WHAT DOES SOCIAL COHESION MEAN? AND WHAT CAN COMMUNITIES DO TO ENSURE EQUITY?

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2022 STUDY TOUR ON SOCIAL COHESIONS
The American Council on Germany (ACG) is an independent, nonpartisan nonprofit organization that was founded in 1952 to strengthen German-American relations. Today, the ACG works across generations to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding about Germany, Europe, and the importance of the transatlantic partnership. Through a range of programs and activities, the ACG addresses the most pressing economic, political, and social challenges of the day to ensure better mutual understanding.

Funded through the Transatlantic Program of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany through funds of the European Recovery Program (ERP) of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), the Study Tour on Social Cohesion brings together small groups of Americans and Germans for two one-week long study tours on either side of the Atlantic. This project explores how communities address diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA).

For more information on the Study Tour on Social Cohesion
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In the fall of 2022, the first cohort of the American Council on Germany’s Study Tour on Social Cohesion embarked on a journey together. This diverse group, representing various industries such as city governments, academia, nonprofits, and corporations, was united by a common goal to learn how communities strive to be more equitable. The wealth of knowledge and experiences within the group made the exchange between fellow participants as valuable as the interactions with our meeting partners.

The group set out to understand the meaning of social cohesion and how they could be examples for their communities. Conversations happened in conference rooms, on long train rides, and around the dinner table. While solutions for challenges are not necessarily transferable from one city to another, the challenges remain very much the same. How can communities become more equitable when political structures often seem to stand in the way?

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has laid bare societal vulnerabilities and continues to impact communities, the Study Tour on Social Cohesion took on a heightened significance. As the first new project launched by the American Council on Germany after lifting restrictions, it served as a crucial platform for understanding and promoting community resilience and forward-thinking in the face of such challenges.

The cohort of ACG’s first Study Tour on Social Cohesion gathered their thoughts while reflecting upon the two-part exchange.
“Nothing will change without the involvement of those who are most impacted.”

This statement was mentioned during the first meeting at the Landtag in Dresden and remained a theme throughout the program. It did not matter what organization, governmental official, or academic we met - the theme remained true. The ones who can make change happen often need to remember to involve the ones who would be impacted.

Social cohesion is the cornerstone of any thriving society, serving as the glue that binds individuals together in shared purpose and solidarity. At its core lies a sense of belonging and inclusivity, where individuals perceive themselves as integral parts of a larger social fabric. Rising inequality, political polarization, and identity-based tensions pose threats to social cohesion, undermining trust and eroding community bonds. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts at the individual, community, and government levels.

During a conversation in Dresden with the organizers of Dresden isst bunt, the group explained this concept. The idea behind this event is to host a city-wide dinner that shows Dresden is a welcoming community. However, the organizers did not involve anyone from the migrant community in the planning. The event is a great idea but falls just slightly short. If the city is welcoming, then all communities should be welcomed to the organization.

When institutions, organizations, and public spaces reflect the diversity of their communities, it promotes a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Representation in politics, governance, and leadership ensures that diverse voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes, leading to more equitable policies and outcomes. Moreover, inclusive representation challenges systems of privilege and discrimination, dismantling barriers to participation and advancing social justice and equality.
Many meetings focused on the rise of the far-right party, the Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD). Social cohesion only works when people support each other. The AfD's polarizing rhetoric not only exacerbates existing tensions but also undermines efforts to build bridges of understanding and cooperation across diverse communities. Many state-funded organizations worry about what an AfD-led government would bring and fear that initiatives that strive to be more inclusive will be eliminated.

Addressing these challenges posed by a rise in far-right politics requires a concerted effort to counter divisive narratives, promote intergroup dialogue, and reaffirm the values of equality, diversity, and solidarity. Only through collective action and unwavering commitment to democratic principles can societies resist the divisive forces of the far-right and forge a path toward a more inclusive and cohesive future.

The worry lessened when we switched from Dresden to Nuremberg, but it did not disappear entirely. The city of Nuremberg understands what can happen when authoritarians come to power. Reflecting on its history, the city now focuses on engaging people of all backgrounds. This is why Nuremberg became the first city in Germany to create an Office of Human Rights. Their intersectional approach to social cohesion could serve as a blueprint for many German cities.

