# Horizontal inequalities and conflict: Education as a separate dimension of horizontal inequalities

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## Abstract

The current paper focuses on the relationship between group-based or so-called horizontal inequalities (HIs) and the emergence of violent conflict. Given the importance of educational HIs as both a direct and indirect driver of (violent) group mobilisation, we argue that it is important to conceptualise educational HIs as a separate dimension of horizontal inequalities.

## Key Words

Horizontal inequalities

Violent conflict

Educational inequalities & drivers of conflict

## Introduction

Throughout history, the linkages between inequalities and the emergence of violent conflicts have been studied intensively by scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds. Around the turn of the century, research focusing on the inequality-conflict nexus was rekindled by the introduction of Frances Stewart's (2002) theory concerning horizontal inequality as a cause of conflict. She hypothesised that countries with severe inequalities between culturally-defined or ethnic groups – i.e. horizontal inequalities (HIs) – were more likely to experience conflict because of grievances caused by those inequalities (see Stewart, 2002; 2008). Since then, a large body of empirical research has substantiated the link between HIs and the emergence of violent conflicts.

At the same time that the HI-theory was introduced, an increasing number of conflict and educational scholars started re-thinking and re-assessing the role of education in fostering more cohesive and peaceful societies. In particular, Bush and Saltarelli (2000) argued that while education could help to bring about more cohesive and peaceful societies, it could also contribute to societal tensions and reinforce conflict dynamics. Moreover, educational inequalities in particular can cause and/or aggravate conflict (e.g. FHI 360 EPDC, 2015). While some educational scholars have approached inequalities in education through the prism of HI-theory (see e.g. King, 2015), many do not employ -and are possibly not familiar with- this concept. Conversely, within the HI-literature, educational inequalities are often only used as an indicator for approximating social HIs (see e.g. Fjelde & Østby, 2014). In the current paper,

we examine the role of education within the HI-theory of conflict and critically review the empirical evidence linking HIs in education to conflict, thereby bringing together two strands of literature that have so far hardly communicated. Given the important direct linkages between educational HIs and conflict, as well as the indirect effect that educational inequalities may have through their impact on political, social, economic and cultural status HIs, we conclude that educational HIs should be conceptualised as a separate dimension of horizontal inequalities, and not just a proxy for social HIs.

In the next section, we define the concept of HIs. Section 2 reviews when and under which circumstances (educational) HIs are theorised to lead to violent conflict. Section 3 then reviews the empirical evidence concerning the relationship between (educational) HIs and violent conflicts. Section 4 concludes.

## Defining horizontal inequalities

The concept of 'horizontal inequality' focuses on inequalities between culturally-defined or ethnic groups. HI differs from so-called 'vertical inequality', 'which lines individuals or households up vertically and measures inequality over the range of individuals' (Stewart, 2002: 3). HI is a multidimensional concept and can pertain to economic HIs (i.e. inequalities in ownership of assets, incomes and employment opportunities), social HIs (i.e. inequalities in health, social and educational outcomes), political HIs (i.e. inequalities in the distribution of political power and positions as well as opportunities and access to state or parastatal institutions and the judiciary), and cultural status HIs (i.e. differences in recognition and status of different groups' cultural norms and practices) (Langer and Stewart, 2014).

Until now, education has not been conceptualised as a separate dimension within the HI-framework. Indeed, in most empirical studies, inequalities in terms of educational access and attainment are usually used as an indicator for social HIs (see e.g. Murshed and Gates, 2005; Østby, 2008). In addition to worsening the prevailing social HIs, educational HIs may however also play an important role in sustaining and/or reinforcing the existing economic, political and cultural status HIs (see e.g. Brown, 2011; FHI 360 EPDC, 2015). In this respect the following points are worth noting. First, an ethnic

group's return to education – which depends on having access to education in the first place – determines to a large extent a group's future economic opportunities and hence socio-economic status in society (Brown, 2011). Second, the education system may also play an important role in sustaining and perpetuating cultural status HIs. In particular, school curricula and textbooks often marginalise minority and/or non-dominant groups by exclusively reflecting the history, culture, values and traditions of the dominant group(s) in society (Al-Haj, 2005). Third, educational HIs may also influence the prevailing HIs in the political-administrative sphere. On the one hand, in situations characterised by severe educational HIs, large proportions of disadvantaged groups may not have the required qualifications or may be facing unfair competition from advantaged groups in society with regard to gaining access to public employment and/or obtaining senior political, administrative and judicial positions. Often, certain educational qualifications are stipulated for such positions. While it is understandable and indeed seemingly appropriate to require certain minimum educational qualifications for specific political-administrative and judicial positions (e.g. an advanced law degree seems to be an appropriate educational prerequisite for a judge), members of disadvantaged groups are less likely to have these qualifications, especially in cases where there are severe educational HIs, and hence are likely to be under-represented in these positions – at least in the absence of some kind of positive discrimination or affirmative action. Further, in some countries, electoral eligibility criteria may bar many people from educationally disadvantaged groups from standing in elections. For instance, in Azerbaijan and Turkey, presidential candidates need to have completed higher education in order to be eligible to participate in the presidential elections. On the other hand, educational HIs may also indirectly affect the prevailing political HIs, in particular perceptions of political HIs. Indeed, in cases where there are sharp educational HIs, which is often associated with less inter-group contact and interaction in the educational sphere, it is likely that group identities become more salient. As a consequence, people particularly from disadvantaged groups may perceive their group's political exclusion and marginalisation to be worse than in cases where group identities are less salient.

