From Rhetoric to Reality

Uncovering Strategic Division and the Linkages Between Polarization and Inequality

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PATHFINDERS

FOR PEACEFUL, JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

HOSTED BY THE NYU CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

About the Author

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Acknowledgments

About Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies

Pathfinders was founded in 2016 by Brazil, Sierra Leone, and Switzerland as a multistakeholder partnership currently involving 46 member states to promote the peace, justice, equality and inclusion goals in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The partnership has three "Grand Challenges" on access to justice, violence prevention, and inequality and exclusion. The Pathfinders' Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion seeks to identify practical, politically viable solutions to combat inequality, exclusion, and divisions at the national and international levels and advocate for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda targets for more equitable and inclusive societies (SDG16+). The Pathfinders is hosted at New York University's Center on International Cooperation.

About the Grand Challenge on Inequality & Exclusion

Inequality and exclusion stand out as some of the most pressing political issues of our time, steadily on the rise. The growing discontent felt by citizens towards elites perceived as disconnected from their realities constitutes a potent political force. Policymakers and the public are demanding a comprehensive set of policy options that can halt and reverse this trend. The Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion aims to identify practical and politically feasible solutions to meet the targets in the Sustainable Development Goals for building equitable and inclusive societies. Our primary objective is to catalyze action among national governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society, urging them to bolster their commitments and adopt solutions that advance equality and inclusion.

For further information on policy solutions to address inequality, please visit our online portal, InequalitySolutions.com.

About this Publication

About the Bridging the Divides and Countering Polarization Initiative

In 2021, the Grand Challenge on Inequality and Exclusion released its flagship report, **"From Rhetoric to Action: Delivering Equality and Inclusion."** The report draws on the lived experiences and policy experiences from across the world to assess how countries and communities can indeed sustain progress towards inclusive and equal societies. Since then, we have consistently heard from policymakers, civil society, and political actors that one of the emerging challenges is the pervasive impact of divisive narratives, backlash, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Whether it was recognizing Indigenous communities in legal documents, plans to implement a transformative climate agenda, policies to advance gender equality, increasing public investments, or providing safe passage and resources to forcibly displaced people—narratives that sow discord between groups, create a backlash and normalize prejudice and hate derailed these efforts. This rhetoric translates into detrimental policies at the domestic and international level, posing a significant threat to social cohesion, solidarity, and democracies. The concerns are not just limited to policymaking but also about the impact on communities, as the pervasive sense of fragmentation, polarization, anger, and tension appears to be symptomatic of deeper societal inequalities. In the past decade, the world has witnessed a concerning surge in divisive narratives, disinformation, and escalating polarization—both online and offline.

In a time when multilateralism and international cooperation are faltering, and faith in our political and economic systems is low, we face polycrises that no country acting alone can resolve. It is imperative that we proactively shift the dynamics from polarization to solidarity, inequality to inclusion, and fear to hope. In response to these concerns Pathfinders has convened over 100 policymakers, civil society representatives, and experts from more than 35 countries for **wide-ranging dialogues** on these issues since fall 2022. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics, meetings were conducted under the Chatham House rule and behind closed doors to allow for honest reflection among participants. The similarities in challenges faced by communities and policymakers in vastly different contexts were striking.

While much of the literature in this emerging field is biased towards the United States and the English-speaking countries, this new report is informed by first-hand experiences and dialogues from all regions of the world and aims to contribute to three objectives:

1. Provide an analytical framework for understanding the emerging context of fragmentation, polarization, and disinformation.

2. Identify the factors that make societies, communities, and individuals vulnerable to divisive forces.

3. Offer a framework for countering fragmentation, bridging divides, and building more resilient communities.

Executive Summary

"We are living in an age of polarization. Among communities and across regions, people are being driven apart by rising inequality, escalating conflicts, and record-breaking climate shocks. Misinformation and a breakdown of trust are tearing the social fabric and reducing space for meaningful public discourse."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, March 13, 2024, speaking at the launch of the 2024 Human Development Report.

