CRISE:

Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity

IN BRIEF

Management of horizontal inequalities in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria: issues and policies

The political histories of countries in West Africa differ in terms of political instability, conflict and democracy.[1] An important objective of CRISE's work on this region has been to contrast experiences across countries and over time in order to improve understanding of why some countries have remained relatively peaceful while others have suffered serious violent conflict (either at the national or local level, or both). A particular focus of the centre's research has been on horizontal inequalities (HIs) or inequalities between 'culturally' defined groups. This focus emerged because of increasing evidence that such inequalities can cause a range of political disturbances, including violent conflict and civil war (see, in particular, Stewart, 2008). Such HIs may be economic, social or political in nature or they may concern the 'cultural' status of different ethnic and/or religious groups. The CRISE West Africa team (composed of a multidisciplinary group of University of Oxford-based academics and a large number of local scholars) analysed the political histories and socio-political experiences of three countries in West Africa: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria.

Despite acknowledged differences in such variables as population size, state structures and colonial history, the three countries are similar in a number of important ways. For example, all have ethnically diverse populations, yet a majority belongs to a small number of large ethnic groups; each country is confronted by a sharp socioeconomic north–south divide that has its origins in the colonial era; and this divide overlaps to a considerable degree with a

Christian–Muslim divide. With regard to socio-political instability and inter-ethnic/religious violence, however, the three countries have very different post-colonial histories:

- In light of the economic and political achievements of **Côte d'Ivoire**, international observers often referred to it in the 1960s and 1970s as an 'oasis of peace' and an 'African miracle'. At the beginning of the 1980s, though, the Ivorian success 'model' slowly started to unravel, first economically and then politically. The low point of its political and economic demise was the emergence of a civil war with clear ethno-regional and religious undercurrents in September 2002. Despite the signing of a string of peace agreements over the past seven years, Côte d'Ivoire remains stuck in a 'no peace, no war' situation.

- **Nigeria** has a turbulent and violent political history. While the country has remained relatively 'peaceful' at the national level since the end of the Biafran War (1970), violent conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups at the local and state level have been pervasive. Recent (2009) clashes between Christians and Muslims in Jos, Plateau State, resulting in hundreds of deaths, are a stark reminder of the destruction associated with this ethno-religious violence. In addition, in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, a range of militant groups have taken up arms against the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations since the late 1990s. Moreover, Nigeria's federation itself remains a contested political entity, particularly vis-à-vis the distribution of oil revenues. Since the most recent return to civilian rule and multi-party elections in 1999, Nigeria's progress towards consolidating its democracy has been quite limited.

- While **Ghana** has not experienced a large-scale violent conflict at the national level, it has had its share of coup d'états since independence in 1957. However, since the establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1993, a functioning multi-party democracy has developed. While Ghana is overall a peaceful and democratic country, there have been several serious, localised violent conflicts and clashes in northern regions.

In each of the countries, the CRISE West Africa team examined the dominant features of HIs, their historical origins, and the linkages between HIs and the political situation (both at the national and local level) and the mixture of policies and institutions used to address the problem. Following widespread consultation with local stakeholders, the team (with substantial contributions from local partners) developed a set of policy recommendations aimed at improving the management of HIs in these three countries. This *In Brief* summarises some of the findings of CRISE's research on West Africa and provides a number of policy recommendations.

The management of HIs in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria

Socioeconomic HIs

All three countries face serious socioeconomic HIs, especially between the north and the south. Figure 1 illustrates the sharp socioeconomic north–south divide in each of these countries in terms of the ratio of under-five child

mortality. Due to the ethnic and religious make-up of the northern and southern regions, these inequalities are also reflected in similarly sharp inequalities between different ethnic and religious groups. The origins of the prevailing inequalities lie in the British and French colonial policies of investing more heavily in those regions where exploitable agricultural and natural resources were cheapest to produce and export. In Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, post-colonial development strategies and investment patterns have largely mirrored colonial ones. In particular, because of the geographical concentration of most commercial agricultural activities and natural resources in the south, most investment and public expenditure has benefitted this region. This in turn has exacerbated the north–south divide. While the southern-dominated governments in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana introduced some measures to redistribute part of their country's wealth to the northern regions, these attempts were too limited in time and scale to reduce the socioeconomic north–south divide substantially.

