 1998). In other words, social cohesion is the foundation of human existence.

Although a literature review covering research since the 1990s found a relatively large development in social cohesion (AO,

2021), there currently needs to be a widely accepted definition or conceptualization of social cohesion. He then outlined three core dimensions in the definition of social cohesion, namely: 1) the ideational dimension, emphasizing intangible aspects such as shared values, mutual trust, and acceptance of diversity, with an increasing focus on cooperation for a common goal; 2) the behavioral dimension, which highlights the translation of values into action, including political engagement and cooperation between individuals; and 3) the distributional dimension addresses allocating tangible resources, ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Together, these three dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding social cohesion, considering the intangible and tangible factors that promote unity in society.

In terms of its horizontal and vertical dimensions, social cohesion as a multidimensional concept encompasses various aspects that define the robustness of a society. Its horizontal dimension includes interactions between individuals, trust, collective identity, and integration within local communities. Vertical cohesion involves the relationship between citizens and government and the level of trust in political and social institutions. The concept also extends to economic, cultural, and security dimensions, all of which shape healthy social cohesion. The horizontal dimension refers to the relationships and interactions between individuals in society across different identities and social constructs, such as race or class. Meanwhile, vertical cohesion involves trust between government and society, encompassing trust in political, economic, or social leaders, institutions, and processes such as elections, access to justice, taxation, budgets, and the provision of public services (Andy McLean & Smith, 2020). Hence, social cohesion involves politics, economics, social affairs, and security.

There is a complex interplay between these two dimensions, where high trust in the government can affect social interactions in society. (Fonseca et al., 2019) describe the intersection of relationships and interdependencies between individuals, communities, and institutions, or the so-called

framework of social cohesion characterization, as shown in Figure 1 below:

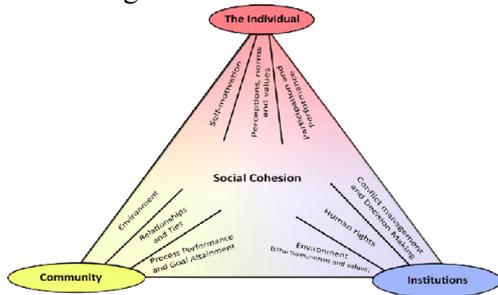


Fig. 1 Framework of social cohesion characterization

This framework illustrates how high levels of trust in government and institutions can promote a sense of solidarity and social cohesion within communities. When individuals and communities feel that their governments are reliable and fair in their policies and actions, this can form the basis for better cooperation between citizens and the development of positive social norms. Conversely, distrust of the government or feelings of unfairness in government actions can undermine social cohesion by fueling social conflict and societal instability. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions is critical in designing strategies to strengthen social cohesion amid ongoing societal changes. Figure 1 in the Framework of Social Cohesion Characterization illustrates the complexity of the factors and the importance of understanding the role of trust in government in social cohesion. In the post-pandemic context, changes in this dimension need to be identified and analyzed to plan practical recovery efforts.

### The COVID-19 pandemic in Brunei Darussalam

The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center provides real-time pandemic data and has recorded 279,661 confirmed cases and 225 deaths (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2023). Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) also noted that from January 3, 2020, to September 13, 2023, at 19:25 CEST, there were 310,522 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 163 deaths in Brunei Darussalam (World Health Organization

(WHO), 2023). There are no recorded cases specifically in Brunei Darussalam after the implementation of vaccines as a measure against the COVID-19 outbreak.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented tremendous challenges for countries around the world. This outbreak does not only affect one aspect but creeps into all sectors, including economic, social, educational, and others. Economically, approximately 1.6 billion people out of 62% of society (2 billion people) who work in the informal sector feel a significant impact due to movement restrictions and lockdowns (S. Lee et al., 2020). In this case, migrant workers, in particular, are highlighted as highly vulnerable workers in the informal economy. They are more likely to work in risky and low-paid informal jobs with little protection, making them difficult to reach with government support measures (Enfield, 2021).

From a social perspective, the United Nations states that people with low incomes, refugees, migrants, and people who are homeless are those who suffer disproportionately both from the pandemic and its aftermath (The Social Impact of COVID-19, 2020). In education, there is a change in the learning system from face-to-face to online. It is certainly not easy for students to consider that traditional face-to-face learning cannot be replaced with online learning because the process is more effective, interactive, and environmentally friendly (Belousova et al., 2022; Kalićanin et al., 2021; Kochan, 2021; J. Lee et al., 2021). Lampropoulos & Admiraal, (2023), revealed that the lack of adequate training, technical support, equipment, infrastructure, and digital competencies, increasing mental and physical demands, and technical problems are some of the most apparent challenges that education stakeholders must overcome. Increased levels of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression may result from the pandemic.

