

Strengthening Social Cohesion - an Opportunity for Mental Health and Human Development?

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Multiple factors such as education, income, health, and many others feed into human development, each specific to settings, context, and people. More recently, it has been suggested that mental health is fundamental to human development as well and, likewise, that stable social relationships can buffer mental distress to a certain extent and under certain circumstances. Focusing on Bhutan and the Asian region in a global context, this article argues that the relationship between mental health, social cohesion, and human development deserves more attention. Strengthening social cohesion may be an opportunity to improve mental health, with the aim of fostering holistic human development in Bhutan and beyond.

The concept of human development is known for its holistic approach of assessing not only development outcomes but the freedom to achieve those outcomes that one values. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which implemented human development as an operational concept for international politics, human development is the process of expanding people's choices, so that each and every individual can develop his or her full potential.²

The theoretical foundation of the concept is based on Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, according to which the aim of human development is to build human capabilities, expand freedoms, and enable humans to "lead the life they have reason to value".³

Capabilities are a combination of things a person is able to do or be – the various functionings he or she can achieve.⁴ Sen explains the difference between capabilities and functionings with his famous example of the starving person in a famine, who lacks the capability of being nourished, compared to the fasting priest, who has the capability of eating but chooses to not convert it into a functioning (being nourished). The starving person is deprived of human development, while the priest is not.

In addition to income and economic growth, the human development approach includes education, health, multidimensional inequalities, gender inequality, social norms, and more recently, mental health, among many other aspects, to assess progress at a globally comparative level.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.⁵ Mental health is fundamental to human development because toxic mental distress affects people’s potential to live the life they have reason to value.⁶

This is expressed in the conversion function that illustrates people’s ability to convert resources into achievements. Mental distress affects people’s individual conversion factors that shape their ability to convert resources into capabilities (freedom to achieve) and make choices that help them pursue those functionings (achievements) they have reason to value.

For example, even though a child may have access to education (resource), her ability to learn (freedom to achieve) and become educated (achievement) may be impaired if she suffers from mental distress. Concretely, some mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms like fatigue, trouble sleeping, and headaches reduce cognitive ability and constrain people’s possibilities of learning.⁷

The 2021/22 Human Development Report lays out several aspects of current times, marked by uncertainties, that have an impact on mental health for many people, potentially impairing human development and increasing multidimensional inequalities.⁸

Structural changes such as digitalisation and the increasing pressure that humans put on the planet, as well as more traditional challenges such as violence and discrimination, and also increased economic insecurity, including food insecurity, partially triggered by the war in Ukraine, pressure human minds amid increasing uncertainty.

Mental Health in Bhutan and Beyond

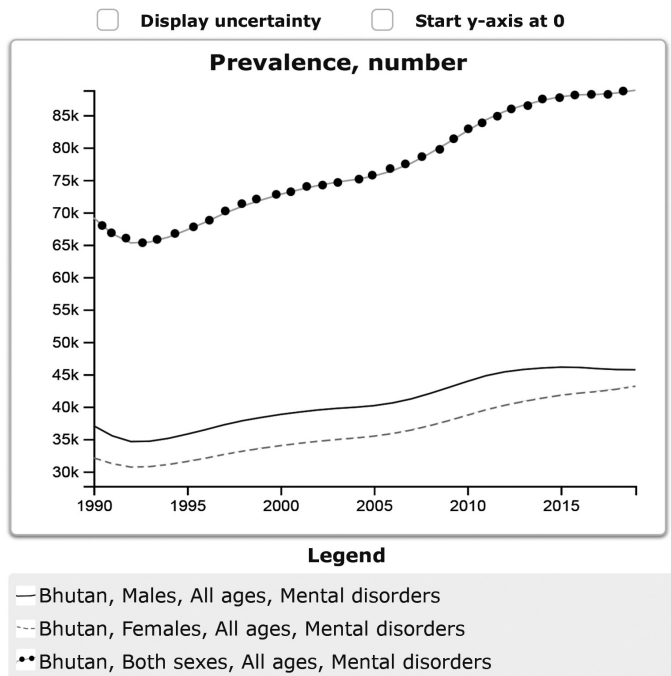
Against this backdrop, the state of mental health among societies around the world should be closely monitored to identify opportunities for

improving mental health and fostering human development. This paper takes the opportunity of doing so for Bhutan, a society that has recently faced some of the above-mentioned challenges, since it is a small country and increasingly susceptible to global developments and interconnectivity.

