



MEETING REPORT

Bridging the Divides: Fostering Pluralism, Inclusion, and Solidarity in a Fragmented World

About the meeting

The [Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies](#) and the [Global Center for Pluralism](#) co-hosted a high-level roundtable on bridging societal divides and promoting inclusion and respect for diversity both within and between countries. Diversity in society is a universal fact; how societies respond to diversity is a choice. In today's political landscape, pluralism is increasingly contentious, and diversity is seen as a threat to be managed.¹ Polarizing narratives and disinformation campaigns that pit groups against each other have become the "new normal." In this era of discord, we must work to understand best how we can foster solidarity across our differences and leverage pluralism to build just, equal, and peaceful societies.

The meeting aimed to delve into the global contemporary challenges facing societies, acknowledging the profound impacts of division, tech-amplified disinformation and polarizing rhetorical and political strategies that undermine trust in democratic institutions and multilateralism and threaten social cohesion and pluralism. The dialogue emphasized the interconnectedness of domestic and international politics, stressing the urgency of addressing societal fractures at both levels. The roundtable underscored that countering polarization requires not just a whole-of-society approach but international cooperation. Bringing together policymakers and practitioners from diverse countries such as Canada, Kenya, Indonesia, and Spain, participants explored practical solutions to bridge divides.

¹The Global Centre for Pluralism defines pluralism as a positive response to diversity, which involves taking decisions and actions grounded in respect for diversity. When embracing pluralism, societies go beyond merely including diverse peoples and communities into existing institutions and cultures. Instead, pluralism encourages societies to make changes that lead to the recognition and belonging of diverse peoples. Pluralism, therefore, means recognizing, valuing, and respecting diversity.



Key messages

- **Harmful polarization and the spread of strategic divisive narratives represent a global problem**, as division pits groups against each other and undermines social cohesion and trust in governments and democracy.
- **Divisive narratives are often connected to inequalities and genuine fears, insecurities, and frustration** over undelivered promises of security and prosperity. However, the blame seldom falls upon those most directly responsible and is instead directed towards inter-group conflict.
- **A feedback loop exists between domestic and international divisions.** Governments built on platforms that exclude certain groups also tend to backtrack on international commitments. In turn, this reverberates within domestic spheres, sparking new conflicts and exacerbating existing ones.
- **Evolving social media and digital technologies have aggravated the spread of mis/disinformation** and further intensified the impact of division.
- While polarization is not inherently detrimental, the **use of divisive political strategies appears to promote prejudice and affective polarization** (growing animosity between groups), which puts communities at risk of increased hate crimes and can diminish constructive dialogue in the political and interpersonal realm.
- Solutions to tackle to strategic divisive narratives require:
 - Listening to the underlying causes of people's discontent and fears and engaging in constructive, civic dialogue rather than suppressing speech.
 - Addressing people's material and group-based needs in the pursuit of a renewed social contract—between citizens and institutions, and among the general public—including through meaningful and inclusive participatory mechanisms.
 - Rethinking strategies to combat misinformation that do not rely solely on fact-checking and leverage grassroots initiatives and trusted actors.
 - Exploring lessons from various contexts across countries and engaging in international partnerships that demonstrate political will to combat division at the domestic and international levels.

SESSION 1

Navigating the Tides of Disinformation: Global trends in polarization and disinformation and their impact on social cohesion, democracy, and international cooperation

The first session sought to explore common factors and differences in the impacts of division and polarizing narratives and how they emerge at the local and global levels. Participants provided insights about primary factors fueling divisive narratives and polarization in their contexts; the role tech-amplified disinformation plays in exacerbating societal divisions, specific groups that stand to benefit or be targeted by polarizing narratives, and the role of the ecosystem in fueling these emerging narratives.