Amid the economic, climate, and health crises, in addition to deteriorating socio-economic conditions and escalating conflicts in many contexts around the world, **societies are facing a new major threat: fragmentation**. That is, many societies are experiencing a mixture of increased divisions at various levels of society characterized by worsening polarization, not merely along partisan lines, but across various groups. In addition, the prevalence of hate speech and violence, intermixed with a heightened sense of discord, the resurgence of marginalization for some communities, and widespread insecurity, distrust, and hardship, has resulted in a fracturing both at the political and community level. In a time when we need to work together more than ever, the era of soundbites, disinformation, and reactionary rhetoric makes thoughtful debate and dialogue, consensus-building, and coalition formation increasingly difficult.

For instance, V-Dem data finds that polarization has increased in almost every region since 2005, and the Edelman Barometer (2023) reveals a widespread belief across 28 countries that the social fabric holding countries together has grown too weak to serve as a foundation for unity and common purpose. Increasingly, anti-rights, anti-equality, and anti-democratic movements are gaining traction worldwide. Simultaneously, the existing norms, laws, standards, and enforcement mechanisms that prevent hate speech and hate crimes in many countries seem to be eroding, becoming part of a troubling "new normal." The 2023/24 Human Development Report stated, "We are at an unfortunate crossroads. Polarization and distrust are on a collision course with an ailing planet." Confidence in our ability to collectively address climate change, resolve conflicts, and achieve sustainable development for all is eroded when building consensus, even on the most fundamental aspects of decision-making, seems impossible. To make matters worse, patience is running out. There are high levels of distrust towards leaders in government, media, business, and non-governmental organizations.

This fragmentation has not occurred in a vacuum. Promises of progress in the last few decades, such as the United Nations "leave no one behind" ethos and the World Bank's "shared prosperity" approach, have not been realized. Nowhere is this clearer than with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a recent estimate found that only 12 percent of the SDGs are on track to being achieved by 2030, with the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report stating that progress on the goals amounts to "stagnation in the face of multiple crises." Since the 1990s, inequality has sharply risen in most countries, leading to unfulfilled expectations and growing insecurity for the global majority. According to the 2022-23 Global Wage Report, global real monthly wages fell on average in 2022, marking the first decline in real earnings in the twenty-first century. Against a backdrop of multiple and converging crises and rapid changes, global survey data reveals two-thirds of people feel insecure, half feel they have no, or limited, control over their lives, and over two-thirds believe they have little influence on their government's decisions.

The narratives we tell to make sense of this moment hold the potential to instill hope, encourage empathy, and promote solutions, but they can also be **wielded as weapons** to sew further discord. As inequalities within and between countries rise, there has also been a concomitant rise in divisive narratives and tech-amplified disinformation used to pit people, identities, and even policies against one another. Whether these narratives foment backlash against gender equality, break consensus around climate action, or incite hatred due to differences in race, place, or faith—there are striking similarities across contexts. Today's media and information ecosystem is conducive to "divisive entrepreneurs"—actors who trade in hate, fear, and blame—to transform certain issues, often rooted in identity, into flashpoints for division. These divisive strategies pave the way for rolling back hard-won rights and existing legal frameworks while undermining efforts to implement inclusive and sustainable policy agendas. This rhetoric can translate into detrimental policies at the domestic and international levels, posing a significant threat to social cohesion, solidarity, and democracies. The concerns are not just limited to policymaking but also about the impact on communities, as the pervasive sense of polarization, anger, and tension appears to be symptomatic of deeper societal inequalities and frustrations.

Our inquiry begins here.

