

Inequalities and organised violence

By David Sogge

■ Executive summary

According to recent research, Western policies on fragility and peacebuilding pay little attention to the “root causes” of destructive conflict. It is broadly evident that sociopolitical inequalities are among these root causes. Understanding how inequalities drive organised violence and are in turn driven by it can help inform policies for peace.

This policy brief sketches some issues and recent research findings on this topic. It focuses on inequalities among social groups as major sources of risk; the distribution of material goods, power and status as preconditions of organised violence; the dynamics of organised violence stemming from inequalities; the risks of organised violence as a consequence of inequality, and vice versa; and lines of approach open to outside agencies, including knowledge gaps that they can help fill.

Why pay attention to inequalities and organised violence?

- Inequalities and organised violence often worsen state fragility and cripple efforts to promote peace. Together they can trap states and regions in whirlpools of maldevelopment and quiet coercion, denying people basic security and defeating the plans of authorities and donors alike.
- Full-scale civil wars are currently less common than in past decades, yet organised violence by politically, economically or criminally motivated actors has not declined. The interplay of inequalities and political exclusion helps explain why this violence persists.
- Nothing makes inequalities and the resulting inequities (unfairness, injustice) inevitable. They can be triggered, worsened, and multiplied by public and private policies – policies for which there are almost always better alternatives.
- To ignore inequalities is not an option morally – or even perhaps legally. National and international authorities face formal obligations to promote peace and human

rights universally; hence the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Today’s tendency to intervene with violence in the name of peace and the protection of civilians, often unleashing yet more destructive conflict, makes such obligations all the more relevant.

Inequalities among whom?

At the country level, the usual point of reference is inequality among individuals or households, commonly indicated by the Gini coefficient of income distribution. Yet this interpersonal or “vertical” inequality is not necessarily relevant to organised violence, because it correlates with violence only weakly.

However, disparities among *groups* or *social categories* – termed “horizontal” inequalities – are a different matter. Insofar as they resonate with collective feelings of injustice or injured self-esteem, horizontal inequalities can unleash organised violence in powerful, cumulative ways. Social groupings carry cultural markers of ethnicity, race, caste,

religion, language or birthplace. These are commonly interwoven with material markers of exclusion/inclusion, status and power. Grievances born of horizontal inequalities can express themselves, sometimes violently, in terms of cultural difference.

In many societies inequalities between men and women are dogged by violence. This violence is frequently of a structural kind, based on norms and rules that impair dignity, bodily integrity and health. Also looming large are inequalities between generations. These may gain importance as climate change affects social cohesion in ways that increase risks of violence for future generations.

Inequalities of what?

Recognition and respect. Collective self-esteem and collective resentment are at stake where some people are shown respect while others face discrimination and humiliation. Triggering or avoiding collective violence can depend on how such discrepancies are dealt with.

Access to the basics. Unequal access to food, water, decent work and livelihoods, housing, sanitation and basic public health, education, and transportation services are the stuff of politics, especially where mediated by public provision or subsidies.

Political “voice”, justice and “freedom from fear”. Disparate histories, norms, and rules of politics create widely divergent views and aspirations across the world’s polities. However, discrepancies are widening between what political classes claim as their democratic practice and how responsive they actually are toward common citizens. In both higher- and lower-income countries, unequal political influence creates, and is created by, skewed distributions of income and assets, both among households and across social groups.

Public obligations. The incidence and enforcement of tax collection and the performance of other public obligations can fall unequally across social groupings, evoking collective feelings of unfairness.

Exposure to risks. Some groups are often at greater risk of harm than others from natural disasters and health hazards. While not major drivers of collective violence today, tomorrow’s volatile weather and underlying climate change seem likely to provoke more migration and competition for water and good land.

Inequalities driving organised violence

Disparities typically grow as value-producing resources such as land, knowledge and market access are confined to an in-group, e.g. where they are possessed by established residents, not immigrants; men, not women; Hindus, not Muslims; or *mestiços*, not blacks. Exploitation is a common driver. Exploitative systems do not exclude people so much

as include them under adverse terms. The factors that shape relations are geography, trade, modes of production and labour systems, including the “reproductive” work that keeps households going. These determine who gets what kinds of livelihood opportunities. Distribution depends on unequal patronage, protection and mobilisation by political, business or religious leaders. Meanwhile, ideological processes lay down social boundaries, prejudices and rules. Many people internalise their low status and powerlessness, which they see as “the natural order of things”. This is a hallmark of “structural violence” that operates silently and with apparent legitimacy. Yet a collective sense of humiliation and resentment toward in-groups and their privileges can build up over long periods, even generations.

