

SOUTHEAST ASIAN SOCIAL COHESION RADAR 2025

Executive Summary

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SCHOOL OF
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Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Executive Summary

As global conflicts, ethnic nationalism, and geopolitical rivalries rise, fostering a strong and resilient social fabric is all the more vital for multicultural societies. Southeast Asia (SEA), with its rich diversity of 700 million people from major religions, and extensive linguistic and ethnic plurality, is highly susceptible to sectarian tensions, fuelled by the external instability and identity politics.

The rise of far-right extremism, trade protectionism, and the ideological polarisation in Europe and Americas affect the stability of this region, pulling sectarian communities apart by reinforcing ethno-religious stereotypes and discrimination, exacerbating social fragmentation.

Apart from the global ethnocultural dynamics, structural and systemic biases remain deeply entrenched in the domestic policies of some SEA countries, alienating certain minorities and raising communal hostilities. Notwithstanding the robust regional economic growth in recent years, some segments such as the youth, rural population, and low-income households remain highly vulnerable due to the lack of economic mobility.

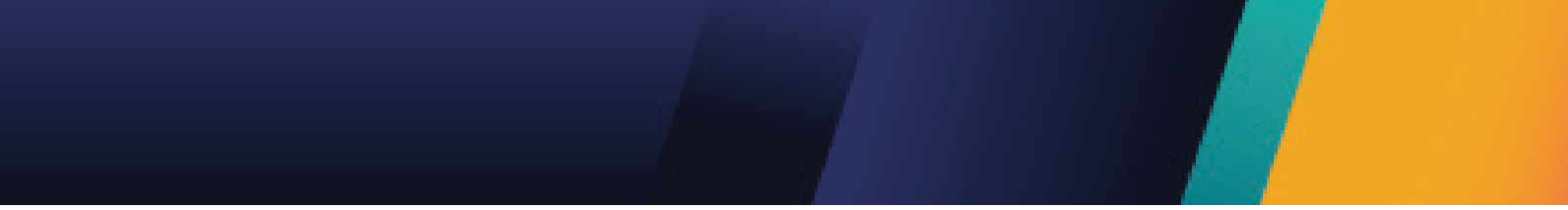
Social cohesion is therefore a strategic imperative of, and foundational pillar for, the continued prosperity, stability, and well-being of societies in Southeast Asia. Broadly defined, social cohesion refers to the quality and strength of a society's social fabric. It is a multilevel and multidimensional concept, widely recognised for its role in promoting economic resilience, political stability, and societal harmony.

Conceptual Research Framework

The Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation defines social cohesion through three key domains that are crucial for resilient societies: Social Relations (i.e., the horizontal ties between people from diverse backgrounds), Connectedness (i.e., the vertical ties between the individuals and the state or institutions), and Focus on Common Good (i.e., participation and contribution to the wider community). Each domain consists of three other sub-dimensions, namely: quality of social networks, social trust, and acceptance of diversity for the Social Relations domain; identification, trust in institutions, and perception of fairness for the Connectedness domain; and solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation for the Focus on the Common Good domain.

While the Bertelsmann Stiftung framework has demonstrated strong validity in European and American contexts, questions have been raised about whether it adequately reflects the cultural complexities in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it does not sufficiently account for the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversities that shape both cohesion and conflict in the region. Scholars have noted that these factors are persistent drivers of sectarian tensions in Southeast Asia, highlighting the need for more context-specific measures and analytical approaches.

In 2022, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) piloted a measure of social cohesion tailored for Southeast Asia that drew on insights from 1,000 regional thought leaders (100 from each



ASEAN state) with deep understanding of their societies. To build and enhance the work done in 2022, the Social Cohesion Research Programme at RSIS has conducted a large-scale survey of 1,000 respondents in each ASEAN state in 2025 using the instrument developed in 2022.