Unlike Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana's export-oriented agricultural economies, Nigeria's economy has been largely dependent on oil for the past 30 years or so—oil currently accounts for approximately 40 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and around 80 per cent of public revenue. Most of this oil is found in the Niger Delta, which is situated in the southeast of the country. The oil revenues accrue to the Federation Account and are then shared among the country's 36 states according to a derivation formula based on the following five criteria: equality (equal shares per state) (40 per cent); size of population (30 per cent); level of social development (10 per cent); land mass (10 per cent); and revenue generation (10 per cent). Despite receiving substantial payments from the Federation Account, the north has been unable to catch up with the south mainly because of the lack of a strong endogenous economy or alternative sources of income.

Political HIs

The three countries have managed their political HIs in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Nigeria has introduced a number of *formal* measures and institutions, including a quota system for public sector appointments, the Federal Character principle, and the institutionalisation of a federalised state structure, to ensure that all major ethno-regional groups are represented

Figure 1 Under-five child mortality: north–south ratio in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria

Note: Macro International Inc. provides free-of-charge access to Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data. For more information, see http://www.measuredhs.com/.

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys in Ghana (2003), Côte d'Ivoire (1999) and Nigeria (2003).

in its main political and administrative institutions. Despite its complex and challenging ethno-political environment and history, the country has successfully contained the threat to its survival posed by political HIs by sharing political-administrative decision-making power among its key ethnic groups.

In contrast to Nigeria, Ghana has adopted a largely *informal* approach to managing its political HIs. Throughout the post-colonial period, consecutive Ghanaian regimes have maintained a reasonable level of ethno-regional balance in the country's principal political institutions.

Côte d'Ivoire's management of political HIs has two very different sides. Initially, under President Felix Houphouët-Boigny, who was in charge from 1960–93, the country had an *informal* system of ethnic 'quotas', which was aimed at establishing a balance between different regions and ethnic groups within state institutions. However, following his death in 1993, this informal policy of ethno-regional balancing was abandoned and as a result, political HIs sharply increased. The primary losers were the northern ethnic groups, which became increasingly politically excluded and disenfranchised, in addition to being disadvantaged in socioeconomic terms. The political exclusion of the 'northerners' was an important factor in the emergence of violent conflict in September 2002.

Cultural status HIs

Cultural status HIs refer to differences in public recognition of ethnic and religious groups' norms, customs and practices. The records of the three countries and the challenges they face in this area are quite different. In Nigeria, although there is no cultural oppression or open favouritism towards one specific ethnic group, the *wazobia* culture of the three majority ethnic groups (Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo) is the default template of the Nigerian state. CRISE's research shows that members of minority ethnic groups tend to have a deep sense of cultural marginalisation and many of them believe that their languages and culture could soon become extinct. Furthermore, with respect to religious status inequalities, an important issue in recent years has been Muslim grievances about the relatively marginal status of Islamic law within the Western-oriented constitutional architecture of the Nigerian state. Fortunately, however, the Nigerian federal democratic system, as it has unfolded since the restoration of civilian rule in 1999, has created space for the articulation and expansion of Muslims' demands for the implementation of Islamic law and has provided ways to address and mediate these demands.

