Nigeria:
The State of Social Cohesion.
Implications for Policy

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Abstract: The development of socially diverse societies depends on social cohesiveness. Yet the subject has remained mainly understudied. This article discusses the level of social cohesion in Nigeria and its consequences for policy. Using primary and secondary data from the African Polling Institute's annual Nigeria Social Cohesion Project, as well as interview-based primary and secondary data collection methods, the paper illustrates the poor state of social cohesion in Nigeria. People are less willing to work together and have less faith in government officials and institutions. The study participants, except for the North, criticized social cohesion issues of lack of inclusive and participatory political and policy processes and equity in recent appointments to important federal government agencies. Strangely, most participants take pride in being Nigerians and would refuse to move elsewhere permanently in the globe if given the chance. In the meantime, there are no social cohesion policy frameworks other than those that are diagonally pushed, including an unworkable Federal Character Principle. The article makes several recommendations, including the creation of a social cohesion research unit at each of Nigeria's three levels of government – federal, state, and local – whose main responsibility would be to ensure that each government policy was examined from the standpoint of social cohesion theory. Nigeria's social cohesion can be increased by offering social services, selecting public officials who reflect the diversity and needs of society, and defining governance more broadly through the prism of social cohesion. This means that, in a deeply divided society like Nigeria, social cohesion can be adopted as a means of preventing destructive conflict.

Keywords: Nigeria, social cohesion, policy, government, social services, conflict.

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Introduction

For society to flourish and thrive, strong social cohesion is a prerequisite (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Carron *et al.*, 2016; Chuang *et al.*, 2013; Friggeri *et al.*, 2011; Murphy, 2012; Tuckman, 1965; Yang & Tang, 2004). Scholars have identified several indicators that can be used to define social cohesion, including willingness, capacity, mutual trust, national identity, and a strong sense of belonging on the side of the populace. These indices are crucial for policy development and execution by the executive, judicial, and legislative institutions. They collectively reflect societal growth. For the well-being of individuals and society, social cohesion is crucial.

For the third time in three years, the Africa Polling Institute (API) has conducted a national survey on Nigeria's social cohesiveness. Focusing on equity, trust, identity, social justice, patriotism, self-worth, and expectations for the future, it has measured social cohesion. The socioeconomic and political elements, as well as the indicators of tolerance, culture, and security, were clearly excluded from the survey (API, 2019). This article contributes to the body of knowledge on nation-building, national integration, and national identity in Nigeria by using an enlarged set of indicators to represent the difficulties that frequently cause citizens and the nation to become divided. Introduction, background, literature review, the status of social cohesiveness, implications, and con-clusion are the five sections that make up the article.

Background to the emergent threats to social cohesion in Nigeria

Scholars concur that the post-colonial state of Nigeria has seen serious dangers to each citizen's sense of identity and readiness to work with people from various ethnic and religious groups for the benefit of the larger community (Easterly *et al.*, 2006; Friedkin, 2004; Moody & White, 2003; Portes & Vickstrom, 2011; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017; Stansfeld, 2009; Van Der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Poor management of Nigeria's ethnic diversity is one of the country's major problems. The declaration of the State of Biafra by Col. Odumegu Ojukwu, leader of the Eastern Regional Government, in 1967 was a violent rejection of the existing structure and ethnic relations in the country. It also be-came apparent as a danger to social harmony. The secessionists and federal forces would engage in a three-year civil war as a result of this declaration. Nearly four decades after the end of the war, the suspicion of ethnoreligious groups seems to have endured amidst various government policies for nation-building and national integration. Sentiments against oneness or a united Nigeria have been expressed and continue to manifest among citizens and groups in parts of the country, with some even querying the logic of the nation-state of Nigeria and the notion that it is working in the interest of all.

These are possible indicators of a nation with poor social cohesiveness that requires more thorough research to assist analysis and add to the body of knowledge for the purpose of influencing policy. Every public policy or piece of legislation should take

social cohesiveness into account, according to advocates. Important lessons can be learned from the examples of Canada and the European Union, where multiculturalism and the integration of immigrant groups are critical challenges that every policy must consider. Nigeria deals with multi-ethnic and multi-religious variations of these issues, and it must be taken care of that they never overrun the nation. In addition, as with other studies on social cohesion, the policy implications are an important aspect that Nigeria under-analyses.

