Annex 1
background to the concept of social cohesion

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The predominant concept of social cohesion in the current international debate was developed in the 1990s by the European Union as part of a political discourse imbued with an essentially normative-evocative meaning that seeks to define a desirable horizon for society.75 The notion of social cohesion synthesizes in a way the central values of solidarity and equality in the European model. It contrasts sharply with the Anglo-Saxon model, which is regarded as steeped in more individualistic values and less concerned with distributive aspects or the state's role as guarantor of the common good.76

Underlying the European Union's concerns with social cohesion are its changing productive base and demographics in recent decades, its insertion into globalization processes and the attendant impact on job
creation/unemployment and the distribution of wealth and opportunities, and challenges to the welfare state. These changes provoke social tensions which, in turn, jeopardize “social cohesion.” In synthesis, European social cohesion has to do with the specter of the immediate past which it hopes, in some way, to preserve.

As the concept of social cohesion became increasingly central to the European Union’s discourse, criteria and indicators were developed to measure it. Known as the Laeken indicators, they deal mainly with distributive variables (employment, income, access to public services). In this way, the notion of social cohesion, a normative framework, became operational and therefore a target for public policies intended to influence the indicators.

In sum, the concept of social cohesion is associated with a specific political context that evokes what is regarded as a desirable state of affairs relative to the status quo ante. As such, social cohesion is not set up as an interpretative framework for reality in the sense of proffering a theory and an analytical framework for social dynamics.

The concept of social cohesion is clearly part of sociological tradition: it is featured prominently in the work of Émile Durkheim and later revisited, though not always under the same name, in the functionalist tradition. The concept of social cohesion adopted by the European Union, however, claims no intellectual affiliation with that current of thought. It is essentially a normative reference associated with operational criteria revolving around indicators (employment, health, etc.) which are selected by public debate, politicians, and technocracies.

Can the operational instrument developed in the European Union be applied to the Latin American reality? We think not. Our history and social realities are very different and we must therefore come up with an analytical and political translation of the concept of social cohesion for our region. Moreover, a legitimate question to pose is: why introduce into the Latin American debate a concept that risks becoming the new fad, one that in a sense superimposes itself on pre-established normative concepts (such as full citizenship or democracy with equity) and others involving

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relatively similar indicators (such as the Human Development Index, for example)? We believe that the value of addressing the issue of social cohesion in Latin America lies in its potential to focus the debate on social and cultural dynamics after decades of hegemonic thinking centered on economic issues.

This is not to say that the issue of social cohesion cannot be addressed following parameters similar to those developed by the European Union. In this case the aim would be to design public policies around indicators of social cohesion associated with issues that have been widely debated in recent decades (growth, inequality, poverty, technological innovation, fiscal policy). In the second scenario, which is our choice in the present discussion, the subject of social cohesion can be taken as an opportunity to introduce into the public debate a fresh vision of the directions our societies are taking and new ways to approach public policy-making and democratic consolidation. These two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they could stimulate a rich dialogue over the paths to follow in the region.

If it is true that the concept of social cohesion requires more sensitivity to, and the effective inclusion of, social, political and cultural issues, one might conclude that a return to an interdisciplinary dialogue is required, one that incorporates the contributions of the various disciplines in the social sciences. This means galvanizing economists, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and historians in an effort to discover the many nuances evoked by the concept of social cohesion (societies that value democracy and equity and transmit a sense of belonging and dignity to their citizens). It is not so much a matter of developing a theory of social cohesion as placing this concept at the service of a multidisciplinary examination of the social processes underway in Latin America. In this sense, while progress in the area of definitions and indicators, such as those developed by ECLAC, represent an important contribution, they also run the risk of declaring resolved conceptual problems that require further theoretical and empirical development. The challenge, in particular, is to

make sure that the concept of social cohesion is not treated merely as a new label on a container with the same contents and methodologies as always, with their essentially economic bias.

Sociocultural dynamics tend to be overlooked in the reports of international agencies or only included when they have a specific economic purpose, as is the case with “social capital,” or in the form of public opinion surveys. One of the reasons for this absence is that when handled in an intellectually responsible manner, sociocultural dynamics require a sensitivity to, and acknowledgement of, the diversity of national histories in which values and symbolic universes acquire specific meanings that are hard to quantify and generalize. This ultimately conspires against the analyses developed by international organizations whose vocation is to come up with generalizable and quantifiable solutions, sometimes at the expense of the complex webs and the particularities of national histories.

