BOOK REVIEW

Promoting Social Cohesion: Implications for policy and evaluation

Rose Ardron*
Independent Community Facilitator

Cohesion is very much a live issue in Britain today, as people react and struggle to respond to recent events in Woolwich and the Home Office 'Go Home' vans re-ignite the debate of migration and immigration. The underpinning rationale of cohesion policy is to create a positive vision of a diverse society that is based on understanding, respect, trust and shared values. It is a response to the increasing pace of change in a complex world of globalisation and diversity and the strains that this places on social stability.

Community cohesion emerged as a driver of government policy following the disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford in 2001. Subsequent research and enquiry identified a number of causes for the unrest, not least social and economic deprivation. However, policy makers chose to focus on the need for integration, with communities being seen to be living parallel but separate lives. Attention turned to the realms of ethnicity and faith as the faultlines between communities and a return to integration as the overall goal. Following the London bombings in 2005, the agenda has become increasingly entangled with issues of national security and tackling the small number of extremists emerging from the Muslim community.

This interesting collection makes the argument that community cohesion policy should be replaced by a policy programme aimed at *social* cohesion. It makes the link between the challenges posed by such a complex and multi-stranded policy agenda and the development of 'theory based' in place of 'methods led' approaches to evaluation, particularly Theories of Change.

Social cohesion is a more fundamental concept than **community** cohesion. It effectively acknowledges the presence of intra- as well as inter-'community' divisions. Social cohesion refers to a situation where these internal divisions (based, for example on age/generation, gender and socioeconomic background) have also been addressed successfully. Here, 'success' is judged by sustainable, lasting stability based on the firm foundation of **achieved** equality targets. (p.41: emphasis in original text).

The opening chapter traces the backdrop to the emergence of cohesion policies and makes the argument for an extensive policy agenda around social cohesion. Community cohesion is characterized as culturally based, with policies promoting integration criticized as a one way process that places the onus on the excluded to join in. The wider policy approach of social cohesion takes into account diversity within communities, encompasses relations between all segments of the population and makes firm links with achieved equality targets. This broadens the territory of cohesion from an exclusive emphasis on ethnicity and faith with a back story of internal security and places material inequalities firmly centre stage.

This then opens the door to the consideration of poverty and deprivation and a more open and honest conversation about tackling racism and discrimination. It involves a shift from a culture of blame and 'responsibilisation', where individuals are held to be ultimately responsible for their own life chances, to a power analysis that takes factors such as age, gender and class into account. The social cohesion agenda thus becomes inextricably linked to equalities and human rights, moving away from a vague aspiration for people to get along together.

Chapter two develops the argument for an evaluation strategy that can engage with policies designed to bring about change in multiple ways in a world that does not stand still. Theory of Change has much to offer in response to the challenges posed by the complex and multi-stranded policy area of cohesion by delineating outcomes, attributing causality, specifying data and engaging with a diverse and unequal set of stakeholders. Theory of Change evaluation is formative and deliberative. It offers a more rounded approach in contrast to the traditional evaluation approach of hard evidence based on quantifiable data. It is a democratic approach, involving multiple stakeholders and seeking to build consensus and as such re-surfaces issues of power, class and inequality in British society.

Having set out the broad arguments, subsequent chapters explore both methodological issues and key policy areas in depth. Cohesion policy and practice have been hampered by a lack of conceptual clarity and subsequent implementation detail. The role of evaluation is promoted as a key tool to achieving clarity of purpose and ensuring that policy is informed by and emerges from practice. This is of particular relevance in the design and delivery of local services at a time of diminishing resources. The emphasis on social cohesion opens up analysis around population change and housing policies, offering a challenge to the presumption of deliberate segregation between communities on the basis of ethnicity.

Education, the labour market and housing are selected as the core policy areas for further examination in the remainder of the book. The argument is made for outcomes to be linked to broader issues of deprivation and to become sensitive to a more nuanced analysis of community and identity. It is notable that crime and policing are not included in the discussion. This leaves a significant gap given the key role of the Home Office nationally and of local community safety initiatives.

The book looks back over the policy landscape created under New Labour, and looks forward to the implications of the then newly elected coalition government. It envisages political changes that will have further impact on social cohesion policy and evaluation – the rolling back of the state, reliance on the market to drive change and the continuation of the 'responsibilisation' agenda. There is now further territory to explore as the impact of austerity and cuts to public services are hitting hardest those who have the least. Ongoing migration and change in the face of diminishing resources have also had major adverse effects on deprived areas. The contribution of the Theory of Change evaluation co-production methodology is that it offers disadvantaged groups

an opportunity to shape policy and interventions. In the face of increasing inequality this becomes a tool for challenging injustice.

However, the reliance on equalities legislation to underpin social cohesion that the contributors advocate has become more problematic. The introduction of the Single Equality Act has been undermined by weakening of specific duties (monitoring, training, equality schemes, impact assessment, etc.), the rollback of national equality standards and cuts to equalities staff and resources. One year after coming into force the Public Sector Equality Duty is under review and there are fears that it could be revoked.

The authors are open about the challenges facing the approach that they are advocating and question whether it may be utopian and unrealistic. However, they conclude that it is important for those committed to social cohesion to pursue this approach as a challenge to injustice at a time of rising inequalities. If social harmony and stability is our goal the central argument of this book is a timely reminder that we must look beyond community relations to the deeper social and economic roots of inequality. This book is a thought-provoking read at a time when public debate on migration and immigration is being provoked in adversarial ways in the run up to the European, local and general elections. For those of us who are concerned by the rise and legitimisation of racism and xenophobia, it is pertinent to be reminded of the premise that cohesion is threatened by deprivation, not by diversity.

* Rose Ardron is an independent community facilitator. She supports the Sheffield Cohesion Advisory Group, a voluntary body drawn from BME and faith communities that provides a channel for communication between grassroots communities and statutory agencies. Email: roseardron@btinternet.com