Findings from Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar 2025

The quality of social relations between diverse communities, also known as horizontal ties, is generally robust and resilient across all ASEAN states. The empirical evidence points to a shared appreciation for diversity among religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups. This finding mirrors the conclusion of the 2022 pilot study, and reflects the region's demographic and historical realities, as well as an enduring social compact for harmonious coexistence in Southeast Asia. Across countries, most respondents identify strongly with cultural and national markers—such as ethnicity, religion, and language—indicating a growing sense of confidence and security in their sectarian identities. However, differences were found between developed and emerging economies which suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to assessing social cohesion and its underlying drivers may be inadequate and warrants a more context-sensitive analysis.

Despite the broadly positive assessment, the results also revealed comparatively lower levels of trust in institutions and perceived fairness compared to other dimensions in the Bertelsmann Stiftung's social cohesion framework. The degree of confidence between communities, institutions, and the state, is also known as the strength of vertical ties, and is an important pillar to fostering resilient societies. The relatively lower score on vertical ties is consistent with global findings including those from the World Values Survey and the Edelman Trust Barometer. These findings reflect, among other factors, the public discontent with established institutions and a perceived lack of representation and responsiveness.

Across all domains of cohesion, higher levels of economic and social development appear to be positively correlated with overall measures of cohesion. Interestingly, the relationship between social cohesion and political openness is less straightforward – some countries that are widely considered less democratic appeared to correlate with higher levels of cohesion, including *greater* institutional trust and perceived fairness. This counter-intuitive finding suggests that it may be the quality of governance, rather than the political model of government, that plays a more significant role in shaping the strength and resilience of the social fabric.

Furthermore, a shared focus on the common good can bring communities closer by fostering a shared commitment to addressing societal challenges. In this regard, both governments and civil society have important roles to play in enhancing social cohesion. Beyond the sectarian identity politics tied to ethnicity and religion, there are signs that cohesion is also shaped by class, gender, and geography. Structural inequalities, entrenched biases, and gendered norms that restrict access to opportunities can significantly influence perceptions of inclusion and the overall strength of the social fabric.

Comparative Analysis

Beyond the topline findings for each country, comparative national-level analyses were also conducted to establish the conceptual validity of the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar and ensure that it accurately measures what it is intended to assess. To this end, country-level averages from the study are compared with global indicators of stability (Global Peace Index; Fragile States Index), development (GDP per capita; Human Development Index), inequalities (Gini Coefficient; SDG Gender Index), and models of governance (Freedom House Index; Corruption Perceptions Index).

The findings support the validity of the current Radar study. The overall cohesion scores broadly align with country-level indicators of peace and resilience. Consistent with existing literature on socio-economic inequality, societies with greater income disparities and strong gender biases tend to report lower cohesion. Notably, there is no discernible pattern between governance models (e.g., neo-liberal democracies or top-down paternalistic states) and cohesion outcomes. Instead, the quality of governance, particularly in terms of integrity and levels of corruption, appears to play a more decisive role.

Drawing on key findings from the 2025 Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar, our researchers also consulted with regional scholars, public intellectuals, and policymakers to identify ways in which ASEAN member states can forge stronger and more resilient societies:

- 1. Foster proactive engagement** between sectarian communities and policymakers across various domains of everyday life (e.g., workplaces, residential areas, public spaces) and across geographic divides (e.g., urban-rural). Regional initiatives including the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) can serve as valuable platforms for dialogue. ICCS can act as a conduit for deeper exchange, helping to build empathy and mutual understanding across diverse groups.
- 2. Harness horizontal ties** among ethnic groups, religious leaders, and non-government organisations to strengthen vertical ties between communities and their leaders. Policymakers could partner with civic actors and tap their deep understanding of local challenges. Such partnerships can enhance perceived representation and institutional fairness, ultimately nurturing greater trust in governance structures.
- 3. Develop strategic policies** that prioritise the common good and address contemporary societal challenges. Specifically, policies that promote income equality, rural development, societal resilience, heritage preservation and shared experiences are most imperative.

In summary, the Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar 2025 provides a sharper lens to develop the state of social cohesion in the region, especially amid a changing geopolitical landscape. Its localised approach to measuring, tracking, and analysing cohesion offers a more reliable basis for sensemaking, enables the identification of key subgroups, and can inform more targeted and effective policymaking and programme design.