The global challenge of strategic division

- **Harmful polarization and the spread of divisive narratives represent a truly global challenge**, affecting all regions of the world. Polarization and divisions are fueled by grievances, often exploited through intentional and polarizing strategies, exacerbated by the widespread dissemination of tech-amplified disinformation. With many grievances being shared across borders, and in particular—economic or identity-related ones—it is not unusual that polarizing narratives and divisive messages are exported to different countries.
- **A common political strategy emerges across diverse contexts: “Strategically Divisive Narratives”** serve as deliberate rhetorical devices that pit groups against each other by scapegoating and demonizing specific groups and identities, aiming to distract, divide, and disempower communities. Strategic division poses a significant threat to democracy by eroding trust in institutions and fostering distrust among different groups, resulting in social fragmentation and a pluralism deficit. This often leads to instances where people vote against their own fundamental rights and material interests that are shared across groups. Furthermore, it serves to justify regressive policies and the erosion of democratic institutions.
- **The targets of division and societal fragmentation vary across contexts and evolve over time, even within the same country.** In some contexts, divisions are fostered between majority and minority ethnic and religious groups. In others, tensions are inflamed between conservative and progressive social values and perspectives. Moreover, single-issue grievances often expand to encompass broader anti-authority, anti-globalist sentiments and even conspiracy theories. This trend is accompanied by a perceived increase in international and foreign interference, alongside the propagation of conspiracy theories regarding multilateral institutions.
- **A global playbook of divide-and-rule tactics becomes evident as similar strategies are exchanged, mimicked, and supported across borders.** Political leaders play a central role in spreading dis/misinformation and normalizing divisive rhetoric, a trend exacerbated during the pandemic. The cross-border collaboration underscores the global scope of the disinformation challenge.

Division is in part driven by genuine grievances

- **Divisive narratives wield considerable influence because they are often connected to genuine fears and insecurities** caused by pressing economic issues such as inflation, housing affordability, and the rising cost-of-living intertwined with group-based grievances, a loss of belonging and feelings of dislocation. Most of these issues have been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent rise in the cost of living. Governments are seen as not delivering. When governments fail to deliver, the social contract between the government and the people breaks apart, leading to decreased trust in institutions, poor political participation and weakened social cohesion—rendering societies more vulnerable to disinformation, divisive narratives, and anti-pluralist sentiments. These, in turn, drive harmful and/or exclusionary policies.



- **Divisive narratives offer convenient scapegoats to blame** people's economic and group-based grievances, fear, and insecurity. For instance, we observe unevidenced narratives scapegoating the lack of affordable housing and limited access to healthcare by targeting immigrants, even in countries with colonial histories where the majority are descendants of immigrants. **Consequently, blame seldom falls upon those most directly responsible, such as corporations and property developers.**
- **Division, intergroup conflict, and a diminished sense of belonging and respect are mutually reinforcing factors**, making it increasingly challenging to address socio-economic inequalities that require collective action. These intertwined dynamics perpetuate a cycle of discord and hinder efforts to foster inclusive societies and tackle systemic injustices.
- **Many democratic institutions are perceived as dysfunctional due to their failure to address diverse needs promptly or effectively.** Many individuals feel excluded from decision-making processes governing their lives, resulting in low engagement in elections and limited participation in policymaking and community initiatives. The erosion of civil society further exacerbates this disengagement. **Divisive narratives tap into the dissatisfaction by attacking various pillars of society.**

International divides

- Recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical crises like the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Sudan, have underscored disparities in global solidarity and humanitarian response, further fueling divisions between Western and the Global Majority countries.
- A notable feedback loop exists between domestic and international divides, where governments built on platforms of exclusion of certain groups backtrack on international commitments. Notably, numerous divides are surfacing within the UN, particularly regarding issues such as gender equality, financing, and human rights. This discord reflects the skepticism toward multilateralism exhibited by far-right governments, who nonetheless coordinate efforts to undermine human rights agendas.
- For instance, the 2023 UN resolution aimed at promoting democracy, typically passed without issue, encountered significant opposition as Russia and twenty other countries abstained. This resistance stemmed from objections to the inclusion of gender perspectives and references to sexual orientation.
- The impact of conflicts abroad reverberates within domestic spheres, sparking new conflicts and exacerbating existing ones, thereby blurring the lines between international and local dynamics. These ripple effects highlight the interconnectedness of global events and local realities, underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding that address both domestic and international dimensions.