This is not to say that Latin America is not a legitimate subject for comparative research. To the contrary, in addition to their similar or parallel historical processes, the same political and ideological winds periodically blow across the continent. Yet these winds blow across a wide variety of topographies and therefore their effects cannot be generalized. Sensitivity to the diversity of national societies must include the recognition that social processes affect different social and generational groups differently. For this reason, our analysis focused mainly, although not exclusively, on the large metropolis and the most dynamic sectors, as that is where social problems and emergent trends are revealed more explicitly.

Social cohesion in democracy: change and social conflict

The analysis of social cohesion in Latin America must elucidate its relationship with democracy. In Europe, democracy is a consolidated fact, while in our countries a question mark still remains. That is why we prefer to speak of social cohesion in democracy to describe more precisely the challenge we face in the region. By referring to social cohesion in democracy we can also distinguish more clearly between the analytical and normative dimensions of the concept. Why is this so?

As social theory teaches us, all societies generate some form of cohesion. Otherwise they would not exist. But the mechanisms for social cohesion vary based on the history and type of society. In complex societies, this is reflected
in the existence of universes of beliefs and values shared, to varying degrees, by all members of society, and by systems of authority rooted in consensual norms and coercive systems that ensure the functioning of the established order. Mechanisms of social disintegration are also many and varied. They may be the product of exclusion, anomic violence or authoritarian ideologies. While the social vectors may vary enormously the end result is an inability to trust in the capacity and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

If every society has, by definition, social cohesion, then what is at stake from the standpoint of the operative value of the concept is the degree of social cohesion in a society in function of particular objectives. For the purposes of this study, the issue at hand is *social cohesion in democracy*. That is, of the processes and mechanisms that might weaken or strengthen the belief in democratic values and practices as a way to resolve social conflicts and advance the common good.

Social cohesion in modern times cannot be dissociated from social change and from social conflict. Modern societies are in constant mutation which means that some forms of sociability are always disintegrating and giving way to new mechanisms for integration in which citizen participation and demands play a critical role.

In established democracies, as in Europe for example, the legitimacy of social conflict and the existence of channels to resolve demands are considered an *acquis*. This is not the case in our societies, where political systems feature enormous limitations and easily become channels for authoritarian solutions, and where the state itself, rife with flaws and antidemocratic components, is part of the problem.

The analysis of social cohesion in Latin America must therefore include an understanding of processes of change and social conflict, as well as the mechanisms through which they are expressed and resolved. The analysis of *social cohesion in democracy*, therefore, centers around the social transformations in progress and the challenges they pose for democratic institutions. This means expanding the analytical and normative horizon of social cohesion beyond (but inclusive of) public policy, to encompass the functioning of political and cultural systems. The analysis is framed, then, around nations as the space reserved for the functioning of the political system and the state, in the context of globalization.

In order to develop this perspective we must first present the historical framework that circumscribes the potential for social cohesion in democracy — which implies paying particular attention to the diversity of political models and forms of social conflict.
Political models

Most assessments of the region — due to the limitations of the official and semi-official institutions that produce them — do not refer explicitly and directly to the current dominant political models and discourses. Yet this aspect is critical to understanding the political reality of the continent. If structural socioeconomic conditions can cause antidemocratic trends to emerge, they only do so through the presence of concrete political models advanced by specific actors. We cannot forget, then, that while poverty and social inequality are the foundational substratum upon which political dynamics are constructed, what ultimately destroys democracies are antidemocratic movements, ideologies and political leaders — which mobilize and polarize the imagination and the political debate — and that anticorruption movements were the main factor that brought down several presidents in the region over the past decade.

As a consequence of the preceding point, we understand that social cohesion has to do not only with the most adequate or effective public policies — which are clearly crucial and have certainly been mentioned herein — but also requires us to ask ourselves about the mechanisms for the symbolic and political mobilization of citizens, which are a prerequisite for the possibility (or impossibility) of public policies and state reforms. Any examination of public policies requires a more nuanced understanding of the sectors they target. The poor, for example, are not a statistical conglomerate but rather heterogeneous social actors with active and creative survival strategies that are not always in sync with the official plans. The informal sector (from housing to work), for example, is much more than the lack of alternatives in the formal sector. It is built out of the constant search for niches and opportunities made possible by the absence, or fragility, of government regulations. It encompasses everything from constructions with no urban development plan to the diversion of electricity, potable water or cable TV; from mini-contraband to arms and drugs trafficking or illegal collective transportation. Moreover, the legalization of these activities is not always an obvious, possible or desirable course from the standpoint of the participating actors.