Highlights of Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar 2025

Dr Leong Chan-Hoong

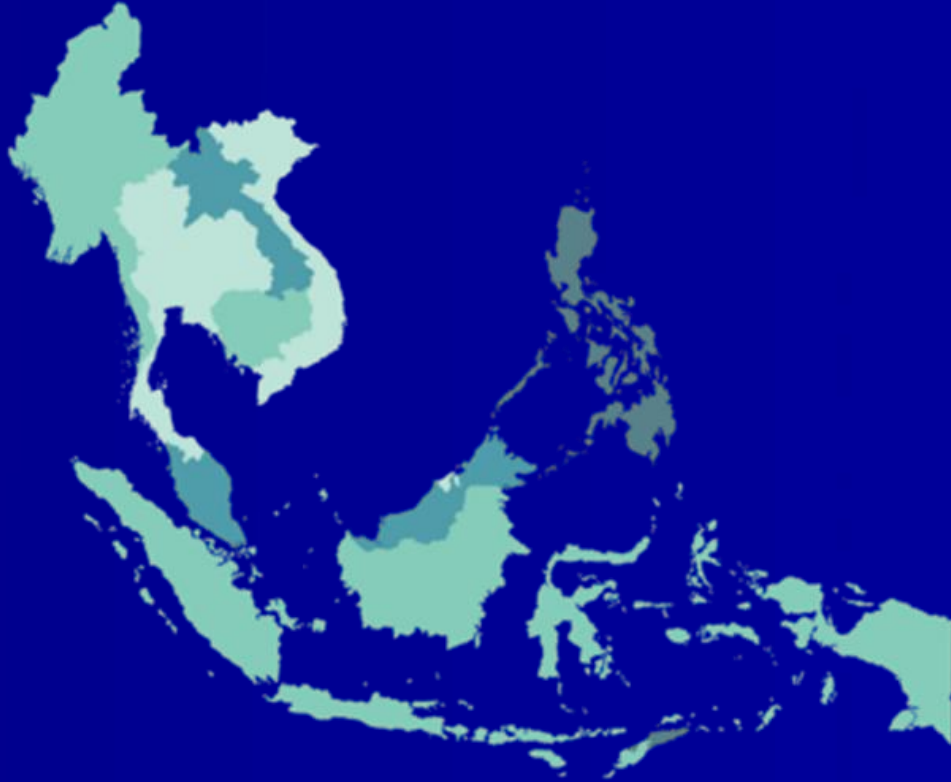
Senior Fellow and Head of
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S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University

Highlights from 2025 Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar

- Social cohesion is generally positive in Southeast Asia (SEA). Regional average across all indicators was **72.4%** (Strong).
- There is a broad acceptance for cultural differences based on measurements of social ties across ethnicities, religions and language groups. Overall, more than 7 in 10 are confident that people from diverse communities will help each other regardless of their identity.
- Opportunities for SEA countries to promote institutional trust and perceived policy fairness.

Why a Social Cohesion Radar for Southeast Asia?



- Southeast Asia is culturally diverse, but no dedicated approach to track social cohesion in the region and to provide basis for longitudinal studies
- Religion, ethnicity, and language diversity could be incorporated in measurement and analyses
- Social cohesion is integral for harmony, stability, sense of nationhood, and progress in the region

Unpacking Social Cohesion

- Social cohesion - broadly refers to the state and strength of the social bonds in societies
- Social cohesion is multi-level (e.g., communities, institutions, state) and multi-dimensional (e.g., network, identification, trust)
- “...cohesive society is characterised by resilient ***social relationships***, a positive ***emotional connectedness*** between its members and the community, and the pronounced ***focus on the common good***” (Dragolov et al, 2016)

Adapting Social Cohesion Research in Southeast Asia

Bertelsmann Stiftung Framework (BSF) used widely to assess social cohesion

Enhancing Rigour

- In 2022, a pilot study measuring social cohesion in SEA
- In 2025, validated with national samples from all countries