In the case of Nigeria, social cohesion has not been sufficiently investigated. According to scholars, social cohesion is the willingness of people to work together for collective progress and prosperity, equity, social justice, inclusion, identity, shared values, mutual trust, national identity, and a sense of oneness. Yet this is a key element that needs to be considered in the development and implementation of public policies in Nigeria and the development of the country. Scholars have attempted to comprehend and explain the situation by focusing on the associated nation- and state-building challenges without sufficiently considering the potential policy ramifications. The body of literature also demonstrates a dearth of thorough conceptualizations of social cohesion that take into account regional variations. There are unresolved threats to ethnoreligious and political relations that have had implications for social cohesion. Several years after the war, there still are sentiments and signs of lack of sufficient patriotism, equity, and willingness of citizens from the different ethnic and religious groups (in the southwest, southeast, south-south, middle-belt, and northern region) to cooperate toward securing the sanctity of the geographical map of the country. These are values and behaviours necessary not only for securing a corporate Nigeria but also for making social cohesion stronger in the interest of the development of the country.

The study uses information from the African Polling Institute (2019), previously published works, and one-on-one interviews to answer the following three questions: What is the Nigerian society's level of social cohesion? What effects will this have on how policies are created and carried out? What are some ways to improve social cohesion?

In light of this, the study's objective was to develop a set of policy recommendations to strengthen social cohesion in Nigeria by examining the current situation in the nation and using a broader range of indicators to reflect the problems that have a tendency to divide citizens and the nation, as seen in the literature on nation-building, national integration, national identity, and political processes in the post-colonial era of the country.

Literature Review

There is no universally accepted definition of social cohesion as a concept. Researchers may have an issue with this. Nevertheless, a lot of them have exercised their freedom to define the concept in order to meet their own research goals, creating what one author has called "a concept of convenience" (Chan *et al.*, 2006). Despite the lack of a precise

and widely accepted definition, the idea has gained popularity among researchers and decision-makers. Due to the concept's adaptability, they have been able to use case-specific indicators to analyze social cohesiveness problems. Some academics, for instance, define social cohesion as the degree of inclusion, socioeconomic security, and social empowerment (Spiker, 2014).

The Canadian government is credited with popularizing social cohesiveness, starting in 1996 when it established a Social Cohesion Network as a crucial component of its approach to formulating policies in a country marked by social variety. Likewise, the European Union has done so, using it as a compass for all its member states' policies (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Boucher, 2013; Farole *et al.*, 2011; Hervieu-Léger, 2003; The European Trade Union Institute, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose & Fratesi, 2004).

The study of social cohesion has been characterized by two approaches: sociological and psychological (Berry, 2013; Helly, 2003; Holtug, 2016; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007; Reitz *et al.*, 2009; Taylor & Foster, 2015; Uslaner, 2010; Wilkinson, 2007). The European Union's request for social cohesion-sensitive policies and the Canadian government's establishment of a cohesion network in 1996 have brought the argument over the potential contribution of social cohesion to national prosperity to the fore. However, because of the non-African context of these studies, generalization has proven to be challenging, particularly when it comes to the impact of social cohesion and the policy implications based on indices that are culturally, socially, economically, and politically different from those of African societies like Nigeria (Meagher, 2009; Nolte, 2004; Cox & Sisk, 2017; Shittu *et al.*, 2013; Ukiwo, 2005). Notions of social cohesion are embedded in the analyses of nation-building, state-building, security, and national integration challenges, which the country has continued to face, without a clear positioning of the key defining concepts (Ajaebili, 2015; Akpome, 2015; Bamidele, 2015; Bello-Imam, 1987; Lenshie, 2014; Maiangwa, 2016).

The cohesion of Nigerian society is impacted by two contrasting theoretical policy languages. Scholars have examined the issue of social cohesiveness in relation to their pursuit of "genuine federalism" which they define as a rejection of marginalization, flawed federalism, and ethnic dominance. The persistent struggles for secession by groups in some parts of the country are also part of the evidence of a social cohesion crisis in the country. The Nigerian civil war is still a significant historical event and a topic of discussion over why some sections of Nigerian society desire to split apart. Perhaps the closest definition to the ideal that guided data collection for this study is Dick Stanley's (2003) definition of social cohesion: "the willingness of members of society to cooperate with one another in order to survive and prosper" (p. 6) The most obvious issues with social cohesiveness in Nigeria are its unclear definition, its complexity, and the lack of innovation and imagination in the selection and use of the indicators. It is also the biggest measurement problem that hinders the development

and application of policy. With nearly 200 million people of various social, racial, and religious backgrounds, there is still much to learn about Nigeria.

