

Horizontal Inequality and Humiliation: Public policy for disaffection or cohesion?

A think-piece by Gay Rosenblum-Kumar
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“The best development is that which allows the greatest improvement in people’s quality of life.”
Manfred Max-Neef, 1991.

One doesn’t have to be well-schooled or innately brilliant to figure out when de facto, if not de jure, the rules of the game are stacked against certain groups – the poor, the vulnerable, the minorities, people of a certain gender, religion, or skin color. The policies of governments often intentionally or unintentionally permit and encourage unequal access to opportunities of all kinds, be it development aid, education, loans, land, representation, or other public good. This creates or at least contributes to a condition of ‘horizontal inequality’, which Frances Stewart of Oxford University, has introduced to the lexicon of development and peace work. ‘Horizontal inequality’ (HI) refers to inequality among well-defined different societal groups – cultural or other – where mobility among those groups is, for a number of reasons, limited. When it comes to societies addressing and resolving their differences, violent conflict is more likely to occur in situations of high horizontal inequality where disparities are large, group-based, arbitrary and predetermined.

Before the occurrence of violent conflict, such inequality is likely to lead to three types of consequences:

- a. On the positive side, HI might cause the affected groups to organize and mobilize better to undertake social and political action; a resilient political system could translate such action into progressive policy gains;
- b. On the negative side, systematically excluded groups could translate their frustration into organized violence, thus setting off a cycle of repressive response and more violence, leading to all-out collapse of state and society and prolonged violent conflict;
- c. A third outcome could involve the affected groups turning inwards instead of taking action, and facing increasing social decay, malaise and disintegration as their frustration and anger turns against members of their own communities or apathy and alienation toward mainstream society. Concurrently, the rest of society develops negative images toward affected groups and blockages grow between them, resulting in further polarization and exclusion, and a pervasive cultural or societal trauma.

Similarly, in the aftermath of violent conflict—if the reconstituted national, regional or transitional authorities continue to practice or are not able to overcome the legacy of HI—the following outcomes might result:

- a. Large sections of the post-war state’s population might continue to harbor grievances that could simmer again into violent conflict at a later stage, thus making peace unsustainable;
- b. As in a pre-violent conflict situation, significant sections of the country’s population might remain in a state of malaise and disintegration, thus acting as a drag on its recovery and growth, and fuelling frustration that could re-ignite violent conflict.

Given these possible outcomes, one might ask, what can governments do to undue the residual effects of ill-conceived public policies and what can governments do to channel grievance toward constructive political or social action rather than violent expression?

Some parts of an answer can be found in the nature of governance and leadership within a society or country. Governance policies that knowingly or unknowingly cause or maintain high 'horizontal inequality' produce personal or group humiliation by their very nature, and their intent and their result are often expressed with violence (of the spirit if not the physical kind). Policies that perpetuate horizontal inequality are usually accompanied by a systematic debasement of people, whether officially sanctioned or not. Feelings of humiliation, exclusion and discrimination ultimately (and naturally) create grievances that manifest in anger and aggressive pursuit of rectification. This in turn serves leaders (perhaps legitimate and well-meaning, but more often self-serving), who catalyze political mobilization around this frustration and humiliation and can manipulate excluded groups into destructive expressions of that grievance. Understanding the psychological dimensions brought about by horizontal inequality, can help design better policies with a range of necessary complementary social and political interventions. Without addressing the psychological dimension, societies cannot heal or undue the damage of horizontal inequality even with somewhat adequate public policies because they will miss and not address the underlying dynamics that have led to the destructive relationships and behavior.

If one accepts that there is a link between how government policy translates into perceived humiliation due to inequality and exclusion, then perhaps public policy should be more concerned about measuring its effect on 'horizontal inequality.' Policies could be conscientiously tailored to lessen horizontal inequality as a way of lessening humiliation and grievance that can spark violence. Perhaps there are a set of principles or guidance through which public policies that address horizontal inequality could be reconfigured to be more holistically HI-sensitive, and therefore less humiliation-producing, more directed toward meeting all people's needs and having the greatest impact on improving overall quality of life (taking into account political and social factors as well as economic factors).

One could propose that such public policies be conflict-sensitive, but that would not actually be enough. Conflict-sensitivity involves analyzing the impact of an action, policy or programme (or its absence) and re-engineering it so that it does not exacerbate tensions, but instead mitigates or contributes to resolving them. But, it is necessary to look deeper into such conflict-sensitivity in order to ensure that public policy interventions are not merely intended to placate a portion of the populace, reduce animosity between groups or alleviate their frustration with the status quo. Rather, humiliation-sensitive and HI-sensitive public policies have to lead to a reordering of the status quo and real structural change in the social order such that the policy or action brings about real equality and inclusion in decision-making, and equal access to opportunities and resources. How to do this, given the aims and intentions of governments, and the pressures on them as well, is complex.

