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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

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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](https://inequalitysolutions.com).

About this Publication

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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.

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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.”

1 Navigating the Twin Storms of Inequality and Polarization

In recent years we have witnessed a notable surge in inequality, polarization, and the proliferation of divisive narratives and disinformation across diverse socio-political contexts. Countries worldwide face intensified divides and amplified rhetoric that undermines governance, democracy, and collective solidarity. This section aims to map out the evolving political landscape by recognizing the complexity of these issues and examining the parallel trends of increasing inequalities, polarization, and social fragmentation. As this is an emerging field, we take a brief look at the data to untangle the various factors contributing to the generalized perception of increasing societal fragmentation. We explore global trends in perceptions of division, academic studies on different types of polarization—including false polarization driven by misperceptions and affective polarization characterized by negative feelings toward other groups—elite-level political polarization (defined here as ideological or partisan differences among politicians), current data on trust and polarization, and the impact of the digital revolution on polarization.



1.1 Growing inequalities and social unrest

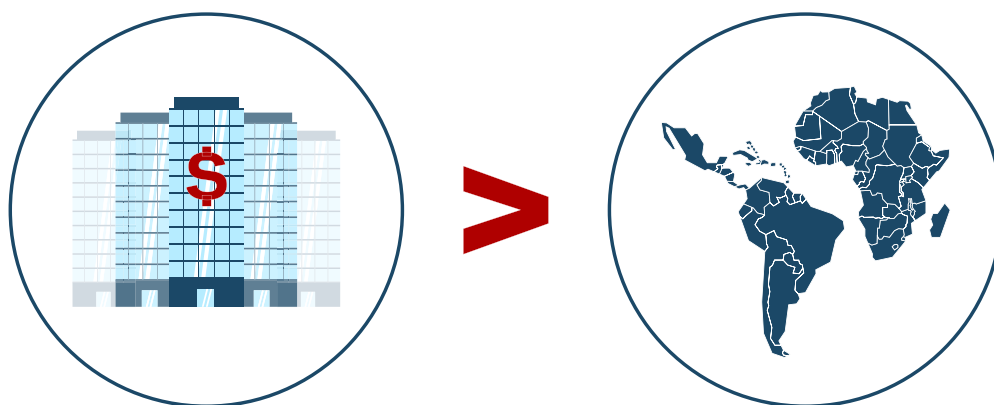
Despite increasing convergence in people's incomes **between** countries in the last two decades, **within-country** inequality has deepened worldwide. Global inequalities are close to the levels seen in the early twentieth century, when Western imperialism was at its peak, predominantly benefiting middle and upper classes at the expense of the poor and working classes around the world.¹ According to the 2022 World Inequality Report, within-country inequality has risen in every region of the world, apart from Europe.² In many regions, the share of the bottom 50 percent in total earnings is less than 15

percent, while the share of the wealthiest 10 percent is over 40 percent and approaching 60 percent in some. The gap between the average incomes of the top 10 percent and the bottom 50 percent within countries has almost doubled from 8.5 times to 15 times since 2002.³ Wealth disparities are even more pronounced: the bottom 50 percent of the global population holds a mere two percent of total global wealth, whereas the top 10 percent commands a staggering 76 percent. The statistics indicate a lack of progress over the past century and underscore the trend of economic power consolidating in the hands of a few.

In fact, historical data from the World Inequality Database⁴ shows that while the global Gini coefficient was at its peak in 2000, in-between country inequality started to decline for twenty years up until 2020, largely due to the growth of fast-growing emerging economies such as China and India.⁵ A separate analysis of income growth for each ventile of the global income distribution over twenty years (from 1988 to 2008)—resulting in the famous Elephant Curve—by Lakner and Milanovic,⁶ found that globalization largely benefitted the global elite (particularly the top 1 percent) and the global middle-class (mainly in middle-income countries, particularly in Asia). Alvaredo et al. confirmed these findings in their 2018 study,⁷ which found that the top one percent captured twice as much of the total growth each year as the bottom 50 percent from 1980 to 2016. At the same time, the incomes of the global upper middle-class (based largely on advanced economies) have stagnated, indicating zero growth over two decades. In the meantime, the global extreme poor continue to be left behind. It has been postulated that the frustrations of this **upper** middle-class have been channeled into populist politics in wealthier countries.⁸

These factors have resulted in a context where the combined wealth of the five largest corporations now surpasses the gross domestic product (GDP) of all African and Latin American countries. Since 2020, the world's five wealthiest men have more than doubled their fortunes—at a rate of USD 14 million per hour. Millions of workers around the world

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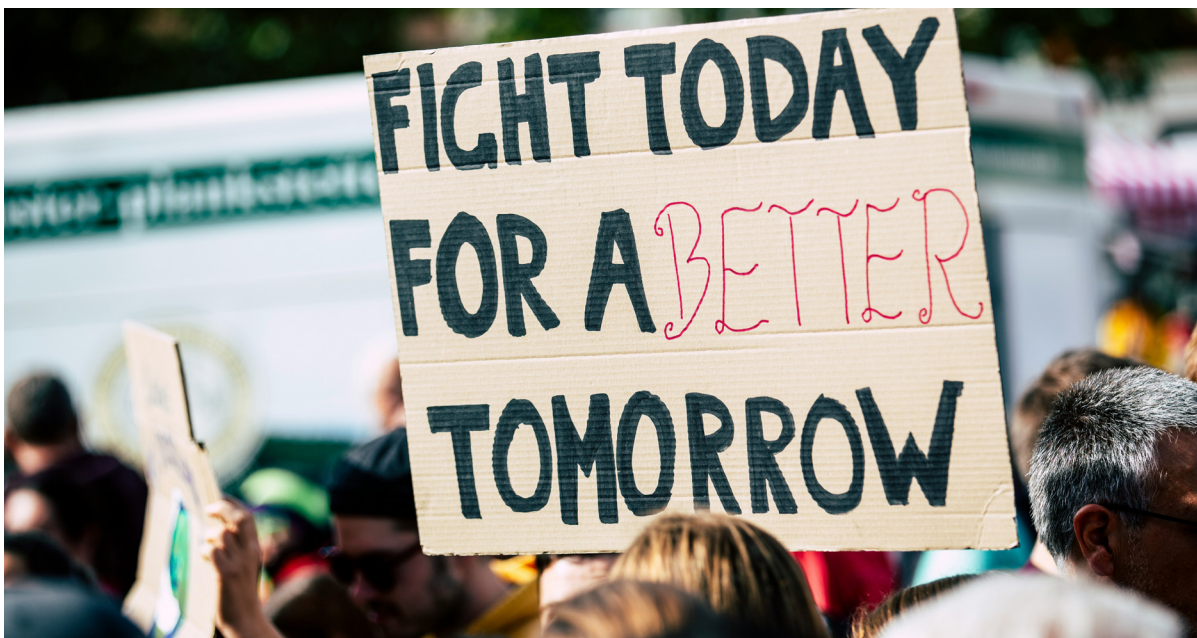


are experiencing reductions in real wages,⁹ and half of the world's population is already forced to survive on less than USD 7 a day.¹⁰

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2010s had already witnessed an unprecedented surge in global protests, ignited by pivotal events such as the bank-induced 2008 global financial crash and subsequent austerity measures imposed around the world. From the early 2010s, movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street mobilized more people than ever to demand equality, justice, and a better life. And yet, the proceeding decade saw more inequality, not less. The needs of many communities continue to go unmet and the vast majority of countries are experiencing democratic erosion. Currently, only two percent of humanity resides in open countries where civic space is both free and protected.⁴

Since the pandemic, the situation has worsened. Communities have protested against key economic and political trends, including fiscal austerity (Argentina, Belgium, and the European Union), the rising cost-of-living—including the lack of affordable housing (Pakistan, Portugal, and Slovenia), monetary policies (Ghana and Nigeria), pension reforms (France), and corruption (Croatia, Guatemala). There have also been massive protests motivated by group-based grievances, ranging from youth-led movements demanding climate action across 125 countries to the Black Lives Matter protests—which mobilized an estimated 25 million people in the US to demand racial equality—to massive gender equality protests in Iran and the world's largest farmer's protest in India, among many others across the world.

It is no wonder that today that trust in political leaders and institutions is at a low and the perception that democracies and leaders are unresponsive—or even hostile—to the needs and aspirations of their populations is widespread.

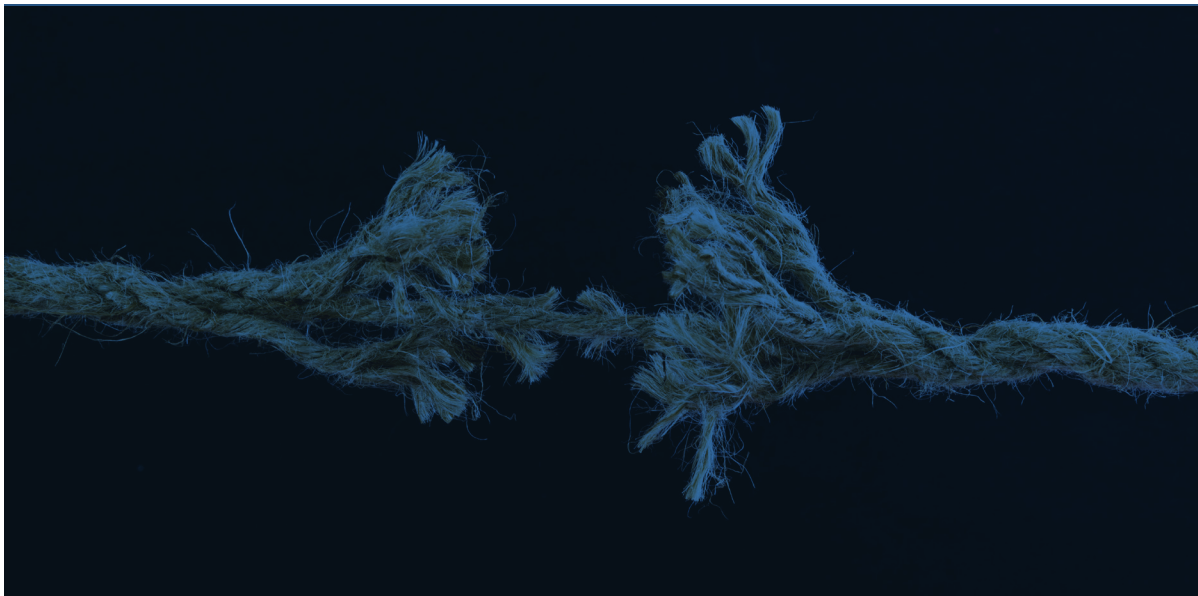


1.2 Trends in polarization

1.2.1 Relevant global trends

As inequalities increase, polarization has simultaneously become a growing concern. Many have suggested there is a positive correlation between inequality and polarization.¹¹ For example, using the World Values Survey, one study suggests that the association between economic inequality and political polarization is not only statistically significant but also economically meaningful, finding that a 0.1 increase in the Gini coefficient will lead to a 4–8 percent increase in political polarization.¹²

Unsurprisingly, a society marked by escalating inequality faces the danger of eroding public trust in institutions and growing polarization, which may destabilize the pillars of domestic and global governance. The Edelman Trust Barometer finds a deepening distrust among individuals towards government, media, business, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).¹³ The Barometer also identified that six countries are severely polarized, including Argentina, Colombia, the US, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden where the majority of people across the 28 countries surveyed believe their country is more divided than in the past.¹⁴ In particular, clear majorities in the Netherlands (80 percent), Brazil (78 percent), Sweden (73 percent), and France (70 percent) believe their country is more divided today than in the past. Additionally, research conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reports that almost every region has seen polarization rise since 2005, with Brazil, Mexico, and the US said to be experiencing “extreme” levels of division.¹⁵



The interplay between nationalist fervor, geopolitical rivalries, and issues around identity and norms influences domestic and international relations, contributing to a polarized global order where entrenched divisions often hinder cooperation. In 2023, the Global Solidarity Report, which used a scorecard with 11 quantifiable indicators to measure levels of solidarity, found that the world is in the “danger zone:” defined as “worryingly low levels of solidarity that threaten to make international crises far worse.”¹⁶ Such findings underscore the impact of polarization and emphasize the urgency of addressing these challenges both locally and globally. The convergence of data from the Edelman Trust Barometer and Carnegie emphasizes the imperative of concerted efforts at national and international levels to foster unity and bridge divides.

1.2.2 Can we define polarization?

Outside of carefully qualified academic works, a clear definition of polarization is rarely presented in political discourse. It has become a catch-all description and explanation for the divisive character of current culture across different contexts.¹⁷ Yet, there is a lack of consensus on the conceptual foundations of the term¹⁸ which has led a growing number of scholars to question its utility.¹⁹ One issue is that the term is frequently employed to encapsulate a wide array of related but distinct phenomena that are often conflated (e.g., the perceptions of societal tensions, measures of the differences in policy stances among political elites based on partisan identity, and degree or depth of differences in cultural and normative values across different demographic groups).

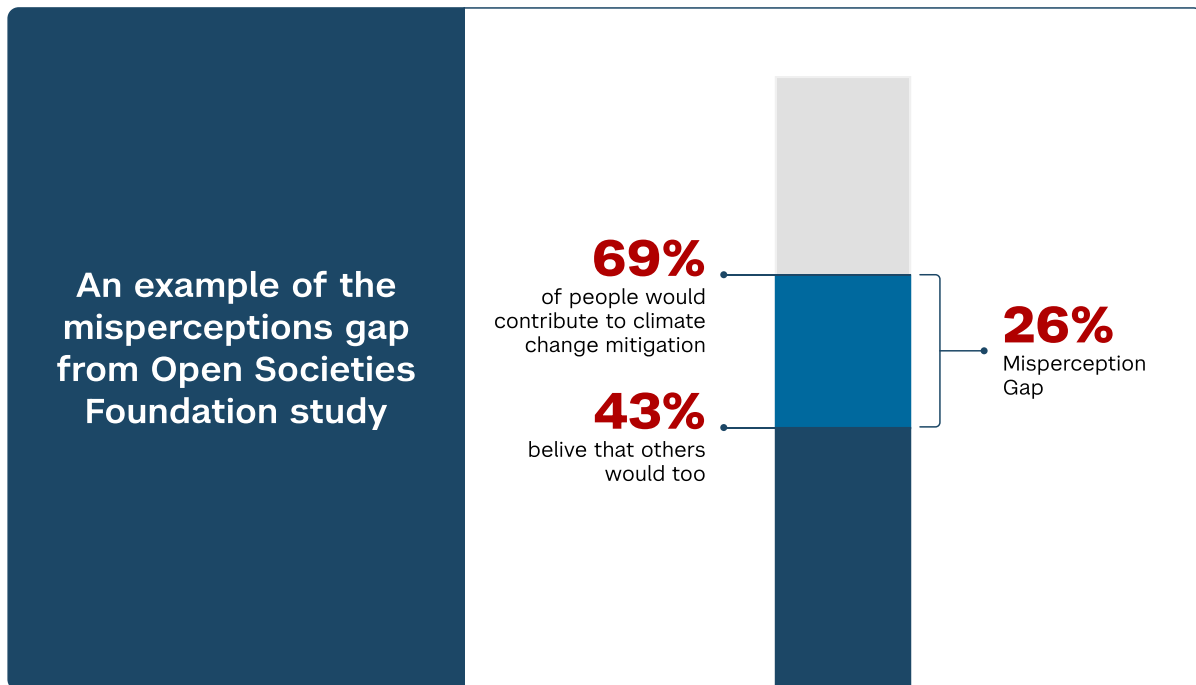
Importantly, the study of polarization often focuses on perceptions—specifically, measuring how divided people feel and how entrenched they believe these divisions are, especially between different demographics rather than assessing actual ideological and policy disagreements. Polarization is also often used to capture how people perceive and feel (be it negatively or positively) towards in-groups in comparison to out-groups.²⁰

1.2.3 False polarization

Perception of polarization vs. ideological polarization

A closer look beyond the buzzwords reveals that headlines noting an increase in polarization are often measuring the perception of polarization (how polarized people think we are)²¹ rather than the actual degree of disagreement over policy preferences (commonly referred to as opinion or ideological polarization).²² This is underscored by growing concerns among scholars over false polarization, which is where people perceive we are more divided than we are, which is attributed in part to misperceptions of what the “other side” believes.²³ Alongside tensions between groups, the 2024 Human Development Report notes that “often people agree more than they think.” An example of misperceptions is that while 69 percent of people around the world would be willing

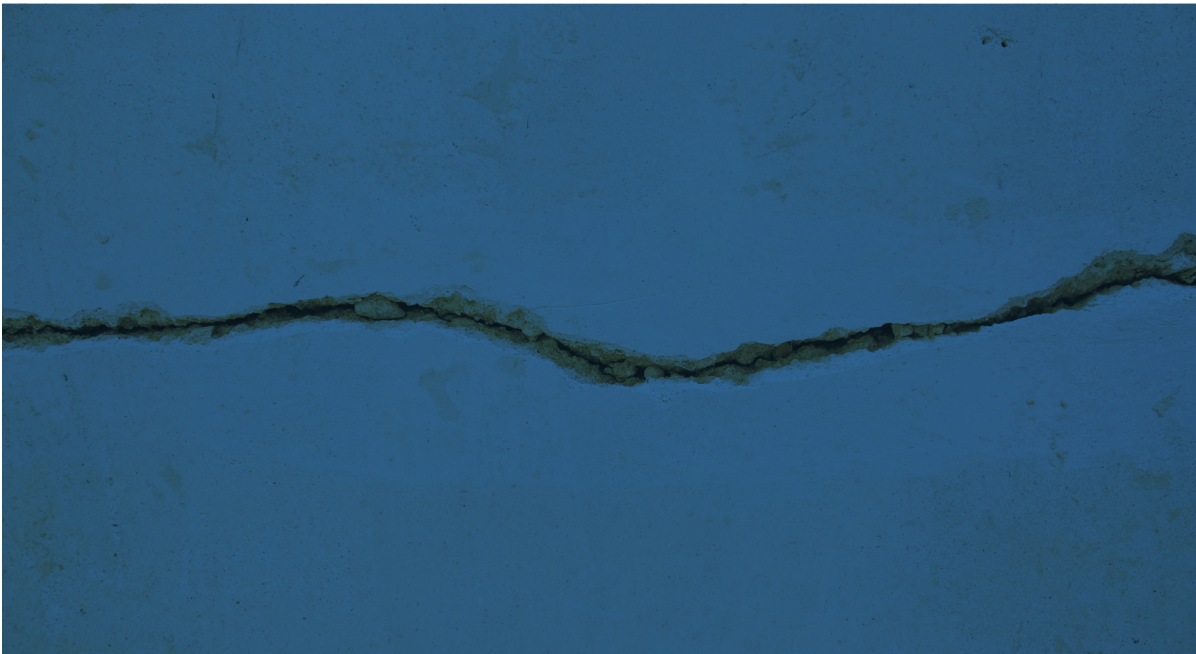
to sacrifice some of their income to contribute to climate change mitigation, only 43 percent believe that others would too—that is a 26 percentage point misperception gap.²⁴ Another survey by the Open Society Foundations in 2023 underscores the considerable agreement when it comes to climate action: 71 percent think high-income countries should compensate low-income countries for the impacts of climate change, 79 percent believe high-income countries should take the lead on reducing emissions, and 84 percent believe lenders should do more to help indebted countries.²⁵ Even on a highly politicized issue like migrants and refugees, 74 percent of people across 29 countries surveyed believe in the principle of giving people refuge; this contrasts with just 19 percent who think that refugees in their country should be deported.²⁶ These findings reflect the words of Maya Angelou: “We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike”—a message worth repeating but rarely heard.