Prevalence of mental disorders has slightly increased over the years, from around 65,000 affected people in the early 1990s, to over 88,000 in 2018 (see Figure 1), with more men than women suffering from these disorders.⁹ In a global comparison, the prevalence of mental disorders is slightly lower in Bhutan than in other countries (Figure 2).

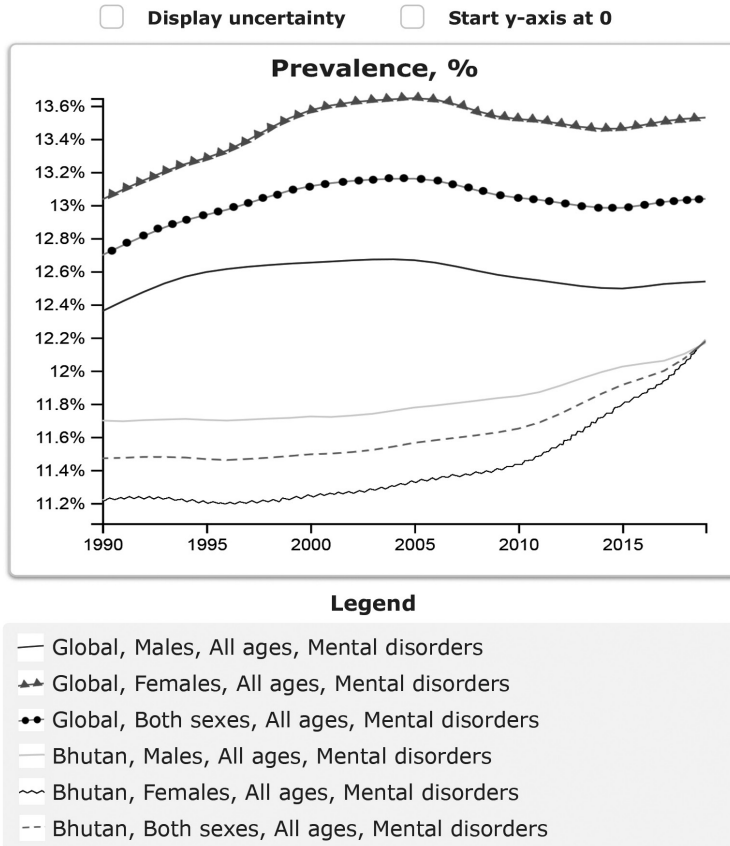
While the global average shows a slight downward trend, prevalence of mental disorders has been increasing in Bhutan since the early 2000s. The prevalence of mental health disorders is higher among men than women, but the trend is opposite at the global level, where the prevalence is higher among women.

Figure 1: Prevalence of mental disorders in Bhutan



Source: Author’s elaboration with data from IHME 2021

Figure 2: Prevalence of mental disorders (%), Bhutan and global



Source: Author’s elaboration with data from IHME 2021

Social Cohesion- An Opportunity?

A vast body of literature has shown that the impact of toxic stressors and adverse events is especially strong during childhood, with long-lasting effects on physical and mental health.¹⁰ For a country like Bhutan, where health care is provided at no cost to citizens, prevention of mental stressors is critical not only for the population’s health and well-being, but also for national budget concerns.¹¹

Research from Bhutan and beyond shows that healthy and stable relationships, especially with caregivers, can buffer the effects of adverse experiences on mental health.¹² Not all family relationships are healthy and, at times, they may even be the source of (chronic) toxic stress. In that case, the larger community can take the role of supporting individuals, by providing a sense of belonging and safety.

This can be fostered through strong institutions and relationships that provide a sense of safety and fairness throughout society; it can be expressed through solidarity and helpfulness, and it is usually reflected by trust in other people and increased participation in groups and social networks. The literature has typically summarised these and similar concepts into social cohesion.¹³ At the heart of social cohesion is the quality of the relationships among members of society.¹⁴

A systematic review of over 40 studies finds evidence of a positive association between different aspects of social cohesion and mental health among adolescents.¹⁵ For example, Kingsbury et. al find that strong neighbourhood communities in Canada have benefitted the mental health of adolescents who had been previously exposed to stressors such as economic insecurity, domestic violence, and crime.¹⁶ The association has also been found for other age groups and across different groups of the population.

