»» Horizontal inequality as a driver of conflict – what does science say?

One Pager

Armed conflicts used to be waged primarily between states but today they mainly occur within countries. Academic research indicates that inequality between different segments of a population ("horizontal" inequality) is in many cases a key driver of internal conflict. Some of the key findings from conflict research on the relationship between horizontal inequality and armed conflict are summarised below.

The combination of economic and political horizontal inequality is particularly "explosive"

Numerous studies have shown that a combination of different horizontal inequalities significantly increases the likelihood of conflict. Central to this is the linkage between political inequalities (exclusion of often ethnically defined groups from political power) and economic horizontal inequalities (unequal distribution of income and wealth between groups). Less research, however, has been done on social horizontal inequalities (e.g. access to education and health resources). Nevertheless, studies suggest that conflict potential exists here as well, e.g. when governments and dominant ethnic groups implement discriminatory education policies.

Motives, identities and opportunities fuel the outbreak of violent conflict

Causes of conflict are highly complex and context-dependent. However, motives, identities and opportunities are important conditions for mobilising groups. When these conditions occur together, they intensify the potential for conflict.

Collective motives develop when individuals compare the status of their group with that of other groups, perceive the objective situation as unequal and unjust or their own position as threatened, and assign the blame for this to another group or the government.

This is more likely to happen when identities are strong, i.e. strong identification of individual group members with the group (and thus homogeneity within groups).

Opportunities are also important in mobilising groups. Such opportunities are, for example, access to natural resources or sources of finance or shocks such as an increase in the price of basic goods. Strong group leadership also increases the potential for conflict.

Inclusive institutions can help to prevent violent conflicts

Various contextual factors may lessen the impact horizontal inequalities can have on conflict. Inclusive institutions that enable proportional representation and the sharing of political power between central and sub-national state institutions are notable examples of some of these factors. However, research on decentralising power to the local level suggests that conflicts at the national level can be reduced but at the expense of increasing conflicts at the local level.

Development cooperation (DC) that reduces inequalities and strengthens (stabilising) institutions can help to manage and prevent crises.

The type of horizontal inequality, perception, number, homogeneity and identity of groups, as well as contextual factors such as the political-administrative system interact with each other and impact the likelihood of violent conflict. Effective conflict management and prevention needs to generally come "from within". DC can, however, also be effective, especially in the following areas:

– reducing inequalities in infrastructure provision (e.g. access to drinking water, basic education, basic health care, transport connections, energy, etc.)

– increasing the socio-economic potential of disadvantaged groups (e.g. small business support, measures to promote gender equality, long-term job creation, basic social security)

– promoting participatory and inclusive processes and institutions that help to reduce inequalities, remove power imbalances between groups and government levels, and improve relations between segregated groups (e.g. removing legal discrimination, promoting civic and political participation, strengthening democratic rights and checks and balances, promoting transparency and accountability, etc.).

Conclusion

Successfully managing and preventing crises requires considerable conflict sensitivity in line with the "do-no-harm principle". Achieving this in the short term or through individual measures is generally not possible and requires longer-term, well-coordinated measures in the above areas.■