It is important to emphasize that while HI and humiliation tend to be linked, the two are not the same phenomena, and one could find one phenomenon without the other. The good news is that sensitive public policies, coupled with imaginative leadership and sustain efforts to transform inter-group relations and perceptions, can address both. Public policies can be designed to specifically address both phenomena, and to also be sensitive to the fact they do not inadvertently promote these phenomena. This short think piece will reflect on three sets of policies that could help leaders and societies in both pre-and-post-conflict situations address both HI as well as perceptions of systematic humiliation:

- (1) With regard to tangible government action on concrete issues that aim to **re-dress recognized inequalities** or rectify conditions of access to opportunities, i.e. admission to jobs, education, housing, etc. the importance of and how to bring in the conflict-sensitive/humiliation-sensitive aspects that involve the intangibles issues of attitudinal change and psychological reconciliation
- (2) Key elements in the public policy equation in **pre-violent conflict situations versus post-violent conflict** with a view to whether there are different priorities among the two and how to attain maximum healing and undue varying types and degrees damage.
- (3) In developing countries, how to engage in dialogue processes or other ‘ground up’ **internally driven consultative processes** as a means to self-generate remedies or create long term capacity to rectify HI’s and promote social cohesion

Redressing recognized inequalities

In a promising situation, a government would publicly acknowledge that there are social disparities and inequalities, accept some culpability for them and assume some responsibility for rectifying. Government would be expected to make a good faith effort to address its multiple manifestations in the political setting, economic realm, and psycho-social dimensions. But in reality, when designing policies, government authorities have many considerations including the dynamics of any decision on its hold of power, its popular standing, and the influence of major interest groups.

For instance, targeted affirmative action initiatives could rectify particular areas of inequality or unequal access such as open admissions, school bussing, targeted job creation, land reform, education policy, income generation and private sector employment schemes, and more. However, such technically competent initiatives may have unintended negative consequences of not complemented by consciously targeted social and political ‘affirmative action’ programmes to counteract and rectify deep-seated feelings of individual and group humiliation, hostility and disaffection. Without these, the primarily economically driven policies will not work. The social negligence or disinterest on the part of the State, as it is reflected in official and unofficial policies, (i.e. in the ‘face’ of the State in leadership, in media, in the promotion of national culture and language, etc. will continue to perpetuate the conviction of the out-groups that the rules of the game have not been sincerely addressed, are still stacked against them and they won’t buy-in to the equalizing effort or have the confidence or wherewithal to grasp it and make it work for them.

Therefore, in addition to public policies which promote affirmative action as a way to lessen HI and humiliation, governments need to publicly acknowledge the status quo, recognize the implications of the uneven playing field, and make sincere, public attempts rectify. Examples of this may be targeting vulnerable groups or minorities for poverty reduction programmes or income-generation initiatives but having these complemented by:

1. media campaigns to transform images to the State and for the state to transform images of marginalized groups;
2. revamping educational curriculum to create inclusive national histories that all citizens can relate to and introduce new subjects like multicultural studies, conflict resolution skills, and tolerance and coexistence programmes;
3. constructive dialogue processes between political or government leaderships and marginalized groups directed to concrete problem solving;

4. public service reform for affirmative action in recruitment, in service delivery, and in public positions with commensurate transparency of process and outcome;
5. private sector awareness raising in hiring, training and service orientation;
6. rectifying social policies proactively with new language policies, culture and language training, integration of schools, community projects, development programmes, etc.;
7. decentralization and commensurate development of competent locally-chosen government authorities with real devolution over money and decision-making;
8. civic campaigns, voter education developed not as one-off events around elections, but with long-term objectives of instilling civic responsibility and connection
9. in post-conflict situations, justice and reconciliation processes that reach local level and have involvement across all class lines, regions, religious, tribal and other societal divisions.

Pre-conflict vs. post-conflict

Pre-violent conflict environments present a different situation than post-conflict situations, and can be more receptive to public policy interventions, before egregious damage is done by violence, civil war, or state failure. However, experience sadly shows that it is more often in post-conflict situations where governments are so weak as to admit or need external assistance to re-work their policy frameworks toward more equitable goals and outcomes.