This does not mean the city does not have its challenges—it very much still does—but it seems more committed to improving the lives of its citizens through citizen engagement.

The meetings in Cleveland and Charlotte showed similar challenges. There is a palpable fear of what a conservative government would mean for social cohesion. Although both cities have liberal governments, they are in conservative states. Often officials at the city levels butt heads with that at the state level.

Again, at meetings in the United States, the conversations focused on including all voices at the table. Again, the city governments seemed to be committed to becoming more inclusive.

The most complex struggle for these cities seemed to be systemic racism. During meetings, discussions focused on uniquely American issues, such as the lasting impact of redlining and the school-to-prison pipeline. However, the cities seemed to recognize that these are issues.
Racial segregation and discrimination persist as significant social issues in Cleveland, contributing to disparities in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Historical patterns of segregation and discriminatory practices have resulted in racially divided neighborhoods and unequal access to resources and services. Addressing racial inequality requires confronting systemic racism, promoting inclusive policies, and investing in Communities of Color to address the root causes. The city of Cleveland declared racism to be a public health crisis, allowing the city to dedicate funds to fight racism actively.

While Charlotte is a rapidly expanding city, it is becoming increasingly too expensive for its citizens. Charlotte faces a shortage of affordable housing, exacerbated by rapid population growth and gentrification in certain neighborhoods. High housing costs, coupled with stagnant wages, contribute to housing insecurity and homelessness for many residents. Engaging communities in the planning and development of affordable housing could ensure that projects meet the needs of residents and promote social inclusion. Community input and participation foster a sense of ownership and accountability, building support for affordable housing initiatives and promoting positive social outcomes.

Throughout the two weeks, the one constant remained true. Change will only happen when those impacted are involved. Social cohesion can only be sustained when people who have been systematically ignored are brought into the conversation. Achieving true inclusivity requires deliberate efforts to dismantle barriers, challenge prejudices, and create environments where diversity is celebrated and valued. Society can only improve with a sincere commitment from the government at all levels.

By promoting diversity and representation, creating inclusive spaces and environments, and fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging, we can build societies where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the common good. Embracing diversity as a source of strength and recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual is essential for creating a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

If policy recommendations are needed, look no further than the citizens of your community.
The following are individual thoughts, recommendations, and new projections from select program participants.
First, knowing that the program covered not only public but also private institutions and civil societies. Second, based on the lack of universality of a narrative model on social cohesion, there is a need for transatlantic dialogue because, as Solomon, King of Israel, once said, “Without counsel, plans fail. With many advisors, they succeed.” So, the third motivation was to ally the transatlantic experience on one affordable social cohesion model for the city of Reutlingen.

Therefore, I cannot deny that a program in which the diverse content, for example, on cultural, political, and, to a certain extent, religious themes and actors, exceeded my expectations. Indeed, I learned particularly how public and private institutions and civil society intend to practice social cohesion, and I experienced that it is not always easy to translate theory into practice. As I went along with the program, each context was embedded with its own strategic, conflicted elements and implications, whether at a university or government institution. Nevertheless, this gave me the idea -not misreading the context – as entailed the consequence of the successful implementation of social cohesion.

In conclusion, my takeaway, which is based on my previous three points, is to accommodate the experience within the focus of my project called “Demokratie Café Reutlingen” as a continuous reflection along with public and private sector as well as civil society to disclosure one innovative 21st (twenty-first) century narrative social cohesion concrete (specific) model for Reutlingen as a city where more than 136 cultures are living and coming along everyday life.

Rui Marques Pinto is Portuguese by birth. He has spent the last decade in Germany, learning the language and culture and creating a life. Throughout the program, a point of absolute joy, Rui provided insight into the idea of integration.
In September 2022, I had the privilege of joining the American Council on Germany (ACG) and traveling to Germany. Unbeknownst to the group and most of our host organizations, I grew up in Germany and spent a significant part of my life living in pre-reunification Germany, a Germany Pre-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—living, learning, and experiencing the other side of Germany’s humanity.