The consequences of polarization and divisive narratives impacts

The impacts of division, disinformation, and polarization are profound and far-reaching, manifesting in various detrimental outcomes across societies and are difficult to detangle:

- **Societies and marginalized groups are increasingly at risk** as they are confronted with the transnational and national rollback of hard-won rights, especially in areas like minority



rights and gender equality. Online platforms have become breeding grounds for hate speech, characterized by a lack of civil discourse and emboldened expressions of aggression without filters or boundaries. **Affective polarization is on the rise in many contexts**, manifesting as heightened negative sentiments toward outgroups. The rise of hate crimes taking place in parallel with a rise in right-wing extremism underscores the escalation of societal tensions fueled by disinformation campaigns targeting outgroups.

- **Polarization at the elite level** leads to the breakdown of cross-party consensus and a diminishing diversity of viewpoints. There is a notable reluctance to entertain policies associated with opposing factions, narrowing the spectrum of acceptable ideas and solutions. This entrenched stance impedes constructive dialogue and undermines the collaborative spirit necessary for effective governance.
- **The resulting erosion of trust in institutions and between groups**, while sometimes stemming from legitimate concerns and systemic shortcomings, leads to the imposition of fundamentalist and exclusionary visions of society. The use of scapegoats to deflect blame and distract from regressive policies serves to advance the interest of a few over the benefits of all. The attacking of institutions and groups who champion democracy, human rights and pluralism are expressed with the intention not of contesting ideas and deepening democracy and participation but to lay the groundwork for authoritarian policies.

The impact of evolving social media and digital technologies

- **The pervasive nature of polarization and disinformation has been super-charged by new and evolving digital capacities (such as bot farms, deepfakes, and AI-generated content).** This synergy has established an infrastructure that accelerates, monetizes, and facilitates the artificial amplification of mis/disinformation. There must be a tailored approach on how to best combat and educate about mis/disinformation for various groups.
- **Harmful narratives, fake news stories, and hate speech spread rapidly across diverse social media and communication platforms**, reaching unprecedented numbers of individuals within minutes. This phenomenon poses significant challenges to containment efforts, particularly as fact-checking exerts only limited influence in polarized contexts and can often drive individuals into further separation.
- **Online dynamics have brought about a substantial shift in media and information consumption. Increasingly, people around the world source their news from social media and digital platforms**, underscoring its potency as a conduit for mis/disinformation, anti-rights movements, and divisive rhetoric. Moreover, in many contexts, local media has collapsed, and legacy media, in a bid to compete in the new attention economy, heavily relies on increasingly sensationalist, negative, and even fake news to remain competitive. The role of media in societies cannot be overstated, as representation in media plays a significant role in reinforcing public perceptions of who belongs in society. When the media relies heavily on sensationalist and insensitive approaches, negative attitudes about minorities are reinforced, and spaces for inclusion and social cohesion shrink.
- **The single-minded focus on the technology or digital platforms deflects attention from the deliberate, human-engineered motives.** Mainstream media has often been responsive to the interests of political elites, who remain central agents in influencing societal views independent



of technology. Furthermore, the relationship between polarization and misinformation is not linear. While it is commonly understood that mis/disinformation contributes to polarization, polarization can itself lead to the spread of mis/disinformation as groups seek explanations to justify their grievances.