Methodology

The study consisted of two parts: fieldwork and a thorough desk analysis of secondary sources of data. Due to the nature of the problems it aimed to address, it utilized a mix of qualitative and quantitative designs. To embody a nationally representative sample of all significant ethnoreligious groups, the study relied on three sets of data: the African Polling Institute's Social Cohesion project database, which was funded by the Ford Foundation, a thorough literature review, and interviews with participants from across the six informal geographical maps of the nation. The snowball method was used to proportionally choose the participants.

To ensure complementarity and examine the prevalence of erroneous responses, the data collecting, and analysis procedures were triangulated. A proportionate number of people of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, Ibo, Ijaw, Efik, and Urhobo ancestry underwent interviews. Others included atheists, Christians, Muslims, and African traditionalists. The reason is that in Nigeria, residents' perceptions are closely tied to sub-national identities, and as a result, these factors may have an impact on how they interpret social cohesion. Tables, graphs, and interpretive qualitative content analysis approaches were used to analyse the data obtained from the three sources.

The State of Social Cohesion in Nigeria

No matter their ethnicity, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, or religion, most Nigerians believe that their nation is not as unified as it could be. Many people would prefer to live in a united Nigeria, but they tend to agree that the circumstances aren't right and might even be growing worse. To give one recent example, Amaka Anku (2022) wrote in Foreign Affairs that "Nigeria's leaders must restore trust in the country's institutions". She expressed the annoyance of the majority of research participants who complained about how these leaders in crucial institutions like the legislative and executive branches of government had abused public confidence. The country's lack of social cohesiveness is seen in the frequent calls by groups and people from various regions for either a reorganization of the federal system or its total dissolution into separate sovereign entities. There are signs of a waning interest, and people's readiness to coexist and work together for the common good is eroding over time, particularly in the southeast of the country. We observed a growing feeling of injustice rooted in exclusion from mainstream governance on the federal front.

Using an API database and information gathered through interviews and desk reviews, we evaluated people's notions of identity, trust, impunity, social justice and equity, self-worth, future expectations, patriotism, and involvement. The social cohesion index of

Nigeria for the year 2021 was 44.2 percent (API, 2021). As was the case in 2019, this average is less than 50%. If the backdrop of rising insecurity and complaints throughout the nation is properly taken into account, this conclusion is not difficult to explain. The newfound solidarity of State Governors in the southwest, south-south, and southeast, who rapidly gathered to begin planning for alternative security institutions outside of the present formal security, reflects the growing hostility in the nation caused by the problem of insecurity. They were also noted for being frank about the necessity for state police to deal with the threats.

Since 2015, there has been a deepening of the power disparity between those in authority and those outside who fear being assaulted by bandits. With more prominent political and ethnic leaders calling for the federal system to be restructured, mistrust of organizations like the Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) in the southeast and separatist movements in the southwest and south-south has risen. They have continued to complain about exclusion from mainstream political positions in the country and the centralisation of power and control in Abuja, and the concentration of political opportunities in northern Nigeria under the present APC-led federal government with Muhammad Buhari as president.

The belief that the current administration can handle the nation's problems has continued to drop as more people live with a sense of irritation over the problem of insecurity, which they see as a major duty incumbent upon every government to address. The majority of survey participants and API statistics believe that residents have not yet been entirely persuaded that the current administration can end the problem of insecurity.

As Figure 1 shows, the study adopted API's ten key indicators of social cohesion and utilized data from questions pertaining to them, namely, impunity, self-worth, trust, and social justice, showing the percentages for each of the variables and the indicators of social cohesion, such as impunity, identity, corruption, gender resource governance, gender equity, future expectation, and participation and patriotism.

Social justice and unequal natural resource administration, according to a sizeable part of Nigerians, especially those from the south-south and southeast, are crucial defining concerns when it comes to the desire of citizens to collaborate for the common good of the country. Even the question of participation and patriotism, which form an important element of any discussion of social cohesion, is on the high side at 79.9%. Why do you think so many people think this way? Their sense of belonging and confidence that justice and fairness can be assured in a country with a vast diversity of individuals from diverse ethnic and religious groups have a lot to do with winning the cooperation of citizens from every ethnopolitical and religious group.