In Ghana, problems of unequal cultural status appear to be relatively minor. Successive regimes have maintained a climate of ethno-cultural and religious inclusiveness and equality fairly successfully. Measures, practices and customs that illustrate Ghana's 'culturally' inclusive character include: the persistent rejection by consecutive governments of proposals to promote a particular local language (especially Twi/Akan) as the national language; the conscious efforts to provide radio and television broadcasts in all major local languages; and the custom that government representatives regularly attend the most important ethnic and/or traditional festivals and events (*durbars*) throughout the country.
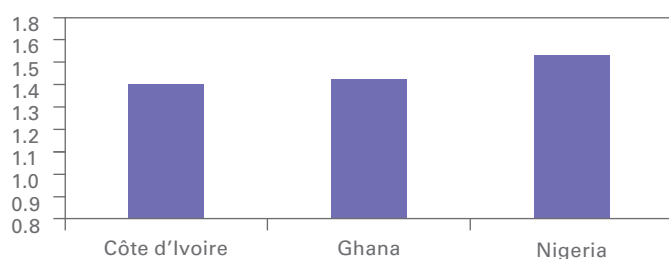
In Côte d'Ivoire, in contrast, cultural status inequalities are an important variable in society. Indeed, throughout the post-colonial period, Christianity received much more public recognition and visibility from the state than Islam, the dominant religion of the northern part of the country. However, particularly after Houphouët-Boigny's death, religious status inequalities grew progressively worse. Moreover, although the political exclusion and the relative socioeconomic deprivation of the northern ethnic groups were critical factors in the emergence of the violent conflict, perceptions of non-recognition and secondary status of the Muslim religion also played an important part in instigating the northern rebellion.

Some policy recommendations

Socioeconomic HIs

In all three countries, much more consideration should be given to reducing prevailing socioeconomic HIs (especially between the north and the south), which may otherwise become a serious underlying grievance with the potential to provoke violent confrontations. There are a range of measures that governments could introduce or expand in order to improve the socioeconomic situation of the poorer regions of the north (as well as other parts of the three countries). Measures that might contribute to a reduction in the north–south divide include:

- redirecting government expenditure on social and economic infrastructure towards the north;

- using the fiscal system to ensure that poorer regions receive more public funds than the relatively richer ones, especially from oil in Nigeria;

- offering tax benefits and other financial advantages to companies that develop economic activities in the poorer regions;

- taking regional inequalities into account to a greater extent than at present in the design of macro policies;

- stimulating the northern economy by promoting more direct links with neighbouring countries (bordering the north);

- identifying, promoting and supporting new economic activities in which the northern regions have a comparative advantage;

- increasing the productivity of northern agriculture, for instance by promoting R&D (research and development) into northern crops;

- introducing universal cash transfers and other pro-poor programmes, which will help the northern regions the most; and

- ensuring equality across regions with regard to the provision of education.

Clearly the implementation environment, as well as ability and political willingness to deal with the north–south divide, differ substantially across the three countries. Given its recent violent history and unresolved political problems, Côte d'Ivoire faces the most challenging situation in this respect. Moreover, in the short term, there are other policy priorities, notably the return and reintegration of internally displaced persons and the demobilisation of government and rebel soldiers. Another important group of people that needs special attention and targeting is the youth. Due to high youth unemployment, young people are easily mobilised and have been manipulated by politicians for political purposes. It is vital that the three countries design and implement employment and education policies aimed at this important group. In the long term, however, the developmental north–south divide needs to be tackled effectively not only to enhance the welfare of deprived people but also to underpin political stability.

Political HIs

The three countries have adopted very different approaches to the management of their political HIs. While Nigeria's formal approach has been relatively successful in providing the larger ethnic groups with access to the political-administrative system, it has not ensured adequate representation of small ethnic minority groups in mixed ethnic states. Moreover, it has strengthened consciousness of group identities as opposed to the national identity. CRISE's research identified several problems with the current system and suggests a number of ways in which the management of political HIs could be improved in Nigeria, including:

- The arithmetic quota for state representation—the 'quota model'—is open to abuse in practice, because the emphasis is often on the state of origin, and not on the qualifications of all those from a state. This frequently leads to nepotism and claims that merit is being sacrificed. Instead, a 'trumping model' is recommended that requires that state quota regulations only apply if a state has enough adequately qualified candidates. This shifts the emphasis from quota to merit and means that all candidates from each state *must* also be ranked according to merit.

- The Federal Character Commission (FCC) should also consider including an urban–rural criterion in its selection procedures within each state. Privileging qualified candidates from the rural areas of a state over those from the urban areas of the same state is likely to improve the prospects of minority ethnic groups and other marginal groups within the state.