Triggers of social tension

Horizontal inequalities tend to create inflammable situations. Recent events in Africa and elsewhere illustrate how fear can ignite violence when food prices spike, world commodity prices tumble and public services collapse. Inequalities can come into play in at least three ways, often overlapping:

1. *Sudden widening of disparities in wealth and income.* When these fissures emerge among territorial/ethnic groups, they can tap a collective sense of injustice, undermining the legitimacy of local institutions.
2. Increasing *uncertainty about the livelihoods and assets* of dominant or subordinate groups generates collective insecurity.
3. *The weakening of state capacity* to provide public goods and services in ways seen to be fair undermines the legitimacy of the public sector and public politics.

Many African cases illustrate how such changes, and the external pressures that drive them, can bring on political violence. Market fundamentalist policies such as “structural adjustment” have sometimes triggered civil conflict directly, such as in 1998 in Guinea-Bissau. More common are cases like the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the Kyrgyz Republic in the 2000s, where, through longer chains of cause and effect, these economic policies created inflammable conditions for collective violence.

Risk multipliers

Many conflict-prone places are “extraverted”, i.e. oriented outward toward transnational circuits and forces. In them, domestic elites wield power by converting their dependence on outsiders (investors, donors, security officials, transnational criminal circuits, etc.) into domestic resources and authority. Those processes mean that outsiders carry special responsibilities and have leverage over policies such as the following:

Trade policies. Especially for low-income countries, the liberalisation of trade has seriously reduced state revenues due to lowered taxation of external flows, weaker trade regulation and global intellectual property rules. Western-led prohibition regimes (e.g. regarding narcotics and migrant labour) have created incentives for criminal rackets. Liberal laws and weak enforcement of the trade in small arms has facilitated criminal access to the means of violent coercion.

Investment and ownership policies. As seen widely in Africa and countries of the former Soviet Union, privatisation has often helped to facilitate capital flight, feed corruption and convert public services into commodities people have to pay for. Foreign direct investment (FDI) in extractive industries, land acquisition, agro-industries and “carbon offset” schemes tends to increase risks of collective violence, whereas FDI in most service sectors does not. In Latin America, the maldistribution of land is strongly associated with violence. Although there is some evidence that land degradation may increase the risks of violence, these risks do not seem to arise directly from the scarcity of renewable resources per se.

Foreign aid. Aid systems tend to increase vertical inequality, especially as a result of macroeconomic policies that donors require as conditions of their aid. Plausibly, aid may also help increase horizontal inequalities, but such hypotheses have yet to be studied in depth.

Financial policies. Where state and supranational systems are weak or captive to financial interests, the rising power of offshore circuits, shadow banking, corporate transfer pricing, and “forum shopping” by businesses seeking subsidies and tax breaks all tend to reduce public revenues and government legitimacy. They further expose economies to external shocks that hit some groups and institutions harder than others.

All of these policy vectors affect job markets – often negatively, from the standpoint of underemployed people in “survivalist” situations. However, the lack of decent jobs as such rarely drives organised violence directly. More important, it seems, are discrimination and humiliation in job markets, which are hallmarks of horizontal inequality, although broad research here is lacking.

Organised violence driving inequalities

Organised violence refers to force used or threatened by many kinds of actors: governments, political parties, business corporations, criminal networks, and ethnic and religious associations. Depending on its purposes and claims of legitimacy, violence may be lethal or non-lethal, indiscriminate or selective, overt or covert.

Through displacement, dispossession, and the destruction of productive and social infrastructure, organised violence can radically redistribute assets and access to basic social services. Indeed, the promise of booty – the gains from predatory practice – can be a major incentive that spreads and intensifies organised violence.

Disorder, insecurity and the need for protection create circumstances for predatory action. “Conflict entrepreneurs” play active roles in organised violence, making it a business sector in itself. Their pursuit of profit validates the saying “there’s more to war than winning”.

In recent decades civil wars have usually worsened income distributions in the short term: polarisation commonly peaks about five years after a conflict ends. Yet after about ten years pre-conflict patterns of income distribution have been re-established. However, this finding may not necessarily apply to the distribution of assets or to horizontal inequalities.

Outsiders’ scope for action

International development agencies today face opportunities to influence drivers of inequalities in important ways. Their scope for action includes:

- imperatives to “do no harm” in both their daily operations and in wider strategies of intervention – especially armed intervention – in conflict-prone settings;
- responsibilities to curb and eventually eliminate rules that reward and protect those who avoid or evade taxation and who hide or convert stolen assets;
- responsibilities to drop conditionalities whose effect is to drain away investible resources, and weaken systems of regulation and compliance over externals;
- opportunities to promote, protect and fulfil basic socioeconomic rights by: (a) helping governments to assure that basic services, including systems of social protection, become universal rights, not market commodities; and (b) helping enlarge and protect the political space whereby citizens can influence decision-making and hold public and private sector authorities to account; and
- the need for interdisciplinary ways of tracking and analysing change in inequalities and their (transnational) drivers, relying on indicators that reflect national or regional circumstances. ■

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