ID	Quotation Name	Document
2:5	The stress of everyday living.	*South-South 3 Edo State Traditional Rulers*
2:6	Not enough effort	*South-South 3 Edo State Traditional Rulers*
2:11	I'm not sure	*South-South 3 Edo State Traditional Rulers*
3:6	they are trying	*South-West*
3:9	I think they are trying.	*South-West*
4:8	Quite low and unimpressive	*NORTH 1*
4:15	avoid all sorts of ethnicity	*NORTH 1*
5:3	You have to accommodate,	*NORTH-MIDDLE BELT BENUE*
5:5	If we make amends, Nigeria will be a better place	*NORTH-MIDDLE BELT BENUE*
5:7	remove that barrier called tribalism	*NORTH-MIDDLE BELT BENUE*
5:8	yet inactive,	*NORTH-MIDDLE BELT BENUE*
9:4	Obviously no	*SOUTH-SOUTH IJAW 2*
9:8	Well, there is a 100% possibility	*SOUTH-SOUTH IJAW 2*
9:9	The govt is not making any concerted effort	*SOUTH-SOUTH IJAW 2*

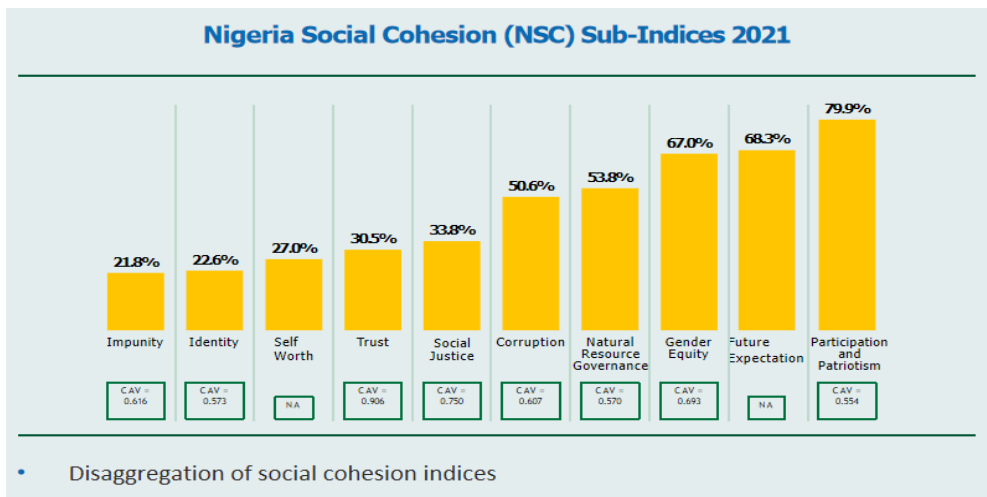**Figure 1:** Sample comments by some interviewees