This paper aims to disentangle the threads of escalating global fragmentation, the dynamics fueling it, and emerging solutions to counteract its adverse effects. This work stems from listening to the recurring concerns and challenges from policymakers and civil society about navigating the emerging backlash, division, and disinformation when pursuing inclusive policy agendas. Whether it is to recognize Indigenous communities in legal documents, plans to implement a transformative climate agenda, policies to advance gender equality, increase public investments, or provide safe passage and resources to people on the move—divisive narratives are derailing these efforts. This report attempts to understand why and how different communities, actors, and policy

agendas are being undermined in similar ways. Although these are difficult times, numerous solutions, actionable strategies, and dedicated communities are addressing these challenges—if we know where to look. We aim to highlight successful examples of tackling disinformation, bridging divides, and driving the desperately needed change.

Navigating the Twin Storms of Inequality and Polarization

In **Chapter One**, we explore how populations worldwide face intensified divides in access to resources and power, along with pervasive societal rifts often more associated with identity than policy. Central to this paper is the argument that these twin trends of increasing inequalities and polarization are interconnected, both of which may undermine the trust and confidence we have in each other as well as in our political and economic systems. The inequality statistics examined indicate a lack of progress over the past century in reducing inequalities and underscore the trend of economic power (re)consolidating in the hands of a few at the expense of the majority.

Since the 2010s, there has been a surge in global protests and social unrest. Key moments include the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, the climate strikes, and when 250 million Indian workers and farmers went on strike in 2020— the biggest organized strike in human history. Yet despite these historic mobilizations, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen more inequality, not less. Additionally, we've witnessed a crackdown on civic and political freedoms in almost every country. It is no wonder that trust in political leaders is at an all-time low.

As inequalities increase, polarization has simultaneously become a growing concern, with **several major studies and figures identifying dangerous levels of division**. While "polarization" has become the buzzword to describe the divisive nature of recent times, the data and the dynamics of contemporary politics reveal a more complex picture. While perception surveys reveal strong beliefs that certain groups are in conflict and that societies see themselves as more divided than ever, this reality coexists with significant common ground. Multiple studies find that a majority of people share worries and desire comparable societal outcomes. Yet, this consensus is rarely highlighted in public discourse.

While there is evidence and observations of growing ideological polarization particularly in the political class, a growing body of research identifies "false polarization" and "misperceptions'' as crucial factors in levels of polarization in the public, showing that we often incorrectly assume we have less in common than we actually do. Despite the data, narratives of shared interests, solidarity, and collective goals are noticeably lacking, instead drowned out by stories of division and conflict. Whether it's anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQI+, anti-gender discourse, Islamophobia, various strands of ethno-nationalism, or the so-called "war on woke"—adversarial narratives that scapegoat, inflame prejudice, and weaponize differences have become incredibly commonplace.

Unveiling Strategic Division—The Power Play Behind Societal Divides

In **Chapter Two**, we aim to make sense of the complex milieu described by examining why these trends have emerged and how division, and to some extent inequalities, are perpetuated. We introduce the concept of "strategic division," which builds on Ian Haney López's notion of "strategic racism." López explicates in "Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class" that strategic racism differs from hate-based and structural racism as the driving force is "not racial animus for its own sake or brutalizing nonwhites out of hate; it is the pursuit of power, money, and/or status." Expanding on that same logic, this paper suggests that "**Strategic Division**" are productive political strategies seeking to divide, distract, and disempower communities through the **exploitation of our differences**—be it race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, geography, or occupation—**and anxieties** stemming from the current political and economic system in order to achieve certain ends. For some, the insecurity is driven by material and economic grievances, including unmet aspirations, while for others, it stems from the rapid pace of changes in norms, demographics, technology, or urbanization and a fear of losing status or belonging relative to other groups. Whether anxieties are deemed legitimate or not, the fear people feel is real, and it is being exploited. These divisive strategies are not merely motivated by prejudice and hate but are fueled by political ambition and the desire to protect or expand financial gain that do not benefit the global majority.

