Ethnic Power Relations and Conflict

Background

Although political violence appears to be on the wane, numerous civil wars and uprisings continue to claim thousands of casualties, result in huge refugee flows, and cause economic distress. In most cases the state is either under attack or so fragile that it can hardly control its territory. While recent scholarship has demonstrated that economic and political inequality between ethnic groups is a major contributing factor to political instability and conflict in both of these situations, the exact mechanisms behind this relationship have so far not been sufficiently probed. Mobilization processes of ethnic groups and states' accommodating strategies are likely to be of central importance in this relationship.

Aim

In cooperation with researchers in five different developing countries – in regions that are themselves affected by such conflicts –, this project examines the link between group-level inequality and ethnic conflict in fragile states. We aim to provide scientific knowledge to political actors to reduce exclusion and discrimination of ethnic groups and to mitigate its adverse consequences, especially with respect to conflict and political instability, thereby improving governance in these countries and their surrounding regions. Concretely, the project improves existing measures of inequality, while paying closer attention to both subjectively perceived collective grievances and mobilization processes involving political organizations that represent ethnic groups. A key characteristic of this project is the refinement of global quantitative data with the local expertise of our partners.

Relevance

A more detailed understanding of the formation of collective grievances and the political mobilization of ethnic groups, as well as possible accommodating strategies by the state, can serve as a basis to produce policy recommendations for structurally weak multiethnic countries in order to reduce the risk of violent ethnic conflict and improve political stability. The transfer of scientific knowledge to political decision makers as well as to society at large in the regions of interest is an important and integral part of the project.

Highlights and most important results

One of the main findings of our R4D project so far is that the consequences of ethno-political mobilization depend greatly on the ethnic cleavage type in a country. In societies with hierarchical group relations, as, for example, in Latin America, ethnic movements are likely to promote the political empowerment of historically subordinated groups. This finding qualifies commonly held notions (both in academic and journalistic works) about the precarious consequences of ethnic mobilization for horizontal equality and peace.

A second finding refers to the role of natural resources in fueling sentiments of ethnic inequality. In contrast to conventional accounts of the resource-conflict link, interaction with our partners has produced preliminary evidence that state-led extraction of mineral resources tends to trigger ethnic grievances along the lines postulated by our project. Yet, in addition, we have also found that the resource curse may actually decrease the risk of governmental conflict.

Finally, information on politically relevant groups and their access to executive power has been extended and validated with contributions from each hub, proving the relevance of such data. Inputs from the hubs allowed to identify two gaps, namely political inequality at the subnational level and the discrepancy between perceived and objective inequalities both in political and economic terms.

Funding

Grantees, coordinator and partnerships

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Partnerships
- Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway
- Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden
- Department of Politics, University of Essex, Great Britain
- Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland
- University of Konstanz, Germany

Geographic scope
- Egypt
- Côte d'Ivoire
- Guatemala
- India
- Zambia

Duration
Length of the project: 6 years
Start of project: January 2014

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