Figure 2: The state of social cohesion in Nigeria
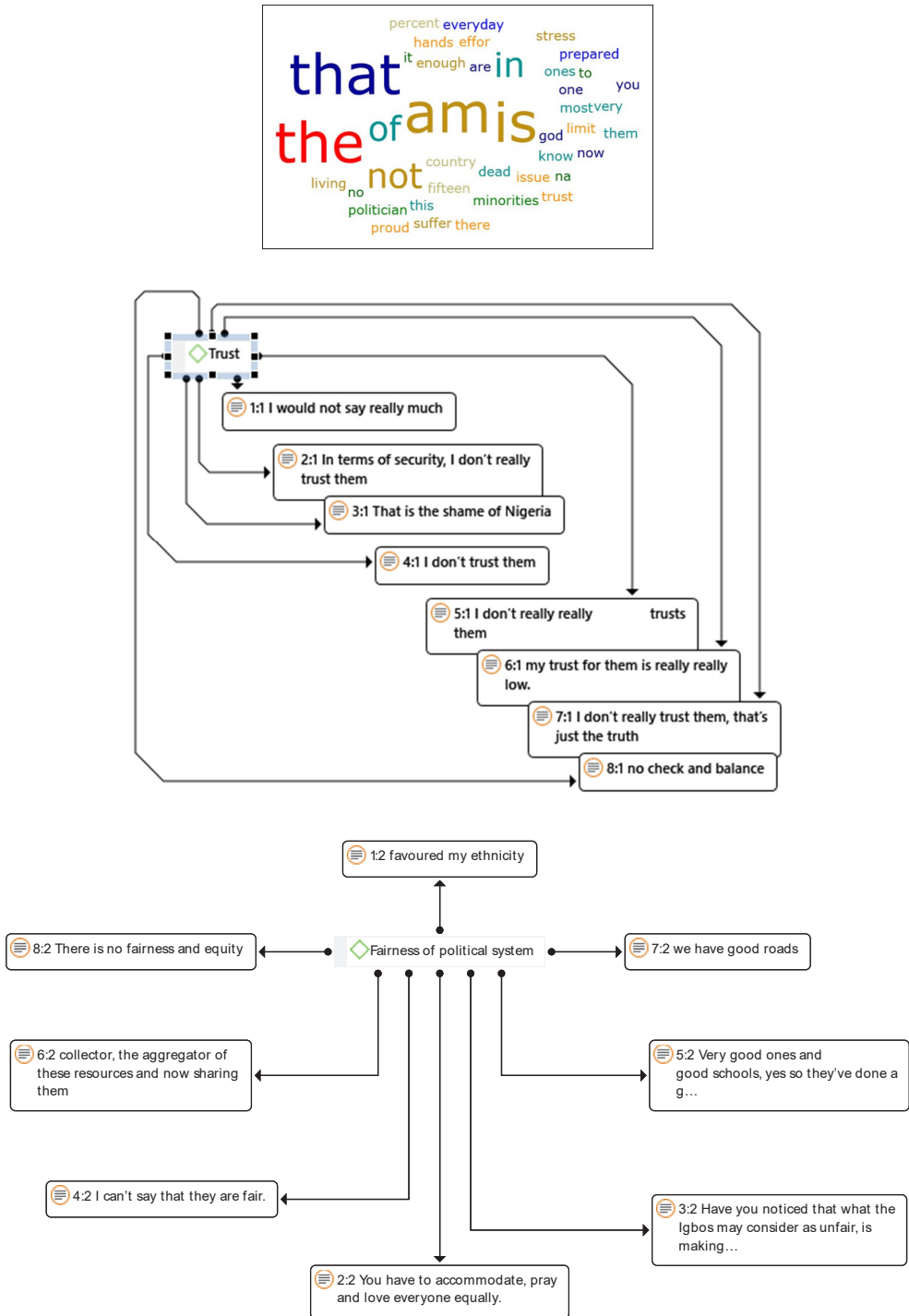**Source:** African Polling Institute 2021.

Figure 3: Atlas.ti key words of views on the state of social cohesion in Nigeria.

**Impact of the State of Social Cohesion
on National Integration and Development**

Nigeria's current lack of social cohesion has adverse social, economic, and political effects on the country's integration and progress. In general, it has a negative impact on both society-society and state-society interactions. Both have influenced national integration and development. Starting with the nature of state-society relations and its implications, the growing lack of trust by citizens in their leaders and state institutions has undermined the evolution and development of a strong state capable of providing national security in Nigeria. Although there is disagreement over what constitutes a strong state, some standards have been established to gauge state power. These include "the depth of penetration of society by the state, breadth of penetration, and state autonomy" (Davidheiser, 1992, p. 464). The depth of penetration, for instance, refers to "the magnitude of transformation at the state's behest" (Davidheiser, 1992, p. 464). Evaluation of state strength is mostly based on the state's capacity to adopt policies that change society and the populace. Nigeria is an exception to this. Instead, citizens and ethnic groups in Nigeria are contesting the state more and more. This is because they feel perpetually excluded from the sociopolitical power structure and tend to want constant political autonomy. Conflicts over divergent views of citizenship and the legitimacy of the sources of political authority are therefore common in the nation. As a result, a clear trajectory of the development of ethnically motivated separatist agitations as a distinguishing characteristic of the Nigerian state from the colonial era can be seen. For example, in the 1990s, the Ogoni people of the Southeastern Niger Delta spared headed a non-violent movement for political autonomy, citing cases of ethnic domination by the majority ethnic groups, which they argued manifested in the structural deprivation of their indigenous rights to own and control oil resources in their land. Indeed, the structural marginalization of the Ogoni has been compounded by the political economy of oil extraction by the Nigerian state and the Oil giant, Shell, which had devastated the Ogoni environment with the corresponding loss of traditional sources of livelihoods, dearth of social infrastructure, rising poverty and violent social conflicts. The Ogoni people's wrath and animosity toward the Nigerian state have grown because of these societal circumstances. Animosity by individuals and organizations toward the state takes on various shapes and manifestations in various parts of the nation. For instance, civilian outrage over police brutality and human rights violations in Nigeria was evident during the EndSARS protests by young people in October 2020. Young people came together in protest for the first time in Nigerian history, defying ethnic manipulation, religious differences, and elites' political mobilization to fight against poor governance and defend their freedoms. After the Presidential Elections on February 25, 2023, that rage once more erupted in the nation. Youth protested in Abuja and other cities, claiming that the Independent National Electoral Commission had broken its own rules of engagement by conducting the polls, which rendered their ballots invalid.

