UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM STAFF COLLEGE

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ONLINE

10 APR 2026 - 31 DEC 2026

Bridging Divides in a Polarized World

Governance and Human Rights

Sustainable development and the SDGs



DURATION
45 minutes

ENROLL BY
31 Dec 2026

PRICE
Free

LOCATION
ONLINE

TARGET
Everyone

CONTACT academicpartnerships@unssc.org

This resource was developed by UNSSC as part of the Nelson Mandela Project for Social Change.

It consists of a self-paced online module that explores:

- How polarization differs from disagreement and conflict, and why that distinction matters for social change;
- How pressures such as insecurity, misperceptions, agency gaps, and zero-sum thinking can contribute to stalled cooperation;
- Practical ways to recognize and respond to polarizing pressures in everyday professional and civic contexts.

It should take approximately 45 minutes to complete the module.

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, many of the challenges facing humanity, such as climate change, technological disruption, and widening inequalities, demand cooperation across societies and sectors. Yet, global efforts to respond to shared challenges with collective action are often mired in gridlock.

Polarization has become an important part of this picture. When disagreement is increasingly framed in black-and-white, "us versus them" terms, trust can erode, agreements are contested, and compromise may appear less legitimate. These dynamics affect not only political systems but also the everyday work of communities, organizations, and social change actors seeking to build dialogue and cooperation.

Grounded in the 2023/2024 United Nations *Human Development Report*, *Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World*, this self-paced module introduces key concepts for understanding how polarization develops and why it matters for human development, dignity, and collective problem-solving. The module also presents tools to bridge divides and contribute to reversing polarization trends,

Objectives

Upon completion of this online module, you will be able to:

- Distinguish polarization from disagreement and conflict, and recognize it as a multidimensional dynamic;
- Explain how polarization operates across social, emotional, informational, and institutional dimensions by matching examples to each dimension and stating why it matters for cooperation;
- Identify how agency gaps, human insecurity, misperceptions, and zero-sum thinking can interact with and reinforce one another to entrench polarization.

Course methodology

This is an online, self-paced module.

Course contents

Polarization, communication, and bridging divides for positive social change.

Target audience

Everyone.

Cost of participation

Free of charge.