1.2.4 Affective polarization: Deepening divides between groups

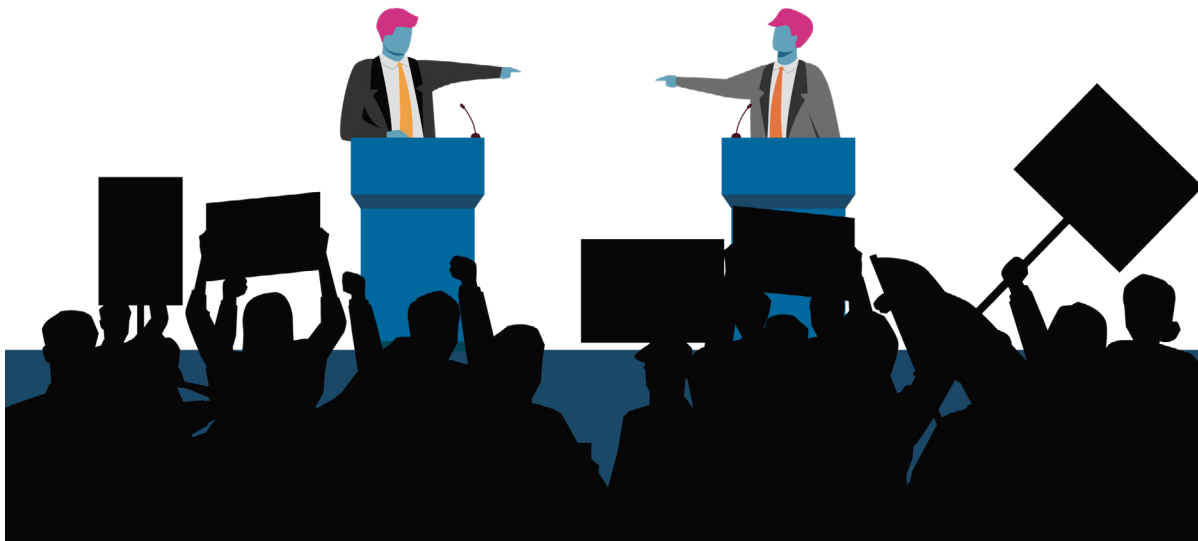
It seems that polarization within countries may be more deeply rooted in perceived differences between groups. Research indicates a growing concern with regard to affective polarization—marked by heightened animosity towards the out-group and a stronger affiliation with the in-group—which is often out of proportion to the actual level of disagreement over policies or issues.²⁷ One study suggests that misperceptions (false polarization) fuels affective polarization.²⁸ Alongside divisions between those who hold “traditional” versus “progressive” beliefs or identify with different political parties, the Edelman Barometer 2023 noted that across the countries surveyed, the tensions are perceived to be highest between migrants and citizens, majority and minority ethnic

groups, and between the wealthy and poor.²⁹ Similarly, the Ipsos Mori survey in 2022, which looked at 28 countries, found that tensions are also perceived to be the highest between wealthy and poor groups (74 percent), different social classes (67 percent), immigrants and native-born citizens (65 percent), different ethnicities (62 percent), the metropolitan elite and ordinary working people (62 percent), different religions (57 percent), and between men and women (48 percent).³⁰ These findings highlight that societal divisions appear to be strongly linked to issues of identity, inequalities, and perceived differences.



1.2.5 Elite-level political polarization

Elite-level polarization, often referred to as political polarization, pertains to the division among politicians, typically manifesting between different political parties. Some research shows that public perceptions of polarization—particularly in a context of high inequality—are heavily influenced by elite-level polarization. While there is a lack of global data on elite-level polarization,³¹ studies indicate a growing trend of ideological polarization between the political parties in the US, suggesting that there used to be more of an overlap between the positions of both parties in the past. Indeed, a Pew Research Center analysis finds that on average, Democratic and Republican politicians are farther apart ideologically today than at any time in the past 50 years,³² even on issues that do not have an obvious ideological dimension.



In a different context, polarization among party elites in Brazil have intensified not only on traditional ideological fronts such as economic policy or social issues but also on matters like environmental protection, corruption, and even foreign policy. While many view the former President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, as a key driver of the extreme polarization we see today, Brazilian politics was already profoundly divided before he rose in prominence on issues related to the cost-of-living, delivery of social services, and corruption.³³ The resulting growing polarization, therefore, reflected broader societal divisions and interests, with party elites aligning themselves along extremely distinct positions to appeal to their respective bases and maintain political power.³⁴ Similarly, in Bolivia, following the resignation of the country's long-standing president, Evo Morales in the aftermath of the 2019 elections, allegations of vote counting irregularities engulfed the nation—precipitating a phase of deep polarization. The longstanding schism between supporters of Morales and the Indigenous political movement and the established sociopolitical elite of Bolivia culminated in a political crisis and heated social unrest.³⁵ Elsewhere, party elites in Lesotho have shown polarization across various issue areas, including governance reforms, resource management, and regional integration.³⁶ While some issues may lack a clear ideological dimension, they nonetheless carry significant political implications and can serve as rallying points for different factions within the political landscape.

While distinctive ideologies and policy agendas of political parties are not inherently negative and provide the electorate with choices. However, there is a balance to be struck. When a political system becomes too polarized it appears to narrow the spectrum of acceptable ideas and solutions, diminishing the diversity of viewpoints as there is a notable reluctance to entertain policies associated with opposing factions. Therefore, polarization in the political system can impede constructive dialogue, break

down cross-party consensus, and undermine the collaborative spirit essential for effective governance. In turn, polarized political environments fundamentally change how citizens make decisions; one study notes that increases in elite political polarization intensify the impact of party endorsements on opinions, decrease the impact of substantive information, and, perhaps ironically, stimulate greater confidence in those—less substantively grounded—opinions.³⁷

1.2.6 Technology and polarization

While many are quick to blame social media and digital platforms for an increase in polarization, the linkage is anything but clear. Yet while existing research does not support the claim that social media is a primary factor driving political polarization;³⁸ there is likely no single factor that is primarily responsible for political polarization. However, the emergence of digital technologies and social media platforms since the mid-2010s has indeed profoundly reshaped societal dynamics, introducing a new infrastructure of connectivity and influence. These platforms have accelerated the dissemination and quantity of information, facilitated global communication, and empowered a wider range of individuals to participate in public discourse like never before. However, they have also exacerbated issues such as the spread of mis/disinformation and have facilitated the possibility to artificially amplify divisive content. Changes in how we access information have transformed the media landscape, forcing significant adaptations to compete in the new attention economy. This shift has often come at the expense of diverse, independent, and local news and investigative journalism in favor of clickbait. Politics has also been impacted, with messages now mediated through social media and digital platforms. Governments and regulatory bodies have struggled to keep pace with these changes, especially in the last ten years, often failing to grasp their impact fully.

1.2.7 Polarization, inequality, and trust

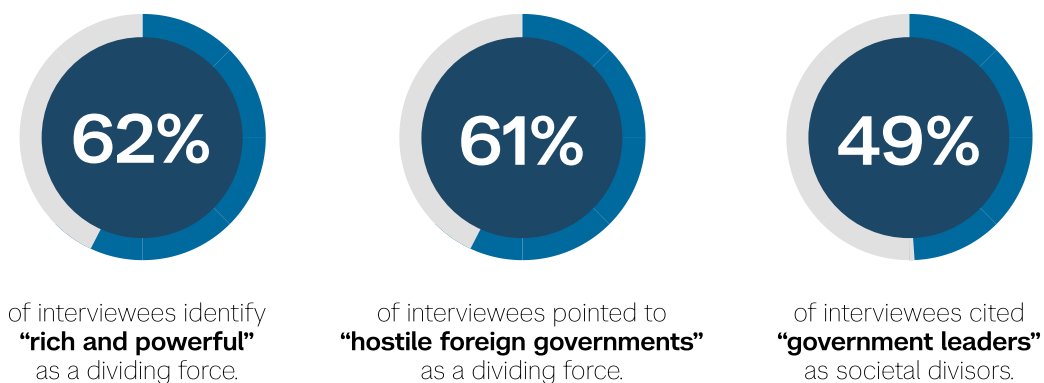
Global trends highlight a concerning correlation between perceptions of societal divisions and declining levels of interpersonal trust.³⁹ One survey found that among those who feel strongly about an issue, only 30 percent of respondents say that would be willing to someone who strongly disagreed with their point of view if they were in need, even less—20 percent—would be willing to live in the same neighborhood or willing to have them as a coworker.⁴⁰ This erosion of trust is starkly evident in global data, which shows that two-thirds of the global population believes that most people can't be trusted.⁴¹ Research underscores the intertwining nature of polarization,⁴² hate speech and disinformation, and polarization, revealing the difficulty in discerning between them as political discourse becomes increasingly saturated with hostility.⁴³ These trends are deeply concerning for democracy, as polarization fueled by hate speech and disinformation not only fractures societies but also undermines trust in institutions vital for democratic functioning. As trust wanes, the fabric of democracy weakens,

as democratic governance relies heavily on mutual trust between citizens and their institutions to sustain legitimacy and effective governance. Therefore, addressing the nexus between polarization, trust, and democracy becomes imperative to safeguarding democratic values and institutions in an era of increasing political polarization and information manipulation.

1.3 The rise of divisive narratives

This paper examines the emergence of divisive, exclusionary, and harmful narratives, alongside the reactionary and combative approach increasingly prevalent in contemporary politics. Divisive narratives that pit groups against one another, inflame prejudice, and weaponize differences can be observed all around the world. Examples of divisive narratives include prominent anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric in Costa Rica,⁴⁴ Islamophobic backlash against newcomers in Sweden,⁴⁵ anti-feminist movements in South Korea,⁴⁶ the promotion of anti-migrant resentment in South Africa,⁴⁷ and the so-called “war on woke” in the UK.⁴⁸ The 2023 Edelman Barometer highlights the perception that divisions are perpetuated, at least in part, by elite groups. The survey, conducted across 25 countries, found that 62 percent of respondents identified the “rich and powerful” as a dividing force, 61 percent pointed to “hostile foreign governments,” and 49 percent cited government leaders as contributing to societal divisions.⁴⁹

A majority of people surveyed believe actors are trying to divide them



Although divisive and polarizing narratives are most apparent and frequently observed from right-wing and autocratic actors, they can be found across the political spectrum. For instance, prominent democratic leaders in the US denounced that Trump voters are “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic and Islamophobic” and a “basket of deplorables.”⁵⁰

The hostile discourse with those holding opposing views also extends to the way politicians of divergent ideologies engage. For instance, Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa, is known for his confrontational and brazenly racializing rhetoric⁵¹ and has previously claimed he is willing to take up arms to “remove the government through the barrel of a gun.”⁵² Another example of polarizing political discourse happened when Javier Milei won the Argentine presidential election in November 2023. This prompted Gustavo Petro, the president of Colombia, who had previously drawn parallels between Milei and Hitler, to lament the outcome as “sad for Latin America.”⁵³ In return, in a TV interview, Milei called Petro a “communist murderer,” prompting Colombia to recall its ambassador to Buenos Aires and expelling all Argentine diplomats from Bogotá.

Whether fomenting conflict between citizens and migrants, sparking clashes between supporters of conservative social values and feminists, or creating tension between climate concerns and workers’ rights, we consistently see narratives framing issues and identities as adversarial. These narratives suggest that there are always winners and losers and that addressing one group’s concerns or policy issues necessarily leads to losses for others, even when this isn’t necessarily the case. Many narratives exploit identity politics, not to recognize intersectionality or the interaction of how multiple dimensions and systems of inequalities interact, but instead to frame identities adversarially.

Examples of divisive headlines in recent global media



While it has to be said that the hostile and adversarial style of political discourse is problematic, not all those who use divisive rhetoric do so intentionally or maliciously. This paper concentrates on who we label as “divisive entrepreneurs,” namely, those who deliberately engage in such practices to serve their interests. While motive may be difficult to prove, it is increasingly evident that adversarial narratives are becoming commonplace “playbook” of some political elites. While divisive narratives may resonate with communities, they are often instigated through top-down processes rather than arising spontaneously from grassroots resentments. There appears to be a growing number of bad-faith actors, ranging from social media influencers to political leaders and foreign operatives, who spread divisive and harmful content for selfish purposes.

2 Unveiling Strategic Division: The Power Play Behind Societal Divides

Understanding the rise of divisive narratives



Although the body of literature is expanding, the underlying drivers of perceived and affective polarization and its consequences on societies are less clearly understood. Amid rising inequality, distrust in institutions, and technological developments in our information ecosystem, we also highlight the rise of polarizing and divisive narratives as a global phenomenon.

Building on Ian Haney López's notion of strategic racism, this paper forwards the concept of "strategic division" to understand **why** we are seeing an increase in divisive narratives that foment conflict and perceptions of polarization. Strategic division is a meaningful way to understand that an interlocking set of powers is hurting different groups of people in similar ways. In *Dog Whistle Politics*, López outlines how politicians and plutocrats in the US utilize racial appeals to intensify racial anxieties, aiming to sway white voters into

supporting policies that benefit the extremely wealthy despite the potential detriment to their own interests.⁵⁴ Strategic racism differs from hate-based and structural racism, as López writes:

“The driving force behind strategic racism is not racial animus for its own sake or brutalizing nonwhites out of hate; it is the pursuit of power, money, and/or status.”⁵⁵

Hence, racism did not come first. Racial distinctions were created to facilitate and justify the exploitation of enslaved populations from West Africa, Indigenous populations across the Americas, and indentured Europeans. As historian Emma Dabiri writes,

“Race was invented to shut down solidarity and coalition building.”⁵⁶

Following that same logic, strategic division is an increasingly common political strategy that exploits differences—whether based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, geography, or occupation—and anxieties and grievances stemming from the current political and economic system to divide, distract, and disempower communities. The division is created in order to achieve particular ends that tend not to represent the interests of the global majority. These divisive strategies—and by extension, the narratives—are not merely motivated by prejudice or hate but are fueled by political ambition and financial greed.

Although the role of technology in amplifying disinformation is undeniable, there is a tendency to hastily indict the platforms or technology itself. The single-minded focus on technology or digital platforms deflects attention from the deliberate, human-engineered motives at play. From colonial-era divide-and-rule strategies to modern-day social media interference in elections, divisive tactics have often been employed to sow discord throughout history by exploiting societal fractures to undermine collective solidarity and consolidate power and resources. Traditional media, which is often corporate-owned, and political elites remain central agents that influence societal views independently of technology. The intersection of human intent with new digital capacities has created a fresh infrastructure of incentives and short-term benefits, which not only accelerates

Division is used to:

**Seizing
power**

**Generate
backlash**

**Divide:
break
coalitions**

**Set the
agenda**

**Deflect from
regressive
policies**

**Economic
gains**

the spread of disinformation⁵⁷ and divisive narratives but also brings on a broader set of actors to shape public discourse—for better and worse.

2.1 Productive political strategies to fracture societies

Core to the concept of strategic division is that they are productive; these tactics are employed because they are an effective means to achieve specific political or financial goals. In this section, we explore what motivates engagement in divisive tactics and we examine how divisive strategies, specifically the deliberate pitting of groups, ideas, or issues against one another, serve as strategic tools for political actors and parties. In answer of the second question, we take a closer look into “strategically divisive narratives”—a form of disinformation.

2.1.1 Motivations to engage in sowing division

- » **Seizing power at any cost.** Divisive political strategies that exploit rifts—whether based on religion, ethnicity, geography, or political affiliation—enable political actors and parties to consolidate power by mobilizing support and securing votes, as seen in Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 presidential election in Brazil.⁵⁸ In Nigeria, a similar pattern emerges, where divisive political tactics exploiting religious, ethnic, and regional differences have been employed to consolidate power. During Nigeria’s elections, including the most recent one in 2023, politicians have often capitalized on these divisions, leveraging ethnic and religious differences to mobilize their base and secure electoral victories,⁵⁹ mirroring some of the strategies observed in Brazil’s 2018 presidential elections. Aside from consolidating power through electoral victories, in various countries, a range of authoritarian and anti-rights actors have often used a mixture of often disengenuous populism and divisive rhetoric to legitimize their agendas and create an environment conducive to enacting laws that centralize authority, often by portraying dissenting voices as threats to society or “the people.” Figures like the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda,⁶⁰ and the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán,⁶¹ exploit anti-establishment sentiment to dismantle institutions, rolling back democratic checks and balances, limiting civic space, and weakening the rule of law. The removal or erosion of such checks and balances does not serve the majority’s interests, as they often contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. According to research by CIVICUS, only 3.2 percent of the global population live in a society where civic and political freedoms are protected today⁶² (for more on the democratic backsliding, see Box 1).

Box 1: A brief look at the data on trends in authoritarian backsliding and polarization

The V-Dem Institute, which produces the most extensive global dataset on democracy with over 30 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 to 2021, has found that the level of democracy that the average global citizen experienced in 2021 is down to 1989 levels—that is, the advances of the previous 30 years have been eradicated. They further find the highest number of countries ever—33—are autocratizing. This, in turn, has come with other related trends: increasing repression of civil society in 22 of the 33 autocratizing countries, greater censorship in 21, and diminished respect for counterarguments in at least 19 of these countries.

In addition, V-Dem has found an increase in toxic polarization—a worsening of respect for counterarguments and associated aspects of the deliberative component of democracy—in more than 32 countries, representing an increase from only five countries in 2011. All regions and regime types are negatively affected, from long-standing democracies (Germany, the US, India) to increasingly autocratic countries (Brazil, Serbia). They further suggest that the nature of autocratization itself is changing, with many using mis/disinformation to shape domestic and international opinion in their favor. Thus, in addition to polarization “increasing to toxic levels in 40 countries,” which is contributing to electoral victories of anti-pluralist leaders, the use of mis/disinformation—purportedly used to the greatest extent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—is a signal of increasingly emboldened autocrats. In this sense, polarization and autocratization may bolster one another, creating a detrimental cycle where deteriorating conditions in one aspect exacerbate the other.

- » **Strategic division is also used to generate a backlash** against progressive policies, actors, and institutions, that seek to democratize and redistribute resources and power, often making such ideas appear politically untenable. In fact, divisive narratives are undermining the inclusive agendas, fueling a backlash against progressive policies, such as LGBTQI+ and gender equality legislation in Spain.⁶³ Similarly, backlash against LGBTQI+ and women’s rights has adversely influenced the outcome of the peace referendum in Colombia, albeit among many other factors.⁶⁴ The rapid spread of divisive and adversarial narratives which aim to disinform can turn enough of the public off of specific policies in a matter of months, as seen in the rapid decline of support for The Voice referendum in Australia last year,⁶⁵ which would have seen the recognition of Indigenous Peoples in the constitution and to create an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee. This policy would have provided affected communities with a means to consult with Parliament on policies

affecting their communities, echoing practices in Finland, Canada, and New Zealand. At the start, in October 2022 polling showed 60 percent of the population supported the initiative, with backing from influential figures (former prime ministers, the Business Council of Australia, sporting teams, former high court justices, and a host of celebrities)—but by April 2023, polling dropped to the mid-forties. The final count saw that only 34 percent voted in favor of The Voice.