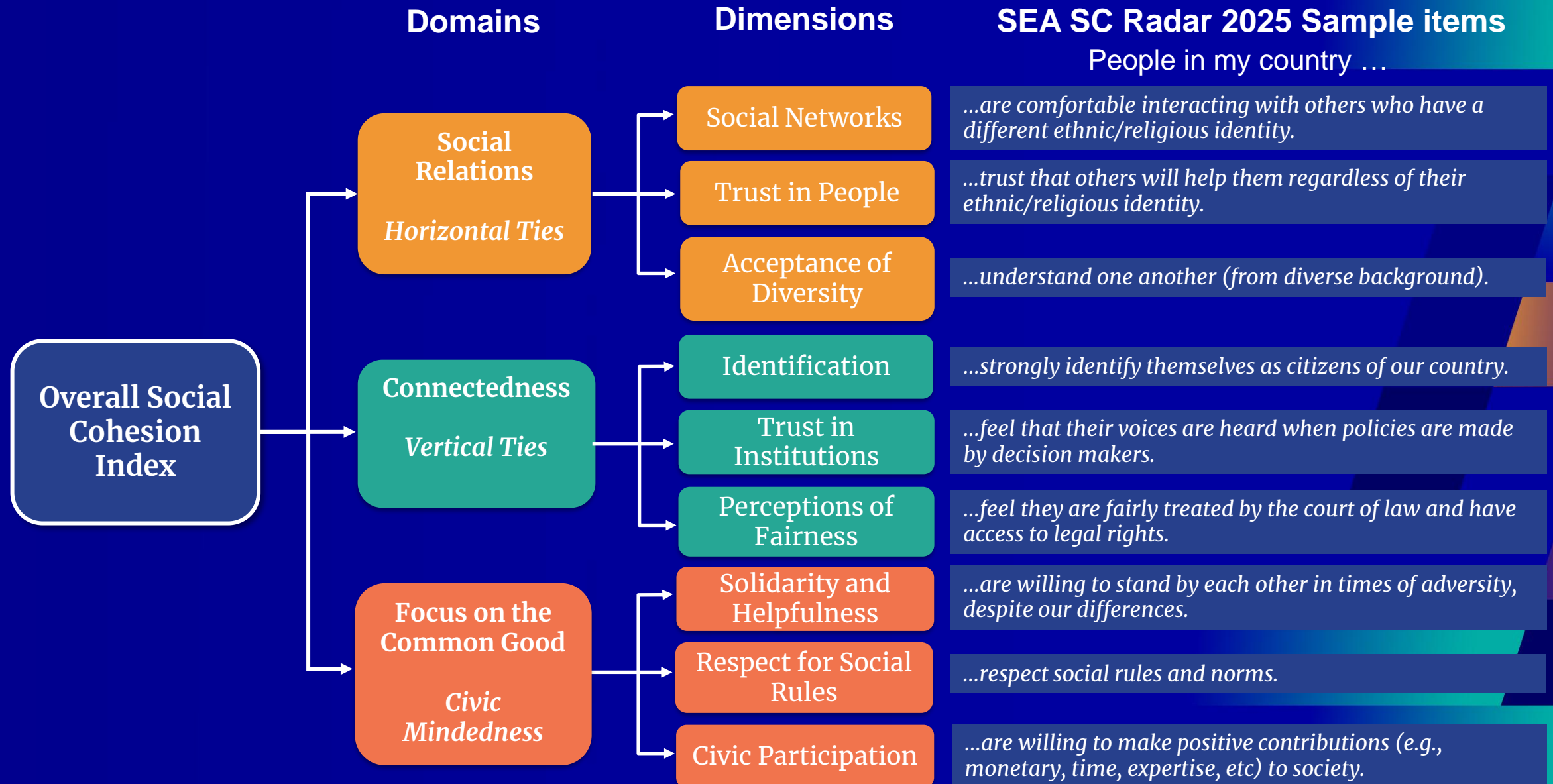
Objectivity

- Stringent survey language and data quality control
- Surveyed 1,000 individuals in each country, ensure demographic representations with hard (age and gender) and soft quotas (ethnicity, religion, urban-rural)

