



CRISE:

Centre for Research on Inequality,
Human Security and Ethnicity

IN BRIEF

Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict: a review of CRISE findings

Anyone concerned with promoting development and reducing human suffering must make conflict prevention a priority. Violent conflict within multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries, often fought along ethnic or religious lines, is a major cause of death, destruction, poverty and underdevelopment.

Fortunately, conflict within multi-ethnic countries is not inevitable—in fact, most multi-ethnic societies are peaceful. The primary objective of the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), based at the University of Oxford and funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), is to discover why some multi-ethnic countries are peaceful while others experience violent conflict.

CRISE research is multidisciplinary, conducted jointly with partners in Latin America (Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru), Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia) and West Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria). In each region, one of these countries has avoided serious national conflict (Bolivia, Malaysia and Ghana, respectively) while the remainder have experienced severe violent conflict in the recent, or relatively recent, past.

The fundamental conclusion of CRISE research is that the presence of large horizontal inequalities (HIs), or inequalities among salient identity groups, increases the risk of violent conflict. Such inequalities may be economic, social or political or concern cultural status.

- **Economic HIs** include inequalities in access to and ownership of assets—financial, human, natural resource-based and social. In addition, they comprise inequalities in income levels and employment opportunities, which depend on such assets and the general conditions of the economy.
- **Social HIs** include inequalities in access to a range of services, such as education, health care and housing, as well as to the benefits of educational and health care outcomes.
- **Political HIs** include inequalities in the distribution of political opportunities and power among groups, including control over the head of government, cabinet, parliamentary assembly, regional and local governments, the bureaucracy, the army and the police. They also encompass inequalities in people's capabilities to participate politically and to express their needs.
- **Cultural status HIs** include disparities in the recognition and standing of different groups' customs, norms and practices.

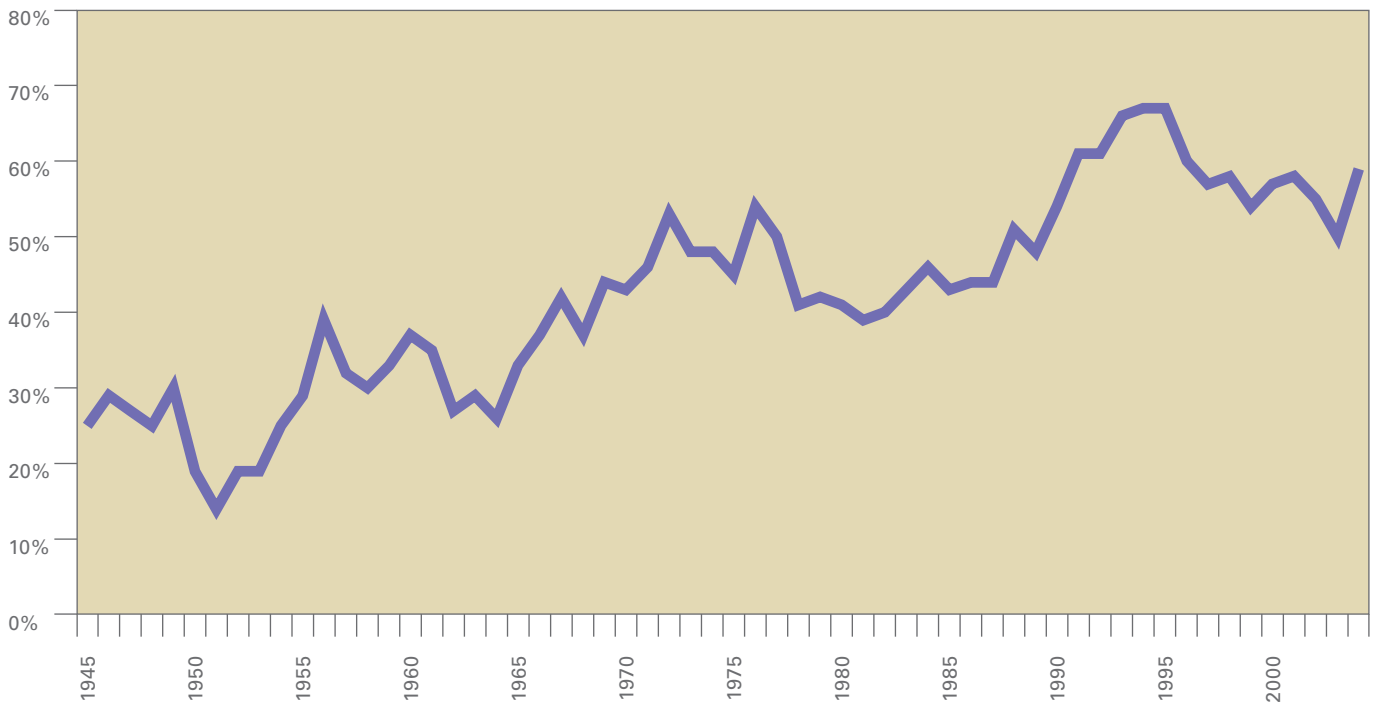
Any type of HI can provide an incentive for political mobilisation, but *political* inequality (that is, political exclusion) is most likely to motivate group leaders to instigate a rebellion. By contrast, *economic* and *social* inequalities are more likely to motivate the mass of the people, while *cultural* discrimination tends to bind groups together.