But first, a caveat. The introduction of the concept of strategic division aims not to homogenize the heterogeneous nature of anti-rights trends and polarizing rhetoric nor to imply that this phenomenon manifests identically in every nation. Specificities are highly localized and context-dependent, as are the impacts and solutions. Despite cross-border collaborations, variations in ideology, motivations, and ambitions exist, albeit with significant overlaps in maintaining power and hierarchy, consolidating resources, and undermining human rights and democratic principles. Analyzing how strategic division unfolds in specific contexts exceeds the scope of this paper. Rather, we aim to recognize that an interlocking set of powers is hurting different groups of people in similar ways and to identify the commonality of divisive narratives that manipulate much of public discourse driven by the pursuit of political and economic incentives, therefore driving inequality and exclusion of certain groups.

Moreover, this is ultimately nothing new. For centuries, elite actors have used "divide-and-rule" strategies to sow discord and maintain power and resources. Today, these motives intersect with the transformation of our information ecosystem, creating a fresh new infrastructure of incentives and opportunities. Modern digital capabilities enhance this age-old tactic, creating an infrastructure that accelerates and monetizes the spread of disinformation. This development introduces new actors into the media landscape, presenting novel ways to interfere with political processes, and has undermined the principles of participation and informed political engagement.

We examine the various motivations observed behind engaging in strategic division across different contexts, which include mobilizing support, dominating discourse, and using disingenuous populist rhetoric to legitimize regressive policy agendas. Crucially, these divisive strategies enable political elites to disproportionately shape the narratives around societal problems and their solutions. Hence, Chapter Two focuses on the **"playbook" of strategic division**, perpetuated through **"Strategically Divisive Narratives" (SDNs)**.

Bringing together insights from psychologists, cognitive linguists, experts and the first-hand experience of policymakers and changemakers, we identify the common threads of the strategic division "playbook." They are fear-based narratives that perpetuate an "us versus them" mentality, framing societal problems as a zero-sum game between an "in-group" victimized by an "out-group." This is true of many political narratives; what distinguishes an SDN is the perverse use of identity to break coalitions, to encourage segments of the population to identify with an exclusionary form on an identity (e.g., your gender, ignoring the intersectionality of race, class, nationality, gender diversity, sexuality, disability for example) while describing the "out-group" as a threat. These narratives manipulate public perception, serving as a form of disinformation that primarily benefits a select few. Regardless of the specificities of the narrative, the result is always to distract attention from rising inequalities of wealth and power, and divert attention from common interests between diverse middle- and working-class groups.

Understanding how SDNs function is critical for several reasons. Firstly, to avoid **replicating divisive tactics within political parties** and movements, we need to understand what they are. We need to reject the politics of hate and fear and equip policymakers with tools to navigate the new political reality marked by disillusionment, disinformation, and backlash. Secondly, we need to **recognize the power dynamics shaping public discourse** by highlighting the role of divisive entrepreneurs as agitators. It also encourages us to question whether conflicts and grievances (and the narratives used to describe it) attributed to grassroots origins or "the people" are genuinely emergent and to what extent they are manufactured. Thirdly, we hope to highlight the **connections between various "anti-rights" narratives and their movements**. By doing so, we can avoid falling into binaries and clashes created by divisive entrepreneurs and instead call out strategic division for what it truly is.

Mapping Vulnerability: Factors Fueling Susceptibility to Strategic Division

While there have always been those who seek to sow discord, **Chapter Three** examines five compounding factors that may increase societies, communities, and individuals' susceptibility to strategic division. These include:

1. **High and rising vertical inequalities** create power imbalances, unmet needs, and significant—and unnecessary— suffering for the global majority. The existence of a super-wealthy class poses a major obstacle to meeting the needs of the broader

populace and results in a minority having undue influence over our understanding of the world, as a handful of conglomerates have disproportionate control of much of what we see, hear, and read online.

2. **Societies with entrenched hierarchical structures** determined by place, race, gender, class, caste, religion, sexuality, disability, and other characteristics create tangible divides, power imbalances, and divergent lived experiences. These conditions may not only weaken social solidarity and empathy across groups, but when access to respect and resources is tied to identity, divisive entrepreneurs can exploit heightened anxiety over potential shifts in societal norms or challenges to the hierarchy as a threat to dominant groups. Moreover, the lack of truth and reconciliation processes and insufficient education on historical injustices allow prejudice and demonization of already marginalized groups to persist, providing a ripe environment for divisive entrepreneurs to tap into.