My linguistic skills and cultural assimilation to Americanism did not give away my rich historical German background – and it would have a monumental impact on the conversations during the various stops and meetings ACG had carefully curated and planned for us. It was very apparent that many parts of Germany, including politics, academia, church, and cultural groups, had not done the DEI work. Some of the experiences, dialogues, and encounters were very interesting and insulting at the same time. How so? The 70-plus years of rich post-World War II history, whereby thousands of foreign-national citizens and professionals (ultimately HUMANS) brought themselves, their skill sets, and their expertise to rebuild today’s Germany, are either still not acknowledged at all, or not sufficiently and fairly recognized for their role in that undertaking. The narrative seems very convenient and opportunistic. A narrative that credits Germany's Equity and Inclusion work and accomplishments (housing, education, and access to food and resources) to Germany’s “Do-Goodership” in the context of Germany’s involvement and rescue mission for Ukraine. These issues were not a “Hot Topic " until Germany was forced to pick up speed following the initiation to offer refuge to Ukrainians.

Anyone who knows me should know by now what's going to come next: I was sitting in the various meetings listening, dialoguing, and subsequently commenting on some of the statements from an American perspective as it relates to all things DEI, but also from a perspective of a person who lived in Germany 20+ years earlier, after immigrating into Germany in the early 1980s, with memories that are still very fresh, raw, and real.

Quite frankly, memories that are as real as an open wound or a scab that keeps being ripped open from time to time. The reactions and faces some of the individuals made when they discovered that I not only spoke the language authentically and fluently, but I was also very well informed and well-versed as it related to the history and socio-economic developments - as far back as old Nazi Germany’s real history, the post-World War II German history, and lastly status quo. Germany’s reference to non-White Germans as “Guest Workers". “Foreigners” (“Gastarbeiter”, “Auslaender”, and “Asylanten”) is as daunting now as it was back in the early 80s. Germany clearly has not done the work in that area.
(Uncomfortable) Conversations aren’t being had in settings where the needle should and could be moved. Clearly, Germany is still trailing behind in areas of diversity. America stays in the headlines for its systemic racism and the disparities in equity and inclusion, yet America is not getting the credit it deserves in areas of accessibility. Germany remains synonympic for its “Do-Goodership” – if and when one is not aware, knowledgeable, or simply not drawing comparisons.

This study trip was monumental and instrumental for many of the participants who are invested, passionate, and actively doing the work: the work for and on behalf of people. The work for Humanity: tokenized and untokenized. When looking at the whole human, we can agree that meeting the needs of the communities we serve requires an unadulterated equity lens. It is very rare to have someone within the group who has the insider/outsider perspective for both the German and the American world. However sobering it may have been to re-enter my German world after 20+ years in American exile, it brought me back to my humble beginnings, reinforced my gratitude, and magnified my passion and excitement for the work I am doing and am committed to doing.

This experience took me down memory lane, and in a way, I re-lived my family’s experiences under the leadership of my dear grandmother, Nechi, who was forced to leave her homeland, Eritrea, and immigrate to Germany after a two-year hiatus in Khartoum, Sudan. She had no comparisons, socio-economic, or political wherewithal to question anything she experienced. She was simply grateful for an opportunity to flee into safety and allow her descendants to win. She was labeled a “refugee”. She gave up her life and made herself comfortable with life inside a barrack-like fortress behind tall fences at Steinbecker Strasse 98, Buchholz, West-Deutschland, a small village about 1 hour from Hamburg, Germany. A little sprinkle of color among a population of 2000+ souls who probably never saw people of color before this political experiment by Germany.
This social cohesion trip was a reality check, a journey of gratitude, and an opportunity to recognize the need and continue the untokenized work for humanity.

Daily work is required, and genuine passion and care are imperative. Tokenizing humanity by assigning labels based on political needs and objectives won’t yield the desired and needed results. Picking and choosing labels based on economics and profit margins has proven to be a ploy to set people up for failure.

Historical, systemic, and economic idiosyncrasies have been divisive in nature and lack value for humans. Cultural norms are a form of tokenizing humanity if and when used to exclude or marginalize groups and individuals and when intended to marginalize efforts for personal or group gain.