Hence, educational HIs can clearly cause severe grievances by themselves. From a conflict or mobilisation perspective, it is important to note that group grievances caused by severe educational HIs will arguably most acutely be felt by the younger generation in society, because they are the ones most directly negatively affected by these inequalities.

## Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict[1]

Stewart (2002; 2008) theoretically linked the presence of HIs to the outbreak of violent conflict via a grievance-based discourse. In particular, she argued that HIs are likely to cause profound frustrations and severe grievances among the relatively disadvantaged ethnic groups, which in turn may encourage these groups to mobilise along ethnic lines in order to redress their situation. In the same vein, Cederman et al. (2011: 481) argued that 'objective political and economic asymmetries can be transformed into grievances through a process of group comparison driven by collective emotions', which in turn could 'trigger violent collective action through a process of group mobilization'.

The HI-theory has clear parallels with Ted Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation, which explains which individuals are most likely to join a rebellion. Later, Gurr (2000) adapted his theory in order to explain which minority groups were most likely to mobilise politically. In particular, he argued that when resentment caused by perceptions of relative deprivation were combined with a sense of cultural group-belonging, minority groups were more likely to mobilise politically, whether violent or not, against the dominant group(s) in society (Gurr, 2000). It is worth noting here that while the 'relative deprivation theory does not explicitly focus on interpersonal or intergroup wealth comparisons' (Cederman et al., 2011: 479), the HI-theory 'explicitly hypothesizes that if there are sharp inequalities between different groups in society, these inequalities may directly lead to violent conflict because the relatively disadvantaged groups will feel aggrieved about their inferior position' (Langer and Demarest: 2017).

In addition, the HI-theory hypothesises and has empirically shown that it might be the relatively advantaged groups – instead of the relatively disadvantaged or deprived groups – who initiate violence in order to maintain or safeguard their relatively advantaged position in society (Stewart, 2008).

Importantly, the emphasis of the HI theory on linking group inequalities via a grievance-based narrative to violent conflict does not preclude the view that violent group mobilisation might be more 'feasible' in certain political, economic, regional and geographical contexts and settings (Langer and Stewart, 2014). Moreover, the HI-theory is largely complementary to the conflict feasibility-hypothesis, which draws attention to the feasibility or opportunity of rebellions rather than insurgents' motivations (see e.g. Collier, 2001; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

Recently, a new analytical framework was introduced, which has clear parallels with the HI-framework. The so-called 4R-framework identifies four spheres of influence: Redistribution, Recognition, Representation and Reconciliation (Novelli et al., 2017; see also in this special issue). With the exception of the fourth R (Reconciliation), the 4R-framework largely overlaps with the HI-framework. In particular, inequalities in the distribution of educational resources and opportunities clearly speak to the sphere of redistribution, while grievances over cultural status inequalities seem to overlap with issues of recognition. Further, representation is about whether or not different groups can participate on an equal footing in educational decision-making processes, which points to issues and dynamics of political HIs (Novelli et al., 2017).

## Evidence supporting the link between horizontal inequalities and conflict

Since Stewart's (2002) seminal article, many studies have empirically analysed the linkages between HIs and the outbreak of violence, both quantitatively (e.g. Besançon, 2005; Murshed and Gates, 2005) and qualitatively (e.g. Thorp et al., 2006)[2]. Research has focused on different types of conflict, including civil war (Gubler and Selway, 2012; Østby, 2008), ethnocommunal conflict (Cederman et al., 2011;

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[1]This section heavily draws on Langer's earlier work concerning the linkages between horizontal inequalities and violent conflict. We particularly draw on Langer (2005), and Langer and Stewart (2014).

[2]For a comprehensive literature review on the relationship between horizontal inequalities and violent conflict, please see: Hillesund et al. (2018).

