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Horizontal Inequalities:

BARRIERS TO PLURALISM

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HORIZONTAL INEQUALITIES AND PLURALISM

Horizontal inequalities (HIs) are inequalities among groups of people. This is to be contrasted with vertical inequality which is inequality among all the individuals in a society. Relevant group categories include, among others, race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender and age, with the relevance and importance of any category varying across societies. HIs are important above all because of their implications for justice and social stability. Moreover, large HIs in a society are likely to undermine pluralism, because they generate grievances between groups and disaffection in society; however, while reducing horizontal inequalities is a necessary condition for flourishing pluralist societies, by itself it is insufficient.

People can be grouped in many ways, and most people are members of many groups. In assessing a

country's horizontal inequalities, the first question to be considered is which group classification to follow. The appropriate classification is the one which reflects the identity distinctions that are important to people in that country, in terms both of their own perceived identity and how they perceive others. Some group categories may be transient or unimportant—for example, membership in a neighbourhood association. But other categorizations shape the way people see themselves and how they are treated and behave.

Societies differ as to which the salient identities are at any time. Some identities persist over a long period, while others may lessen in significance. The social, political and economic context will vary across time and place. For example, race is clearly an important identity distinction in Brazil, Malaysia and South Africa as well as in the United States, while ethnicity is relevant in the politics of many African countries. Religion—which has been of overriding importance historically in Europe, with religious differences leading to much violence—

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each “change case” examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

today constitutes a critical dividing line in many countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Caste is an extremely important category in South Asia. Class is of recurring significance in many places, varying with the nature of the economic system and how far people identify with their economic position. Age and gender distinctions are universally important.

People have multiple identities and there can be significant overlaps in group membership. In Nigeria, for example, northern ethnic groups are mostly Muslim, and Southern groups, Christian. Such overlapping can reinforce deprivation or privilege and strengthen divisions between groups. “Intersectionality” relates to overlapping group membership (Kimberle, 1989), a concept which is most often used to depict the double discrimination and oppression frequently suffered by females in deprived groups.

The significance of particular categorizations varies according to the rigidity of group boundaries. If people can move freely from one group to another, group inequalities may be inconsequential. Though most group distinctions are socially constructed and many are blurred at the edges—for example, many ethnic distinctions—they are nonetheless felt very strongly in some situations. There is no singular or “correct” group classification in any country, but a number of relevant ones, each important in relation to particular issues. Context, as ever, is important to pluralism.

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHARACTER OF GROUP-BASED INEQUALITIES

Horizontal inequalities are multidimensional. Major dimensions include inequalities in economic, social and political status and in cultural recognition. Each dimension includes a number of elements: economic inequalities cover inequalities in income, assets, employment and so on; social inequalities consist of inequalities in social networks and in access to basic services. The political dimension encompasses representation in central and local government, the bureaucracy and the military as well as political parties. Relevant inequalities in the cultural dimension include recognition, use and respect for a group’s language, religion and practices. The significance of particular inequalities differs across societies. While land inequalities are of major significance in agrarian societies, they matter little in advanced economies where inequalities in financial asset ownership and skills determine life chances.

Causal connections across the various dimensions tend to reinforce any initial inequalities, which are often the outcome of colonial policy favouring particular groups or region. For example, educational inequalities lead to economic inequalities, and there is also a reverse connection, as children’s education is less among low-income households. Inequalities in cultural recognition can result in educational and economic inequalities. For example, if a group’s language is not used in government business the opportunities of group members is reduced. These connections

are one factor accounting for the persistence of HIs over a long period. Many indigenous groups have suffered from persistent deprivation due to cumulative disadvantage in multiple dimensions. The experience of Peruvian indigenous people over centuries is illustrative as is that of Bolivia. Since the Spanish conquest indigenous groups have been deprived in all the four major dimensions of HIs, as successive generations of the non-indigenous have largely monopolized land ownership, technology and education and indigenous communities have been mainly excluded from political power and the modern economy, altogether or incorporated on adverse terms (Thorpe and Paredes, 2010).

THE IMPACTS OF HORIZONTAL INEQUALITIES

An overriding reason for concern with horizontal inequalities is that they are unjust. There is no reason why people should receive unequal rewards or have unequal political power merely because they are black rather than white, women rather than men, or of one ethnicity rather than another. People's sense of wellbeing and self-respect suffers when they are a member of a deprived and discriminated against group (Akerlof and Kranton 2000).

Another critical reason for concern is that HIs can threaten social stability. Research has shown that the risk of violent conflict increases with the extent of horizontal inequality (Stewart, 2008; Cederman et al., 2011). Group-based inequalities provide powerful grievances which leaders can use to mobilize people to political protest—by calling

on cultural markers (such as a common history or language or religion) and by pointing to group exploitation. This mobilization is especially likely to occur in situations of political as well as economic inequality, where the leaders of the more deprived groups are excluded from political power and are therefore motivated to mobilize. Inequalities in treatment of the cultures of different groups can also be highly provocative. Among others, group inequalities have been a contributory factor to conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Chiapas and the Sudan (Langer, 2005; Stewart, 2001).