**Judith Davis** grew up as a refugee from Eritrea in Kassel, Germany. Now, she lives and works in the United States and is actively involved in the social cohesion of her community in Arlington, VA.
I greatly enjoyed meeting the professors and administrators at the Technische Universität Dresden. It was a fascinating exchange about what are the horizons of possibilities for diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and belonging given certain federal regulations in Germany such as the restrictions on gathering racial data and German universities’ focus on gender equity. The conversations we had in the more formal setting sparked a lot of fascinating discussions with those in our own study tour group who have had their nonwhite backgrounds deeply shaping their experiences in the US and Germany. We had many spirited and engrossing discussions comparing US immigration and Black, Indigenous and People of Color experiences with those in Germany.

I also very much appreciated experiencing “Dresden Isst Bunt,” the white table, a bring-your-own-food event sponsored by the Cellex Foundation to inspire food and cross-cultural connections. My research looks at performance art and international relations, and I am proposing ethnographic research that will include this event in future articles and publications.

Given my research in urban unrest, I was especially interested in Charlotte and found our time at the International House moving, something that should inspire many other organizations in my own town and other locales with immigrant populations. It was impressive how they reached out to many immigrant communities and developed lasting forms of belonging in the area. I also appreciated meeting Federico Rios, Assistant Director of HNS, Office of Equity, Mobility, & Immigrant Integration, and Manuel Campbell, President of Aspire Community Capital. After their talks, I had quick conversations with them about immigrant entrepreneurship, which I found illuminating and helpful in my research on financial citizenship after the Great Recession, especially in relation to Asian and Latina women workers, both target populations under their purview.

I made lasting friendships with many in our study tour group and look forward to collaborations with my fellow participants in research or other not-for-profit endeavors in the near future that will advance social cohesion in the US and Germany.

**Dr. Lynn Itagaki** is a Professor of Gender Studies and Literature. She brings an understanding of white feminism's shortcomings and the insight of American academia.
The ACG Study Tour on Social Cohesion (DEI) took place in September 2022, with a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEI-A) in Germany. The tour had a theme of "Creating Inclusive Communities" and visited two cities, Dresden and Nuremberg, which are addressing their challenges regarding social cohesion in different ways. In Dresden, the group found the city to be less friendly than Nuremberg, with a high percentage of residents self-identifying as having racist views. The social cohesion in Dresden focused primarily on gender and sexuality, with blind spots regarding German citizens who were phenotypically German. However, there were people doing great work to offset the harm caused by the extremist groups, including Dr. Gerhard Ehninger, the founding member of "Dresden - Place to Be," and Mr. Peter Rosenbaum, Director of International Office at the Technical University of Dresden.

In Nuremberg, the group felt a palpable change in how people carried themselves, with the negligible presence of right-wing extremists and young people sharing ways to support refugees, immigrants, and climate change. Nuremberg is the only city in Germany that has a dedicated office called Human Rights and Office for Equal Opportunities. Additionally, the group was introduced to two people of color who held positions of power in their government: Dr. Tilgun Massih-Tehrani, Director of Diversity, Participation, and Immigration, and Dr. Nassar Ahmad, Chair of the Social Democratic Party, the first Black person ever elected to the city council.

Both cities faced challenges in supporting those with ambulatory and cognitive issues, and their relationships with families and schools were damaged during the pandemic. The pandemic also caused much misinformation to be easily disseminated throughout their communities, causing fear and anger among the populace. However, there were unexpected positives from the pandemic, including senior citizens becoming much more proficient in using technology out of necessity and schools taking at least a 10-year leap forward in technology. On the other hand, domestic violence increased dramatically, and food insecurity became a bigger issue because schools are where a lot of children get at least two meals a day.

**Dr. Chuck Herring** is an educator in South Fayette County, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh. He champions diversity, equity, and inclusion in his community.
Having actively participated in the illuminating study tour, I have acquired profound insights into the intricacies of redlining, particularly in Cleveland, thereby fostering a deeper comprehension of its impact. The consequential takeaways from this experience are indeed noteworthy:

Recognition of Historical Injustice: Foremost among the insights gained is a profound appreciation of the historical injustice and the pervasive nature of systemic discrimination that characterized redlining. Through an in-depth exploration of the policies and practices that subjected specific communities to marginalization based on racial grounds, I have developed an acute awareness of the enduring ramifications imposed upon both neighborhoods and individuals. This heightened understanding serves as a catalyst for nurturing empathy and instilling an unwavering commitment to rectifying systemic inequalities that have left an indelible mark on various aspects of life, encompassing wealth, health, and education.