What is more, some policies such as those governing cash transfers, for example, can undermine democratic consolidation if they are not implemented with the necessary care. It is therefore not just a matter of what is delivered, but how, and the way in which it is received by social actors. We must also address the challenge that the impact of public policies
is of variable duration. Some policies may have an impact only in the long term, while society is demanding more immediate responses.

**Cohesion and social conflict**

All of these elements must be borne in mind insofar as they define the ultimate aim of this book: to deepen the debate over the possibilities for consolidating democratic political projects on the continent. The analysis of social cohesion means striving to understand the myriad social dynamics of integration and of conflict, which are legitimate and critical components of the construction/transformation of mechanisms for social cohesion in democratic societies. In this sense, it is not possible to characterize the specific contents of social cohesion based on *a priori* definitions. For example, the definition of social cohesion — according to ECLAC (2007a), “the dialectical relationship between established mechanisms of social inclusion/exclusion and citizens’ responses, perceptions and attitudes towards the way in which these operate…” — implies a theory and an empirical analysis of what is meant by “citizens” and “established mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion,” and of the content of this *dialectical relationship*, in other words the intermediaries that relate what is established to the institutional actions of social actors.

The included/excluded dichotomy leads to a unilateral vision of the construction of social cohesion in that it fails to take into account the entirety of processes that traverse society. All of these processes are fundamental to the construction of social cohesion and they cannot be reduced to issues of social inclusion/exclusion. They generally involve a direct correlation between the objective criteria of inclusion/exclusion (usually socioeconomic and schooling indicators) and the subjective dimensions of social cohesion. Of course, limited access to social services, income and opportunities in the labor market frequently are keystones in the construction of a sense of social exclusion. But this relation is not mechanical and we cannot overlook the category of relative deprivation (for example, the expectations and feelings of inclusion or exclusion of a recent migrant originally from a rural setting are not the same as those of a generation born and raised in the city), nor can we assume that feelings of exclusion, frustration and social anomie are not present among sectors with better indicators of social wellbeing.

This assumption concerning the centrality of social exclusion does not correspond to the historical reality of the continent or other regions, where
many social movements that have questioned democratic institutions had middle class roots. Today, feelings of frustration among the middle classes — which generally are associated with generalized corruption and the inability of the state to protect life and property — erode social cohesion around democratic values. The importance of this issue for democratic consolidation should not be underestimated: as we pointed out earlier, most of the social mobilizations that brought about the removal or the impeachment of ten presidents in recent years revolved around reports of corruption, while in many countries the main issue concerning much of the population is insecurity associated with violence.

Similarly, reducing social inclusion to its purely economic dimensions does not permit us to assign the proper weight, for example, to the danger that informal labor poses for the consolidation of democratic institutions. While the informal sector sometimes facilitates survival strategies — and for some sectors can even yield higher incomes than those they would obtain in the formal sector — its very existence strengthens a culture of illegality and is generally associated with Mafia-like structures of control that foster corrupt relations with the law enforcement officials responsible for suppressing their activities.

The interrelations between social cohesion and inclusion/exclusion are, therefore, complex, as an abundance of sociological studies have shown and as our study has tried to demonstrate in more depth specifically with regard to Latin America. Societies whose cohesion revolves around egalitarian values can intensify feelings of exclusion among individuals and groups who would be considered acceptable in other contexts. In certain cases, greater economic inclusion can increase feelings of symbolic and political exclusion and, conversely, greater symbolic inclusion can intensify feelings of economic exclusion. In sum, the objective and subjective dimensions of inclusion/exclusion are complex and require theoretical and empirical analyses sensitive to the historical formation of values systems in each society.

In general, analyses of social cohesion guided by the included/excluded dichotomy tend to consider institutional integration mechanisms (usually employment and social policy) as the main, or even the only, factor of integration, against which individual leanings are juxtaposed. This vision generally only considers the family (and more recently, ethnic group) as a factor of integration, leaving aside other associative forms through which
individuals find solidarity and meaning in their lives. Without excluding social policy and the workplace, which are of course critical, we have tried to identify the dynamics of the new (and old) universes of meaning and individual strategies of solidarity and belonging (including religion, party, trade union, music, virtual communities, emigration, neighborhood, drug use, violent gangs, civil society organizations, and affinity groups) which are key intermediaries in relations between the individual and the market/state and producers of social cohesion that cannot be reduced to the included/excluded dichotomy.

80 We recall that in all of his works, Émile Durkheim stressed the central role that these intermediary levels between the individual, the state and the market play in social stability and the construction of meaning.