Relevance

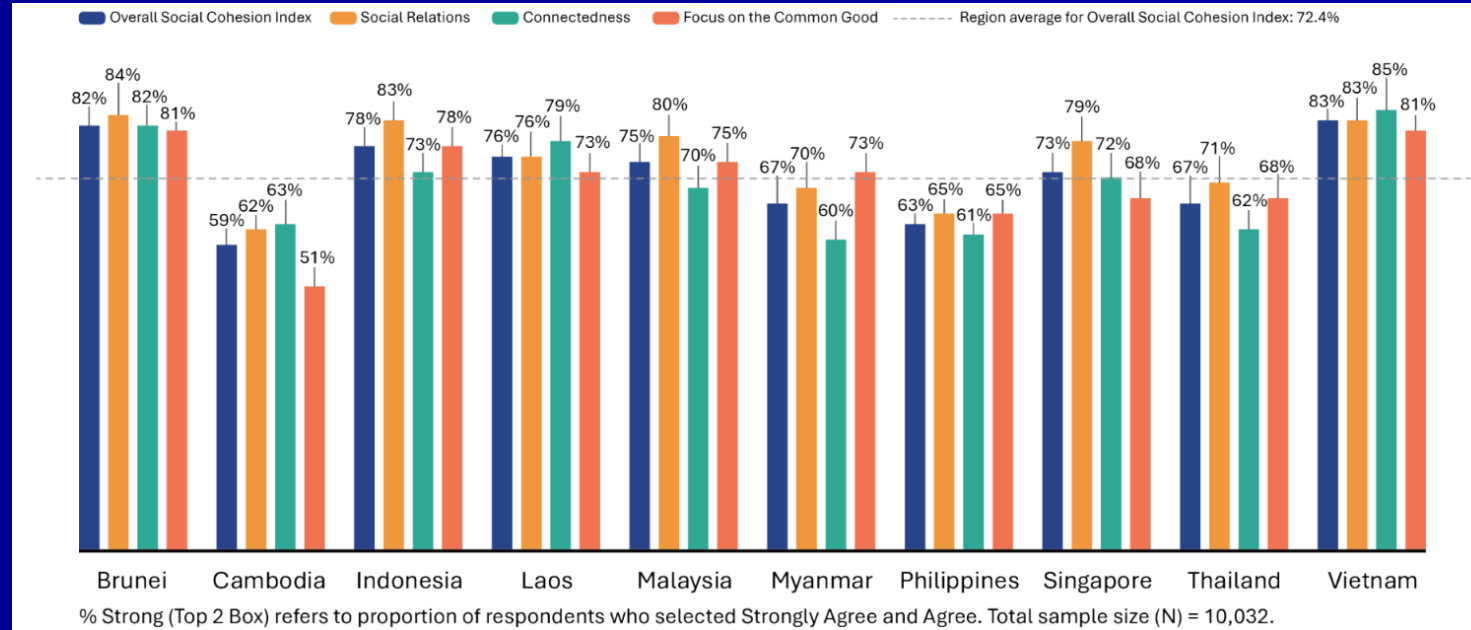
- Fieldwork period from January to May 2025
- Empirical data to enrich discussion

Bertelsmann Stiftung framework



Regional Highlights

Figure 1: Summary of ASEAN States Overall Social Cohesion Index and Domains by Top 2 Box (% Strong)



Overall Social Cohesion Index

- Generally positive in all countries (i.e., regional average of 72.4%; most indicators 60% and above)

Social Relations

- Refers to the horizontal ties that link communities from different ethnic, religious, and language background
- Broad acceptance of diversity, suggesting baseline of trust between communities

Connectedness

- Refers to the vertical ties that link communities, institutions, and the state
- Helpful if countries can promote greater institutional trust and perceived policy unfairness