- » **Divisive strategies undermine potential coalitions.** Divisive strategies fracture various communities with shared interests, undermining potential coalitions and collective efforts toward inclusive policy agendas. Likewise, India's political landscape has been heavily influenced by a diverse array of identities—religious, ethnic, and caste-based—present among the Indian electorate. Multiple developments, including the ascendancy of Hindu nationalism, the electoral achievements of caste-based parties, and the prominence of regional parties, all indicate the prevalence of identity-driven politics in the country. With one of the most complex demographics in the world, politicians frequently exploit these identities to garner support during elections, often prioritizing loyalty to one's community over policy considerations. This practice has perpetuated a cycle of identity-based politics, where voting sometimes becomes a headcount along religious and caste lines, which in turn has led to growing majoritarianism, discrimination against minority Muslim populations, and the neglect of broader policy issues.⁶⁶
- » **To effectively set the agenda.** By dominating discourse and framing issues as conflict or creating political controversies, political elites can set the agenda, maintain focus on topics that serve their interests, often scapegoating for salient issues, and deflect attention from other controversies and pressing matters. British politicians across the political spectrum have consistently scapegoated social problems—including strained public services, job scarcity, lack of affordable housing—on migrants, particularly people seeking asylum. Numerous immigration policies have sparked severe criticism.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, with the anticipation of the next general election in the UK on July 4, 2024, the competing political parties are competing to implement exclusionary and harmful policies.⁶⁸ In an article in *The Guardian*, people seeking asylum interviewed said they have been kicked around “like a political football by politicians.” Aria Danaparamita, Advocacy Director of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants said, “the government continues to scapegoat migrants and fuel racist rhetoric to cover its policy failures – to address the deepening cost-of-living crisis, to reform our crippled healthcare sector, or to provide adequate public services after years of austerity.”⁶⁹ While politicians and the news cycle focus on immigration, we must remain mindful of what is left unsaid. While in one of the richest countries on earth, 30 percent of children are growing up in poverty (4.3 million children in 2022–2023, up from 3.6 million in 2010–2011),⁷⁰ along with fifteen years of wage stagnation⁷¹ and increasing job precarity, meaning that of all the families living in poverty, 71 percent are working, sometimes even multiple jobs.⁷² The setting of the agenda by the political class is not reflective of the concerns of the British public, a new poll by the Big Issue finds that only 22 percent of people who took part in the poll

are not sympathetic towards refugees, more than half of the UK population expresses empathy towards people seeking safety, a figure that has grown since 2017, even in the context of the highly polarized political debate on the topic. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed believe that “politicians use refugees as a weapon to stoke the ‘culture wars.’”⁷³

- » **Divisive strategies appear to facilitate the implementation of regressive policies** by demonizing specific groups and using normative ideas that make those policies more acceptable to the public or reduce strong opposition. For instance, in many parts of the world, many leaders, politicians, and other sectors have normalized a discourse of hatred and opposition to policies promoting gender equality and diversity, largely through narratives about the threats of “gender ideology”—a school of thought that defends restrictive gender roles, sexuality, and family.⁷⁴ Anti-gender ideology opposes same-sex marriage, gender diversity, sex education in schools, and transgender rights, but also economic and social policies mainly focused on advancing the situation of women and girls when it comes to access to education, health, and employment opportunities. This discourse has led to attempts to roll back laws that threaten various groups. For example, since the start of 2024, 15 anti-trans bills have been passed in the US,⁷⁵ and further south in El Salvador, there were attempts to pass the “Law for the Protection of Life and the Family,”⁷⁶ which proposed that the government fully criminalize abortion and marriages between people of the same gender.⁷⁷
- » **Economic incentives for spreading division manifest in various forms**, including ad revenue and sponsorship for content creators and organizations, which can amount to millions of dollars for those with significant engagements online (see page 56, “Funding Disinformation” for further discussion). On an individual level, numerous political actors who gain prominence through polarizing agendas often personally benefit financially from their heightened visibility in the public arena (for example, Julius Malema in South Africa has been implicated in the illicit extraction of large sums from a bank mainly holding money from poorer municipalities).⁷⁸ Another example is Nigel Farage, a former British politician and a leading figure in the Leave campaign during the European Union referendum, described as “a virtuoso of the dog whistle.”⁷⁹ A 2016 investigation uncovered that during the referendum year, an insurance tycoon had provided Farage with gifts, housing, office space, and other benefits valued at around half a million pounds.⁸⁰ While challenges exist in tracking and understanding anti-rights and anti-democratic funding streams,⁸¹ wealthy individuals and families have been known to donate to political candidates to support campaigns and media outlets that align with their own personal interests,⁸² such as the private donations made to Alliance Defending Freedom and the Family Policy Alliance, which have contributed to legislative attacks on LGBTQI+ rights. Funding for anti-rights and autocratic movements often crosses borders, with right-wing Christian groups in the US spending USD 280 million globally against women and LGBTQI+ rights just during the 2007 to 2018 time period.⁸³ Sowing division can also serve to protect financial and economic interests, as seen in the case of a billionaire hedge fund donor who spent millions to defeat a progressive taxation referendum in the state of Illinois in the US.⁸⁴ Furthermore, some political figures exploit divisive and exclusionary platforms to divert attention from regressive economic agendas, as observed in the UK and Argentina (see page 52 for further discussion).

While concerns about the influence of money in politics often focus on the corrupting effects of large contributions, Raymond J. La Raja and Brian F. Schaffner argue that reforms aimed at reducing the flow of money into politics have unintentionally favored candidates with extreme ideological agendas, thereby exacerbating political polarization.⁸⁵ For instance, tighter financing rules in Canada, which limit individual donations to at most CAD 1,700 per year, have left parties financially constrained. This has led to individual Members of Parliament (MPs) prioritizing fundraising in their day-to-day activities. In the report “Far and Widening: The Rise of Polarization in Canada,” two Conservative MPs describe how as elected representatives, they feel compelled to stir up anger and distrust among their core supporters to raise funds. One MP said if they fail to improve their performance, the party is likely to mimic right-wing parties abroad and become avowedly anti-immigration.⁸⁶ Furthermore, research by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that among potential candidates, party chairs are more likely to select and support extreme candidates, particularly on the right.⁸⁷

2.2 What is a Strategically Divisive Narrative?

The way we communicate—the words, metaphors, and stories we share—shapes how we understand the challenges we face and the corresponding solutions.⁸⁸ Experimental evidence suggests that even subtle changes in phrasing or individual words, let alone entire narratives, can significantly influence audience perceptions and policy preferences, often through largely subconscious processes.⁸⁹ There is a large body of research demonstrating how the way a message is framed can create and reinforce specific ways of thinking and lead people toward specific conclusions.⁹⁰ “Strategically Divisive Narratives” (SDNs) are how strategic division is perpetuated. We offer the following definition:

A SDN is a rhetorical device that falsely frames society into an “us versus them,” telling a story of an “in-group” who is victimized by an “out-group.” SDNs often frame issues, policies, and identities as adversarial and often through a zero-sum frame.

“Divisive entrepreneurs” use SDNs to advance specific political and economic objectives by setting the agenda and diminishing a sense of collective empowerment through stoking strife and fear.

Using a concept from the Othering and Belonging Institute, these narratives serve to “break” connections, solidarities and empathy and “breaking” is defined as “when a group turns inwards and explicitly pushes away from other groups who are seen as dangerous or a threat.”⁹¹ Through a perversion of identity politics, divisive entrepreneurs assign blame to scapegoats, diverting attention, and ultimately manipulating public

perception. Even when these narratives are grounded in reality—from genuine and perceived challenges and fears—the solutions proposed or implemented fall short of effectively addressing the issues. Instead, they primarily benefit a select few, serving their economic or political interests. This deliberate manipulation is why we consider SDNs to be a form of disinformation.

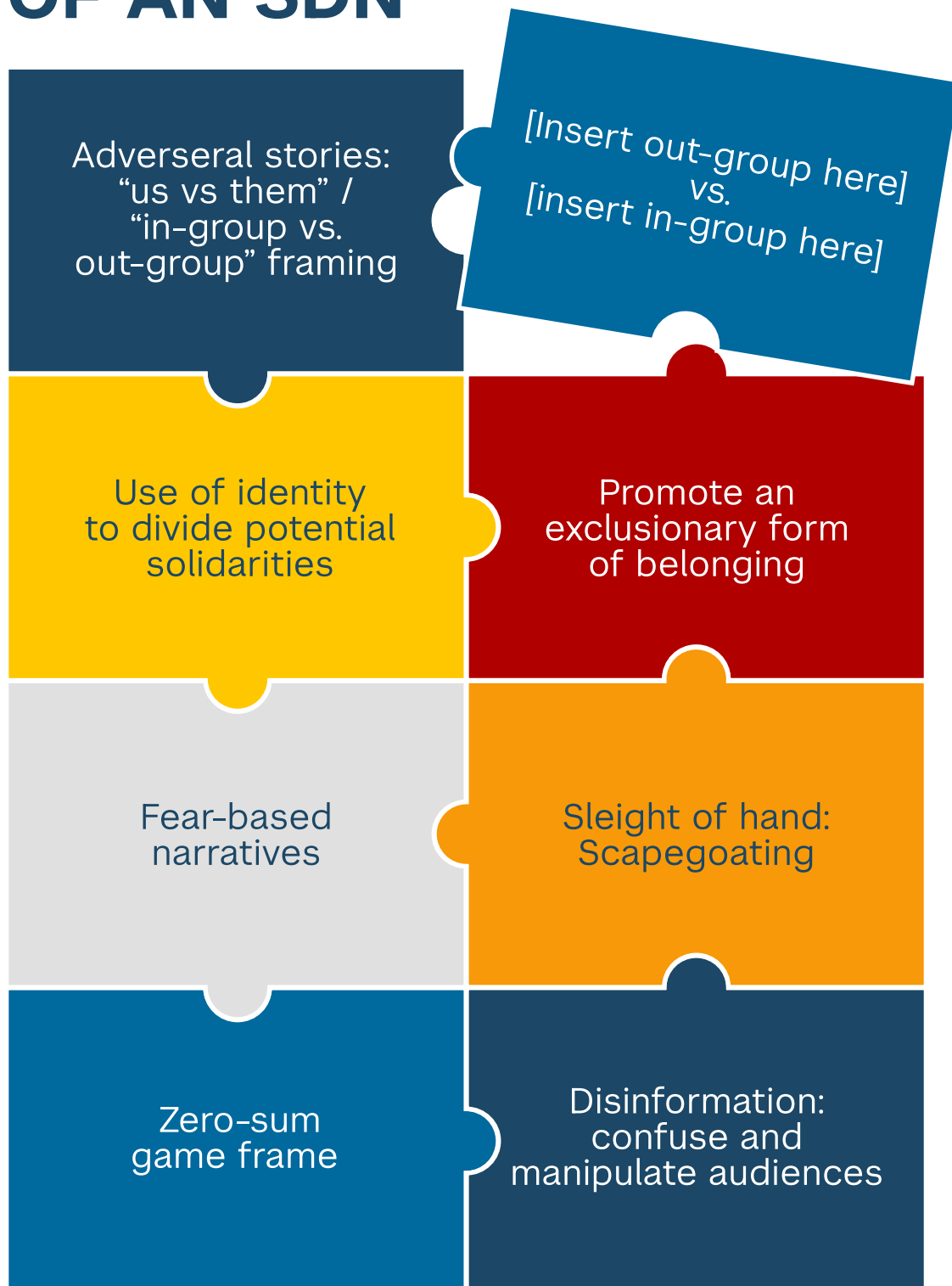
SDNs range from scapegoating and subtly problematizing certain groups to overt dehumanization and explicit hate speech. While it may be tempting to dismiss SDNs as mere rhetoric, it is critical to remember that demonizing narratives have always been a precursor to violence⁹² and even genocide.⁹³ For instance, to perpetuate the genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi, they were first profiled, for example, as insects—cockroaches—that needed to be killed.⁹⁴ Any language that promotes the dehumanization of a group paves the way toward violence. As Michelle Maiese explains:

“Dehumanization is the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment...dehumanization makes the violation of generally-accepted norms of behavior regarding one's fellow man seem reasonable, or even necessary.”⁹⁵

Box 2: Frames

What is a frame? A frame is like a guide; it directs people where to look, but more importantly, helps them interpret what they see. Each frame element (what context is given; which examples are used; use of metaphors, messengers, narratives, numbers; and the sequence of a message, solutions, tone, values, and visuals) affect how people understand, interpret, and respond to social issues. Every message—written, spoken, illustrated, or signed—is presented through a frame of some kind, whether intended or not. Every time a frame is heard, it is further reinforced to the extent that some people will begin to reject facts that do not make sense within their frame. When confronted with divisive narratives, avoiding attempting to dispel myths or using negation as a counterstrategy is advisable. This approach can inadvertently trap us within our ideological opponents' frame and inadvertently strengthen their narrative. Moreover, as cognitive linguist George Lakoff warns, repeating a certain frame, even to refute it, can reinforce that frame. For example, statements like “there is no such thing as an illegal refugee” or “refugees are less likely to commit crimes than citizens” can actually strengthen the negative association between refugees and illegality or criminality.

COMPONENTS OF AN SDN



Box 3: Narratives

What is a narrative? A narrative is more complex; they are the ideas and themes that permeate collections of stories. The ideas are articulated and refined repeatedly in a variety of stories and messages. The Narrative Initiative identifies the “deep narratives,” these are the “stickiest” themes and ideas that have permeated stories for more than 50 years. Deep narratives comprise what we view as “common sense” or “natural” and they undergird collections of narratives and circumscribe how we make sense of our relationships with ourselves, others, and the broader world. Narratives are also central to the policy process and can shape every stage of policy development as well as persuade decision-makers and the public to support a policy. Policy narratives are critical to gain support for policies and are often carefully constructed to influence how the public comes to understand and interpret a policy, which can affect its political sustainability as well as trust with the policymakers. Hence, different narratives about the same policy issue can create different views of reality.



In this paper, when we refer to narratives, we generally mean "political narratives"—the stories political actors use to shape public opinion by presenting their overall political vision—and "policy narratives"—the stories they tell to influence the policy process and its outcomes.

2.3 Using identity to break coalitions of solidarity, empathy, and shared interests

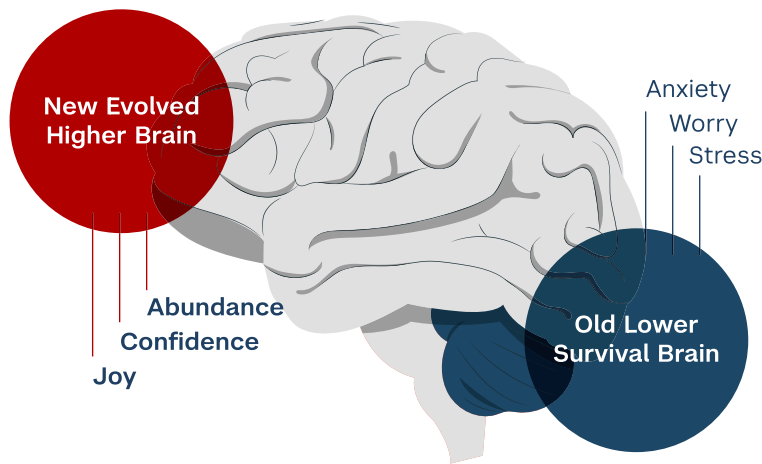
The elite capture of identity politics—particularly, by divisive entrepreneurs—breaks potential solidarities across differences for various demands for justice. SDNs fracture potential (vertical) alliances among “economic losers,” hindering collective action by emphasizing exclusionary, rather than intersectional and inclusive identities over shared social, class, and political concerns⁹⁶ that people of many identities face. These narratives tell a story that encourages some groups to perceive themselves, their grievances, and their social status primarily through a narrow lens of identity and align themselves horizontally—be it their race, faith, nationality, or gender—divorced from an analysis of their relationship to other identities as well as class, power, and capital. **In other words, SDNs promote a strictly non-intersectional viewpoint.** As such, so-called “economic losers” are encouraged to align themselves (horizontally) with “economic winners” even though their material and political interests are at odds. Instead, the alignment is based on an identity that defines in-group membership, often associated with relative advantage (e.g., the dominant ethnic group, religion, male, heterosexual, nationality). Given the complexity and intersectionality of socioeconomic hierarchies, privileges exist among relatively disadvantaged groups. For some, narratives that tap into these (relative) privileges can motivate resistance to challenges to the existing hierarchy to safeguard that relative privilege, even if doing so perpetuates systemic inequalities that ultimately disadvantage them.⁹⁷ From the perspective that an SDN typically offers, we live in a competitive, resource-scarce hierarchy; the point for some is simply to not be at the bottom. This represents a gross perversion of identity politics, the founding principle of which was unity rather than division.⁹⁸

2.4 Exploiting and manufacturing fear

SDNs are fear-based narratives. SDNs frame societal issues as high-stakes battles, often by tapping into social identities, which has been shown to evoke powerful emotional and psychological attachment in the audience.^{99 100} The out-group is demonized and portrayed as a threat to the in-group's core interests, culture, resources, or “sacred symbols.”¹⁰¹ Framing issues—be it immigration, gender equality, or climate activists—as a “war,” “threat,” or “crisis” implies an urgent, even existential threat that serves to instill fear and create a panic that demands precedence, even sacrifice, over other matters. These narratives often redirect fear away from real threats to perceived threats. When it comes to climate change, we often see the inverse, where it is claimed that climate activists are the real threat, who are trying to whip up panic about climate change so they can take advantage of communities. When narratives of fear are combined with identity references, it can imply in some audiences that the very essence of their being and the foundational aspects of their community are at risk, which can trigger a profound

emotional response. Thus, by highlighting and portraying a particular identity as under threat, SDNs conflate policy issues with identity, making the “who” matter more than the “what,” eliciting strong emotions from group members.

Fear is a potent emotion to tap into¹⁰² and there are pragmatic reasons to appeal to fear. Fear-based narratives activate the “downstairs” brain, which is responsible for fight-or-flight responses, which creates emotional interference and hinders the engagement of the “upstairs” brain, facilitating empathy and open perspectives.^{103 104} When fear is experienced, personal safety and self-interest are prioritized, with studies indicating that elevated fear levels, including social phobia, can lead to heightened self-defense mechanisms and negative attitudes towards out-groups.¹⁰⁵ Exploiting fear has been shown to bolster support for authoritarian figures and draconian policies, both of which often offer a false sense of control.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, research indicates variations in threat sensitivity, which may elucidate why certain narratives evoke stronger responses in some individuals compared to others.¹⁰⁷ More worryingly, it has been shown that fear may demobilize people over the long term, potentially leading to disengagement from pressing issues.¹⁰⁸ This risks undermining democracy by reducing political engagement among the populace.



These narratives wield considerable influence because behind the prejudice and hate, they often tap into real fears, challenges, and changes confronting communities.¹⁰⁹

SDNs frequently exploit the fears and insecurities arising from economic and material concerns of non-affluent groups, which are often intertwined with group-based grievances, a loss of belonging, and feelings of dislocation—that progressive narratives have often failed to speak to, let alone address. Among the real fears and challenges people face are the scarcity of decent employment opportunities, inadequate public services, the lack of affordable housing, and the pressures of rapid urbanization—all of which can easily make individuals feel left behind. It is critical to note that SDNs not only impact those “left behind” but also can tap into the fears of communities who are relatively affluent compared to others, as well as those who have suffered recent

impoverishment or carry with them the perceived risk of diminished status. Together, they can create a sense of injustice that can be exploited.¹¹⁰

While it is not possible to provide a philosophical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate fears here, it is undeniable that fear is often present in the **othering of certain groups**.¹¹¹ As Judith Butler discusses in “Who’s Afraid of Gender,” the backlash against “gender ideology” in many countries, which sometimes takes the form of transphobia, is underpinned by fear—fear of being replaced, the appropriation of womanhood, and the perceived risk of violation.¹¹² These fears may stem from misunderstandings, mis/disinformation, or willful ignorance. However, Butler argues that it is crucial to first address and understand these fears, exploring the conditions under which they become primary concerns and identifying ways to address them without resorting to exclusionary politics. It is tempting to dismiss SDNs as hateful and prejudiced, but failure to acknowledge that the manipulated truth fuels division plays right into the hands of divisive entrepreneurs as proof that progressives do not care for people’s fears. Moreover, ignoring the fears and concerns (whether legitimate or not) undermines effective counteraction of divisive strategies, as addressing these fears and challenges along with prejudice is crucial to fostering solidarity and managing change and crises effectively.

2.4.1 SDNs provide simplified stories of an “us” victimized by “them”

SDNs provide simple, digestible stories that explain the challenges, instability, and unfairness people are experiencing and/or perceiving. A quintessential example of an SDN includes messages such as “migrants are stealing jobs,” “refugees are a burden on overstretched public services,” and “gender ideology is a threat to the family.” These narratives are a form of disinformation because while they may often be grounded in real challenges, changes, and fears faced—such as (i) increased competition in the labor market or (ii) decreased availability of public services—the cause is misattributed to the outgroup to fuel discord. By using a scapegoat, attention is deflected from the adverse impact of certain governmental policies and decisions. Governments could, for example, implement tougher labor market standards that do not allow employers to undercut wages and dedicate a greater share of public spending to services to keep pace with the increasing need.