3. **The current context of polycrisis**—convergence of multiple crises that might encompass threats of conflict, environmental degradation, economic distress, and institutional failures—aggravates perceptions and experiences of insecurity, pessimism, and fear. All of these are potent emotions that can be exploited as people search for answers and solutions.

4. **Decades of broken promises and the failures of governments** and multilateral institutions to address crises and historic injustices for a multitude of reasons has eroded public trust and exacerbated disenfranchisement. It has been evident in many contexts that the electorate wants change. Divisive entrepreneurs often exploit this frustration by offering convenient scapegoats and using disingenuous populist rhetoric about standing up to some form of "the establishment" for "the people." Meanwhile, they divert attention from underlying causes and frequently attack institutions not to improve but to dismantle them altogether.

5. **Emerging and largely unregulated technologies** have significantly catalyzed societal division and the mass spread of misinformation and disinformation. Few countries have incorporated up-to-date media literacy into national strategies, leaving people of all ages ill-equipped to navigate this increasingly complex landscape. Meanwhile, the integrity of journalism, access to quality information, local news and independent media has been greatly undermined.

While these five dynamics are by no means exhaustive and certainly differ across contexts, together, they appear to contribute to a complex, fertile landscape for divisive entrepreneurs to exploit for their own agendas. Understanding these factors is crucial to bolstering community resilience against divisive forces. As these issues persist or worsen, public disillusionment and skepticism towards leadership will grow. While these five dynamics are by no means exhaustive and certainly differ across contexts, together, they appear to contribute to a complex, fertile landscape for divisive entrepreneurs to exploit

for their own agendas. Understanding these factors is crucial to bolstering community resilience against divisive forces.

Tackling Division at its Core: Comprehensive Policy Interventions

We have yet to find all the answers to address these explosive political dynamics facing countries in every region of the world, and while there is no single solution to these problems, in **Chapter Four,** we present a preliminary framework of policy interventions designed to address both the symptoms and root causes of strategic division. Rather than suggesting that progress requires addressing everything everywhere all at once, this framework advocates for a dual approach:

1. **Interventions that counteract and disrupt the mechanisms of strategic division**. This policy menu includes interventions to reduce the financial incentives for strategic division, promotes social dialogue and conflict resolution, reduces elite influence over information ecosystems by supporting independent, diverse, and local media, and invests in media literacy and anti-disinformation campaigns.

2. **Interventions targeting the underlying factors that make societies susceptible** to strategic division that alleviate stress in people's lives and equitably rebalance our economies and political systems while considering the political challenges of implementing such transformations. Focusing solely on polarization and disinformation is akin to treating the symptoms while neglecting the root causes. This approach is bound to fall short as vulnerabilities persist and divisive actors continue to operate.

Finally, we come full circle. This inquiry began in response to policymakers highlighting the challenges that polarization, division, and divisive narratives pose to implementing policies aimed at creating more equal and inclusive societies. We need to reject the politics of hate and fear. Instead, we equip policymakers with three overarching strategies to navigate the new and evolving political reality marked by precarity, disinformation, and backlash. This includes:

1. **"Targeted Universalism" may be an effective approach to inclusive policymaking** that combines policies benefiting a wide range of societal groups, including majority ethnic/religious working and middle-class populations, alongside targeted interventions to deliver for marginalized and minority communities. This strategy helps avoid zero-sum frames and an "us versus them" mentality. Shared material and political concerns can be leveraged to bolster social solidarity through collective projects that engage a broad swath of the population, using targeted approaches to tailor policies to specific groups.