Polarization may not be a useful term

- While the sense of polarization and entrenched divides is shared by many, the term “polarization” has emerged as a “catch-all term” encompassing various societal dynamics. Yet, an established and accepted definition remains elusive.
- **Exploring a useful definition for polarization reveals its nuanced nature; polarization isn’t inherently detrimental.** In many instances, it signifies a level of societal contestation essential for driving transformative movements like the civil rights and LGBTQIA+ equality campaigns. Notably, trends such as housing protests underscore how societal discontent can fuel positive change.
- **The prevailing discourse on polarization often fixates on American contexts, which possess a uniquely strict two-party system.** Evidence often emerges from polling data, particularly on contentious social issues such as support for trans rights, migration, and abortion, which delineate along strictly partisan lines. Many other countries exhibit less clear-cut societal rifts between two groups, often exhibiting plenty of shared interests, policy preferences and concerns. Perceptions of polarization—believing we are more divided than we are—may be driven by the proliferation of anger-inducing language in the political arena rather than a growing disagreement over policy visions.
- Additionally, envisioning a “depolarized society” is far from straightforward as it risks stifling dissenting voices. **The pursuit of social cohesion should not sacrifice the rights of marginalized groups.** In some seemingly less polarized societies, limited avenues for public dissent may obscure the true extent of societal divisions. In contrast, pluralist societies enable social cohesion and belonging to thrive while simultaneously allowing marginalized groups to express their grievances.
- **Neither democracy nor social cohesion inherently upholds principles of pluralism.** A driving force behind division and polarization, particularly in the erosion of democratic values, stems from tensions inherent in democratic societies. Majoritarianism is a prevalent issue in many countries, simplifying democracy to mere majority rule, or an ethnocracy, and often leading to ethnic outbidding that marginalizes minorities. In many contexts, the invisibility of certain groups is a deliberate choice.
- Furthermore, societal disagreement on issues like gender equality and minority rights poses a challenge in democratic societies. The suppression of discussions surrounding contentious topics leaves a void that divisive actors exploit. Encouraging open dialogue and creating spaces for nuanced discussions is essential to counteract harmful polarization and foster inclusive societies.



SESSION 2

Bridging Divides and Disrupting Disinformation: Exploring strategies, policies and best practices to counter disinformation and polarizing narratives and promote solidarity and pluralism.

The second session sought to identify innovative solutions and best practices effective in countering the trends of fragmentation and discord. For polarizing narratives that emerge at the local level but proliferate to a global scale, local and global solutions focused on collective actions, solidarity and whole-of-society approaches are likewise needed. Participants discussed initiatives from their own fields of expertise, strategies for fostering understanding across multi-polarized groups and identities, and best practices for building resilience and combating misinformation and tech-amplified disinformation. It became evident that for solutions to work, civil and constructive dialogue would be critical in addressing many of the divides between polarized groups.

Listening and encouraging constructive dialogue

- **Hate speech and mis/disinformation are often seen as markers of polarization, but merely removing them may not address underlying issues effectively.** Individuals banned from one platform may migrate to others, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies addressing underlying motivations. Combative or violent dialogues are not effective but rather drive further humiliation and isolation that strengthens and feeds into the allure of misinformation and polarizing narratives. From interpersonal conversations to national policymaking processes, listening attentively fosters a deeper comprehension of the issues fueling individuals' engagement with these narratives. This may also indicate that long-term solutions will need to factor in education for conducting these dialogues, including non-violent communication methodologies.
- While narratives of polarization highlight our divisions, **we need additional narratives that highlight the numerous points of overlap and consensus** that are shared across different groups. Instead of creating consensus, our focus should be on finding it within the diversity of perspectives. There are areas, such as foreign policy or housing, where agreement is possible. While spaces for dialogues set to dismantle hate are not always readily available, **emphasizing points of connection** helps break down barriers, fosters understanding and can serve as an entry point to more contentious conversations.
- **Solutions to polarization require fostering environments conducive to constructive discourse rather than merely suppressing speech.** Hate speech and polarization often reflect a deficit in civic discourse. Establishing spaces for constructive civil discourse, including mediation and judicial processes, is vital for promoting understanding and reconciliation. Promoting better speech, rather than silencing voices, is key to countering divisive narratives and promoting solidarity and pluralism. Developing the skills necessary for open dialogue is also increasingly important, to ensure that difficult conversations on polarizing issues are performed in an informed and respectful way.
- **Lessons can be drawn from peacebuilding endeavors to bring about reconciliation at a larger scale.** Engaging various actors in dialogue is essential to avoid a sense of opposition and promote inclusive discourse. Social dialogues, citizens' assemblies, and participatory processes



such as deliberative democracy, offer avenues for generating dialogues and fostering greater societal ownership.