In Brunei Darussalam, through UNDRR's measurement framework, estimating the exposure, vulnerability, and resilience of the economy with variables such as gross domestic product, oil prices, international trade in goods, tourism, unemployment, consumer price index, money supply, and national balance showed that the energy and tourism sectors were vulnerable to

shocks due to COVID-19, and unemployment increased during this pandemic outbreak. However, the overall GDP growth rate, international trade in goods, and the financial sector continued to perform better amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Yaacob et al., 2020). The study provides policy implications for the economic recovery process during the pandemic. This wide-ranging impact may even hinder achieving sustainable development goals as social cohesion such as political, economic, social, and security are also affected. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach to social cohesion is needed to address horizontal and vertical challenges.

During the pandemic, various preventive measures have been taken to control the spread of the virus, including restrictions on physical activities such as learning, work, and worship from home (Ihsanuddin, 2020), which continue in the new normal era. These habits still impact people's behavior, even in education, where online learning systems are still part of the learning routine. Cahapay, (2020) emphasizes the importance of preparing insights and education systems that can adapt to these significant changes. Maintaining distance, wearing masks, and washing hands remain relevant and addressed.

### **Challenges and Impacts of the Pandemic on Social Cohesion in Brunei Darussalam**

Social cohesion is not only an important factor in building a more solidary and inclusive society but also significantly impacts a society's ability to adapt to change and overcome crises. In the post-pandemic era in Brunei Darussalam, facing significant transformations in social interaction patterns and economic dynamics, social cohesion is a decisive factor in maintaining stability and prosperity. A deeper understanding of this concept will provide a solid foundation for designing relevant strategies and policies to strengthen social bonds in the face of unprecedented challenges.

The pandemic-related changes in people's behavior, such as being more concerned about their health, have changed how people interact and communicate in society. For example, trust in the government's actions in dealing with the health crisis is one

aspect of vertical cohesion that has changed. Similarly, these behavioral changes have negative impacts on the horizontal dimension. Physical social restrictions and isolation can lead to a decline in broader social interactions, threatening the sense of community and reducing solidarity between individuals. In addition, ongoing uncertainty and anxiety can also put additional pressure on social cohesion. Therefore, it is important to understand these complex changes in people's behavior and their impact on social cohesion during this new normal. In this regard, social cohesion is often used for functional purposes, where Bolgun, (2022) identifies six leading indicators of social cohesion, namely overcoming threats arising from divisions, including countering xenophobia, preventing discrimination and social exclusion, and strengthening social relationships and social capital, including increasing social contact, reducing social distance, and increasing social capital.

In addition, these changes also create new challenges in efforts to strengthen social cohesion post-pandemic. It was discovered in 2022 through the study titled Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar that Brunei Darussalam itself has the lowest level among ASEAN countries at 57% compared to Singapore (81%), Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia (73%), and others who are above it. The overall level of social cohesion in Southeast Asia is 69% (Survey: Singapore Has Highest Level of Social Cohesion among Asean Member States, 2022). Therefore, in the face of changing behaviors and patterns of social interaction, policymakers and community leaders in Brunei Darussalam need to develop strategies that promote community reintegration, support vulnerable groups, and ensure that no one is left behind in the recovery process.

This challenge involves not only supporting the horizontal dimension of social cohesion, which is the relationship between individuals, but also its vertical dimension, which relates to the relationship between the government and society. The government must work hard to maintain its level of trust and credibility in the eyes of the public in the face of changing circumstances. It involves transparency in communication, fair policy implementation, and active participation from the public in the decision process. Thus,

understanding the impact of the pandemic on social cohesion and formulating appropriate solutions will be vital to rebuilding social balance and strengthening community bonds in the new normal.

From this description, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic is not only a test of global health but also presents significant challenges for social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam. One of the main challenges is the change in social interaction patterns. Physical and social distancing required to control the spread of the virus have limited face-to-face interactions within families, communities, and workplaces. Economic challenges have also affected horizontal cohesion, with vulnerable groups more affected by job and income losses. On the other hand, vertical cohesion is also under pressure, with the public paying close attention to how the government handles the crisis. This section will discuss how these challenges have affected the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam.

### **Emphasizing Efforts to Reinforce Social Bonds in the Evolving Post-Pandemic through Social Cohesion**

Strengthening social relationships and social capital is one of the keys to strengthening social cohesion during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic. Policymakers should review and synthesize emerging evidence and good practices to inform crisis response in communities. (Dayrit & Mendoza, 2020) mentioned that this could be useful as an effective control measure for protecting the health and lives of billions of people vulnerable to infection.

In Brunei Darussalam itself, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were similar control measures. Brunei successfully combated the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 through effective control measures, public communication strategies, and improved surveillance mechanisms. Brunei's "whole nation approach", with early and decisive intervention by authorities and public cooperation, played an essential role in dealing with this outbreak. In the same way, the COVID-19 Recovery Plan was based on the implementation of a national vaccination strategy in Brunei. This was done by ensuring

there was enough vaccine and that it was given effectively. This gave long-term protection against this infection, and a phased de-escalation plan made the transition to a new normal easier (Ang et al., 2023).