- Within each state and zone, efforts should be made to achieve proportionality by disaggregating qualified candidates by ethnicity, religion and gender. Trends in the representation of these categories should be constantly monitored.

- Transparent and accountable appointing procedures are necessary to allay fears of nepotism and bias.

- Complaints procedures need to be harmonised and made clear and transparent.

Ghana has used an informal approach quite successfully to maintain a certain degree of ethno-regional balance in the public sphere throughout the post-colonial period. The continued balancing of different ethno-regional and religious interests and groups in the administrative-political sphere remains crucial for the country's long-term stability. As in the case of Nigeria, a way of improving policy further

in this respect is to provide more openness and transparency when it comes to government appointments and public selection procedures more generally. More transparent and accountable procedures can help to reduce perceptions of ethnic and religious favouritism.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the failure to maintain an inclusive political system was one of the main factors in the emergence of violent conflict in 2002. While the current power-sharing arrangement between the government and former rebels is relatively inclusive in terms of ethnicity and religion, a crucial matter is how to ensure that future governments also have an inclusive ethno-regional and religious composition. Local stakeholders, with the active support of the international community, should encourage the government, the opposition parties and the former rebels to start a public dialogue on how to maintain an inclusive political system in the long run. One should note here that a presidential system with a powerful executive is potentially problematic as it can easily turn into a winner-takes-all fight for power. South Africa's first post-Apartheid constitution might prove useful in this respect. A particularly interesting provision in the constitution aimed at achieving an inclusive executive was that each party that received more than five per cent of the votes in the election was going to be proportionally represented in the cabinet.

Cultural status HIs

CRISE's research shows that cultural status inequalities are a significant matter in West Africa, especially in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. In the latter country, members of minority ethnic groups in particular have a deep sense of cultural marginalisation. To address this, the Nigerian government should seek to accord more public recognition to smaller ethno-linguistic groups' traditions, customs and practices, for example by promoting and assisting with the establishment of community radio stations; by supporting the teaching and preservation of minority languages; and by encouraging the media to report more widely and positively on minority issues and groups.

Overall, Ghana's record on cultural status inequalities is relatively positive. Current culturally inclusive practices and customs should be maintained therefore and, where possible, extended. For instance, the languages of relatively small ethno-linguistic groups that are presently not among the 12 state-supported local languages should receive some form of recognition as well. Inter-ethnic and religious contact between young people should also be encouraged to improve mutual understanding and knowledge of other groups' cultural practices and customs. There should be an extension of the practice by some universities of expecting students to take courses in a local language other than their own. Other policies aimed

at promoting an overarching 'Ghanaian' identity, based on shared practices, values and customs, as well as a common history, through, inter alia, school curricula and the media should also be encouraged.

In Côte d'Ivoire, as noted above, the grievances among the northern population that contributed to violent conflict were not limited to the economic and political sphere, but were also related to the inferior status of the Muslim religion. A comprehensive set of legal safeguards is needed to grant more protection to the rights and freedoms of individuals and groups in order to allow them to exercise and uphold their religion and other cultural practices. It would also be helpful if politicians took some symbolic steps to promote national unity and to discourage ethnic and cultural divisions, including denunciation of ethnic stereotyping and xenophobia. In addition, it is vital that Islam receives similar recognition and respect to Christianity.

Conclusion

In sum, the way that HIs have been managed in the three West African countries has contributed significantly to their political evolution. In Côte d'Ivoire these inequalities eventually led to civil war. Active policies in Ghana and Nigeria, particularly on political and cultural status inequalities, have prevented north–south socioeconomic inequalities from escalating into violent political conflict. As long as deep socioeconomic inequalities continue, though, the potential will remain for a north–south conflict. In each of the three countries, development policies need to be directed therefore at reducing these inequalities. Much more active monitoring of HIs in all dimensions is a high priority, so that policies can be appropriately targeted at the source of major HIs.

—**Dr Arnim Langer and Professor Frances Stewart**

Endnotes

1 This *In Brief* draws on various CRISE publications, including, most importantly, Langer (2005); Mustapha (2009); and Stewart (2008).

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