Fjelde and Østby, 2014) and separatist violence (Brown, 2008; Østby et al., 2011). While many studies have studied particular countries and/or regions, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa (see e.g. Fjelde and Østby, 2014; Langer, 2005) and South-East Asia (see e.g. Østby et al., 2011; Murshed and Gates, 2005), other studies have had a global focus (e.g. Cederman et al., 2011; Cederman et al., 2015). These empirical studies show that both advanced and backward ethnic groups are more likely to experience conflict (Cederman et al., 2011); that internal conflict is most intense in the more disadvantaged districts or regions (Murshed and Gates, 2005); and, that particularly regions where the largest ethnic group is severely disadvantaged compared to other groups are more prone to communal conflict (Fjelde and Østby, 2014). It has further been established that countries where the same ethnic groups are politically excluded as well as socio-economically disadvantaged are more at risk of having violent conflict, arguably because in these situations both the political 'elites' and 'masses' of the relatively deprived groups have strong incentives to mobilise along ethnic lines (Langer, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, in the HI-literature, disparities in access to education and educational attainment levels are often used as a proxy for social HIs[3]. Interestingly, these educational inequalities are positively related to the outbreak of civil conflict (Østby, 2008; see also Besançon, 2005). The likelihood of violent conflict further seems to increase when absolute levels of education are lower (Østby et al., 2009). And, conflict intensity also appears to go up as the gap in schooling between a district and the capital widens (Murshed and Gates, 2005). Yet, to our knowledge, the research by FHI 360 Education Policy and Data Center (2015) is the only study to have explicitly and systematically examined the causal link between HIs in education and violent conflict, using a dataset spanning five decades and almost 100 countries. The study finds that countries where group differences in educational attainment are high are substantially more likely to experience violent conflict – particularly since the 2000s (FHI 360 EPDC, 2015). These findings suggest that over time exclusion from education has become more consequential.

Thus, there is ample evidence to support the hypothesised relationship between HIs and violent conflict. Empirical support for the effect of HIs in education on violent conflict also seems to be growing (e.g. FHI 360 EPDC; Østby, 2008). Yet, so far, research examining the latter issue has remained largely limited to assessing the impact of unequal access to education. Disparities in access to education and/or attainment levels are however just one part of the puzzle. In an effort to meet the Millennium Development Goals, global primary school enrolment levels have overall gone up, suggesting a reduction in inequalities in access to education. Yet, a reduction in overall educational inequalities might well be accompanied by a worsening of group-based inequalities concerning the quality of education. More generally, we argue that applying a HI-perspective to the educational sphere requires going beyond analysing and assessing disparities in access to education and educational attainment levels. While these indicators are extremely important, it is also important to analyse, among other things, whether different groups are included in educational decision-making processes, to what extent different groups are represented among the teachers corps, how different groups are represented in textbooks, to what extent vernacular languages are being recognised as official languages of instruction, and to what extent different groups are able to translate their education into income (i.e. returns to education) and social status in society.

## Conclusion: Education as a separate dimension of HIs

The HI-theory of conflict offers an extremely useful framework for analysing conflicts and for understanding when and under which circumstances conflicts and violent group mobilisation are most likely to occur. Since the early 2000s, the theory has been widely supported by empirical evidence linking the presence of horizontal inequalities to violent conflict onsets. Educational HIs have also been increasingly linked to the emergence of violent conflict. Indeed, we have argued that education and, in particular, educational HIs may contribute to

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[3]Given that educational HIs are often highly correlated with the level of income, and the level of income in turn is known to be an important explanator for the emergence of violent conflicts, it is crucial to control for countries' levels of income in any statistical analysis aimed at establishing a relationship between educational HIs and the risk of violent conflict. It is important to note that all the quantitative studies referenced in this paragraph did indeed controlled for different countries' levels of income.

conflict in at least four ways: (1) Educational HIs may engender severe grievances among disadvantaged groups which in turn could fuel (violent) group mobilisation; 2) Educational HIs may create, maintain or worsen existing socio-economic divisions and inequalities between groups; (3) Educational HIs may both directly and indirectly worsen disadvantaged groups' access to political-administrative power and position as well as their perceptions of the prevailing objective political HIs; and (4) Education may also contribute to conflict by failing to accommodate cultural diversity (Brown, 2011; see also King, 2015). On the basis of our analysis, we draw the following two conclusions. First, given the importance of educational HIs as both a direct and indirect driver of (violent) group mobilisation, we conclude that it is important to recognise educational HIs as a separate dimension of horizontal inequalities. Thus, rather than conceptualising educational HIs as a sub-dimension of social HIs, we argue for separating it from other aspects of social inequalities, and putting it next to the economic, political and cultural status dimensions. Second, while it is important to empirically analyse and investigate how disparities in access to education and educational attainment levels are associated with the onsets of different types of conflicts, it is crucial, we argue, to broaden and deepen this analysis by also investigating and studying how far different groups are involved, represented and included in educational institutions, decision-making processes and teaching materials. We conclude that there is clear potential here for a cross-fertilisation between the HI-framework and the field of education, peace and conflict.

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