In regard to society-society relations, Nigeria's escalating citizenship crisis is permanently destabilizing the country. The dichotomization of citizenship into indigene/settler has compounded society-society relations in such a way that ethnic hatred appears to have been institutionalized horizontally. A case in point is the Yoruba people's recent attacks on the Igbos in Lagos following the February 25, 2023, presidential elections. The attacks manifested in mob actions and killings of the Igbos and targeted locking and burning of Igbo-owned shops in Lagos. While the recent altercations between the Igbo and Yoruba have deep roots in the indigene-settler question and provocative statements over the ownership of Lagos, the proximate cause was that the Labour Party, whose presidential candidate, Peter Obi, an Igbo man popularly won the Presidential Election in Lagos, thereby defeating Ahmed Bola Tinubu, the acclaimed strong man and father of Lagos politics. The defeat of Bola Tinubu, the All-Progressive Party Congress' presidential candidate, was seen by the Yoruba as a sign that the Igbo population was beginning to dominate Lagos state and needed to be restrained. The Yoruba fears were further complicated by the electoral projections that the Labour Governorship Candidate, Mr. Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour whose wife is Igbo was most likely to win the gubernatorial election of Lagos state. As in the 2015 election, the Igbo was threatened with genocidal attacks or being frustrated out of Lagos. Historically, and as in other cases of ethnic violence, what the Igbo-Yoruba ethnic and political confrontations reinforce is that rather than Nigerian citizens conceive and define themselves as one indivisible people who owe and demonstrate allegiance to the Nigerian state, they privilege ethnic loyalties based on a problematic interpretation of primordialism. In other words, the unresolved nationality question merely played out once again and again in Lagos between the Igbo and Yoruba people. Indeed, the dialectical contradictions of strong attachments to primordial sentiments lead to the saliency of ethnicity in the distribution of social opportunities like employment and promotion in workplaces instead of merit and competence. All these constitute other forms of structural violence in Johan Galtung's terminology that threaten people's sense of security, safety, and belonging. Consequently, the socio-economic and political development of the country has been sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity and defective society-society relations.

Implications for Peacebuilding and Prevention of Destructive Conflict

The present decline in social cohesiveness in Nigeria suggests that regions are very susceptible to destabilizing conflict. There are several examples of societies where social cohesiveness has been advocated as a means of averting such violence. It is offered as a strategy for promoting peace in places like Côte d'Ivoire, where that process has proven to be rather fragile (Cox & Sisk, 2017; Fokou and N'Da, 2018). The country needs to strengthen its social cohesion approach to peacebuilding, as evidenced by the persistent post-conflict agitations for a separate state of Biafra in southeast Nigeria by members of the Indigenous People of Biafra, or IPOB, and similar agitations in south-south by

oil-producing communities as well as those in the southwest for a state of Oduduwa (Amadi *et al.*, 2023).

Policy Options for Strengthening Social Cohesion: The Reinvention of the Social Contract

Reinventing the social contract between citizens and the state is a crucial policy recommendation for addressing Nigeria's diminishing social cohesiveness and its ramifications for growth. A "dynamic agreement between state and society on their mutual duties and responsibilities" is what social contracts are (Cloutier *et al.*, 2021, p. 8). As a result of such an agreement, state institutions are established, leadership acts are taken, and national policies are developed and put into effect that is in line with public expectations, resulting in social harmony and the advancement of the country as a whole. As it is in Nigeria today, the social contract appears to have broken down both within the context of state-society relations and society-society relations as noted earlier. Our main proposition is that "... a healthy social contract, in which state policies reflect the demands and expectations of society, leads to more stable, equitable, and prosperous outcomes relative to those that do not." (Cloutier *et al.*, 2021, p. 8; see also Sulkunen, 2007). This paper, therefore, focuses on three key specific policies to forge a healthy social contract in Nigeria to promote inclusive development and a cohesive society.