The solution proposed in SDN is usually in some way to exclude, exert control, minimize, or even remove the “out-group” altogether. **Once elected, the divisive rhetoric often translates into political action, often targeting marginalized groups.** Examples of these “low-hanging fruit” policies include attempts to remove the Ministry of Gender Equality in South Korea,¹¹³ the introduction of hostile policies towards migrants in Sweden,¹¹⁴ the banning of gender-neutral toilets in the UK,¹¹⁵ and Trump’s repeal of the Paris Climate Agreement.¹¹⁶ The policies are often implemented to target marginalized groups—the

very groups scapegoated in their narratives—as a means to “fulfill” electoral promises and enhance their legitimacy. Importantly, these policies do not tackle material challenges such as job creation, inflation, economic inequality, debt, and climate change.

2.4.2 Who are the out-groups?

SDNs create a convenient “out-group” for attributing blame. The “out-group” depends on the context and changes over time, shifting according to political exigencies and targeting various groups, institutions, or policies. Depending on the context, the out-group may be cast as external to the nation or community [foreign powers, invaders], an internal threat [lazy, work-shy burdens, the ignorant poor, consumers of limited resources (including jobs), unpatriotic, traitors, or destabilizers] or a mixture of the two operating together. Out-groups typically encompass less economically and politically resourced groups (e.g., migrants; displaced people; those living in poverty; and ethnic, LGBTQI+, and religious minorities). Coincidentally, these groups cannot defend themselves as they often lack access to media outlets and tend to be politically underrepresented. The paradigmatic case has been the increasing targeting of transgender communities by political and media elites in recent years,¹¹⁷ who constitute <0.1 percent to 0.6 percent of the population.¹¹⁸



Out-groups can also include large segments of the population or even majorities, such as the poor, working-class people, women, or entire migrant or ethnic populations. In these cases, a distinction is often drawn between those deemed deserving and undeserving, such as hard-working families versus the lazy and work-shy, or between feminists versus those who just want to undermine men. Similarly, while not all migrants are vilified,

specific prejudiced labels like “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists”¹¹⁹ are used, which can unjustly tarnish an entire group. When the scapegoats are political entities (activists or institutions) that wield greater influence, they are often framed as part of an elite conspiracy, extremist, colonial, or foreign invasion. Crucially, we often see the same sorts of narratives targeting different groups. For example, fabricating fears about threats to children’s safety, such as manipulation or abuse, has long been used against various groups, including working-class families, single-parent families, gay men, feminists, “gender ideology,” drag queens, transgender people, communists, “cultural Marxism,” socialists, Muslims, Jews, and sometimes it is a conspiracy of various of the out-groups working together.

2.5 Using a zero-sum game

SDNs often frame issues, identities, and resources as a zero-sum game, implying a worldview of competition, resource scarcity, and individualism. They often suggest overtly or implicitly that for Group A to realize their rights, it necessarily takes away from Group B. For example, some of the campaigns against “the Voice” (the referendum in Australia which would recognize Indigenous peoples in the constitution and create a consultation group to parliament) presented rights for Indigenous groups as taking away from non-Indigenous Australians. False claims were made that white Australians would lose their homes and may be forced to pay reparations or increased taxes.¹²⁰ The narrative of some “losing out” emerges at a time when economic insecurities are already high due to high inflation and a cost-of-living crisis in the country—a situation that, ironically, disproportionately affects Aboriginal communities.¹²¹

A similar strategy can be seen towards policy issues: addressing issue A implies taking time and resources away from addressing issue B. For instance, democratic concerns and human rights are often portrayed as a sacrifice of national security or that tackling climate change will come at the expense of workers’ rights or development considerations—obscuring the view that it is indeed possible to implement policies that can address both. This view is particularly evident in discussions on the “greenlash” towards climate policies (see Box 4 for an example of overcoming the economic climate zero-sum game). A shift away from fossil fuels will inevitably lead to disruptions, not least in job losses in the sector. Nevertheless, the green energy transition, while disruptive for workers and their communities, does not need to mirror the long-term devastation experienced by communities during analogous changes such as the mining closures in the UK.¹²² This narrative distracts from the fact that the ultimate winners of the fossil fuel industry are the shareholders and CEOs of said companies who can protect themselves from the impacts of climate change. It obfuscates that climate and economic concerns are closely intertwined and often experienced simultaneously by the same communities. Green energy policies can be hugely beneficial for wider communities if such policies are implemented collaboratively with affected communities to ensure that adverse

impacts are mitigated, and that the distribution of green investment is equitable. This will necessitate forward-thinking and planning and incorporating social protection measures such as financial compensation, job creation, upskilling, and adult education programs, and additional investments in local communities to ease the transition. Engaging workers' unions, community groups, and local governments is crucial to managing these changes inclusively and effectively.

Box 4: Overcoming “greenlash:” Crafting sustainable solutions through unearthing win-win scenarios

“Greenlash” refers to the resistance or backlash against even well-intentioned environmental policies, particularly those addressing climate change. This phenomenon occurs due to economic concerns, perceived livelihood threats, and ideological opposition. Understanding the reasons behind greenlash is vital for policymakers to craft effective strategies that mitigate resistance and foster cooperation towards sustainable solutions.

In Indonesia, a significant portion of the economy relies on industries like agriculture, forestry, mining, and fossil fuels, which may be perceived as threatened by stringent environmental regulations. Local communities, often dependent on these sectors for their livelihoods, may resist policies restricting their activities. Similarly, in Germany, the transition from coal mining and other carbon-intensive industries has faced opposition from workers and communities reliant on these sectors.

To overcome greenlash and create win-win scenarios, policymakers must adopt a nuanced approach that balances economic and environmental goals against socioeconomic considerations. Thus, a green transition must be made “just” by embodying socioeconomic necessities that demand thoughtful attention to fairness and employment transition (for those who may otherwise lose out from the transition), as well as environmental justice and community involvement, through implementing mechanisms like social dialogues. Moreover, offering financial incentives and subsidies for businesses to invest in clean technologies can stimulate economic growth while reducing emissions.

Indonesia, for example, has been promoting community-based eco-tourism in regions with rich biodiversity to create jobs and preserve incomes and traditional livelihoods while conserving natural resources. For instance, in areas like Komodo National Park or Raja Ampat, where there are unique ecosystems and diverse marine life, the Indonesian government has implemented policies to promote sustainable tourism practices. These policies aim to create jobs and generate income for local communities while conserving natural resources and protecting the environment. Through these policies, local communities are encouraged to participate (with varying degrees of effectiveness) in ecotourism activities such as guided tours, homestays, and cultural experiences, which not only provide alternative sources of income but also foster a sense of stewardship towards their natural surroundings. Additionally, investments in infrastructure and training programs ensure communities have the necessary skills and resources to manage tourism activities sustainably.

Elsewhere since the 1960s, Germany has deliberately directed its coal reduction efforts to avert adverse economic and social outcomes. A vital aspect of the country's strategy to alleviate the effects of coal decline on workers and regions involves employing integrative policies that blend various policy objectives and mechanisms. Historically, policies have primarily aimed at achieving several goals: (a) promoting “economic diversification and reorientation,” (b) providing support for the workforce, (c) enhancing social welfare and standard of living, and (d) undertaking “environmental remediation and protection” efforts. Additionally, these policies commonly employ three main mechanisms: (1) offering financial assistance to “public organizations, businesses, and workers;” (2) providing services and aid to “public organizations, businesses, and workers;” and (3) making “direct investments.”

By engaging stakeholders, addressing concerns, and highlighting the co-benefits of environmental policies, governments can build consensus and overcome greenlash, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes for both people and the planet.

2.6 SNDs constitute a novel form of disinformation

The deliberately deceptive nature distinguishes SNDs from other rhetoric that may also be divisive. SNDs include entirely fabricated information and conspiracy theories as well as selectively chosen facts to ferment discord, antagonize groups, promote prejudice or undermine institutions. These narratives deflect from root causes and genuine solutions, instead serving interests divergent from their target audience. As the Global Disinformation Index cautions, it is crucial to recognize the adversarial nature of certain narratives, many of which would evade mis/disinformation regulations or detection through fact-checking exercises, rendering them largely immune to mainstream solutions.¹²³

SNDs may be disinforming as they are intended to stoke prejudice and fear against an outgroup. For example, news headlines that focus on an incarcerated transgender individual harming a fellow inmate, while factually accurate, can be misleading. By selectively highlighting specific incidents, there is a risk of portraying it as representative of an entire identity group, which can be harmful and misleading.¹²⁴ Such news stories feed into a wider narrative of demonization prevalent in Northern countries, in which fear of transwomen as a threat to the safety of cisgender women and girls is encouraged. When one zooms out of the specific incident, these headlines distract from the fact that sexual abuse is indeed a pervasive issue in correctional facilities, and women in prison are statistically more likely to be harmed by correctional officers¹²⁵ and other inmates,¹²⁶ and cisgender men are also often victims of assault by other inmates.¹²⁷ Narratives that insinuate that trans and gender non-conforming individuals are a threat obfuscate that, transgender individuals face a higher risk of violent crimes, including rape and sexual assault, compared to their cisgender counterparts.¹²⁸ Vulnerable populations in prisons—whether they are young individuals, those with physical or mental disabilities, LGBTQI+ persons, and those with a history of prior victimization—are particularly susceptible to sexual violence and often encounter significant challenges in reporting such violations and pursuing justice.¹²⁹ Discussions concerning the rights and safety of individuals in prison should prioritize measures to protect all inmates and guarantee justice for victims, irrespective of the perpetrator's identity. Similar, misleading use of statistics and factual information is often noted about the portrayal of migrants, displaced people, and ethnic and religious minorities in the media.

Furthermore, SDNs disinform by suggesting incorrect diagnoses and inauthentic solutions to real problems and areas of concern. Divisive entrepreneurs often (although not always) purport false populist framings of challenging the establishment, power, and injustice even when the actors themselves are part of the elite, and the solutions proposed/implemented disproportionately benefit elite groups.¹³⁰ By deflecting attention through inflammatory rhetoric, these leaders effectively divert public scrutiny from their implementation of regressive policies. A notable example is Javier Milei, whose campaign promised to revitalize the economy and curb inflation.¹³¹ However, once in office, he shut down the anti-discrimination agency and banned gender-inclusive language in official documents and public administration.¹³² Furthermore, Milei's "omni-bill" entails measures like dollarizing the currency, privatizing public services, implementing massive spending cuts, and deregulating policies—measures known to exacerbate vertical inequalities. Similarly, in the UK, divisive rhetoric has proliferated against migrants, who are often blamed for the lack of jobs, housing, and public services, and aggressive hostile environment policies have been pursued,¹³³ including sending refugees to Rwanda¹³⁴ and detaining people seeking asylum in floating prisons.¹³⁵ At the same time, since 2010, the UK government's dominant fiscal policy has been austerity,¹³⁶ marked by deep spending cuts and minor tax increases, contributing to increased inequality, a heavily privatized economy, where the 50 wealthiest families now hold more wealth than 33.5 million people in the UK.¹³⁷ Thus, as SDNs spread and polarization deepens, targeting specific groups, the actual consequences of these economic policies are obscured, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

2.6.1 The impact of SDNs

While there is no established metric for measuring the frequency of SDNs or their impact,¹³⁸ there is a growing body of literature on hate speech, which can serve as a proxy for understanding how language characterized by prejudice can impact behavior¹³⁹ (for key insights on the impact of hate speech on behavior, refer to Box 5). However, it would appear that SDNs exacerbate societal divisions by spreading fear, prejudice, and even hate towards the out-group. These tactics target marginalized out-groups, who are already disproportionately impacted by discriminatory policies. The rise of SDNs coincides with an increase in violence, hate crimes, bullying, and harassment. This creates a chilling effect on political participation, particularly for women, minorities, and those expressing progressive views.

SDNs may contribute to a vicious cycle of affective polarization between in-groups and out-groups, perpetuating mutual animosity. Although SDNs primarily aim to cultivate prejudice and aversion towards the out-group within the in-group, they also evoke reciprocal distrust and hostility from the out-group towards the in-group. This dynamic may arise because the out-group perceives SDNs as a uniform representation of the in-group's perspective. However, these narratives often originate through top-down processes rather than bottom-up as often presumed. Divisive rhetoric may often

represent only a minority viewpoint within the population. Research consistently reveals that people tend to overestimate the ideological consistency of the “other side,” fostering a self-perpetuating cycle of negative assumptions and animosity. This cycle intensifies when individuals indiscriminately critique not only the divisive entrepreneurs or the SDN but also make generalizations about an entire group of people. The failure to acknowledge manipulation or ideological disparity within the in-group provides fodder for divisive entrepreneurs who exploit such sentiments to portray their ideological opponents as indifferent or even adversarial to the concerns of the in-group.

Box 5: Exploring the impacts of hate speech as a proxy for SDNs

Across many contexts, we are seeing an increase in instances of hate speech. For example, a study in Costa Rica detected a 255 percent spike in messages and conversations related to hate and discrimination on social media platforms since 2021. Social scientists have observed how social media posts and other online speech can also inspire acts of violence. Some scholars argue that the normalization and spread of hate speech are partly enabled by mainstream actors and political figures. Rather than combating prejudice and hate, these mainstream figures have increasingly perpetuated such narratives, shifting blame, division, and prejudice from the fringes to mainstream discourse, thus potentially reinforcing and legitimizing extremist ideas. One study found that prejudiced elite speech is particularly compelling if other elites also endorse it, emboldening audiences to declare their prejudices and act on them accordingly. Another finds that politicians who incite hate speech against specific ethnic or religious groups in society tend to strengthen solidarity among in-group members while simultaneously reducing their tolerance towards individuals from the targeted out-groups. In this regard, hate speech threatens the social fabric by increasing divisiveness.

The targets of hate speech bear the most severe consequences. Data looking at online hate speech shows that it has a greater adverse effect on some groups over others: one study finds that online hate speech disproportionately targets women and minority groups and another finds that 64 percent of LGBTQI+ social media users are experiencing harassment and hate speech. The noted repercussions of hate speech include fostering an environment of prejudice and intolerance and promoting acts of violence. Therefore, the increase in acts of violence and harassment should also be recognized as a manifestation of widening horizontal inequalities between different identity-based groups—some groups are forced to live with the fear of being harassed or attacked both online and offline. This inequality is likely to rise as the intensification of scapegoating certain groups in recent years correlates with a rise in hate crimes across various countries.

For example, in Myanmar, military leaders and Buddhist nationalists used social media to slur and demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority ahead of and during a campaign of ethnic cleansing. In India, lynch mobs and other types of communal violence against Muslims have been on the rise since the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. In the US, hate crimes are at the highest recorded point in the twenty-first century, with a notable spike and escalation since 2016., In Germany, a correlation was found between anti-refugee Facebook posts by the far-right Alternative for Germany party and attacks on refugees. Galop, an LGBTQI+ anti-abuse charity, reported the correlation between unchallenged transphobic narratives in the British media by politicians and the surge in violence. This manifested as hate crimes against transgender people rose by more than 50 percent in a year.

Moreover, an alarming trend is emerging where individuals, especially those running for office from marginalized groups or challenging power structures, are facing increased attacks, harassment, and demonization. This hostile environment is becoming the new normal, creating a climate of fear that extends beyond officeholders to anyone who dares to express their opinions publicly., , Online harassment, in particular, can silence social activists and undermine public deliberation. Furthermore, this intimidation discourages many from pursuing roles in these spaces, particularly political positions. Women, especially those from marginalized groups, are disproportionately affected, which undermines their political participation and hampers the development of effective social and economic policies.

Even when hate speech does not incite violence, it may erode trust among different groups and increase levels of fear. Polls of Americans show that over 75 percent believe that heated language makes political violence more likely, and concerns were particularly pronounced among Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities. Continuous exposure to hate speech can have crippling consequences on an individual's behavioral and emotional response and breeds intergroup contempt as a result of the pejorative rhetoric that hate speech carries.

The exaggerated disagreement and opposition contribute to what Anand Giridharadas terms the "Great Write-off."¹⁴⁰ This phenomenon is when people increasingly see the "other side" as too far gone and involves the mutual dismissal of opposing viewpoints as irreconcilable. There is a widespread tendency to disengage from dialogue and interaction, driven by a perception of futility and mutual distrust. This fosters a sense of hopelessness and deep division within society. As communication diminishes, prejudice and stereotypes fill the void, fostering fear of the "other." This disconnection may amplify divisions, hindering understanding and learning from diverse perspectives. When mainstream political parties and institutions are not prepared to convene a frank dialogue on contentious issues. The result is that the people who are concerned about them have

nowhere to go except the extreme. Moreover, the abandonment of dialogue erodes a fundamental tenet of democracy: the ability to collectively shape society through persuasion and reasoning, fostering consensus and compromise. Without this guardrail, the path to authoritarianism becomes more likely.

2.6.2 Who are the divisive entrepreneurs?

Navigating the complex landscape of divisive entrepreneurs and strategic division is challenging due to its diverse networks, actors, and institutions spanning geographical and ideological differences. The widespread use of divisive and inflammatory tactics suggests a common “divide-and-rule playbook,” though tailored to each context's specificities, adapted to local issues and sensitivities. Despite some cross-border collaborations, it is incorrect to homogenize these actors; variations in ideology, motivations, and ambitions exist, albeit with significant overlaps in maintaining power and hierarchy while consolidating resources and undermining human rights and democratic principles.



Divisive entrepreneurs exhibit a striking lack of originality. Numerous copycats are replicating one another's tactics. The digital age allows for strategies, narratives, and events to be easily copied, often without direct coordination among groups. This phenomenon underscores a pervasive culture of mimicry, emulation, and authoritarian learning, where shared strategies and policies are seen to be effective and then adopted and adapted to suit the needs across different contexts.¹⁴¹ For example, we have seen similar narrative strategies in different parts of the world, such as “make X country great again,” broader attacks against what are perceived to be “traditional” family values, anti-

immigrant rhetoric including references to the Great Replacement theory, attacking the credibility of elections and attempts to rewrite history to serve their purposes. In India, Prime Minister Modi and the BJP often promote a narrative that India has been under occupation for 1,000+ years. In part, this implies that Muslim populations in the country are not part of “true” India, and were indeed part of the history of Hindu oppression.¹⁴² In the UK, there has been a sustained effort in recent years to rewrite the history of empire and colonization. The latest government report even claims that Britain barely benefitted from colonization.¹⁴³

Although a full investigation into the transnational networks of divisive entrepreneurs exceeds the scope of this paper, there are notable instances where actors work together and offer mutual support. This is nothing new; the internationalization of nationalism—a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon—was notable throughout the rise of fascism in the twentieth century. For instance, Nazi social scientists went to the US to meet policymakers and observe the treatment of African Americans in the US, adopting strategies and policies for implementation in Germany.¹⁴⁴ However, there does not appear to be a centralized power at the narrative and political levels today, although there have been attempts to create this kind of infrastructure. For instance, Stephen K. Bannon, Trump’s former campaign manager, attempted to establish the Institute of Social Economic and Political Societies to train populist leaders.¹⁴⁵

The interactions among like-minded leaders occur at various levels, including personal relationships (Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi were famously good friends) and at institutional events. For example, the US Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) is a significant platform for right-wing activists and politicians, hosting leaders like Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil. More recently, CPAC hosted Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, Argentina’s president Javier Milei, and El Salvador’s president, Nayib Bukele. International fora like the World Congress of Families also serve as venues for converging anti-gender ideological movements.