2. To achieve politically viable and sustainable policymaking, we need **people-centered, inclusive, and forward-thinking approaches**. Proactively addressing

potential unintended consequences during the design phase can facilitate broader acceptance and implementation of policies. This must include anticipating potential backlash or disinformation and taking proactive steps to counter it. Rapid policy advancements often encounter resistance due to public concerns about relative winners and losers, which can be exploited. Therefore, policymakers must actively engage with communities, facilitate more dialogue, and listen to the people affected by the policy. Policies must be sensitized to both the immediate and broader impacts, recognize blind spots, and remain open to revising their analysis based on feedback.

3   **Policymaking is as much about winning the battle of hearts and minds as delivery**. While there are practical examples of constructive political narratives, they are far from the norm. Our messaging often remains entrenched in unhelpful narratives that suit agitators, such as portraying issues as zero-sum games, framing issues as a crisis and threat, leaning into scapegoating, or inadvertently amplifying SDNs by repeating them in order to negate them, and in doing so, further reinforce them. While others rely on legalistic and statistical jargon, cost-benefit analysis, and human rights terminology which fail to appeal to people's emotional experiences and fire up the public imagination. To rebuild trust and halt the spread of polarization, governments need to articulate and substantiate stronger narratives about the future of their nations and how policies are the stepping stones to realizing that. We conclude this chapter with several key principles from real-world case studies, including:

- **Engaging** communities to co-create messaging that resonates and is contextualized to their daily lives.
- **Lead with values, not problems**: Values-based messaging engages people's better selves—who they aspire to be. Starting a message by establishing the fundamental things most of us have in common and building a sense of "us" around those shared values is essential for countering divisive narratives.
- **Combining material and identity** concerns is essential because issues of identity and economic well-being are often treated separately despite being intimately connected. Speaking directly about identity is frequently avoided out of fear of alienating certain audiences, which creates a vacuum that "divisive entrepreneurs" can fill. Strategic communications research indicates that explicitly naming identities, especially those groups often portrayed as adversaries, as sharing in a value can help foster unity.
- **Create something good, don't merely oppose something bad**. When it comes to describing policy objectives, the language of "fixing" "reforming," or "improving" tends to be employed which focuses on the negative. Instead, describe the good outcome the policy will bring about to fire-up the target audience's imagination (e.g., "people are paid enough to make ends meet" rather than "minimum wage").
- **Ensuring that the right messengers**, who resonate with the target audience, are delivering the messages for effective communication.

While implementing electoral or political codes of conduct may be unrealistic, policymakers, advocates, and experts across civil society, international and governmental institutions concerned with social justice and inclusive policy should commit to **non-divisive communication strategies.** This involves rejecting approaches that scapegoat, excessively use crisis and threat language, or frame issues as zero-sum games, even incidentally. Increasingly tested messaging shows that clear explanations of how divisive tactics distract from policy failures or harmful choices and identifying those who use these tactics are effective. Leaders must not only **call out hate speech but also strategic division as a form of disinformation**. This approach undermines efforts to sow discord by exposing and, therefore, potentially inoculating the public about their tactics rather than engaging in direct conflict.

In this race against time, addressing challenges like inequality, climate change, and the proliferation of disinformation requires a unified effort. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly emphasized the need for **enhanced cross-regional international cooperation and collaboration**, and the swift exchange of effective strategies from community organizers to UN leaders. We need more collaborative endeavors involving diverse stakeholders from various regions, contexts, sectors, disciplines, and communities. By breaking down silos of knowledge and expertise and drawing international attention to these pressing concerns, the world can collectively strive to improve global standards in combating division.

While the mechanisms and solutions to societal fragmentation are complex, there is comfort in the understanding that this challenge is not unique to any single nation or community but is shared. By shedding light on these issues, we can pave the way for solutions—together. As demonstrated in this report and the dialogues that preceded it, numerous individuals, communities, and initiatives are dedicated to innovating and meeting the challenges of our time, bridging divides with the conviction that our strength is amplified when we stand together. We hope this paper can contribute in some small way to these efforts.

And in the words of Nelson Mandela, "It always seems impossible until it's done."

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