The Global Centre for Pluralism's change case studies illustrate many of these points. Each case exhibits horizontal inequalities, along various identities and dimensions. For example, in Brazil the major salient division is between black and white populations; in Bolivia, between the indigenous and non-indigenous; and in Malaysia between Chinese, Malay and Indian populations. In these three cases, the origins of the inequalities lie in the colonial experience, but in Germany it is contemporary and recent migration which is responsible for the HIs. In every case, it is helpful to ask what kind of HIs are present, what risks these HIs pose to pluralism, what remedies to HIs have been adopted and with what success, and what we can learn from the case about how to mitigate HIs to promote pluralism.

POLICY RESPONSES: DIRECT AND INDIRECT

As discussed in the Centre's change case series, a number of policy instruments address horizontal inequalities. These include direct approaches—often termed affirmative action—which target deprived groups in a variety of ways. Some affirmative action policies give preferences in employment and education, others political representation. However, such policies require a supporting national consensus if they are not to provoke hostility among more privileged groups. They also need to be comprehensive, addressing a range of deprivations, as unidimensional interventions are unlikely to be effective. In Malaysia inequalities between groups have declined substantially since such policies were introduced comprehensively after riots in the late 1960s. Although the affirmative action policies are increasingly opposed by the richer Chinese group, strong interests supporting their maintenance makes it difficult to end them. This challenge appears to be a general problem with direct policies.

In contrast, indirect or universal policies are designed to benefit poorer groups disproportionately. Comprehensive provision of services, such as education and health, can sharply reduce horizontal inequalities in service access, but the quality of provision must be maintained. Progressive taxation and transfers and public expenditure favouring lower income individuals also reduce group inequalities. Where poorer groups are regionally concentrated, the promotion of the development of poorer regions will reduce horizontal inequality. Anti-discrimination

legislation is another indirect or general policy that was an important contributory factor in reducing horizontal inequalities in Northern Ireland (McCrudden et al., 2004). Universal policies of this kind tend to work more slowly than direct policies and with greater leakage to members of richer groups, but they have the advantage of reducing vertical inequality as well.

Effective reduction of horizontal inequality may require a combination of direct and indirect policies, as exemplified in Malaysia, Northern Ireland and South Africa. The challenge is to achieve political support for such policies. Where the deprived group forms a majority of the population, such as in Malaysia or South Africa, this can be relatively easy. But where the deprived group is a minority—as, for example, in the case of indigenous groups in many Latin American countries and in many advanced countries—it may be more difficult to change policy. Policy change sometimes follows riots or other violent episodes. Affirmative action and anti-discrimination laws in the United States were introduced in response to riots; extended public services were introduced in Northern Ireland following twenty years of violence. Progressive alliances of minorities with others can also bring about policy change, as they did in Bolivia and Brazil.

MONITORING HORIZONTAL INEQUALITIES: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

Systematic measurement and monitoring of horizontal inequality is essential, and yet global datasets do not include relevant measures, apart from gender and age categories. Many national censuses and some household surveys collect data on ethnic, racial and regional data for a variety of socioeconomic horizontal inequalities, but data on political forms of horizontal inequality, which is particularly relevant to social stability, is very rare. Estimates of political inequalities have only been provided by a few individual scholars (e.g. Gurr, 1993; Langer, 2005; Wimmer et al., 2009). Finally, there are very few attempts to collate data on inequalities in cultural recognition. Like political data, it is difficult to collect this information. Collection requires detailed knowledge of a society on a range of complex matters and presenting the data in summary form is also problematic (but see Gurr, 1993). And yet because inequalities of cultural recognition reinforce group boundaries and stimulate mobilization, information of this kind is critically important, especially when cultural events (such as the destruction of a religious building) often provide the trigger for violence.

Despite the clear importance of keeping horizontal inequalities low in the interest of justice and social stability, as well as pluralism, this priority has not formed part of the norms or policies of the most powerful international actors, such as the World Bank. A more overt and direct approach is needed if these severe and persistent inequalities are to be overcome.

HIIs are clearly relevant to pluralism. A successful pluralist society is one in which social stability and cohesion depends on recognition and respect for difference. Such a society is not possible with large HIIs, since large group inequalities are a clear driver of exclusion and frequently involve a lack of respect for other cultures. Reducing HIIs to modest levels is therefore essential for the attainment of a flourishing pluralist society. And yet, while reducing large group inequalities is a necessary condition for pluralism, on its own it is unlikely to be sufficient. Other conditions, such as advancing trust and social interactions among groups and building an inclusionary national identity, are also part of developing pluralism. Sites of cultural exchange, such as education and religion and the media as well as places and spaces, form an important additional element. Actions in these areas are also needed to achieve the inclusion of diverse populations, which is critical to a pluralist society. Such actions are, of course, consistent with, and can contribute to, reducing group inequalities.

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