It is also well-documented how American religious groups have orchestrated and financed anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-gendere quality campaigns in African countries such as Uganda and Ghana,¹⁴⁶ as well as across Latin America. For example, an investigation by openDemocracy documented the flow of USD 280 million of ‘dark money’ from the US Christian right, influencing areas outside the US.¹⁴⁷ Commenting on these findings, Alejandra Cárdenas, Director of Global Legal Strategies at the Center for Reproductive Rights, stated, “These findings prove a manipulation we’ve been witnessing for years by the US Christian right in Latin America and Africa, aimed at undermining the social fabric and human rights protections that popular movements have fought for.” In addition, there is evidence that Russian actors are also promoting anti-LGBTQI+ narratives in Africa, notably through the establishment of over 200 Russian Orthodox parishes in 25 countries.¹⁴⁸ These parishes often provide humanitarian and educational projects in exchange for local priests converting to Russian Orthodoxy. Within this framework, they criticize “moral relativism”

and “ideological trends” that they claim threaten the institution of the traditional family, including opposition to same-sex marriage and euthanasia.^{149 150}

While we have provided only initial examples to illustrate the role and network of divisive entrepreneurs, Progressive International has recently published the “Reactionary International.” A research consortium that aims to “trace the connections between the politicians, platforms, think tanks, funders, foundations, publications, judges, and journalists that comprise this global network — and to support democratic systems in becoming more resilient to their insidious tactics.”¹⁵¹

Further research is required to explore the transnational networks of divisive entrepreneurs, including their funding sources, collaborative networks, and modes of operation.¹⁵² Understanding these dynamics is crucial in unraveling the complex web of transnational collaboration and narrative manipulation that shapes contemporary politics. This endeavor becomes increasingly critical as 2024 is the biggest election year in history when over 40 percent of the planet’s population is expected to cast ballots in more than 50 national contests. Such developments may lead to new, unfavorable alliances, underscoring the urgency of comprehensive investigation and analysis in this field.

2.7 The role of technology in monetizing and amplifying hate

“There is no question that ideas and language of division and hate have existed for decades, but their form of distribution, the tools of organization—they are new.”

—Remarks made by the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, after a right-wing terrorist killed over 50 people at a pair of mosques¹⁵³

“Is it any wonder, then, that many nations are creaking under the strain of polarization, political extremism and demagoguery—all supercharged by social media, artificial intelligence and other powerful technologies?”

—Achim Steiner, Administrator, UN Development Programme (UNDP)¹⁵⁴

While this paper emphasizes the role of divisive entrepreneurs and SDNs in fragmenting society, it does not dismiss the contribution of advancements in information and messaging technology. **This section explores how modern digital capabilities intersect with the age-old tactic of divide-and-rule, creating a new infrastructure that not only accelerates the artificial amplification of misinformation and disinformation but also monetizes the spread of divisive rhetoric.** This development introduces a myriad of new actors which significantly impacts the media and information landscape and presents

novel ways to interfere with critical political processes. It also highlights the elite capture of society's access to information and the quality of that information which poses a significant threat to the principles of participation and knowledge essential for political engagement.

2.7.1 Harmful content spreads like wildfire

The new digital landscape allows SDNs, fake news, hate speech, and pro-violence ideas to spread like wildfire across various social media and communication platforms, reaching an unprecedented number of people in a matter of minutes, making it incredibly difficult to contain their impact. The intersection between the motivations of “divisive entrepreneurs” and social media companies lies in the fact that the latter’s business model aims to maximize user engagement.¹⁵⁵ As a result, their algorithms tend to prioritize content that can go viral and trigger high-arousal emotions such as anger. The algorithms’ promotion of high-engagement content, which encourages users to share and interact with such content more frequently, results in its wider dissemination.¹⁵⁶ For example, Facebook’s algorithms heavily weighted “anger” reactions over “likes” from 2016 to 2019, as enraged posts garnered more engagement. Despite not necessarily intending to incite rage, each interaction with a post generates valuable data for targeted advertising and surveillance, often without users’ full awareness or control.¹⁵⁷ While there have been calls for regulations such as limiting the use of certain algorithms and content moderation, these large platforms have so far gotten away with being under-regulated, and consumers themselves have largely opted out of conventional self-governance schemes like voluntary disclosures and standards-setting when it comes to more consumer-facing risk.¹⁵⁸

2.7.2 Emerging technologies and political interference

Emerging technologies pose significant risks to democracy, as exemplified by Cambridge Analytica¹⁵⁹ and the Wagner Group's manipulation of public opinion, initiation of conflicts, and interference in recent elections.¹⁶⁰ These shocking acts of foreign interference have become disturbingly routine. However, we have started to see in the 2020s that the strategy appears to have shifted to include manufacturing polarization to weaken societies. For example, in November 2023, a network of fake Facebook and Instagram accounts was uncovered. They had been created to mimic everyday US citizens engaging in political discourse, disseminating divisive and polarizing political content to create discord in the US prior to the 2024 presidential election.¹⁶¹ Rather than supporting one side, the network reshared posts and created content from both liberal and conservative perspectives, aiming to amplify partisan divides and intensify existing polarization. Similar instances were noted in the 2020 US elections as well as in The Voice referendum in Australia in 2023.¹⁶² The Computational Propaganda Research Project also identified that almost half (48 percent) of the 81 countries studied have misinformation campaigns designed to drive division and polarize citizens.¹⁶³



If we once believed we lived in a “post-truth” era, we are now on an entirely different playing field. **The landscape is evolving rapidly: in addition to manufacturing polarization, the spread of strategic division, including mis/disinformation, is supercharged by generative artificial intelligence (AI).** Actors can use AI to create new text, images, and other media from existing data; this technology allows a single person to have the same impact that a factory with hundreds of workers could have had five years ago. AI can amplify cybersecurity risks and make it easier, faster, and cheaper to flood countries with fake content, potentially destroying the information environment and undermining democratic systems with deep fakes, misinformation, and harassment. Recent examples of AI-generated content include audio clips of Slovakia’s liberal party leader discussing vote rigging and raising the price of beer; a video of an opposition lawmaker in Bangladesh—a conservative Muslim majority nation—wearing a bikini; and Trump supporters targeting Black voters with AI images ahead of the 2024 presidential election.¹⁶⁴

Moreover, technology used to track consumer behaviors is now weaponized to target beliefs and viewpoints. There is evidence of communities being targeted with tailor-made content. For example, a recent investigation by *The Observer* unveiled that the ruling Conservative Party in the UK targeted divisive ads at working-class people over 50—playing on fears of crime, stoking anger, and promoting conspiracy theories.¹⁶⁵ Digital platforms facilitate the artificial amplification of content through paid promotions (as well as the use of bot farms) to create an illusion of widespread acceptance and consensus among populations. This phenomenon potentially contributes to the misperception of the prevalence of divisive beliefs, which in turn may fuel false and affective polarization. With AI becoming more available and powerful, its malicious use is poised to test the security of the electoral process by enabling nefarious actors to supercharge their tactics. Despite some progress, like the recent adoption of the first United Nations (UN)

General Assembly resolution on AI, the international community still needs to catch up in effectively regulating the digital world.¹⁶⁶

2.7.1 Funding disinformation

Furthermore, numerous individuals and groups, including media outlets, now could monetize divisive content through paid advertisements, thus incentivizing its creation and attracting a multitude of non-traditional actors into the public sphere. Many stand to gain considerable financial rewards through this process.

For instance, Andrew Tate, who is facing trial in Romania for charges of rape and human trafficking, is known for promoting misogynistic views and exploiting entrenched gender stereotypes to target disenfranchised men and impressionable youth. However, what is less well understood is how his considerable following (4.6 million on Instagram and 11.4 billion on TikTok) generates significant income from ad revenue and the selling of digital products, like the unaccredited “Hustler University course”—a pyramid scheme—which has allowed him to amass millions.¹⁶⁷ Tate exemplifies the hate and conspiracy-driven influencer industry that surged during COVID-19. Many influencers gained substantial followings peddling vaccine conspiracy theories, and now seize other political moments to monetize their content through inflammatory messages and mis/disinformation, affecting elections, policies, and public sentiment (during Australia’s recent Voice referendum, numerous COVID conspiracy theorists then began to spread racially charged disinformation about the Voice).¹⁶⁸

While there is increasing awareness of the rise of anti-gender and anti-feminist movements globally, particularly in how it is impacting a segment of young men, insufficient attention is given to the profits derived from this online content. The Global Disinformation Index underscores the impact of ad-funded content that perpetuates misogynistic disinformation.¹⁶⁹ Their report reveals that companies like Trivago, Oakley, BMW, 1&1, Fitbit, Hulu, and Urban Outfitters are unwittingly financing disinformation. Additionally, the vendors of the ad space, including Google, Amazon Ads, and Criteo, are also involved in this issue.¹⁷⁰ In fact, in 2019, advertising on disinformation sites results in harmful content generating revenue, and conservative estimates that a quarter of a billion US dollars’ worth of advertising goes to sites flagged as disinformation. Moreover, the Global Disinformation Index found that of the 12 countries analyzed, regulatory efforts do not adequately—or even attempt—to address the financial incentives or amplification of disinformation.¹⁷¹ While there is a valid debate surrounding freedom of speech online and the right to express opinions that may be considered disinformation, there is no inherent right to profit from hate or to amplify such expressions artificially.¹⁷²

2.7.2 Elite capture of our access to information

While concerns about media conglomerates and media independence from oligarchs and wealthy and powerful interests have long been a concern for democracies, digital platforms pose a compounding challenge. Today, they have become the primary source of news for the majority of the world's population. Sixty percent of people use social media for an average of 145 minutes daily, with 41 percent citing news consumption as a primary reason and 59 percent saying the same for internet use more generally. However, there are many regional and demographic differences in preferences, internet usage, and platform trends. For example, YouTube dominates India's political discourse, Facebook is pivotal in the US, and WhatsApp and Telegram play integral roles in Brazilian elections.¹⁷³ Globally, much of the news content is consumed and hosted by global digital platforms highly consolidated in the hands of just three conglomerates: Meta Platforms, Inc. (owns Facebook's 3 billion monthly users, Instagram's 2 billion monthly users, WhatsApp's 2 billion monthly users, and Threads' 15 billion users), Google (owns YouTube which has 2.7 billion monthly users, among other subsidiaries)¹⁷⁴ and ByteDance (owns TikTok, which has 1.2 billion monthly users). The sheer power and wealth accumulated by these platforms are astonishing. Meta's market cap today is around USD 734 billion; Alphabet (Google and YouTube's parent company) has a market cap of about USD 1.56 trillion—and only 19 countries on the planet have a higher GDP.¹⁷⁵

The shift in information consumption has profoundly impacted legacy media, contributing to the decline of local news and traditional outlets like newspaper readership and broadcast viewership globally. The financial challenges have contributed to the consolidation of outlets, as survival has become difficult for independent and local outlets. In the highly competitive attention economy of digital platforms, news outlets have adapted their engagement strategies, which demand increasingly sensationalist and click-bait content to vie for attention online, even from radio, television, and newspapers.¹⁷⁶ This intensifies the race for clicks, likes, and shares, which is driven primarily to provide a solid return for advertisers.¹⁷⁷ Corporate-owned media prioritize profitability over other concerns, neglecting the impact of negative or divisive content on marginalized groups and the critical role of ethical resource-intensive investigative journalism in challenging power and informing the public.¹⁷⁸

In addition to the role these platforms play in organizing and mobilizing hate groups and strategic division, the dominance of a few companies over our access to information and the nature of that information represents a direct threat to the principles of democracy. It undermines the diversity of voices, the independence of media, and the quality of public discourse, all essential for informed decision-making and healthy democratic engagement.

3 Mapping Vulnerabilities: Factors Fueling Susceptibility to Strategic Division

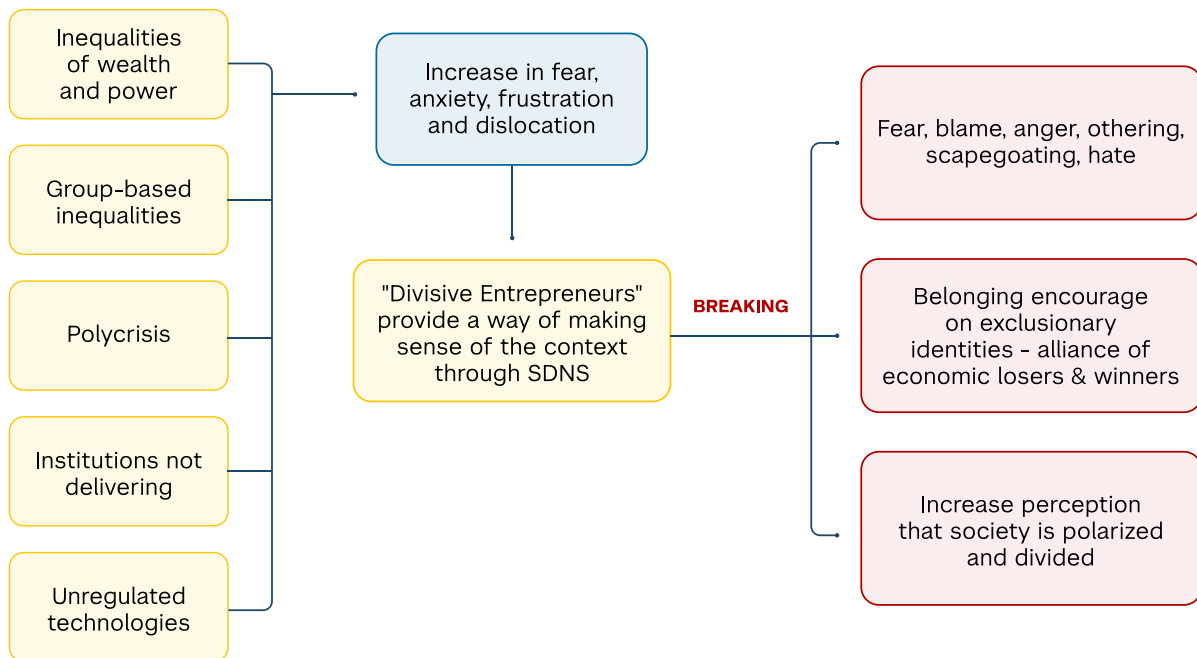
In the previous chapter, we introduced the concepts of strategic division, where divisive entrepreneurs deliberately sow discord, polarize and fragment and mislead communities through the use of SDNs. The discussion also emphasized that while the technology itself is not inherently divisive, it facilitates the spread of SDNs, targeting audiences, making messages seem more widely shared than they are, and enabling financial gain.

While there will always be those who seek to divide for their own gain, this chapter **examines five compounding factors that may increase societies, communities, and individuals' susceptibility to strategic division.**

1. Central to this inquiry are the concepts of vertical and horizontal inequalities, which illuminate disparities in both wealth and power distribution within a given population, resulting in too many having their needs unmet while others fear a (relative) loss of status.
2. Highly unequal societies characterized by hierarchical structures create tangible divides, power imbalances, and divergent lived experiences among groups, which may weaken social solidarity and empathy across groups.

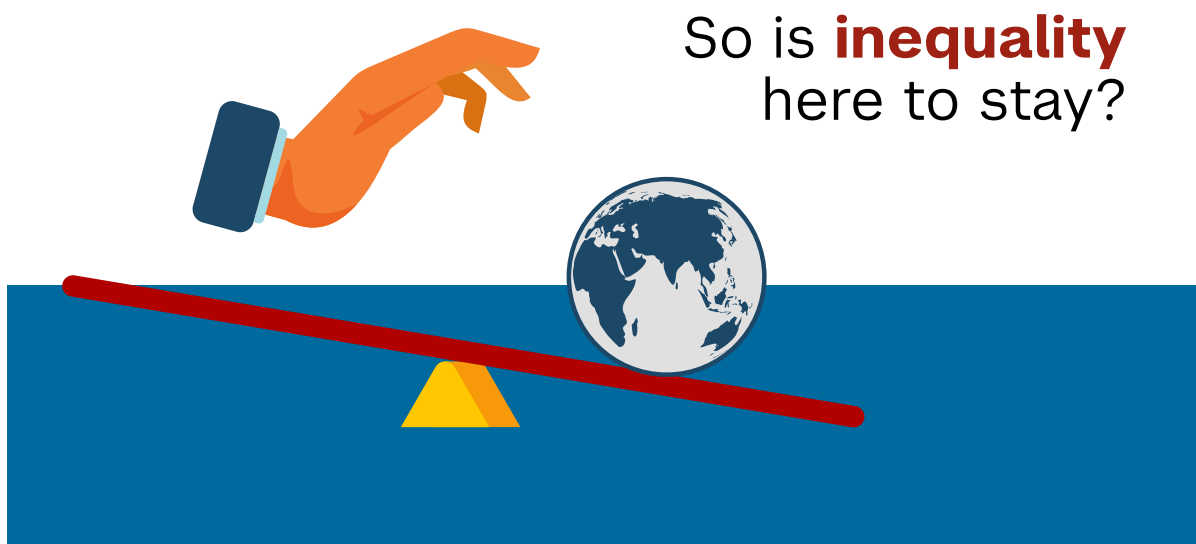
3. Moreover, the current context of the polycrisis—a convergence of multiple crises that might encompass threats of conflict, environmental degradation, economic distress, and institutional failures— aggravates perceptions of insecurity.
4. Finally, failing and unjust institutions further compound this vulnerability, fostering mistrust and exacerbating disenfranchisement. This vulnerability leaves societies prone to narratives that exploit fear and insecurity by offering convenient scapegoats to blame, thereby diverting attention from the underlying causes.
5. The impact of new and largely unregulated technologies and that have shaped much of our information ecosystem.

While these dynamics differ across contexts, together, they appear to contribute to a complex, fertile landscape for divisive entrepreneurs to exploit for their own agendas.



3.1 High and rising vertical inequalities create power imbalances, foment unmet needs and material grievances

Extreme inequalities sit at the heart of the challenges communities face today. Instead of an inclusive economic system that leaves no one behind, the current framework perpetuates a flow of wealth toward the top at the expense of the rest.¹⁷⁹ Given that wealth increasingly equates to undue power and influence,¹⁸⁰ inequalities not only widen the economic gap between the haves and the have-nots but have also created an elite class with disproportionate sway over political and economic systems, policy formulation, and the information ecosystem. Elite influence (or some might conceptualize as elite capture) is manifested through over-representation in politics,¹⁸¹ extensive and powerful lobby groups,¹⁸² as well as the consolidation of media ownership.¹⁸³ Levels of inequality can be problematic for several reasons. One significant issue is that they create an environment where divisive entrepreneurs can thrive. This results in a minority having undue influence over our understanding of the world. They inundate the information landscape with SDNs through various means, including AI, bots, advertisements, political platforms, and corporate-backed media.