Focus on Common Good

- Refers to civic mindedness, how likely for people to work together to tackle common challenges
- Greater civic involvement in some countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar); and some countries can do more to promote civic contribution (Cambodia, Singapore)

Selected Typologies of Social Cohesion

**Robust cohesion across all domains,
including horizontal and vertical ties**



BRUNEI



VIETNAM

**Mutual respect between diverse
communities (horizontal ties)**



MALAYSIA



SINGAPORE



INDONESIA

**Confidence between communities,
institutions, and the state (vertical ties)**



LAO PDR



CAMBODIA

**Sense of civic mindedness and participation
(civic mindedness)**



PHILIPPINES



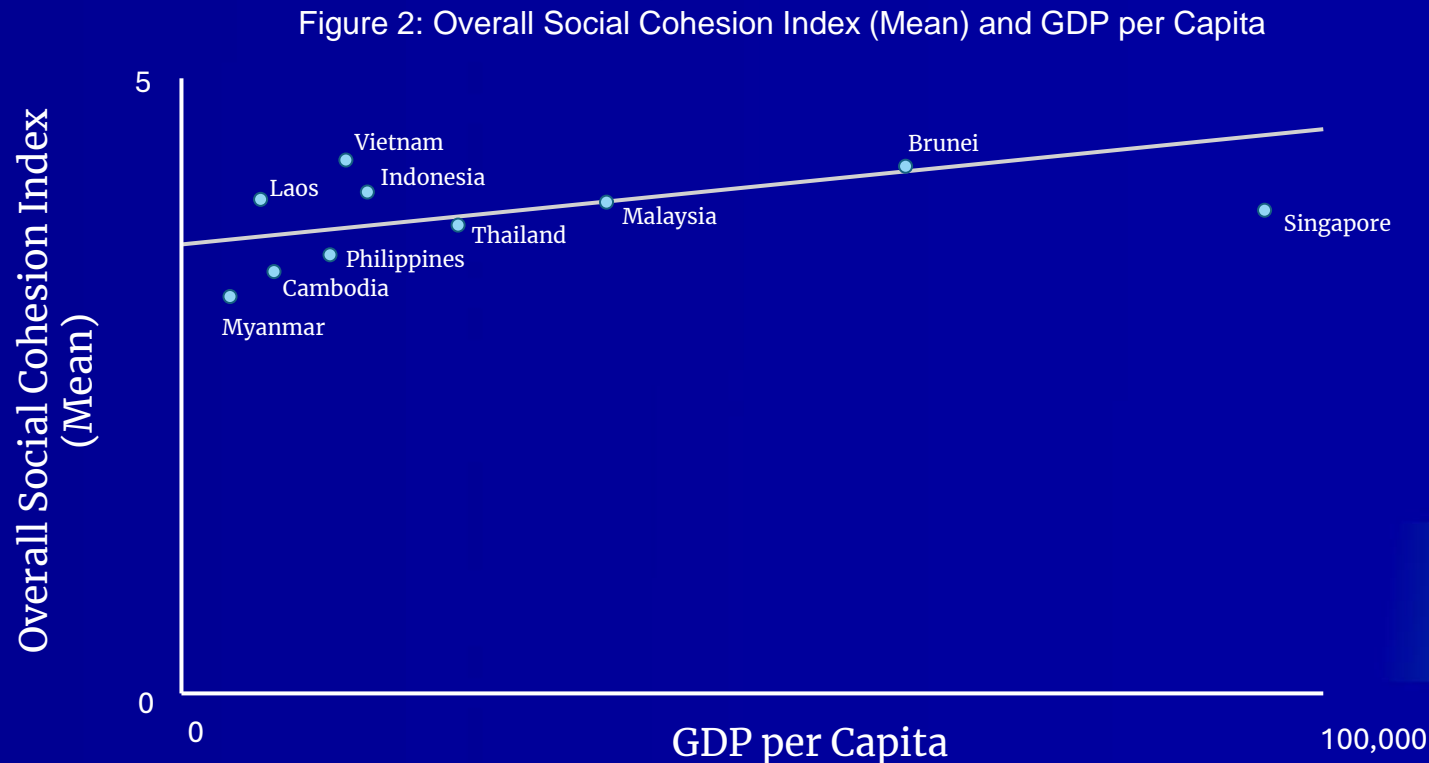
THAILAND



MYANMAR

Relations with economic development and stability

- SEA Social Cohesion Radar scores correlate with economic development (e.g., GDP per capita)
- Positively associated with economic development and stability
- Not related to the type of political systems/structure
- Cohesion can be supported by other variables apart from economic resources