Depending upon the degree to which anger and frustration about ‘horizontal inequality’ has crystallized feelings of anger, frustration and inter-group mistrust, different interventions make have different impacts. A recent UN paper for an Expert Group Meeting on ‘Peace Dialogue in the Social Integration Process’ (UNDESA, Division for Social Policy, 21-23 November 2005) postulates that different stages of societal cohesion or lack of cohesion need different types of intervention strategies. To summarize (in mercilessly few words) societal fragmentation must first be addressed by focusing on individual or small-group reconciliation processes. Manifestations of exclusion in society require focusing on undoing HI’s through concentrated attention to justice issues, i.e. legal redress, rule of law, strengthening governance institutions. And polarization, or social groups mobilized against each other, requires greater focus on joint national and leadership joint dialogue and consultative processes to lessen mistrust, generate a shared national vision, and develop skills to negotiate how to manifest a shared future. These are not exclusive categories and there is a great deal of overlap where many and multiple interventions are needed in for every situation. However, it could be useful to look at examples of where public policy interventions to reduce HI been successful in lessening perceptions of humiliation and lowering the incidence of violent conflict and whether there is more latitude for using public policy as an instrument for sensitive social change in less politically sensitive situations (before things get too tense) or in already wounded societies (post-war State collapse) when there is some recognition of failure of past ways and a need to change.

Where to start? The ‘how’ is as important as the ‘what’

Principles of good development form the basic ingredients and foundation of conflict-sensitive and humiliation-sensitive public policy development – ownership and participation.

It is not sufficient to create and deliver a product, programme or prospect for change to any group unilaterally. Basic psychology shows that it is rarely productive for a group to feel ‘given to’ as if a powerless entity, even if they have a sense of entitlement due to past injustice. Instead, those who hold power can better accomplish their intention by transparently admitting any wrongdoing

(by omission or commission) and creating conditions for a joint process through which all stakeholders can analyze the situation, air perspectives and create together to a joint strategy for rectification.

Similarly it is not sufficient to work solely with the affected groups, which singles them out either as victims or as special beneficiaries. Rather, deep reconciliation and reform needs to start with attitudinal change that embraces all parts of society, gradually creating new norms and behaviors. Governments and their public administrations have the power to catalyze attitudinal change through their words (articulated policy positions) and follow it by concrete actions (policy implementation). It would be useful to find and showcase examples of successful public policy efforts and examine why and how they succeeded and their impact on lessening horizontal inequality and humiliation and how it led to more harmonious social relations. Examples of the instituting of multicultural policies could provide good illustrations. Several post-conflict reconciliation processes could look at other aspects, i.e. Burundi, Rwanda, South Africa, Sierra Leone. Other possible examples: how the South African government created, implemented and followed up on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; how the Romanian government improved relations with its Hungarian minority, changed laws and policies of languages spoken in schools, educational policies, newspapers; how Macedonia attempted school integration and what worked/didn't work.

Key to this is a long-term perspective to focus on a process-centric approach that builds generic capacities. If issues are too sensitive to address directly, it can sometimes be more productive to focus not so much on specific issues of contention, but rather on assisting a cross-section of national stakeholders - through the introduction of new skills, attitudes, aptitudes and processes - to dialogue and develop their own means to identify relevant issues and address them. This approach does not target specific disputes, but rather proactively seeks to strengthen existing mechanisms within communities for constructive problem-solving, collaborative negotiation, dialogue and dispute resolution over a range of issues. The hoped-for result is the development a sustainable, indigenous capacity (through stronger governance institutions like ombudsman, human rights institution, mediation center, office for the protection of minorities, more effective Parliamentary action and oversight, and NGO networks and advocacy groups, etc.) for conducting joint analysis of any contentious issues that arise and collaborative problem-solving processes that can engage in multi-stakeholder dialogue, generate specific policy responses, and influence government policy.

In sum, public policy will not be successful in promoting development or achieving other policy aims, unless it takes into account and addresses the full range of factors that fuel societal tensions and lead to polarization, alienation and exclusion, and ultimately violence of the mind and society. To be effective public policy interventions must take into consideration and grapple with the emotional and psychological impacts of their consequences, as well as the tangible economic and social ones. Public policy formulation needs to recognize that understanding HI-sensitive policies and implementing them can help rectify some of the hurt dignity, humiliation and lack of recognition that blocks social progress of affected groups and all in society. To achieve this, we need a transformed approach from that practiced by most government leaders. We need a moratorium on humiliating policies, we need governments to assess whether their policies are humiliation-sensitive and evaluate as to whether these policies are entrenching or undoing Horizontal Inequality. We need a politics with policies that create a polity of reconciliation--consciously rectifying all levels of economic, political, social and psychological 'horizontal inequality'.