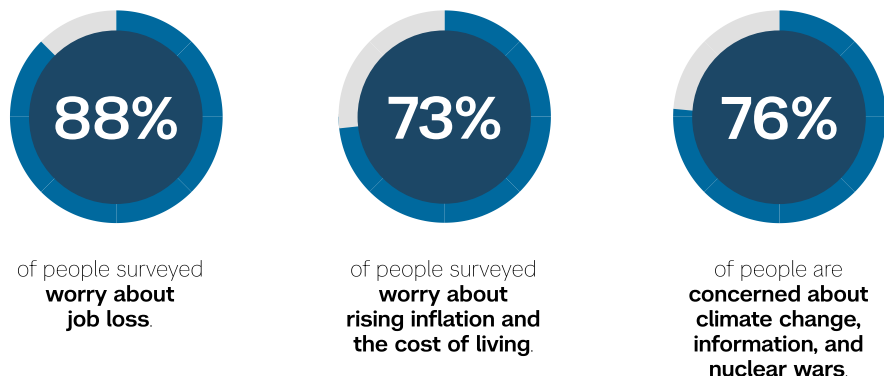


Promises of progress in the last few decades, such as the UN's "reduce inequalities," "leave no one behind," and the World Bank's "shared prosperity," have not been realized. In part, this is because the existence of a super-wealthy class poses a significant obstacle to meeting the needs of the broader populace in real and tangible ways.¹⁸⁴ These inequalities breed dysfunction in governance,¹⁸⁵ leading to situations of state capture

where wealthy majority groups retain power while alliances between disadvantaged groups are undermined. Oxfam's 2024 report underscores how the super-wealthy exacerbate inequality through wage suppression, tax evasion, state privatization, and the exacerbation of climate breakdown to deliver ever-greater wealth to their wealthy shareholders.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, the report finds that corporations use their influence to oppose labor laws and policies that would benefit workers, such as fighting minimum wage increases and pushing for political restrictions on unionization. In addition, rather than redistributing this concentration of wealth, governments in 111 out of 141 countries have decreased corporate tax in the last few years—this despite USD one trillion in profits being redirected to tax havens in 2022.¹⁸⁷

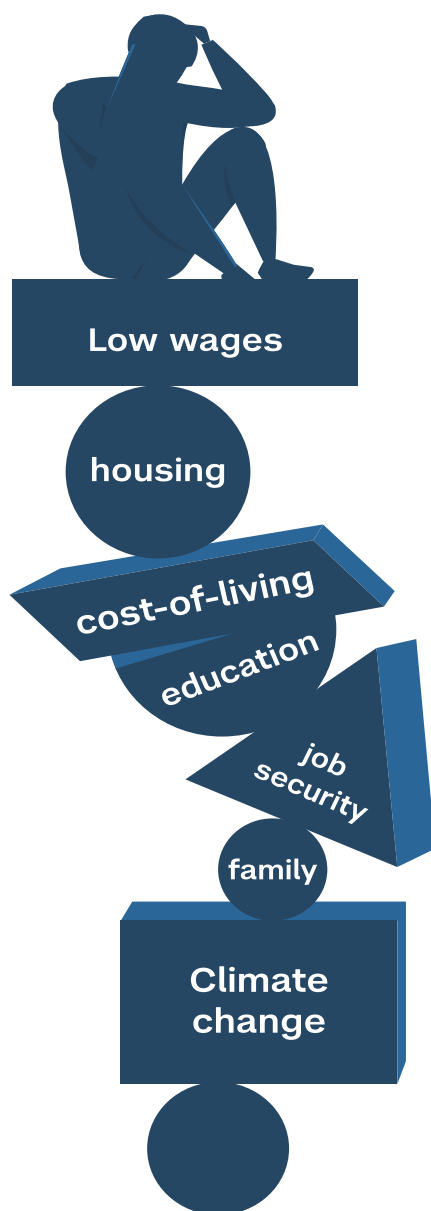
While the rich get richer, in parallel, five billion people have become poorer since 2020. Existential and economic anxieties loom large—88 percent of people surveyed worry about job loss, 73 percent about rising inflation and the cost of living, and 76 percent are concerned about climate change, information, and nuclear wars.¹⁸⁸ The 2024 "Money Talks" survey, which asks populations across 15 countries their top priorities going into the elections in 2024, emphasizes the importance of tangible and material concerns, with the cost-of-living being a top worry for 43 percent of the population, followed by the economy, healthcare, climate change, and crime and safety.¹⁸⁹ Although immigration is a concern, it ranks highest for only six percent of respondents, with the majority citing economic issues and public provisions such as poverty, housing, corruption, unemployment, inequality, education, family life and childcare, welfare benefits, future pandemics, energy policy, water, pensions, international aid, and transport as their primary concerns.

Shared global concerns according to the Edelman 2023 Trust Barometer



The UN Human Development Report finds that today, feelings of distress are pervasive, permeating even the wealthiest countries, and across the world, almost three billion people report feeling worried, stressed, or sad. To make matters worse, there is growing pessimism that the future will not improve. The latest findings from the Edelman Trust

Barometer found that only 40 percent of respondents believe their families will be better off in five years, a ten-point decline from 2022. This widespread predominantly economic anxiety and material grievances **provide fertile ground for divisive entrepreneurs to exploit and manipulate by redirecting social discontent towards out-groups** rather than the elites who maintain an unjust economic system that leaves so many behind.



3.2 Unaddressed horizontal inequalities and historic injustices lead to SDNs that reinforce hierarchies

Access to social, cultural, political, and economic resources and power are frequently structured along entrenched hierarchies within a society, dictated by factors such as geography, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, disability, and other characteristics.¹⁹⁰ As Isabel Wilkerson writes, much of the injustice in the world is underpinned by a caste system:

“An artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits, traits that would be neutral in the abstract... a hierarchy favoring the dominant caste whose forebears designed it.”¹⁹¹

For instance, where a person is born continues to be the single most significant factor in determining life chances.¹⁹² Geographic inequalities represent the enduring legacy of imperial colonization and exploitation, which some argue have persisted, albeit transformed, within the framework of the modern economic system.¹⁹³ These legacies manifest in the fact that Indigenous peoples comprise 19 percent of the world’s extreme poor, despite representing only six percent of the total population.¹⁹⁴ They are subject to higher rates of landlessness, malnutrition, and internal displacement.¹⁹⁵ While significant efforts have been made concerning gender equality, in all regions of the world, men are more likely to have higher incomes than women and are significantly more likely to hold decision-making roles at all levels of society.¹⁹⁶

A few recent studies¹⁹⁷ have proposed that the adverse social consequences of horizontal inequality may primarily stem from diminished levels of interpersonal trust and heightened competition and status anxiety within unequal societies. Some work has also suggested that economic inequality leads to adverse psychosocial outcomes,¹⁹⁸ particularly as it alienates people from one another, undermining social ties and reducing trust and “prosociality” in the process.¹⁹⁹ This lends itself to increasing rifts between various groups, leading to an erosion of a shared sense of purpose.²⁰⁰ Horizontal inequalities has also been linked as a significant driver of conflict and human rights violations.²⁰¹

As discussed in Chapter 2, divisive entrepreneurs exploit identity politics to set groups with material interests against one another. **In societies where horizontal inequalities are significant and identity is tied to opportunities, status, and resources, divisive entrepreneurs may be able to exploit a sense of heightened anxiety over potential shifts in societal norms** by portraying these changes (the Voice in Australia or gender quotas in South Korea) as threats to a person’s (or group’s) position within existing hierarchies. Research indicates that some people exhibit collective narcissistic tendencies,

characterized by a belief in their group's superiority and a perception that it is not receiving the respect and special treatment it deserves, leading to heightened sensitivity to perceived threats and increased resentment towards other groups (for more on collective narcissism see Box 6).²⁰² This response by some belonging to dominant groups is underscored by a study across 27 countries that found a close link between levels of inequality and the privileged group's support of the hierarchy.²⁰³ Privileged groups express more willingness to suppress lower-status groups and even the use of violence to defend their position.²⁰⁴ The research highlights a reinforcing pattern between societal hierarchies and the (largely unconscious) psychology of its inhabitants, which the researchers hypothesize may contribute to the stability of hierarchies as dominant groups support their maintenance.²⁰⁵



In many societies, there has not been a process of truth and reconciliation nor sufficient education on historical injustices committed against some groups. Prejudice and demonization between certain groups persist beneath the surface in various contexts, offering a ripe environment for divisive entrepreneurs to exploit. Although it is challenging to accurately measure the levels of prejudice, we can gauge its pervasiveness

by considering the number of individuals who experience some form of discrimination. Data from UN Statistics Division finds that one in six people worldwide experienced discrimination in some form, with women and people with disabilities disproportionately affected.²⁰⁶ Among both women and men, racial discrimination, rooted in factors such as ethnicity, color, or language, is among the most common grounds. Discrimination based on age and religion, though slightly less widespread, also affects women and men almost equally. Women are twice as likely as men to report instances of discrimination based on sex and almost twice as likely as men to experience discrimination based on marital status. People with disabilities also encounter high levels of discrimination, with one in three reporting such experiences, twice the rate encountered by individuals without disabilities. Although these narratives may take on new forms, they are often deeply rooted in long-standing historical contexts.

Viewing inequality through the lens of identity reveals that these patterns did not arise spontaneously or inevitably, nor are they a reflection of the inherent inferiority of marginalized groups.²⁰⁷ Instead, they stem from deliberate policies and systems (and the prejudice used to justify such choices)²⁰⁸ that favor dominant groups, often at the expense of those lower in the social hierarchy.²⁰⁹ The injustices experienced more by some groups than others are products of historical and contemporary factors (e.g., the legacy of transatlantic slavery and imperial colonization,²¹⁰ the post-war global financial architecture, conflicts, responses to recent crises and technological developments). Many of these factors were (and largely continue to be) perpetuated by elite dominant groups²¹¹—groups that exert disproportionate influence and power over resources and societal structures, norms, and policies—and who predominantly reap the benefits of such decisions.

Box 6: Exploring why some individuals are more affected by SDNs than others: the role of collective narcissism

In researching what leads people to commit acts of terrorist violence, psychologist Agnieszka Golec de Zavala identified that a fragile, uncertain sense of self-worth, steeped in shame and distrust, may be more prone to collective narcissistic thinking. Collective narcissism is not simply tribalism; it is a tendency towards a sense of pride in one's "in-group" that stems from a belief of superiority over others (this can be rationalized in many ways, e.g., ordained by the right God, having worked harder, possessing a higher moral authority, being physically stronger—all the ways in which inequalities are rationalized). Crucially, those exhibiting collective narcissistic tendencies are more focused on out-group prejudice, displaying heightened threat sensitivity and resentment towards other groups. They believe their group is not accorded the respect and special treatment it deserves. This belief often (but not always) forms the core narrative arc of SDNs. Collective narcissism explains how some people who belong to dominant groups may perceive campaigns, norms, or policies aimed at reducing inequalities as a threat to their

perceived status and respect, often resulting in rage and anger. This thinking can happen in seemingly any kind of assemblage: a religious, political, gender, racial, or ethnic group, but also a sports team, club, or cult.

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Researchers suggest that collective narcissists are particularly concerned with receiving group recognition because, on a personal level, they feel insecure about their own value and require validation. Moreover, it is associated with sensitivity to negative environmental stimuli and negative emotions, which could override prosocial instincts—especially towards out-group members. Studies show that variations in people’s threat response make it plausible that SDNs may impact some audiences more than others. In the current environment characterized by crises and change, it is plausible that as more individuals experience feelings of insecurity, some may become more susceptible to collective narcissistic group thinking. The cycle of instability and SDNs might even have a ratcheting effect, given that research indicates that adopting a collective narcissistic perspective does not enhance self-esteem but may, in fact, increase levels of individual vulnerable narcissism. Researchers have found it to breed prejudice, fuel factionalism, radicalism, and even violence.

3.3 Divisive entrepreneurs capitalize on fear and insecurity arising from polycrisis, conflict, and external shocks

In recent years, multiple crises have besieged people’s daily lives, both shaping and exacerbating underlying inequalities and creating more insecurity. For instance, a 2023 study found that people living in 72 out of 90 countries face moderate to high risks of experiencing at least three crises at the same time.²¹² Moreover, mass movements of people due to conflict, lack of economic opportunity, or environmental degradation can also come as an added shock for both host and displaced populations. Today, 110 million people are displaced, and 76 percent are hosted by low- and middle-income countries like Türkiye, Iran, and Colombia, countries dealing with already constrained resources. The complexity and force of how each crisis and shock overlaps and interacts

with the impact of other crises creates a cascading effect that is both profound and damaging. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted the adverse interplay between crises and inequalities, revealing deep disparities within and across countries between the “economic losers” and the “winners.” While 40 individuals became “COVID-19 billionaires”²¹³ while many suffered, it underscored the reality that the current economic system often benefits some at the expense of others, even during times of crisis.

The world has also witnessed an escalation in conflicts, creating an intense atmosphere of volatility and fragility. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program has underscored that the past two years have marked the most conflict-ridden period since the conclusion of World War II.²¹⁴ Armed conflicts are also up, including outside so-called fragile contexts. An estimated two billion people live in places affected by conflict, constituting a quarter of humanity.²¹⁵ The toll on human life and well-being has been devastating, with millions forced to flee their homes to increasingly hostile places.²¹⁶ Worse still, the violence that occurs within conflicts is dwarfed when compared to the everyday violence that occurs in daily society: an estimated 80 to 90 percent of all violent deaths happen outside of conflict, and for each homicide, there are 1,300 more instances of physical assault.²¹⁷ One in three women have been subjected to violence by an intimate partner, and an estimated one billion children experience violence every year.²¹⁸ For too many, the fundamental freedom from violence is denied.

Meanwhile, the pervasive presence of crisis and violence, whether within conflicts or in everyday society, casts a shadow of fear and insecurity over communities worldwide. Currently, six in seven people globally feel insecure,²¹⁹ and one in two do not feel in control of their lives.²²⁰



As noted in Chapter 2, fear and insecurity are potent emotions divisive entrepreneurs can exploit for their gain. Fear can also make some people more inclined towards promises of security that authoritative figures offer. SDNs, often centered around the image of the strongman or *mano dura*, exploit this fear and insecurity by often presenting authoritarian solutions as the only viable means of restoring order and stability—often contrary to the evidence.

The inability of governments and multilateral institutions to curb the rise of inequalities and adequately address crises, address historic injustices and people's basic needs has diminished public trust and confidence in leadership and institutions, which divisive entrepreneurs can exploit.

In addition, state capture often leads to corruption, erosion of democratic institutions, and loss of public trust in governance. On the international level, multilateral institutions are also falling short. Where global leaders are expected to act on issues such as climate action, conflicts, humanitarian crises, and sustainable development, demonstrating global solidarity and international cooperation, this has not occurred.²²⁴



These dysfunctions become fodder for divisive entrepreneurs who can utilize frustrations with institutions to advance agendas that undermine democracy, human rights, and inclusion.

Trust in institutions and leaders is on the decline, especially in politics and media, seen as the least trustworthy people in society,²²⁵ which in turn undermines confidence in democracy as a whole. The allure of authoritarianism grows, as many young people (aged 36 and under) are losing faith in democracy as a system that can deliver, with only 40 percent still believing that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.²²⁶ This is underscored by the fact that globally, seven out of ten people feel their voices are not heard in the political systems, and there is a growing sentiment that those in charge have taken advantage of their power to enrich themselves and their friends.²²⁷

When it comes to climate change, the majority of the people surveyed across 14 countries are pessimistic about solutions and do not trust institutions to take action.²²⁸ The 2023 Edelman Barometer finds that **two “trust realities” are emerging as those in the top quartile of income hold a profoundly more positive view of institutions than the vast majority in the bottom quartile, which, according to the researchers, is potentially leading to a loss of shared identity and national purpose.**²²⁹ Considering these statistics alongside existing inequalities, it is unsurprising that there has been a surge in support for populist parties, which often capture anti-establishment sentiments. The worry is that divisive entrepreneurs may use populist rhetoric to promise a challenge to the establishment by redistributing power and resources. However, rather than enacting redistributive policies, they often pursue regressive and even autocratic agendas, as discussed in Chapter 2.

3.5 Unregulated and new technologies

In the previous section, we explored the dual nature of emerging and largely unregulated technologies. While they can drive innovation, they can also be a significant catalyst for societal division and vulnerability. This is primarily due to the lack of government and international regulation and inadequate education in media literacy. Few countries incorporate up-to-date media literacy into their educational curriculum, leaving both young people and children ill-equipped to navigate the increasingly complex information ecosystem. As a result, individuals are frequently exposed to misinformation and disinformation without realizing it. This is compounded by the rise of sophisticated bots that mimic human interactions on social media platforms, making it challenging to discern the authenticity of online opinions. Furthermore, older adults, often outside the scope of formal education systems, also lack digital media literacy skills, making them particularly susceptible to mis/disinformation online. This deficiency in critical media skills across different age groups makes societies more vulnerable to the “divisive entrepreneurs” in the digital sphere who exploit these weaknesses to spread disinformation. **This underscores**

the need for comprehensive studies examining the interconnections between regulation and governance (or a lack thereof) of new technologies and SDNs.

Conclusion

Societies become vulnerable to division due to a complex interplay of factors strongly linked to rising and extreme inequalities as well as polycrisis, conflict, and the systemic failure to address the root causes of social and economic disparities, further fueling discontent and disenchantment among communities. As escalating disparities widen both among nations and within their borders, and as multilateral institutions and governments struggle to cope with myriad challenges, populations grow increasingly disillusioned and skeptical of their leaders' ability to effect change, often spilling out into the streets. Troublingly, 58 percent of people are concerned that political unrest may spiral into violence within the next year.²³⁰ To avert such escalation, people require meaningful outlets for public discontent and avenues to engage with political leaders beyond the confines of traditional electoral politics.²³¹ This imperative arises as decades of promises regarding shared prosperity, inclusivity, economic stability, and safety remain largely unfulfilled.

As we have attempted to make sense of this complex milieu, it is imperative to address the pressing challenge of societal fragmentation, in all of its facets. The growing and increasingly entrenched divides, the lack of trust in society, in each other and the information we encounter, and the fears and uncertainties that contribute to and result from polarization are issues we must urgently confront and find solutions for.

In addition, **against the backdrop of unprecedented polarization, navigating policymaking has become an increasingly complex endeavor.** The traditional pathways of policy formulation and implementation now intersects with the turbulent currents of ideological and social divides and the omnipresent influence of digital platforms. As societies grapple with increasing fragmentation and the proliferation of dis/misinformation, policymakers are tasked with the formidable challenge of fostering consensus, deciphering truth from falsehood, and crafting effective solutions that resonate across divergent perspectives.

Further research is required to understand how SDNs work and how they can be mitigated, which is essential for steering the course towards better policymaking, governance, and outcomes. It is also worth noting that addressing the symptoms—polarization or disinformation—without confronting the underlying “disease” of systemic inequality and power imbalances will fail to offer a lasting solution for strategic division. Messaging strategies, fact-checking, or policies aimed at technological regulation, such as algorithms or media literacy programs in schools, are by themselves insufficient. They must be complemented by policies that confront the core challenges of crises and inequalities to bolster societal resilience against divisions.

4 Tackling Division at its Core: Comprehensive Policy Interventions

A comprehensive response to strategic division and preliminary solutions

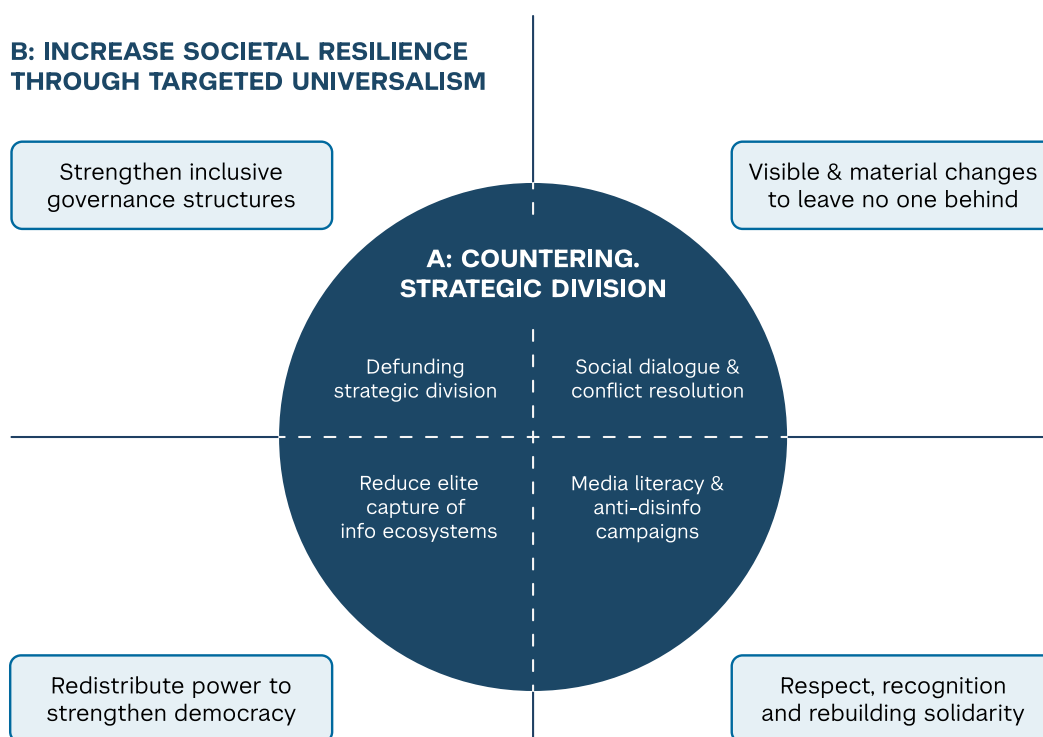
The reality is that there is no silver bullet solution to these intersecting issues. Here, we present a preliminary framework of policy interventions designed to address both the symptoms and root causes of strategic division. This framework aims to bridge policy silos, connecting diverse expertise and approaches. Those focused on tech and media often overlook the underlying drivers and incentives for spreading division—primarily profits and power. This highlights why regulating some of the world's most powerful and wealthy companies has to this date failed. Conversely, those concerned with polarization and division from a social inclusion perspective often neglect the economic and material realities people face, as well as that some of the division is driven by elites, which can be significant drivers of discord. On the other hand, those interested in reducing vertical and horizontal inequalities frequently fail to address the politics of inequality. Today, policymakers often face significant challenges when implementing gender equality, when even the term "gender" has become a lightning rod for division in certain contexts.