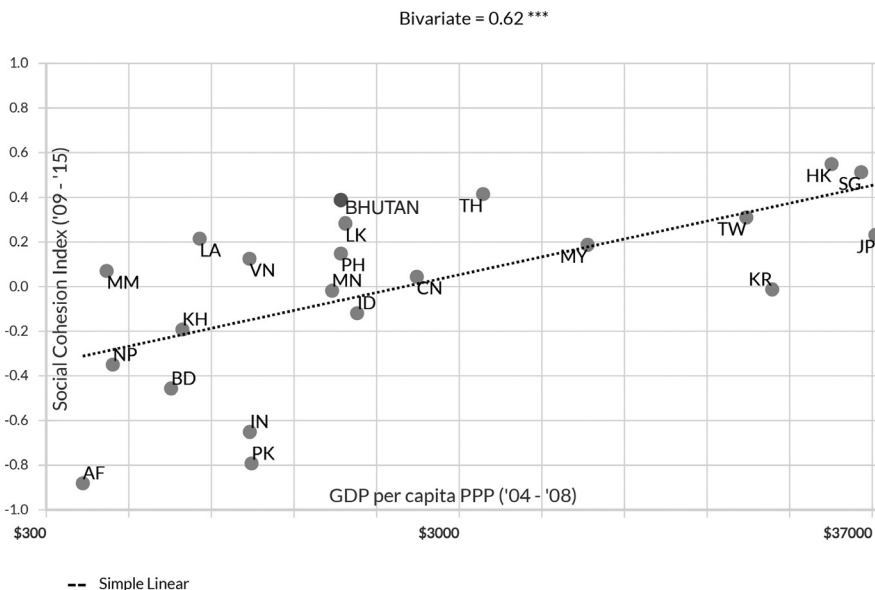
A study from Japan finds that closely knit social relationships with strong mutual trust and reciprocity are linked to psychological well-being of the elderly.¹⁷ Social cohesion has also made a difference when communities faced extreme weather events that affected their mental health.¹⁸ Moreover, it has been suggested that social cohesion has mitigated the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health among marginalised communities.¹⁹

However, the beneficial effects of social cohesion are not always equally distributed, especially in diverse neighbourhoods.²⁰ There seems to be an interplay between levels of income, social cohesion, and mental health inequalities.²¹ The relation has also been found in reverse: Low neighbourhood cohesion has caused mental distress, as demonstrated by a longitudinal household panel study from the United Kingdom.²² Nonetheless, all these studies focus on the local or national level. To our knowledge, there are only very few comparative studies at the regional or global level, not least due to the challenge of measuring social cohesion across different cultures.²³

One of the efforts to measure social cohesion and compare it at the regional level is the Social Cohesion Index (SCI) developed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung for the Asian region.²⁴ The SCI is a composite index that aims at measuring three domains - social relations, connectedness, and focus on the common good - among 22 Asian societies.

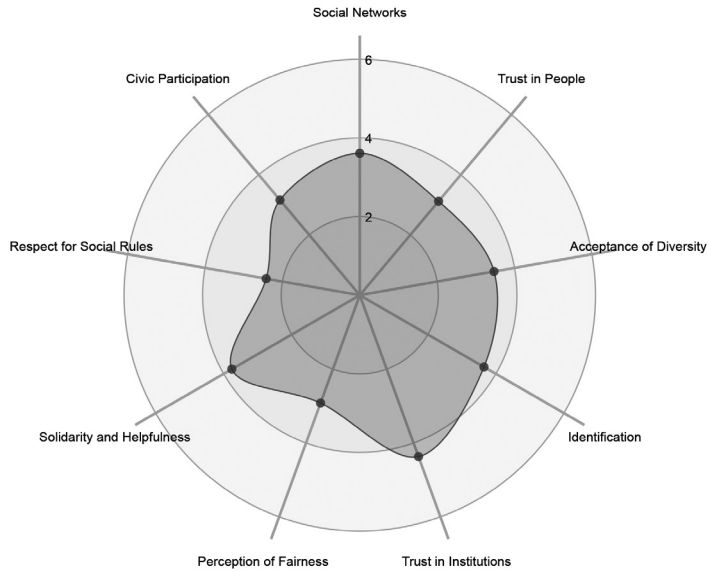
The SCI is populated with survey data on perceptions of nine key metrics - social networks, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perceptions of fairness, solidarity and helpfulness, respect for social rules, and civic participation during the timeframe of 2009 to 2015 (wave 2). According to this index, social cohesion is stronger in Bhutan than in other Asian countries with similar levels of GDP per capita (Figure 3, especially trust in institutions, social networks, and solidarity and helpfulness which are perceived as strong in Bhutan (Figure 4)). This may constitute an opportunity for partially offsetting adverse experiences that would otherwise cause mental distress and eventually mental health disorders in some cases.