A rebel soldier controls a crowd during an uprising at the beginning of the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, 2002. © Tim A. Hetherington/Panos Pictures

Figure 1 Ethnic violence as a proportion of major political violence, 1946–2004

Proportion of incidence classified as ethnic



Source: F. Stewart (ed.) (2008) *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Figure 1.3, p. 6. (Calculated from M.G. Marshall (2006) *Major episodes of political violence, 1946–2005 dataset*. Severn, MD: Centre for Systemic Peace. <http://members.aol.com/cspm/gm/warlist.htm> (last accessed 19 December 2006).)

Conflict is, therefore, most likely to occur in areas where economic, social, political and cultural status HIs occur simultaneously, and where some groups are deprived across every dimension. In these situations, group leaders, who face political exclusion, and their potential followers, who see themselves as experiencing unequal treatment with respect to assets, jobs and social services, are likely to be inspired to mobilise and possibly engage in violence. Econometric evidence and case studies support these findings.¹

The situation in Côte d'Ivoire powerfully illustrates these conclusions. Severe socioeconomic inequalities have long existed between the north and the south of the country, but an inclusive government under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny managed to keep the peace for several decades. After his death in December 1993, a number of important factors, including the political exclusion of northerners—the debarring of a northern politician from standing for president and the exclusion of many others from the rights to citizenship and voting—eventually led to civil war. The rebels' *Chartre du Nord* clearly expressed the economic grievances of northerners as well as their resentment at insufficient state recognition of the Muslim religion.

The importance of HIs in provoking conflict is one reason why societies in natural resource-rich states are more prone to violence than other countries. The presence of

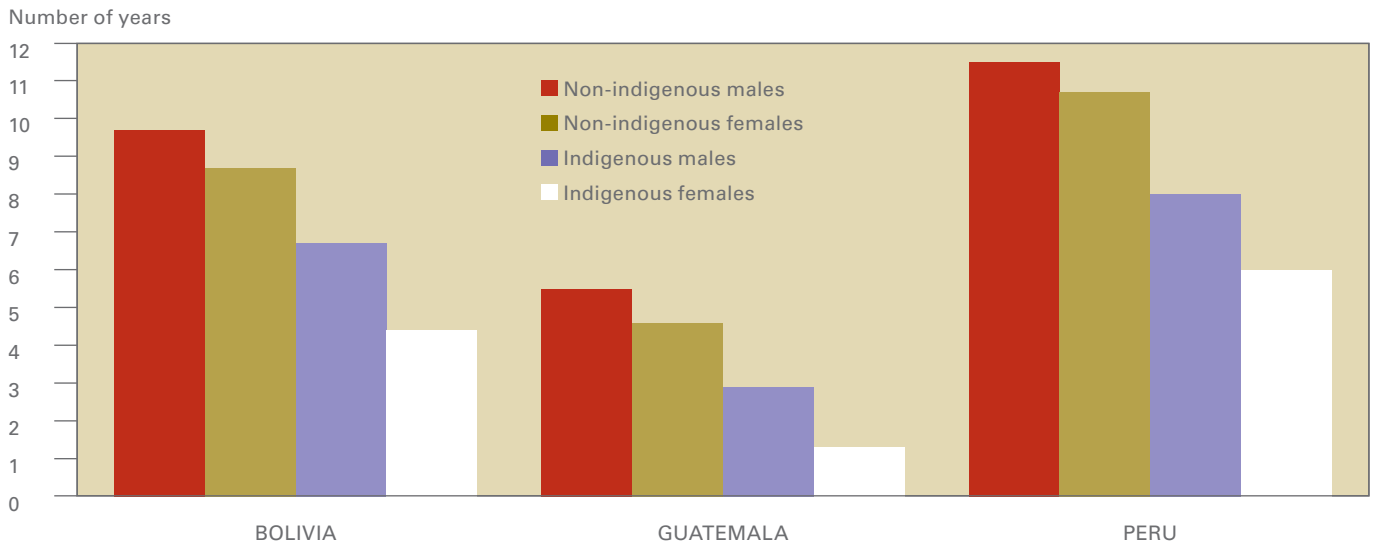
high-value natural resources often results in inequality among regions; when these resources are located in ethnically or religiously distinct regions, separatist conflict may emerge. Consequently, revenue-sharing agreements are vital for sustaining peace in areas where there are high-value natural resources.