Rather than suggesting that the only way to make progress is to address everything everywhere all at once, **this framework advocates for a holistic and comprehensive view of these issues.**

Addressing polarization and societal fragmentation necessitates a dual approach:
(1) Interventions that counteract and disrupt the mechanisms of strategic division and
(2) interventions that target the underlying factors making societies susceptible to strategic division (See the figure on page 71). Policy interventions to alleviate stress in people's lives and equitably rebalance our economies and political systems must also consider the political challenges of implementation and such transformations. Moreover, focusing solely on polarization and disinformation is akin to treating the symptoms while

neglecting the root cause. Such an approach is bound to fall short as vulnerabilities persist and divisive actors continue to operate.

4.1 A comprehensive policy framework to increase resilience and counter strategic division



A. Counter strategic division and strengthen social solidarity

To counter divisive narratives and mis/disinformation, policymakers should consider a comprehensive strategy addressing four key policy areas. The first is investing in media literacy and anti-disinformation campaigns, integrating critical-thinking skills into education curriculums, and launching public awareness initiatives to empower individuals in discerning truth from falsehood. Second, fostering social dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms, encouraging inclusive community engagement, and facilitating peaceful resolution of conflicts through mediation and dialogue platforms. Third, reducing elite capture of information ecosystems requires regulations to prevent concentration of media

ownership and promote a diversity of voices. Fourth, defunding strategic division involves implementing regulations to ensure transparency in funding sources and limiting the influence of financial backers aiming to sow discord, among others. By addressing these areas, policymakers can strengthen societal resilience, foster informed public discourse, and mitigate the harmful impacts of divisive narratives and misinformation.

Policy area 1: Defunding strategic division

Defunding strategic division necessitates a multifaceted approach that includes implementing robust regulations to ensure transparency in funding sources and mitigate the influence of financial backers on those seeking to sow discord. This can be achieved through various policy tools and interventions that governments can use to take proactive steps to defund strategic division and foster a more cohesive and resilient society. As the Aspen Digital Institute recommends in the Commission on Information Disorder, there need to be requirements for greater transparency of platforms.²³² Whereas radio and television are comparatively easy to study, internet-based communication platforms deliver targeted messages to small and large audiences without similar transparency. This opacity—from design to technical implementation to the policies that govern the platform—undermines even good-faith pursuits for effective solutions in mitigating or combating mis/disinformation. Protecting public interest research into digital platforms would facilitate a better understanding of their impact on societal cohesion, enabling informed policymaking aimed at curbing divisive influences effectively.

To enhance accountability, it's essential to establish clear guidelines mandating that both advertising agencies and platforms disclose the placement of advertisements and identify the websites receiving funding from these ads.²³³ In the short term, ensuring collaboration between governments, the private sector, and third parties can facilitate identifying and addressing sites at risk of disinformation to safeguard against strategic division. For example, the Global Disinformation Index provides risk ratings of news websites to ad tech and social media companies through three interventions: (1) Using ad tech to divert funding away from disinformation domains, (2) providing advertisers with a trusted risk rating, and (3) providing platforms and search engines to incorporate third party risk signals about risks to their products, which enables ad and social media companies to decide what websites to monetize.²³⁴ “Check My Ads, a digital advertising watchdog organization took a novel approach where they apply public pressure on the hidden engines of the online advertising world—ad exchanges (See Box 7 for further information).²³⁵

In addition, we need to garner public commitment from platforms to adhere to risk and harm minimization principles that would incentivize them to **prioritize content moderation strategies that mitigate the artificial amplification of mis/disinformation**. At the same time, community-led content regulation mechanisms—akin to the successful Build Up initiative in Kenya²³⁶ and the Gusdurian Network Indonesia, which involves collaboration between platforms, governments, and civil society organizations—could set standards for responsible content dissemination. For ongoing instances of disinformation,

there should be mandates for platforms to promote third-party counter-messaging that challenges disinformation directly to curb the proliferation of divisive narratives further.

Box 7: “Check My Ads:” A novel approach to defunding disinformation

Instead of advocating for a consumer boycott, Check My Ads employed an innovative strategy: exerting public pressure on the obscure but pivotal players in the online advertising ecosystem—ad exchanges. These exchanges, run by major companies like Google and Verizon and a myriad of smaller entities, act as intermediaries connecting advertisers with websites. They typically have content policies prohibiting ad placement on sites that endorse government overthrow or glorify violence. Google, which operates the most extensive ad exchange, has specific rules against hosting ads on sites that propagate demonstrably false claims or could undermine trust in democratic processes.

“Ad exchanges have established a standard for their publishers’ conduct. We are simply insisting that they adhere to their own standards,” stated Atkin, who describes her group’s mission as targeting the “ATM of the disinformation economy.” Check My Ads works to highlight instances where certain websites have breached these exchange policies. Freewheel discontinued its association with Steve Bannon’s Real America’s Voice, OpenX blocked Glenn Beck’s The Blaze, and Google severed ties with Dan Bongino’s website. According to the group’s estimates, their campaign has successfully diverted millions of dollars away from sites that disseminate disinformation.

Policy area 2: Fostering social dialogue and conflict resolution

Encouraging inclusive community engagement and facilitating peaceful conflict resolution through mediation and dialogue platforms are critical to achieving societal cohesion. To achieve this goal, a range of policy tools can be deployed. Firstly, alongside adopting constructive political narratives as explored above, leveraging social dialogue tools and constructive dialogue spaces, like Ireland’s citizen’s assemblies, Tunisian quartet du dialogue national, and Sierra Leone’s Fabuktol, can facilitate inclusive discussions on divisive issues, empowering communities to address challenges collectively. This also extends online, utilizing online discourse spaces such as several Build Up initiatives,²³⁷ Pol.is,²³⁸ Cortico (formerly known as Local Voices Network),²³⁹ and the Front Porch Forum (based in Vermont and New York).²⁴⁰ Democratizing public discourse allows diverse perspectives to be heard while potentially reducing the influence of elite interests in shaping information ecosystems. By implementing these policy tools, governments can

work towards mitigating elite capture and promoting a more inclusive and pluralistic media environment.

Secondly, the truth is perhaps even more critical in a time of mass disinformation. Employing transitional justice tools (TJT) in contexts beyond conflict may be key in addressing polarization and social fragmentation. TJT processes serve as a means for recognizing the humanity of the “other”—acknowledging that individuals whose rights have been violated are fellow citizens who belong to our society. This recognition is a crucial precondition for any meaningful redistribution, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, may be necessary for addressing inequalities,²⁴¹ especially when it concerns identities. Pablo de Greiff reminds us, “One of the worst pitfalls of great inequality is that it allows members of different groups—classes, races, religious, and other groups—to live in different realities.”²⁴² Left unaddressed, de Greiff argues, can make it difficult for the privileged to understand the indignities to which others are subjected on an everyday basis. In many ways, the “socialization” of their reality is a precondition for the creation of the demand for change.²⁴³ While we highlight the role of TJT, the specific truth-telling measures that would be applicable and appropriate depend on the requirements of the context.

Policy Area 3: Reducing elite capture of ecosystems

Reducing elite capture of information ecosystems, particularly in the information realm, demands robust regulations to prevent the concentration of media ownership and foster a diversity of voices. Key policy tools to achieve this include increasing media diversity and amplifying marginalized voices. For instance, initiatives like Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, the first Canadian Indigenous television channel, has played a crucial role in serving Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike for over two decades, sharing Indigenous stories, celebrating cultural heritage, and promoting intercultural understanding.²⁴⁴ Additionally, revitalizing and supporting local media outlets to deliver reliable, context-rich, and community-focused reporting can enhance informed civic engagement and fortify local democratic discourse. Examples like the Local Journalism Sustainability Act in New York underscore the importance of sustaining grassroots journalism, which serves as a vital pillar of democracy by providing citizens with access to accurate and relevant information.²⁴⁵ Moreover, protecting civil freedoms is essential to safeguarding diverse voices and ensuring that media ecosystems remain vibrant, inclusive, and representative of society. By implementing these measures, policymakers can work towards reducing elite capture and promoting a media landscape that reflects the diversity of perspectives within society.

Policy Area 4: Investing in media literacy and anti-disinformation campaigns

To achieve this, various policy tools can be employed. Firstly, implementing media literacy interventions both online and in schools, drawing inspiration from the successful model in Finland, can equip individuals with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the digital landscape responsibly and discern mis/disinformation from factual content,

keeping up with the emerging tech. Furthermore, policies are increasingly needed to improve election information integrity, which can enhance trust in democratic processes and safeguard against the manipulation of public opinion through misinformation. By employing these policy tools, governments can actively promote social dialogue, build resilience against strategic division, and foster a more united and harmonious society.



Additionally, developing anti-disinformation campaigns in consultation with communities, civil society organizations, and former extremists can help combat the dissemination of divisive narratives and promote a more informed public discourse. Linked to the TJT examples above, educating citizens about the historical use of disinformation to sow division, as exemplified by the “Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation” (TRHT) framework, can foster greater awareness of the manipulative tactics employed to incite societal rifts. In addressing mis/disinformation, it's increasingly recognized that debunking myths and fact-checking has limited efficacy and, in some cases, may inadvertently reinforce falsehoods through their repetition. The growing consensus is that we cannot combat disinformation merely with better information; instead, we need to counter it by showing people that this is a harmful strategy they may encounter.²⁴⁶ Antidote, a nonprofit adopting a public health perspective on psychological manipulation,²⁴⁷ is in the early stages of pioneering extensive projects aimed at immunizing societies against the contagion of disinformation and information manipulation. The goal is to foster collective

resilience against disinformation and manipulation, recognizing that there will always be individuals seeking to exploit others' vulnerabilities.²⁴⁸

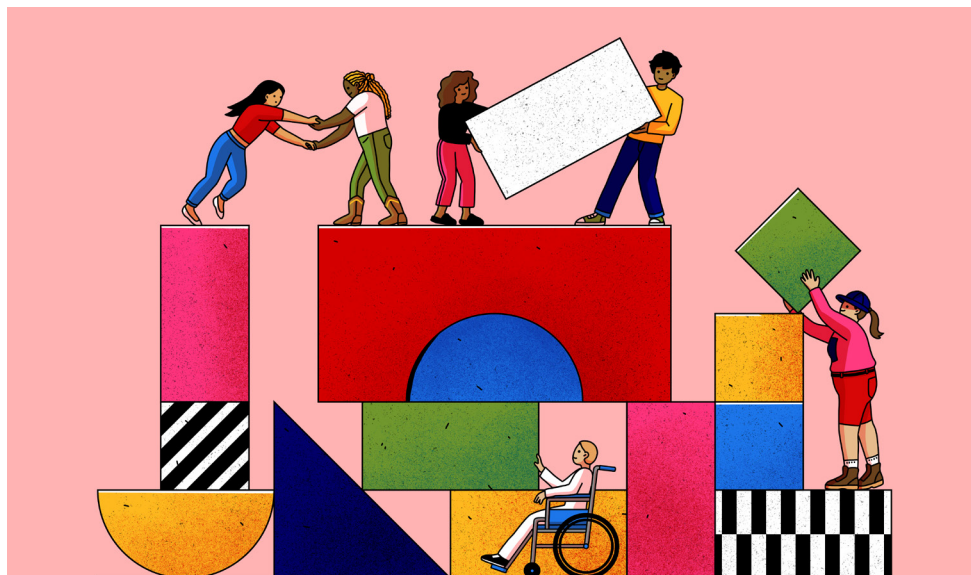
Box 8: Finland's National Strategy on Media Literacy

Finland ranked first out of 41 European countries for resilience against misinformation for the fifth consecutive year, according to an October survey by the Open Society Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria. Officials attribute Finland's success not only to its world-renowned education system but also to a dedicated effort to educate students about fake news. Media literacy is integrated into the national core curriculum starting from preschool, with all teachers required to teach it, though they have significant discretion in how they approach the lessons. Teachers may examine terms like "vaccination" and discuss search algorithms and their reliability. During the war in Ukraine, other teachers used Russian news sites and memes to illustrate the effects of state-sponsored propaganda. It's worth noting that researchers found that Finland has several advantages in countering misinformation: an excellent public school system, free college education, high trust in the government, and relatively minimal impact from the pandemic. Additionally, teachers in Finland are highly respected.

Researchers suggest that collective narcissists are particularly concerned with receiving group recognition because, on a personal level, they feel insecure about their own value and require validation. Moreover, it is associated with sensitivity to negative environmental stimuli and negative emotions, which could override prosocial instincts—especially towards out-group members. Studies show that variations in people's threat response make it plausible that SDNs may impact some audiences more than others. In the current environment characterized by crises and change, it is plausible that as more individuals experience feelings of insecurity, some may become more susceptible to collective narcissistic group thinking. The cycle of instability and SDNs might even have a ratcheting effect, given that research indicates that adopting a collective narcissistic perspective does not enhance self-esteem but may, in fact, increase levels of individual vulnerable narcissism. Researchers have found it to breed prejudice, fuel factionalism, radicalism, and even violence.

B. Increasing societal resilience through targeted universalism

Although we do not provide an in-depth policy recommendations to address inequalities, power imbalances, crises, shocks, and psychosocial factors, here we want to emphasize that **lasting solutions to division and polarization require complementary policies that tackle the underlying issues and strengthen societal resilience**. The foundation of more resilient societies lies in institutions and governments that earn public trust through effective policy action, ensuring individuals feel secure and in control of their lives, emphasizing the importance of every person and family within society. A solution-focused approach involves addressing the drivers of division, which as we have discussed in this paper, include both vertical and horizontal inequalities, the power imbalances politically and economically, external shocks and complex crises, increasing violence and insecurity, alongside dissatisfaction and distrust towards institutions. This must also encompass addressing historical grievances and injustices, expanding opportunities for constructive dialogue at both the political and community levels, redistributing power to prevent its concentration among a few, enhancing community involvement in decision-making processes, and fostering greater agency across various domains. It also involves developing and restoring social solidarity across communities, creating a solid foundation for a united and cohesive society. This is not just about direct attempts to strengthen social cohesion but also about enhancing relationship skills, educational curricula, community support, local leadership, and providing spaces and societal infrastructure where people organically gather—sports clubs, parenting groups, youth clubs, community centers, libraries etc. In tandem with redistributing resources, we must focus on increasing a sense of belonging and strengthening social ties within and across the community. As we explore in the next section, we recommend implementing such policies through a targeted universalism approach and careful, forward-thinking policy design and implementation. This is essential to ensure no groups are left behind and minimize the risk of backlash.



4.2 Adapting to a new political reality

In this section, 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. Now, we propose three overarching strategies for policymakers to counteract strategic division and adapt to this evolving landscape. These include adopting targeted universalism as a policymaking approach that fosters unity while avoiding backlash, implementing forward-thinking and adaptive policies that consider those negatively impacted by specific policies to avoid zero-sum framing, and promoting constructive political narratives.

Addressing the intertwined issues of social fragmentation and polarization requires a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between inequality and power and a commitment to crafting policies that are resilient, inclusive, and forward-thinking. Simplistic attributions, such as “economic grievances fueling right-wing populism” or the notion that “people are simply manipulated,” overlook the multifaceted motivations and circumstances influencing diverse groups. These oversimplifications can lead to misguided policy responses that fail to address the underlying causes effectively. Hence, no single policy prescription exists for societies’ growing rifts and polarization. Diagnosing the underlying problems before implementing strategies to mitigate SDNs is a crucial prerequisite. In addition, a comprehensive and multifaceted policy framework is necessary, incorporating both immediate and long-term strategies. To this end, several overarching strategies—or approaches—be considered before examining key policy instruments. These are listed below.

Considering targeted universalism

Forward-thinking & adaptive policymaking

Constructive political & policy narratives

4.2.1 Consider targeted universalism in policymaking

Policies specifically aimed at aiding certain groups often provoke backlash as they are perceived within a zero-sum frame as granting an unfair advantage to some groups over others and fostering a sense of inequity. When it appears that one group benefits significantly or disproportionately, others may feel neglected or forgotten. This dynamic undermines the principle of neutrality expected from government and public institutions, fostering a perception of partiality or misalignment with majority community needs. It is essential to adopt a smart and sensitive approach to policy design to “eliminate backlash” by utilizing the principles of targeted universalism.

Targeted universalism (see Box 9) may be a highly effective approach to reducing inequality and exclusion by carefully sequencing and combining policies to ensure that benefits are perceived by a broader range of societal groups, including majority ethnic/religious working and middle-class populations, at the same time as historically marginalized communities. As we have documented in this report, many shared material and political concerns across groups can be addressed and even leveraged to bolster social solidarity with collective projects that a broad swathe of the population can buy into. It is vital to recognize that even though some groups are disadvantaged more acutely than others, the relatively less disadvantaged still feel left behind. For example, Mexico's well-known Prospera program (formerly Progresa and Oportunidades) ended after twenty-one years, largely due to the unpopularity of its exclusive targeting of poor households among middle-income voters. Prospera's funding has since been reallocated to two universal schemes intended to benefit everyone across the income distribution.²⁴⁹

Box 9: What is targeted universalism?

According to the Othering and Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, targeted universalism involves establishing universal goals for all groups while developing strategies tailored to each group's unique socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical contexts. This approach balances addressing specific needs with affirming collective and shared needs within the social fabric. For contentious issues or identity groups, measures to enhance equity and inclusivity can be integrated into broader policy frameworks to avoid defensive reactions, especially in societies that have not yet recognized historical injustices or challenged stereotypes and prejudice.

Implementing targeted universalism requires different approaches depending on a country's institutional strengths and maturity. Even affluent countries may struggle to target effectively, particularly in the aftermath of a shock. In "lower-capacity" countries, the implementation gap is often more pronounced, necessitating a pragmatic mix of universal and targeted support (fiscal or policy) tailored to each country's context.

Intersectionality is central to targeted universalism, as understanding how inequalities and injustices impact different groups based on their identity and lived experience is crucial for shaping inclusive policy responses. These policies should not create envy and should be effectively implemented across groups. For example, Canada's Gender-Based Analysis+ (GBA+), introduced in 2011, is a federal policy tool that rigorously assesses systemic inequalities. GBA+ evaluates how diverse groups of women, men, and gender-diverse people experience policies, programs, and initiatives. However, inclusive political processes, surveys, and information gathering come with costs and risks, including lighter processes in some settings and potential mistakes and mis-targeting.

At the same time, universal programs need to be complemented by a targeted approach, especially for groups that are systematically excluded despite their right to provision.²⁵⁰ Targeted universalism acknowledges that achieving a goal—say, economic inclusion—for two groups may not involve identical strategies for each. Understanding and using those differences to drive policy strategy is essential to tailor strategies effectively. Without this nuanced approach, the goal of economic inclusion will remain unattainable for all groups involved.²⁵¹ A false dichotomy is often made between universal and targeted approaches to social protection. Both can coexist and indeed, one may not be possible without the other. Indonesia’s approach to social protection (see Box 10 for further detail) shows the complementarity of universal, community-targeted, and household-targeted mechanisms.