Build on strong foundations

1. Foster proactive engagement

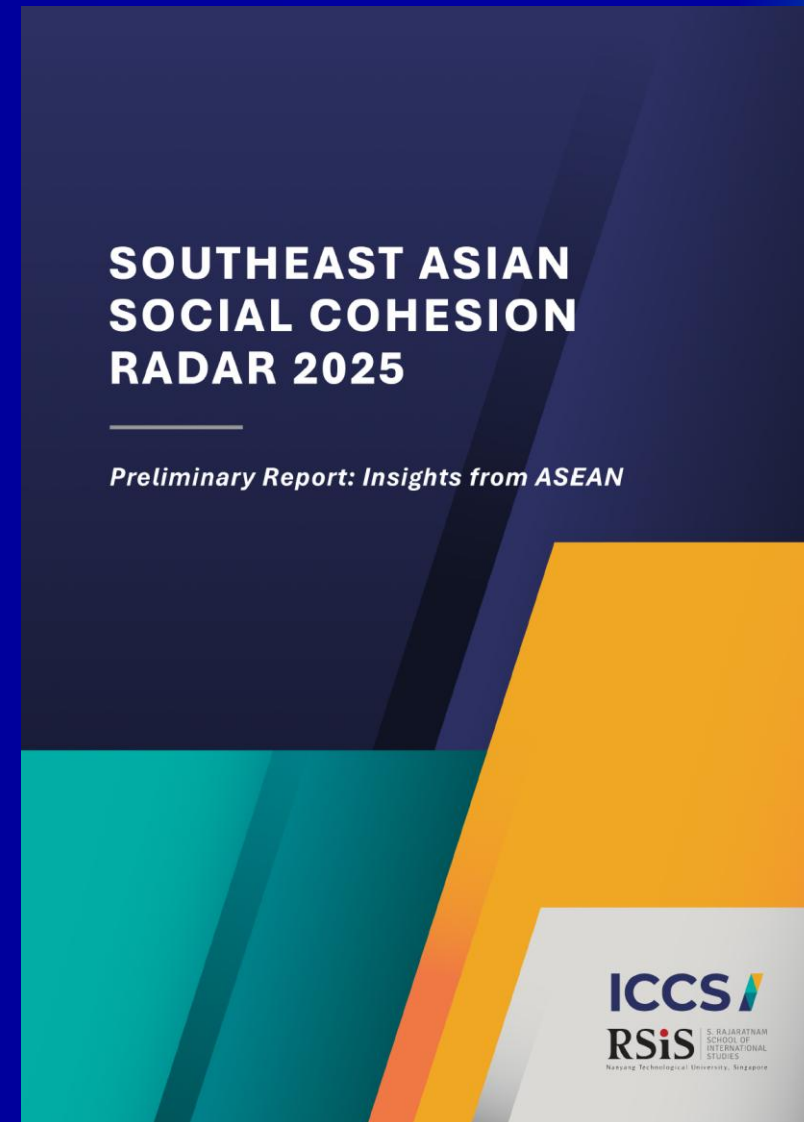
- Between communities and policymakers
- Across everyday life and locations, e.g., workplace, neighbourhood, public space, urban-rural
- Important because it fosters emotional ties, and people are more likely to stand together with each other during crises

2. Harness community ties

- Institutions can leverage existing strong community ties as a stepping-stone towards fostering institutional trust
- Policymakers can partner with civic and religious organisations to tap the community's understanding of local challenges
- Lead to mutual understanding on how community voices can contribute to policymaking