Brunei Darussalam's pandemic challenges are also being addressed in various ways. For example, to deal with the challenges facing SMEs due to the pandemic in Brunei Darussalam, the government has implemented policy incentives to facilitate education and training related to digital technology to encourage digital adoption (digital skills and infrastructure) (Anjum & Sharin, 2022). Although the implementation and recovery do not require the application of digital technology, policy incentives for digital education and training have been instrumental in building trust in the government's response as part of social cohesion. As a result, in Brunei Darussalam, the impact of COVID-19 on the digital market was positive during the pandemic, as the transition to digital media provided an intermediary for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and consumers to stay connected in challenging situations (A. A. Abdullah et al., 2021).

In the field of education, education trains people to preserve society for future generations. As education contributes to maintaining social order and influences social cohesion (Nisa Khan, 2016), education plays a vital role before, during, and after the pandemic. Although it is known that in Brunei Darussalam during the COVID-19 pandemic, many international students have borne the brunt of the changes to their academic activities, finances, and physical, emotional, and mental health (Phan et al., 2021), all stakeholders continue to strive for education as much as possible. As a result of efforts in the education sector during the pandemic, it can be seen from the complementary synergy of face-to-face and online learning where activity-based and multi-media-multi-method learning approaches are one solution (Wantini et al., 2022). Of course, the key lies in managing the system, which (Zakaria & Yusmaliana, 2023) state that in administering an institution, management is crucial. In Brunei Darussalam Polytechnic, for example, through a system called PB-Hyflex, learners have the freedom to choose whether to participate in face-to-face synchronous class sessions, face-to-face

synchronous video conferencing, or completely asynchronously through coursework (Mohiddin et al., 2022).

Furthermore, one key strategy in the effort to strengthen social cohesion post-pandemic in Brunei Darussalam is through the establishment of strong communities. A solid, supportive community can serve as a place where individuals feel welcome, receive emotional support, and have space to share their experiences. Initiatives such as small groups focusing on mental health and social support have emerged in response to changes in social interaction patterns. In addition, community empowerment programs that encourage cooperation and collaboration among residents can contribute to increased social cohesion at the local level. The willingness of university nursing students to volunteer in Brunei Darussalam, for example, has been invaluable and helpful in alleviating the shortage of nursing staff (Atiqah et al., 2021; Brajshori et al., 2023).

In addition to government efforts, various initiatives from civil society and NGOs have also played an essential role in strengthening social cohesion. These examples include volunteer programs that help vulnerable individuals, social campaigns that promote inclusion, and collaborative projects that build strong community networks. This section will explore various community and NGO initiatives that have positively impacted social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam. We will also analyze the factors that have made these initiatives successful.

The economic disparities exacerbated by the pandemic also deserve special attention in efforts to strengthen social cohesion. Efforts to restore the economy should be designed to be equitable and not leave vulnerable groups behind. Inclusive economic support programs, such as social assistance and training for skill upgrading, can help reduce inequality and support horizontal cohesion. In addition, improving people's access to quality health and education services can also play a role in strengthening social ties. This section will discuss concrete steps that have been taken towards an equitable economic recovery in Brunei Darussalam.

In a small country like Brunei Darussalam, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging due to limited

financial resources and a lack of experience in crisis management. However, Woong et al. (2020) highlighted that Brunei could do so and can serve as a lesson for other countries. In this regard, Brunei's ad hoc multi-agency arrangements utilize informal networks and establish clear lines of accountability to improve response mechanisms and implement testing strategies and specific budget allocations for outbreaks and public health emergencies. Next, an important aspect of understanding how to strengthen social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam is directly observing successful government programs. Several government initiatives have been widely recognized for their positive impact on improving social cohesion. For example, programs that support job skill development and entrepreneurial training have helped vulnerable groups cope with post-pandemic economic challenges. Brunei Darussalam, through its government, channeled and centralized a special budget allocation of BND15 million (US\$10.5 million) for outbreaks and public health emergencies, where the National Disaster Council in Brunei, with the support of a multi-agency group, is responsible for COVID-19 response and monitoring (Wong et al., 2020).

In the health sector, services, when new normal conditions have been implemented, are still provided even more intently under the national management protocol in Brunei Darussalam. M. S. Abdullah et al., (2023) conveyed that the average health service visit a year after recovery from COVID-19 was much higher than a year earlier, where the increase was scheduled post-COVID-19 to eliminate the sustainability of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the Brunei Darussalam government has a central role in strengthening social cohesion post-pandemic. Policies and programs that support social inclusion, fair economic distribution, and equitable delivery of public services are some examples of actions that the government can take. Transparency in communication and policies responsive to community needs is essential to maintaining public trust

## **Conclusion**

Through this study, the changes in the horizontal and vertical dimensions during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified to derive strategies and initiatives to strengthen social cohesion post-pandemic. Strengthening post-pandemic social cohesion in Brunei Darussalam involves various factors, including social relations, education, community, civil society initiatives, addressing economic disparities, and the role of government. In the new normal, a combination of learning can continue in terms of education. Community involvement in supporting and responding to changes in social interaction patterns, such as volunteer programs and ongoing social campaigns, can also be carried out. Regarding government and various efforts to maintain social trust, Brunei successfully overcame the pandemic by allocating good funds in the economic field, effective control, and a "whole nation" approach by providing equitable public services.

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