In fact, Moayed, Guggenheim, and Chamier find that social protection programs that are either universal or very broad-based are more successful in sustaining political momentum in reforms such as the elimination of regressive electricity subsidies.²⁵² On the other hand, universal approaches to policymaking are often criticized for failing to adequately address the specific needs of the most vulnerable or marginalized populations. The flagship report²⁵³ finds that sustaining broad political support can be achieved in various ways: by prioritizing broad-based programs that “target out” rather than “target in,” or, as in Indonesia, combining universal reforms such as health insurance with those that more tightly target communities and households.²⁵⁴

A similar analysis can be applied in the successful implementation of sexual and reproductive health rights. Framing “the right to abortion” as the end goal excludes men, boys, and women who hold divergent views on abortion. However, contextualizing this right within the broader concept of universal healthcare access and the freedom to decide if and when to become a parent aligns with more widely held values. This broader framing fosters a collective identity anchored in the desire for a society that upholds positive freedoms. Consequently, specific discussions about abortion policy are integrated into the overarching goals of healthcare access and personal freedom, promoting a more inclusive and unified approach. Abortion, then, becomes not just a “women’s issue” but a “human freedom” issue.

Box 10: Combining universal, targeted, and community social services and social protection mechanisms in Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic brought dual shocks of health and economic crises to Indonesia, significantly affecting the poor and placing lower-middle-class households, which constitute over half of the nation's population, at risk of poverty. Addressing this issue crucially involves refining the targeting system for social assistance to identify and aid eligible households accurately. However, this task presents several challenges. Firstly, the fluid nature of poverty in Indonesia, characterized by high rates of transitions into and out of poverty, complicates the differentiation between the poor and the near poor. Secondly, maintaining the accuracy and timeliness of the targeting system is essential, ensuring the government can swiftly rectify exclusion and inclusion errors. Thirdly, the system must adapt to cover broader needs during crises or disasters.

The debate between adopting universal coverage for all social assistance and social security programs versus targeted assistance hinges on balancing broader coverage with the sufficiency of benefits, considering budget limitations and Indonesia's low tax-to-GDP ratio. Indonesia has opted for targeted assistance, implementing various non-contributory programs like the Family Hope Program, the Food Voucher Program, scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and temporary social aid for those impacted by COVID-19. For social security, Indonesia employs a universal coverage model based on contributory social insurance and mandatory savings, with government subsidies for the poor and vulnerable.

Efforts to enhance the targeting system focus on reducing exclusion errors and leveraging community wisdom to identify deserving households. In 2020, over 75,000 villages were involved in registering such households, with community-based targeting proving accurate and satisfactory. Indonesia plans to improve its targeting system further through an on-demand application for the national social registry, enabling efficient response in crises while discouraging applications from the affluent. Technological advancements and digitalization play a crucial role in this process, ensuring comprehensive social protection and readiness to protect the poor and vulnerable against future disasters.

4.2.2 Adopt forward-thinking and an adaptive approach to policies that consider the relative losers

Effective implementation and broader acceptance of policies are achievable through proactive engagement with the potential unintended consequences of policy choices during the design phase. For example, governments from Indonesia to Germany have faced a substantial backlash against pro-climate initiatives. Rapid policy advancements often meet resistance, driven by the public's apprehension over who might be relative winners, relative losers, and, in the worst-case scenario, outright losers (in the case of oil refinery closures and the consequent layoff of workers, for example).

In some instances, divisive entrepreneurs manipulate these valid concerns, aiming to rally support. This necessitates policymakers to actively engage in listening, seeking a deep understanding of the immediate situation and broader impacts, being aware of blind spots in policy design, and being open to revising our analysis based on what is heard.²⁵⁵ In the case of green transition policies, for example, the following questions could be considered to ensure workers and their communities are protected:

- » What frictions are foreseeable due to green transition policies, and how can these be mitigated early in the process?
- » Which demographics are at risk of adverse effects, and how might they be mobilized either for or against the transition?
- » What can be done to ensure those who lose out are protected?
- » Who are the opposing voices, actors, and interest groups resistant to change, and what are their motivations?
- » How can social dialogues be leveraged to address conflicts?
- » How does the public perceive a policy, and what impact can this have on its success? What are the anticipated reactions to policies, and what are the prevalent concerns or misconceptions that need to be addressed?
- » How will the transition plan be effectively communicated? How can policymakers use strategic communication campaigns to emphasize the benefits, opportunities, and positive outcomes inherent in a green just transition?

- » What strategies will ensure key stakeholders are not only on board but actively participate in co-producing solutions they can advocate for within their communities?

There are several essential components to this approach: 1) Assessing both local and international evidence to ensure policies are informed, locally appropriate, and equitable; 2) Ensuring that winners and losers are accounted for and considered during the policy-making process; and 3) Engaging communities affected by policies, even those who are not the intended targets.

Such an approach acknowledges that policies are not just economic or material but also represent social changes, which require careful management of human impacts. It is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a flexible framework tailored to specific national and local contexts. Finally, policymakers must remain open and responsive to feedback from those who feel marginalized by specific issues, such as the effects of refugee and migrant movements or concerns related to family values and gender identity.



4.2.3 Promote constructive political narratives

Although narratives alone may not be enough to restore solidarity, counteract divisions, and foster more resilient societies, analysis of the impact of SDNs has demonstrated just how much words matter. Progressive messaging frequently remains entrenched in divisive

narratives, such as portraying issues as zero-sum games, framing discussions around crises and threats, or depending on legalistic and statistical jargon and human rights terminology, failing to engage broader audiences. Additionally, this messaging often focuses on denouncing racism, xenophobia, hate speech, and prejudice, which, while important, can inadvertently serve the interests of divisive entrepreneurs by overlooking the underlying truths or legitimate concerns felt by audiences. This approach not only alienates potential allies by dismissing their fears but also fails to constructively address or mitigate the root causes of these divisive sentiments.

Instead, there are a series of practical political and policy narratives—insights derived from subject matter experts, experienced practitioners, and successful case studies of policy change—that can be utilized to persuade, mobilize, and cultivate solidarity. Several are described below.

4.3.3.1 Engage communities

Against the backdrop of widespread distrust and skepticism towards leaders and institutions, it is imperative for progressive political messaging to be grounded in genuine engagement with the community, speaking to their concerns directly and with empathy, and employing language that resonates with their experiences, to ensure that message is understood (see Box 11 for an example of community-oriented messaging).²⁵⁶ Where feasible, messages should be co-produced with communities and tested with the intended audiences²⁵⁷ as effective and persuasive communication is intricately tied to each community's specific context and cultural nuances.

Box 11: Messaging strategies to engage Brazil's youth ahead of the 2022 presidential election

Ahead of the 2022 Brazilian presidential election, there were concerns about mobilizing young people, who were identified as a group disengaged in electoral politics. In the last decade, there had been a 60 percent decline in 16–18-year-old voter registration.

Through listening and deep engagement with this demographic, researchers found that Gen Z are “digital natives” and skeptical of traditional political communication. This generation also felt burdened by the expectation that they were the ones who needed to “save” Brazil. Through extensive research, it became clear that messaging that emphasized individual empowerment struck a chord with this demographic. Consequently, campaigners tailored their communications to inspire action, encapsulating

their approach with the compelling message, “Se você não decidir, alguém vai decidir por você” —If you don’t decide, someone else will decide for you.” Campaigners tapped into the power of cultural influence to motivate political participation by leveraging the message “Speak Yourself,” a South Korean boy band BTS tour slogan, by projecting it onto walls. This choice not only capitalized on the popularity of BTS but also bridged language barriers and cultural contexts, illustrating the universal appeal of self-expression and empowerment. This strategic use of cultural figures and tailored messaging underscored the innovative approaches taken to mobilize Brazilian youth and galvanize them towards political engagement in the lead-up to the 2022 elections.

Instead of focusing on a single message and campaign, the strategy was to develop a diverse ecosystem of campaigns from various organizations, all sharing a common goal but articulated in unique ways. This approach allowed each group to maintain its distinct identity, message, and audience while collaborating towards a shared objective. By presenting multiple voices in unison, the movement appeared more widespread and diverse to society, reinforcing the collective demand. Additionally, this strategy helped mitigate risk by avoiding reliance on a single approach, thereby distributing resources across multiple initiatives.



4.3.3.2 Open with value-based messaging²⁵⁸

Research has shown that messaging that opens with shared values can be highly persuasive and engaging.²⁵⁹ Not only does it speak to a positive vision of the world,

but it also appeals to people's better selves. By presenting a value that most people see as positive and agree with, the messaging works to build upon common ground.²⁶⁰ Focusing on core values, as seen in campaigns for equal marriage and abortion rights, can resonate more deeply than relying solely on statistics or legal jargon. With regards to the human rights movement, strategic communications expert Thomas Coombes explains that "we need to shift away from the information deficit model that if people get more information and facts, they will change their mind. Instead, we need to simulate the ideas and behavior we want to see more of. We cannot be experts making judgments from the sidelines; we must be very clear that we stand for one set of values over another."²⁶¹ This values-first approach emphasizes common human experiences over divisive rhetoric. For an example of the effective use of values, see Box 12 below.

Box 12: Together For Yes, Ireland

In May 2018, Ireland voted to overturn its near-total ban on abortions. In the lead-up to this, the "Yes" campaign focused on promoting a positive vision anchored in its own values, intentionally avoiding the opposition's framing. In this case, these values were about access to healthcare, of which access to abortion is a part, and a vision of society where everyone has the freedom to decide whether and when to become a parent. Rather than speaking about women collectively, campaigns centered on stories of individuals to rehumanize the campaign. A pivotal aspect of the campaign was to foster open conversations about abortion. One survey revealed that 39 percent of individuals who shifted their stance to "yes" did so following discussions with friends or family members, 43 percent of yes voters said people's personal stories in the media convinced them. This underscores the power of personal dialogue in influencing public opinion and highlights the campaign's success in engaging the community on a deeply personal level.



4.3.3.3 Acknowledge and provide accountability

Complex issues such as refugee and migrant flows, along with debates on family values and gender identity, require careful consideration. Dismissing concerns in these areas can inadvertently fuel toxic and divisive narratives. Understanding both local and global evidence, as well as underlying issues that may drive insecurity, like diversity, housing scarcity, and labor markets, is essential. For example, many people might support the principle that everyone has the right to seek safety, yet also express concerns about overpopulation in their communities. Effective messaging should identify and acknowledge these concerns, especially since, in the case of migration, migrants and displaced individuals often share concerns expressed by host communities. Narratives that provide clear policy solutions are vital for navigating these complexities effectively.

4.3.3.4 Combine material and identity concerns

All too often, issues of identity and economic well-being are kept separate, or silence is encouraged in matters about identity out of fear of alienating certain audiences.²⁶² To talk solely about economics leaves strategic division unchallenged, allowing it to continue dividing communities and perpetuating injustices against marginalized groups.²⁶³ Therefore, messages should encompass material concerns that strive for inclusivity. Research shows that messaging that brings in identities that are often presented as adversaries around a common value can foster unity. For instance, “most of us believe that children of all races, backgrounds, and genders should have the freedom to learn and be themselves.”²⁶⁴ **This approach demonstrates that despite varied backgrounds, there is unity in what people have in common.** Achieving this involves clear communication that the value is a collective one, employing inclusive phrases like “most of us,” “the majority of us,” or “we can all agree.” Crucially, this process must be collaborative, engaging directly with communities to select culturally specific and resonant language, ensuring the message is authentic and inclusive.

4.3.3.5 Choose the right messengers

Cognitive science has demonstrated that what is being said can matter less than who is saying it.²⁶⁵ Selecting messengers who resonate with the target audience is critical for effective communication. The right messengers can bridge gaps and deliver messages in a way that is authentic and credible to the listeners. Messengers trusted and respected by the target audience can significantly enhance the receptivity and impact of policy communication; for an example of effective messenger engagement, see Box 13 below. For example, one survey finds that when it comes to climate change, a significant number of people don’t know whom to trust.²⁶⁶ The study revealed that among the countries surveyed, scientists were the most trusted messengers, with 41 percent of respondents placing their trust in them (although still a minority), followed by environmental

organizations at 34 percent. In contrast, the least trusted sources of information were fossil fuel companies, local governments, and activists.

Box 13: Identifying trusted messengers in Argentina's abortion campaign

In the long campaign for safe and legal abortions in Argentina, organizers quickly realized that the standard feminist messages were not resonating with certain groups. The abortion issue was tapping into urban-rural divides in Argentina as it was seen that supporters of abortions were all in the big cities. A study in the provinces rather than Buenos Aires explored conflicted voters, revealing that familiar progressive slogans, including those associated with feminism, often encountered resistance. They also found that the dominant spokespeople on the issue, human rights lawyers, were among the least compelling to audiences. Instead, medical providers—doctors, nurses, healthcare staff—were among the most trusted. However, it was not just any healthcare professional; local ones from the provinces were the most trusted messengers. Organizers working with these trusted figures were able to craft messages through hours of testimony of personal experiences, which were then turned into short social media clips to be delivered by the local medical practitioners. While undeniably calling up sadness, pain, and loss, the overarching message of these stories and this approach to having care providers as lead messengers was “salvemos miles de vidas”—Let's save thousands of lives, and one of their core slogans about the campaign itself was “nos sembraron miedo y nos crecieron alas”—They planted fear in us, and we grew wings. This approach contributed to a rare bipartisan support for abortion in Congress in 2018, breaking longstanding party lines in Argentina.



4.3.3.6 Commit to non-divisive strategies

While it may be unrealistic to implement electoral codes of conduct, policymakers, advocates, and experts across civil society, international and governmental institutions concerned with social justice and progressive policy should adopt non-divisive strategies in their communications. This involves rejecting approaches that scapegoats, employing excessive use of crisis and threat language, or framing issues as zero-sum games, even incidentally. Additional research is also required to **identify effective communication strategies for policy changes** that target a specific group or redress an injustice against one group without alienating majority groups. **Incorporating advanced planning** to anticipate and address potential disinformation and the tactics of strategic division is also a valuable component of the policymaking process. However, rather than retaliate against divisive strategies, research has shown that it can be effective to call out strategic division without repeating or negating their exact words.²⁶⁷ For example, an empirically-tested “Race Class Narrative” methodology has found success in policy and political wins in messages that are clear on how divisive tactics are being used to distract us from policy failures or harmful choices and naming who they blame to distract us (see Box 14 below for an example).²⁶⁸ It is crucial to identify and highlight the strategies employed by divisive entrepreneurs without resorting to antagonism, which can be counterproductive.²⁶⁹ Highlighting their tactics rather than engaging in direct conflict undermines their efforts to sow discord.

Box 14: Effective strategies for confronting strategic division in Australia’s unions

The Australian Trade Union Institute undertook a series of message-testing exercises to assist unions in reconstructing a compelling narrative of working-class solidarity. This narrative aims to counteract the fear-based and divisive rhetoric propagated by right-wing forces and capital. Although the messaging is tailored to this specific case and context, it offers valuable insights into effectively addressing and challenging strategic divisions. The research recommends the following:

- » Naming who is responsible for the challenges facing communities makes it clear that people and choices make these circumstances, offering hope that they can be different. However, it is critical to imply that this group of “divisive entrepreneurs” is in the minority and does not imply a whole system—“government,” “business,” or “capital”—which does not land well with audiences and encourages distrust of institutions as a whole.

- » Using the active voice—describe their actions and hold them accountable for their choices. E.g., “bosses are driving down wages” rather than “wages are slipping.”
- » Naming racial scapegoating and/or class war as a deliberate weapon used to cause harm. However, in doing so, refer to specific actions or outcomes rather than “racism” or “discriminatory policies.”

Where inequalities exist, name what is causing the disparity, e.g., “community health programs stripped of funding” rather than “life expectancy gap.”

Below are three examples of messages that call our strategic division unique to the context under investigation:

1. “But Company X has recently decided to make workers in Australia redundant, and worse, they expect us to train our replacements in call centers overseas. It’s not only disrespectful to us; they’re hoping we’ll take out our anger on our overseas brothers and sisters. They want to pit us against each other—so that we ignore who’s pulling the strings.”
2. “But a few dodgy bosses think they can divide our community. They think they can get away with treating migrant workers as disposable, stealing wages, and disrespecting workers. They refuse to pay minimum wages, and then they call Australians “lazy” for not taking jobs that won’t pay the bills. They want us to blame each other instead of questioning their business model.”
3. “But a few greedy private aged care companies are putting profit ahead of care; cutting back on staff and leaving residents without the care they need. The Minister for aged care could fix this problem, but he’d prefer to distract us with division and fear, blaming welfare recipients and new migrants for the problems his Government has failed to fix.”

4.3. Looking forward: The need for greater inter-country collaboration and research

Addressing challenges as monumental as inequality, climate change, and the proliferation of disinformation demands a unified global effort. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly emphasized the necessity for enhanced cross-regional international cooperation and collaboration and the sharing of effective strategies. In this race against time, the swift exchange and discussion of tactics to mitigate the proliferation of SDNs is imperative to mount a collective response.

4.3.1. Catalyze greater collaboration across borders and sectors

Substantial progress on global issues necessitates collaborative endeavors involving diverse stakeholders from various regions, contexts, sectors, disciplines, and communities.²⁷⁰ Grounded in self-reflection and creativity, such collaboration should identify linkages, assess the evidence for solutions from international examples, and identify the types of adaptations needed for different countries and local contexts. 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.

4.3.2. Further research and policy questions

On solutions

It is evident that we need a comprehensive policy approach that is cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary to tackle strategic division and turn the tides on polarization. We need further research exploring in more detail the evidence for solutions to **“countering strategic division,”** including capacity building tailored for effective implementation to meet the needs of a specific country's context. Regarding **constructive political narratives**, considerable research has been conducted on strategies that effectively bridge divides and foster solidarity among groups in the US and a few other countries. However, evaluating the applicability of these strategic communication insights in different contexts is essential. Further research programs dedicated to strategic messaging, as well as insights into messengers, are required in countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, especially concerning unifying narratives that can garner broad political support for addressing pressing challenges such as environmental sustainability, refugee and migration issues, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ rights.

On diagnosing the problem

In addition to greater cross-country collaboration, there is a need to invest in new areas of research that connect polarization and SDNs with inequality. We still need a consensus on the best way to measure and explain polarization, including the role of SDNs in response to other factors, incorporating time-series and cross-regional data where feasible, and translating this into easy-to-understand statistics and examples. We must understand what factors drive polarization and what kind of polarization impacts truth in institutions, between groups, insecurity, and fear. This should start with understanding how measures of polarization evolved over time (with a global cross-section of countries, data permitting) and how SDNs, material inequalities, tech amplification, and external shocks interact to produce polarization and undermine national peace and democratic resilience.

On international ramifications

In this paper, we have yet to explore the impact of polarization and strategic division on the management of Global Public Goods (GPGs). We need further investigation into how domestic polarization intensifies international tensions and how global dynamics exacerbate internal divisions within countries. The dynamic is evident in fluctuating votes at the UN, pressure to reverse pre-existing agreements, and the erosion of legal and institutional frameworks supporting democracy, good governance, human rights, and gender equality. The risk of regression on hard-won rights for historically vulnerable and marginalized groups is high, potentially stalling progress on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The interplay between domestic discord and international rifts highlights a cyclical relationship that hampers global cooperation and fuels national divisions.

4.3.3. What's next?

Pathfinders seeks to collaborate with key partners, including member states, civil society, policymakers, and experts across disciplines, to produce a framework to provide advice on developing effective national and regional strategies that increase resilience against disinformation and polarization and support the implementation of policies through an inequality lens and using targeted universalism. This would include the production of a handbook bringing together key strategies to anticipate and combat polarizing narratives concerning issues such as gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, refugees, migrants, and displaced people, and climate action initiatives—using the lenses of equality, inclusion, pluralism, non-discrimination, and shared societal benefits.

This dynamic area of research necessitates the involvement of diverse stakeholders, voices, and perspectives. If you are interested in exploring some of the themes presented in the report or wish to collaborate with Pathfinders, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

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