Unveiling the Legacy of Segregation: The tour effectively underscored the lasting repercussions of redlining upon Cleveland's urban landscape and social dynamics. By shining a spotlight on the persistently segregated neighborhoods and the consequential disparities in housing conditions, wealth distribution, and access to resources, a newfound consciousness emerges regarding the ongoing challenges confronted by marginalized communities. This comprehensive comprehension emphasizes the imperative of addressing the root causes of segregation and striving toward creating an inclusive, equitable, and accessible society that transcends the confines of past injustices.
Fostering a Continual Advocacy Imperative: Active engagement in this enlightening study tour and an enhanced understanding of redlining have spurred a profound sense of responsibility and an impassioned call to action. Armed with a comprehensive knowledge of redlining's historical contours, I am even more compelled to champion policy reforms, advocate for fair housing practices, and actively support initiatives to dismantle the systemic discrimination that persists today, whether in Germany or the US. With great conviction, I embrace the realization that challenging the entrenched status quo necessitates collective efforts and serves as the bedrock for cultivating a future characterized by justice and equity.

In conclusion, the immersive study tour, particularly in Cleveland, coupled with the comprehensive grasp of redlining, has left an indelible impact, heightening my awareness of historical injustices, the lingering effects of segregation, and the pressing need for advocacy to effect meaningful change. These transformative takeaways serve as a catalyst, propelling me to further engage within my communities and contribute to the betterment of the society in which I reside.

Baris Sahin is a social and political scientist from Cologne. As a third-generation German of Turkish descent, Baris described his life as not being quite German enough, which has propelled his interest in social cohesion.
In the spring of 2022, the American Council on Germany announced a new study tour to explore social cohesion within Germany and the United States. As a DEI professional, I was very excited about this unique opportunity because there are rare chances to explore and build bilateral relations through a DEI lens. I previously participated in the Young Leaders program that ACG sponsors and was eager to return to Germany to learn more about the country by examining its equity- and civil rights-based policies and rules and meeting with the individuals and organizations that are supporting the most marginalized members of German society.

The German portion of the study tour was based in two cities that I had never visited before – Dresden and Nuremberg. As an attorney, I was very familiar with Nuremberg as the host of the Nuremberg Trials, but I knew very little about either city. As part of my reflections, I preferred the experience in Nuremberg more because I could feel so clearly that it was a city committed to acknowledging its past and atoning for it. Nuremberg has developed institutions like the first-of-its-kind city-based Human Rights Office and has put forward progressive policies to support including all Nuremberg residents. Nuremberg is a case study and model of how other communities can move forward and change the narrative of their horrific past. While visiting the Documentation Center, I drew many parallels between it and the work of Bryan Stevenson, the Equal Justice Initiative, and the National Lynching Memorial in Alabama. As George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This is why preserving the Documentation Center is so important.

My study tour of Germany was transformative as it was the first time I learned about DEI through a different and not-American framework. For instance, I was surprised to find that women and international students were the focus of diversity in higher education. Another aspect of the conversation that surprised me was that all non-ethnic Germans were considered to have a migrant background, even those whose ancestors came from other European Union countries and are racially identified as white. And lastly, the inability to keep demographic data on individuals completely turns my approach to DEI upside down. In my line of work, data is key to equity– we must identify and track outcomes to ensure that there are no disparities, and if there are disparities, we have an obligation to remedy them.
I was so fortunate to participate in the first ACG study tour on social cohesion. It was an amazing experience that allowed me to meet and forge new relationships with other DEI experts in the US and Germany. I highly recommend the program and will provide any assistance needed for its continued operation and success – it is needed now more than ever!

RaShelle Davis served as the Senior Policy Advisor to the Governor of Washington State. Although she had participated in other transatlantic programs before, this exchange provided her with insights into local societal challenges of which she was unaware.
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