- **Political leaders must demonstrate courage** by confronting difficult topics rather than avoiding them, as avoiding discomfort only perpetuates division. Our inability to manage differences underscores the urgent need for platforms dedicated to facilitating constructive conversations.

The role of good government

- **The role of government requires a renewal of the social contract between the government and the people** to turn the tide of high levels of distrust and frustration; it also needs to encompass a social contract among the people themselves.
- **There needs to be a focus on addressing people's material needs**, including housing, employment, and public services, in a manner that benefits all groups. Targeted universalism can help ensure all communities are provided for without singling out marginalized communities and help to build solidarity and common purpose across society.
- **A holistic, whole-of-society approach is essential** for fostering solidarity and a sense of belonging while addressing everyday challenges that harm communities. This approach includes embedding religious moderation, Indigenous recognition and reparations, and anti-racism programs within national development agendas to support local initiatives that create conducive spaces for respectful dialogue and meaningful engagement. Addressing challenges and narratives that continue to disproportionately impact historically marginalized groups can work to re-build the social contract.
- **Embracing deeper participatory practices and bottom-up approaches** is crucial in addressing the growing frustration with democracy worldwide. These address individuals' innate desire to feel valued, heard, and included in societal processes. Communities most affected by policies should be actively involved in the decision-making process to foster ownership and a profound sense of belonging. This participatory approach should also extend to content moderation, with community guidelines reflecting local traditions and speech patterns.

Tackling tech-amplified disinformation

- **Drawing lessons from the proliferation of misinformation during the pandemic**, efforts to combat misinformation must be comprehensive and address both online and offline platforms. For instance, initiatives in Canada were undertaken to counter misinformation attributing blame to Asian communities for the pandemic, involving the collaboration of various regional departments and local organizations in sensitizing the population, yielding significant success.
- **Fact-checking alone is insufficient and often does not result in behavioral or belief change**; instead, there is a need for strategies that sensitize individuals to the possibility of deception or division, fostering a mindset of critical thinking and skepticism. When bots, AI, and fake news campaigns can disseminate dis/misinformation at a faster pace than fact checkers are able to counter them, placing them at a clear disadvantage, it is clear that we need new solutions that counter modern-day problems.
- **Building trust is paramount, with emphasis placed on the role of trusted messengers within communities**. Identifying individuals perceived as trustworthy and integral to their communities and engaging them in disseminating accurate information is crucial for fostering trust and credibility.



- **Grassroots technological solutions play a pivotal role in addressing mis/disinformation**, with initiatives like [Build Up](#)'s program which engages communities to understand their susceptibility to specific content but also, the similar points of views and perspectives that groups typically pitted against each other may share. This shift from technical solutions to personalized approaches facilitates a deeper understanding of community dynamics and vulnerabilities. The importance of supporting groups in finding common ground cannot be understated, as it can play a significant role in building intergroup trust and helping communities become less susceptible to polarization.

What can we learn from each other?

- **Collaboration among diverse stakeholders (across contexts, sectors, disciplines, and communities) is essential for collectively addressing prevalent issues.** This necessitates self-reflection, fostering creativity, and analyzing existing gaps to devise innovative solutions.
- **Exploring lessons from various contexts provides valuable insights.** For instance, examining South Africa's approach to public participation in parliamentary processes, as highlighted by the International Parliamentary Union (IPU), offers opportunities for cross-contextual learning. The highly participatory process that the African National Congress undertook to ensure that everyone's concerns were heard, despite not all being incorporated into the Constitution. The time implications of this process also show us that long-lasting and effective solutions that foster social cohesion will not happen overnight but rather over the course of progressive and sustainable policy decisions and initiatives which may take years.
- **Fostering strategic international partnerships can drive impactful solutions.** Initiatives like the 2021 North American Partnership for Equity and Justice, involving Canada, the US, and Mexico demonstrate the potential for fostering collaborative efforts on a global scale to promote equity and justice. Strengthening such partnerships can enhance collective action and amplify the impact of initiatives aimed at addressing societal challenges.

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