People act, though, according to *perceived* injustices and hence perceptions of HIs affect the likelihood of conflict. This implies that those who influence popular opinion, including education institutions, ethnic, political and religious leaders, and the media, can affect political mobilisation. Before the outbreak of conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the country's political leaders launched an active campaign to 'market' identities and differences, denigrating particular groups, through the media. Thus, policies to discourage hostile views of others, and exaggerated perceptions of inequality, can be important in helping to prevent mobilisation.

One important finding of CRISE research that highlights the difficulties in tackling HIs is that they can endure over very long periods. Analysis of the histories of a range of countries (including Bolivia, Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Nigeria and Peru) reveals such long-term persistence of inequality, with some groups remaining relatively deprived for centuries. Many HIs originated in colonial policies that privileged particular groups, but ongoing interlocking elements sustain them. Different types of inequality reinforce one another, with inequality

¹ For a deeper discussion, see Stewart (2008).

Figure 2 Average years of schooling of the population



Source: calculated from M. Barrón (2008) *Gender and ethnic inequalities in Latin America: a multidimensional comparison of Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru*. CRISE Working Paper No. 32. Oxford: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, University of Oxford.

in one sphere, such as access to various types of capital—including education, finance, land and social assets—making inequalities in other realms more likely. Discrimination and political exclusion compound these inequalities. Such interlocking elements have made it almost impossible for some groups to escape deprivation. Comprehensive policies are needed to tackle these complex problems.

All of these findings have important implications for development policy. They suggest that policies to correct economic, social and political HIs should be prioritised in multi-ethnic societies—as part of general development policies—especially in post-conflict environments. However, the international policy community too often is blind to the issue of horizontal inequality. None of the issues on the leading agenda—notably, poverty reduction, promotion of economic growth and structural adjustment—incorporates consideration of HIs. For example, a 2005 review of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers found that ‘the participation of minorities or indigenous peoples is either often overlooked or simply regarded as impractical due to their marginalisation’ (Booth and Curran, 2005, p. 12).

DFID’s development strategy recognises the importance of reducing social exclusion and tackling disparities (DFID, 2005, p. 10), and more attention is being paid to HIs in analyses of conflict-prone areas.² Yet CRISE research on action to address post-conflict situations shows that HIs are hardly ever integrated into policy in multi-ethnic societies.³ In general, then, HIs do not form a systematic part of reporting, and are seldom part of policy discussions, beyond the regional dimension. There is a much higher level of consciousness of the importance of HIs in

the national policies of some heterogeneous countries, such as India, Malaysia or South Africa, and these states have adopted a range of policy approaches.

As far as political systems and initiatives are concerned, Westerners generally advocate multiparty democracy and governance reforms, such as improved accountability and transparency. In practice, though, multiparty democracy can lead to exclusionary politics in heterogeneous societies and consequently elections can provoke violence. The need for power sharing is acknowledged more frequently in post-conflict societies, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq and Lebanon. Wider awareness of the need to reassess the design of democratic systems in multi-ethnic settings is, however, rare.

