

Depolarisation & Democratic Norms in West Africa

Policy Paper



**Global Perspective on Polarisation: Key
Concepts, Challenges and Solutions**

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01 Introduction

In recent years, societies across the globe have experienced escalating levels of polarisation, a phenomenon that threatens democratic stability, social cohesion, and national security. The recent webinar organised by the Media Foundation for West Africa, titled: “A Global Perspective on Polarisation: Key Concepts, Challenges, and Solutions,” underscored that polarisation is not merely a political or social nuisance, but a “hyper problem” with the capacity to undermine the foundational principles of democracy and human coexistence.

West Africa, a region characterised by diverse ethnic, religious, and ideological identities, faces mounting challenges related to polarisation. These challenges, if unaddressed, risk deepening societal divides, impair governance, and incite violence. This policy paper seeks to elucidate the core concepts of polarisation, highlight the multifaceted challenges it presents, and propose strategic, evidence-based solutions tailored to the West African context, informed by a broad international perspective.

02 Understanding the core concepts of polarisation

At its essence, polarisation involves a process whereby society becomes divided into distinct groups that perceive themselves as fundamentally opposed. From a global perspective, experts have identified two critical elements that characterise this phenomenon as follows:

1 Existence of poles or opposing groups at a distance

Polarisation begins with the formation of groups or poles. That is distinct entities that exist at a perceived or actual distance from each other. These poles can be defined along various lines. They include political, ethnicity, religion, ideology, or geography. The defining feature is that these groups are seen as mutually exclusive, often perceiving each other as incompatible or threatening.

2 Radicalisation within each pole

The second element involves the process of radicalisation within each group. This entails a shift toward more extreme beliefs and behaviours. They are often accompanied by demonisation of the opposing group and romanticisation view of one's own. This internal radicalisation fosters a mentality of “us versus them”, intensifying divisions.

03 Dynamic and mutually reinforcing process

Crucially, these two elements—distance and radicalisation—are mutually reinforcing. As groups perceive greater distance from each other, radicalisation tends to increase. It creates a cycle that pulls society further apart. If left unchecked, this dynamic can lead to societal fragmentation, intolerance, and violence.

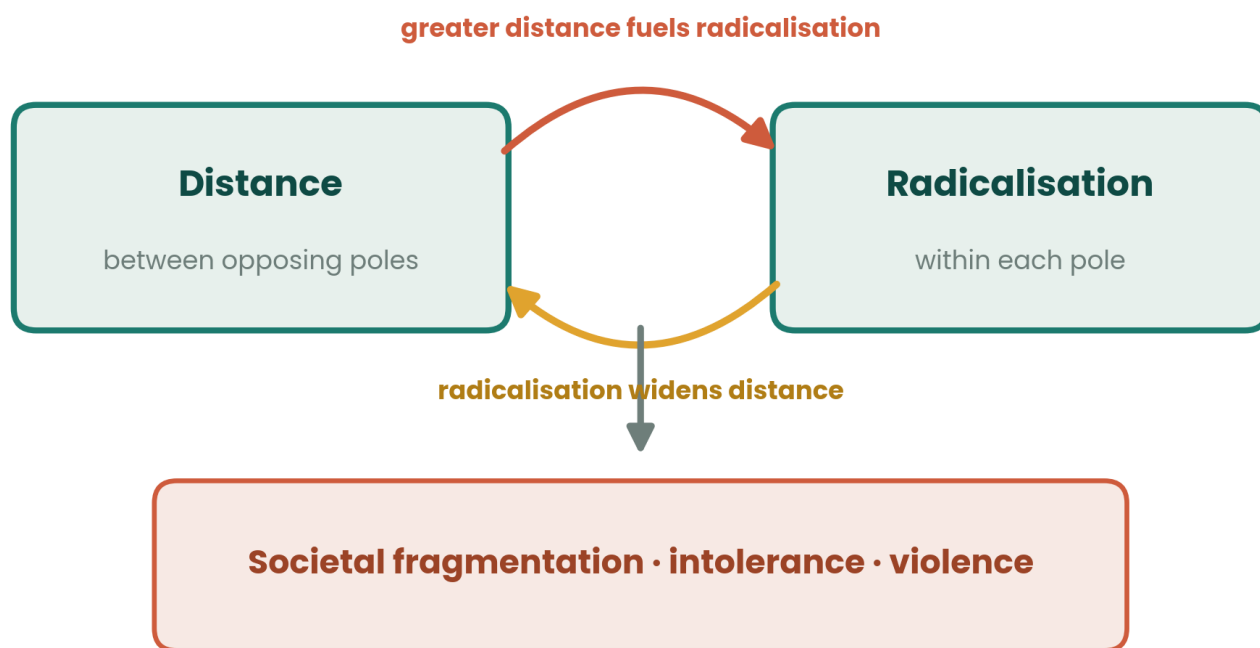


Figure 1 · The self-reinforcing cycle of distance and radicalisation

04 The challenges of polarisation: A multifaceted threat

The webinar highlighted that polarisation is more than a social division. It is a hyperactive challenge. It has a profound and systemic implications that manifest across legal, political, social, and security domains. These manifestations are discussed below:

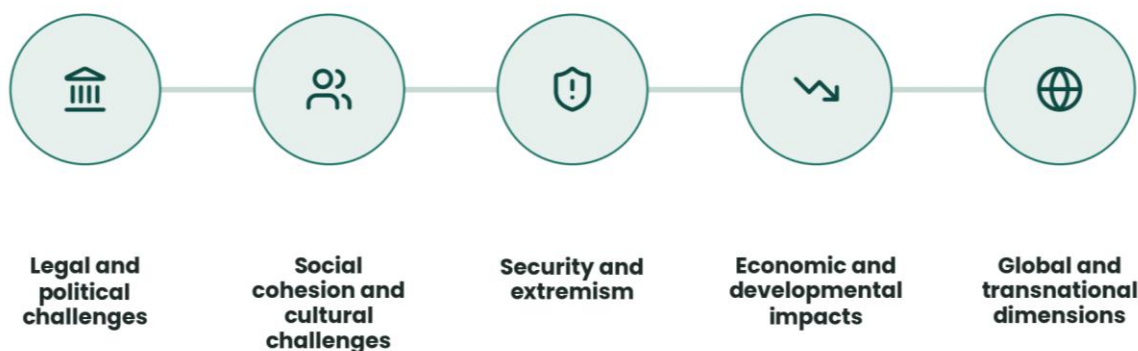


Figure 2 · The five domains of challenge

Legal and political challenges

The legal and political challenges manifest mainly in policy gridlock and legislative paralysis. Polarisation hampers effective policymaking. Opposing groups resist compromise, leading to deadlock in legislative bodies. This paralysis impairs governments' ability to deliver public goods, and adapt legislations and policies to societal needs.

Legal and political challenges also lead to erosion of democratic norms. Societies become increasingly distrustful of democratic institutions; particularly, electoral processes. Groups and opposing camps perceive electoral processes as arenas for conflict, rather than avenues for legitimate representation.

Social cohesion and cultural challenges

This largely manifest social fragmentation. Divisions deepen along ethnic, religious, and/or ideological lines. This erode social trust and cohesion. Communities become segregated. It reduce opportunities for interaction and mutual understanding.

Again, groups becomes intolerant of each other. They dehumanise each other's perspectives and ideological identities: As groups demonise each other, societal tolerance diminishes. And lead to dehumanising narratives that can incite violence, discrimination and disharmony.

Security and extremism

Polarisation also lead to radicalisation and violence. High levels of polarisation facilitate radicalisation. It potentially lead to violent clashes, insurgencies, extremists narratives or terrorist activities. Historically, societies with entrenched polarisation are more susceptible to conflict escalation.

Economic and developmental impacts

The result from these negative dynamics is stunted development. Political gridlock and social unrest impede economic growth, discourage investment, and worsen poverty and inequality.

Global and transnational dimensions

Polarisation pave the way for foreign interference and manipulation. In an interconnected world, external actors may exploit societal divisions. Bad actors exacerbate polarisation through disinformation campaigns. They fund divisive groups and/or propagate conflicting narratives that hamper social harmony and cohesion.

05 Solutions Spectrum: A global perspective on addressing polarisation

Drawing from international experiences and scholarly insights, the webinar identified a comprehensive spectrum of solutions. That is, an ecosystem approach that emphasises both structural reforms and community-level initiatives. These are as follows:

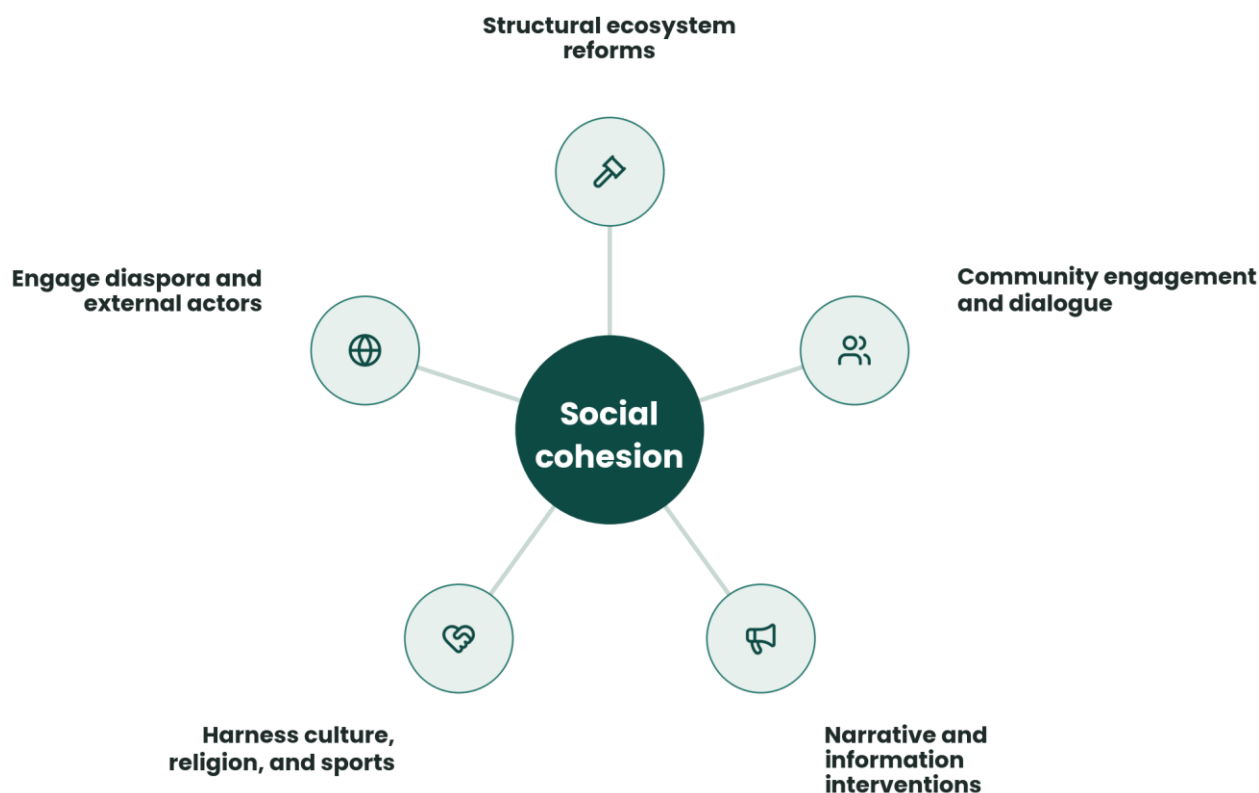


Figure 3 · The solutions ecosystem

Structural ecosystem reforms

- **Reform laws and policies:** Society's laws and institutional frameworks significantly influence the propensity for polarisation. Law and reforms should promote inclusive electoral systems, protect minority rights, and foster civic participation.
- **Regulate digital platforms:** Social media and online platforms are critical arenas where echo-chambers and misinformation flourish. Governments and regional bodies should formulate regulations and policies that aim at promoting transparency, content moderation, and algorithmic accountability.
- **Revise norms and education:** Civic education curricula must promote pluralism, conflict resolution, and media literacy to build resilient societal norms.

Community engagement and dialogue

- **Foster inter-group contacts:** Empirical evidence shows that meaningful dialogue and interpersonal contacts reduce prejudices. Initiatives such as citizen assemblies, interfaith dialogues, and youth exchanges can be effective.
- **Leverage organic meeting spaces:** Religious, cultural, and sports institutions serve as natural, and trusted spaces for interactions. Supporting their role in promoting tolerance is essential.
- **Confidential and strategic engagement:** In highly polarised contexts, confidential dialogues within groups or between influential leaders can de-escalate tensions.

Narrative and information interventions

- **Counter disinformation:** Implement widespread media literacy campaigns, promote fact-checking, and develop narratives that emphasise shared identities and common interests.
- **Address hate speech:** Formulate and enforce regulations against hate speech and promote responsible journalism to prevent divisive narratives.

Harness culture, religion, and sports

- **Deploy social institutions as connectors:** Religious leaders, cultural festivals, and sporting events are organic platforms for interaction. Supporting their role in building bridges across divides can have lasting impact.
- **Promote shared identity:** Initiatives that highlight common cultural or national aspirations can weaken "us versus them" narratives.

Engage diaspora and external actors

- **Deploy diaspora as bridges:** Diaspora communities, with their transnational links and diverse perspectives, can facilitate dialogue and investment, and help mediate conflicts.
- **International support:** Global actors can provide technical assistance, funding, and policy guidance aligned with local realities.

06 Contextualised solutions for West Africa

While the above solutions are rooted in a global understanding of polarisation, their application in West Africa requires careful contextualisation. The paper propose the following context-specific recommendations:



Figure 4 · Acting at national, regional and community levels

📍 Context-specific recommendations

- **Assess local conditions:** West Africa societies differ in their levels of polarisation, societal norms, and political structures. Interventions must be tailored accordingly.
- **Timing and phasing of interventions:** Peacebuilding efforts should focus on preventive measures before polarisation becomes entrenched, especially outside election periods.
- **Multi-level approaches:** Engage diverse stakeholders for sustainable impact. Strategies must operate at national, regional, and community levels
- **Prioritise inclusivity:** Stakeholders should emphasise inclusive governance, equitable development, and respect for diversity to prevent societal fractures.

07 Conclusion

The recognition that polarisation is a complex, systemic, and “hyper challenge” underscores the necessity for a holistic and evidence-based approach. The insights gleaned from a global perspective reveal that while polarisation manifests uniquely across contexts, its underlying dynamics and solutions share common features.

For West Africa, addressing polarisation is an urgent imperative. It requires bold structural reforms, community-driven initiatives, responsible media practices, and leveraging social institutions that naturally bring people together. Success will depend on sustained political will, inclusive policymaking, and active participation of civil society and communities.

By embracing these strategies, West African societies can transition from a cycle of division towards a resilient, cohesive, and democratic future rooted in shared values and mutual understanding.



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