Figure 3: Social cohesion is stronger in Bhutan than in other countries with similar levels of GDP



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2017

Figure 4: Different Aspects of Social Cohesion in Bhutan



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2017

Although no causal relationship can be established with the available evidence, data shows that social cohesion goes hand in hand with mental health in Asia, meaning that the stronger the social cohesion within societies, the less mental health disorders are reported (Figure 5).

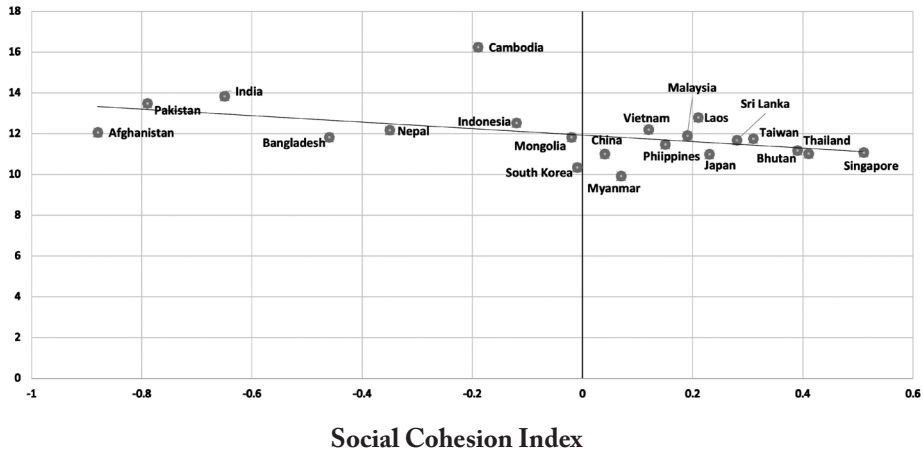
From an intuitive perspective and supported by literature, the relationship between mental health and social cohesion may be mutually beneficial since individuals with good mental health may contribute to the formation of cohesive societies and, conversely, a cohesive society may improve mental health of its members.

Figure 5 uses a time lag when testing this association. The plot shows that cohesive societies are associated with a lower prevalence of mental health disorders several years later. The time lag was chosen assuming that it takes some time to see the effect of quality relationships on mental

health throughout the population. More research is needed to test this relationship with more control variables, and for different population groups and regions.

Figure 5: Prevalence of mental disorders (%) goes hand in hand with social cohesion

Mental Disorders



Source: Author’s elaboration with data from IHME 2021 and Bertelsmann Stiftung 2017

Note: The correlation coefficient is - 0.46 and the correlation is statistically significant (P-value 0.002).

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Mental health is a fundamental component of human development. When it is impaired, people’s freedoms to achieve are constrained and, consequently, individuals may be hindered from developing their full potential. Previous studies have indicated that strong relationships and social support systems can buffer some of the adverse effects of mental distress.

After analysing data on social cohesion and mental disorders throughout the Asian region, we conclude that - although much more research is needed to study the relationship between social cohesion, mental health, and human

development - strengthening social cohesion constitutes an opportunity for improving mental health and fostering human development in Bhutan and beyond.

There are numerous ways to improve social cohesion, and each depends on national, local, and even neighbourhood settings. Nevertheless, there are some more general observations that could be useful when searching for policies that aim at improving social cohesion. For example:

- Education has been identified as one of the drivers of social cohesion.²⁵ It can teach norms and values and promote participatory and active citizenship.²⁶
- Societies with less inequality are usually more cohesive, so fiscal policies could be used to reduce inequality and thus foster social cohesion.²⁷
- At the community level, neighbourhood sports programmes and other cultural activities help build strong relationships,²⁸ preferably in green spaces that are beneficial for mental health per se,²⁹ especially in combination with positive social interaction.³⁰

When seeing human development through a holistic lens, the interplay between multiple aspects that shape human lives becomes evident. Mental health and social cohesion constitute important components of this interplay and will continue to need more attention from researchers and policymakers.

Notes

¹ The authors are grateful for research assistance from Diego Vallejo. The findings, analysis, and recommendations of this publication do not represent the official position of the UNDP or of any of the UN Member States that are part of its Executive Board, and any errors or omissions are the authors' own.

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