3. Develop strategic goals

- Achieve consensus in areas of priority, common good, and contemporary challenges
- Focus on income equality, rural development, civic participation, promoting cultural preservation and inclusion are most important



Build on strong foundations

Partnership with regional academics, civic leaders, and public intellectuals to deep dive into the key findings and for outreach, specifically but not limited to:

1. **Analyse** culture-specific challenges that affect the social fabric of ASEAN member states
2. **Identify** the drivers for cohesive norms and the community-specific policy levers that can promote harmonious coexistence
3. **Uncover** subgroups that may benefit most from multicultural dialogues and regional programmes, such as skills development workshops

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Thank You

FACTSHEET

SOUTHEAST ASIAN SOCIAL COHESION RADAR 2025 **Presentation on Wed 25 June 2025, 11.30 am, at ICCS**

What is Social Cohesion?

It broadly refers to the state and strength of social bonds in societies.

Social cohesion is

- multi-level (e.g., communities, institutions, state)
- multi-dimensional (e.g., network, trust, identification)

Social cohesion is crucial for harmony, stability, sense of nationhood, and progress in the region.

Why measure Social Cohesion in Southeast Asia?

Southeast Asia is culturally diverse. Yet, there has been no dedicated approach to track the state of social cohesion longitudinally.

Religion, ethnicity, and language diversity can be incorporated into the measurement and analyses.

How to measure Social Cohesion in Southeast Asia?

RSIS uses an adaptation of the widely used Bertelsmann Stiftung Framework (BSF) to assess social cohesion.

- In 2022, RSIS did a pilot study using BSF to measure social cohesion in the Southeast Asian countries.
- In 2025, RSIS strengthened it with validation using national samples from all the Southeast Asian countries.
 - Surveyed 1,000 individuals in each country (ensuring demographic representations)
 - Stringent survey language and data quality control
- Fieldwork was done from January to May 2025.

Key Findings – Regional Overview

- Overall Social Cohesion Index - generally positive across all countries (regional average of 72.4%)
- Social Relations – broad acceptance of diversity and cultural differences; more than 7 in 10 are confident that people from diverse communities will help each other regardless of their identity

- Connectedness – opportunities many countries to promote greater institutional trust and perceived policy unfairness
- Focus on Common Good – some countries have greater civic involvement (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar), others could do more to promote civic contribution (e.g. Cambodia, Singapore)

The Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar scores correlate with global measures of stability and economic development.

What are the Key Takeaways for the community?

1. Foster proactive engagement between communities and policymakers across various domains of everyday life and across geographical divides.
2. Harness strong community ties as a stepping stone towards fostering institutional trust
3. Develop strategic goals that prioritise the common good and address contemporary challenges in the country.

Next Stage: Partnership

RSIS plans to partner with regional academics, civic leaders, and scholars to deep dive into the key findings, addressing the following:

1. Analyse culture-specific challenges that affect the social fabric of ASEAN Member State.
2. Identify the drivers for cohesive norms and the policy levers that promote harmonious co-existence.
3. Uncover subgroups that may benefit most from multicultural dialogues and regional programmes.

-END-

25 June 2025

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About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a global graduate school and think tank focusing on strategic studies and security affairs. Its five Research Centres and three Research Programmes, led by the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman, and assisted by the Dean on the academic side, drive the School's research, education and networking activities.

The graduate school offers Master of Science Programmes in Strategic Studies, International Relations, International Political Economy and Asian Studies. As a school, RSIS fosters a nurturing environment to develop students into first-class scholars and practitioners.

As a think tank, RSIS conducts policy-relevant and forward-looking research in both national and international security, science and technology, society and economic and environmental sustainability. RSIS also produces academic research on security and international affairs. It publishes scholarly research in top-tier academic journals and leading university presses, and distributes policy research in a timely manner to a wide range of readers.

About the Social Cohesion Research Programme of RSIS

The Social Cohesion Research Programme (SCRП) examines social cohesion with a view to advancing policy-oriented research, forging strategic partnerships, and developing leadership to inspire cohesive and resilient societies.