A dearth of international statistics on the issue reflects this lack of focus. Neither the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) nor the World Bank includes statistics on ethnic, regional or religious HIs in their well-known datasets, although some national-level *Human Development Reports* provide ethnically or religiously disaggregated data. A notable exception is the Demographic and Health Surveys (supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other donors)—55 of 77 countries covered to date (September 2009) have included an ‘ethnic’ variable. These surveys, though, do not cover all countries, do not include many relevant variables, and they are not conducted at regular intervals.

Policy implications

The main conclusion of the CRISE programme is that HIs increase the risk of violent conflict, especially in cases where they are consistent across the economic, social, political and cultural status realms. Correction of such inequalities thus should be a major policy aim in any multi-

2 See, for example, OECD (2001), DFID (2005) and World Bank (2005).

3 An important exception is post-conflict Nepal where HIs are taken seriously in the areas of analysis and policy.

ethnic society where HIs are severe. This is important from the perspective of efficiency, justice and well-being, as well as for reducing the risk of conflict. Policies to address HIs are not only clearly required in countries that have suffered conflict, but also they should become a component of development policies in general—both as a conflict prevention measure and because they will contribute to the creation of a just and inclusive society.

Policies are needed that address specific inequities, including exclusionary political systems and inequalities in assets, employment opportunities, income levels and cultural status. At the same time, policies also must remedy the deeper causes of horizontal inequalities, particularly long embedded factors such as discrimination and prejudice. In addition, they need to improve the capabilities of members of deprived groups and enhance their ability and confidence to exercise their rights. Such change depends in part on a decision by international donors to make the reduction of HIs an important part of their policy discussions and of their aid commitments, as well as on HI reduction becoming an accepted goal of national policy.

There are three distinct approaches to managing HIs:

- **Direct approaches**—groups are targeted directly through quotas for the allocation of jobs, distribution of assets or educational access, for example. These can be effective, but they risk increasing the salience of identity difference and antagonising those who do not benefit from the policy initiative. Generally, direct approaches should be of limited duration to avoid mounting opposition and the corruption often associated with their implementation.
- **Indirect approaches**—these are general policies that have the effect of reducing group disparities, such as anti-discrimination policies, policies to decentralise power, progressive taxation or regional expenditure policies. Such measures are less likely to increase the significance of identity, but they may be less effective in reducing HIs.
- **'Integrationist' approaches**—these aim to diminish the salience of group boundaries by, for instance, promoting national identity and shared activities across groups. These policies decrease the significance of group differences, but they can conceal rather than reduce inequalities.

The cases of Malaysia and Northern Ireland illustrate how a comprehensive effort can improve economic and social HIs. Both employed a combination of direct and indirect approaches, although arguably neither put enough emphasis on integrationist policies.

Finally, one should note some caveats concerning policies to correct HIs:

- These are not the only policies needed. Wherever possible, they should complement other development policies focused on employment expansion, economic growth and poverty reduction; where there are trade-offs, priorities will need to be determined.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach to HIs. It is essential to understand the nature and extent of HIs in a particular context in order to design appropriate and effective policies, requiring the gathering and analysis of data.
- It is important that decision-makers are conscious of and sensitive to the tensions and controversies that might arise following the implementation of policies aimed at redistributing resources among groups.

In summary, policies to correct HIs are desirable to maintain peace and security and to establish a just and inclusive society, but they need to be introduced with care and sensitivity.

—Frances Stewart

References

- Booth, D. and Z. Curran (2005) *Aid Instruments and Exclusion*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- DFID (Department for International Development) (2005) *Fighting Poverty to Build a Safer World: A Strategy for Security and Development*. London: DFID.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2001) *The DAC Guidelines: Helping Prevent Violent Conflict*. Paris: OECD.
- Stewart, F. (ed.) (2008) *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- World Bank (2005) *Toward a Conflict Sensitive Poverty Reduction Strategy: Lessons from a Retrospective Analysis*. Report No. 32587. Washington, DC: World Bank.



Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE)
Oxford Department of International Development (Queen Elizabeth House)
University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK

T +44 1865 281810 **F** +44 1865 281801 **W** www.crise.ox.ac.uk