The regional dynamics of historical grievances, which are the root of separatist aspirations, must first be addressed. For instance, in the Southeast, the IPOB agitation and demand for a separate homeland for the Igbo is driven by resentment over exclusions that date back to the Nigerian civil war. The expectations of the Igbo people in Southeast Nigeria thus border on inclusionary politics. More specifically, there is a widespread view amongst the Igbo that they have been denied access to the Presidency since Nigeria became independent. Accordingly, a deliberate zoning of the presidency by the major political parties to the Southeast that speaks to some form and expression of consociationalism democracy will assuage feelings of political marginalization in mainstream national politics and reduce tensions in Igboland. Similarly, in the South-South, dating back to the colonial time and post-independence, particularly from the 1970s when there was the oil boom, there has been a gradual evolution of a centralized federal system in Nigeria that deprive the oil minorities of their rights of ownership and equitable distribution of the benefits of the oil. To put it differently, "since the oil boom in the 1970s, oil revenues reoriented an already-fractious social contract around rent distribution via a multi-ethnic provisioning pact" (Cloutier *et al.*, 2021, p. 51).

Therefore, rather than adopt violent state repression of ethnic-based demands, a policy must respond to the diverse regional grievances through negotiated political settlements in order to close the gap between state-building and nation-building, which often thus throws up challenges of socio-political cohesion and state legitimacy crisis (Nyiayaana,

2021). The implementation of the 10 years of residency in any part of the country for a Nigerian to claim full citizenship rights will address the dialectic of the indigene/settler discriminations and contestations that reflect a broader crisis of citizenship and ethnicity. By itself, ethnicity weakens government institutions and encourages corruption.

Second, a policy must seek to regain citizens' trust in the governments and state institutions at all levels. Here good governance and putting in place accountability mechanisms aimed at checking systemic corruption in all areas of our national life is the answer. This will include strengthening the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission. Good governance will, for example, foster economic prosperity, social inclusion, and social justice in the distribution of opportunities, thereby making every citizen have a sense of belonging and patriotism. In a way, ensuring a mutual constitution of state obligations, and citizenship entitlements and duties, will promote the interactions of social cohesion, cooperation, integration, and national development. One concrete way of doing this is the initiation of the social cohesion research unit at the three levels of government in Nigeria – federal, state, and local – whose primary duty should be to ensure analysis of every government policy from the perspectives of social cohesion theory. Overall, providing social services, making appointments in government positions to reflect the diversity and needs of society, and framing governance generally from the lenses of social cohesion can help improve Nigeria's social cohesiveness.

Third, continuous reorientation of citizens and inculcating in them values of hard work, accountability, patriotism, nationalism, and unity will contribute to the process of producing active citizens who are able to resist ethnic hatred, corruption, and the instrumental mobilization by political elites for narrow personal gains. It is argued that active citizens build strong and effective states. The National Orientation Agency should be strengthened to work harder in this direction.

Conclusion

Nigeria's existing level of social cohesion foretells a serious threat to the country's sustainability and ongoing survival. There is increasing distrust in government and national institutions by Nigerian citizens. Yet, the level of ethnic distrust amongst the different ethnic groups is also deepening, and while this trend is historical, it has been particularly pervasive since 2015 due to the ethnic approach to governance by the Muhammadu Buhari regime. Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. Cooperation and integration that hinge on the policy of reinventing the social contract in relation to addressing specific regional grievances of marginalization such as the structural crisis of fiscal federalism and regaining citizenship trust in government will be helpful. Second, policy frameworks that promote national citizenship rather than ethnic and state-based citizenship expressed in the form of native/stranger distinction of 'we versus them' is

desirable. The implementation of the 10 years residency policy for Nigerians to qualify as a member of a community or village where he/she resides will ensure the realization of full citizenship and citizenship rights to all Nigerians. This policy will help to reduce the centrifugal tendencies associated with the communitarian nature of the African conceptions of citizenship that characterize social life in Nigeria. It is imperative to establish social cohesion research unit in all agencies of government whose primary function will be to analyse all government policies and decisions to ensure that they are sensitive to and consistent with social cohesion requirements. Finally, the decline in social cohesion in Nigeria makes sections of the country vulnerable to destructive conflict. The post-civil war environment in all regions of the country, especially in the southeast, requires careful application of a social cohesion approach to governance. This recommendation is supported by the existing literature.

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