

8. 'Leaving no one behind': the challenge of intersecting inequalities

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This contribution deals with the durable forms of inequality which result when economic deprivation intersects with identity-based discrimination and spatial disadvantage. Groups located at these intersections tend to be worse off than the rest of the poor in their societies, in both the multiple dimensions of poverty and their voice and influence in the political process. Conventional approaches to poverty reduction have left these inequalities largely intact. The author suggests a number of basic principles that could lead to more transformative forms of public action.

Conceptualizing intersecting inequalities

A key principle of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is 'to leave no one behind': no goal is considered to be met unless it is met for everyone. More specifically, SDG 10 commits the international community to the reduction of inequality within and between countries, and to the promotion of 'the social, economic and political inclusion of all'. These commitments are unlikely to be realized without policies that ensure that the socially excluded among the poor, those who are hardest to reach, are part of the transformations aimed at by the SDGs. The focus on intersecting inequalities in this article seeks to illuminate the nature of this challenge.¹

Inequality has been conceptualized in a number of ways. The dominant approach in economics is based on the ranking of individuals (or individual households) by income or wealth to capture what have been described as 'vertical inequalities'.

A second approach revolves around the analysis of social discrimination. The focus here is on identity-based discrimination operating at group level rather than against individuals. These 'horizontal' inequalities cut across the distribution of income and wealth, and are the product of social hierarchies which define certain groups as inferior to others through the devaluation of their socially ascribed identities.

While the identities in question take different forms in different societies, the most enduring forms of group-based disadvantage are associated with identities ascribed from birth such as race, caste and ethnicity.

Gender inequalities cut across all other forms of inequality, so that within most socio-economic groups, women and girls are positioned as subordinate to men. Unlike many socially subordinate groups, women and girls are distributed fairly evenly across different economic classes, so gender on its own does not constitute a marker of deprivation. However, the overlap between gender and other forms of inequality generally positions women and girls from poor and socially marginalized groups as the most disadvantaged in their society.

Finally there are spatial inequalities, which tend to affect poor and socially marginalized groups to a disproportionate extent. In rural areas, they may relate to the remoteness of a location or the nature of the terrain, which makes it physically difficult for its inhabitants to participate in broader socio-economic processes. In urban areas, they are likely to be associated with slum neighbourhoods which are poorly served by infrastructure and social services, and are characterized by high levels of violence, criminality and drug dependence.

These vertical, horizontal and spatial conceptualizations describe the different ways in which inequalities are manifested in society.

Where they overlap with each other, they give rise to an intersecting, rather than an additive, model of inequality, where each fuses with, and exacerbates, the effects of the other. This helps to explain why certain groups in society are systematically left behind, or left out of any progress experienced by the wider society. A concern with intersecting inequalities encourages us to pay attention to those whose economic disadvantages are intensified by the discriminations they face on the basis of their identity, as well as by their greater concentration in the least favourable locations in their society.

Thus we find that even when poverty is in decline, the persistence of intersecting inequalities means that it declines more slowly in some groups than in others. In India, for instance, it fell by 40 per cent between 1983 and 2004/05 for the overall population but by just 31 per cent for indigenous groups and 35 per cent for Dalit castes, leading to a widening of economic inequality over time. In Nepal, the overall decline in poverty between 1995 and 2003 varied from 46 per cent for the Brahmin/Chhetri castes to 21 per cent among Dalits and just 10 per cent among indigenous groups living in the hills. In South Africa, while per capita income has risen for all groups between 1917 and 2008, it increased for whites from an average of ZAR13,069 (at constant 2000 values) to ZAR75,297, while average incomes of Black Africans rose from 9 per cent of white income to just 13 per cent. In Nigeria, the northern, predominantly Hausa-Fulani states reported poverty levels of over 70 per cent, while the southern, predominantly Yoruba states reported levels of 30 per cent or less.

In Latin America, moderate and extreme forms of poverty have decreased since the 1990s, but both have remained considerably higher for ethnic and racial minorities in all countries for which disaggregated data are available. Thus, white people made up 88 per cent of the richest 1 per cent of the population of Brazil in 2005 and just 27 per cent of the poorest 10 per cent, while Afro-descendants made up 12 per cent of the richest 1 per cent and 74 per cent of the poorest 10 per cent.

Gender, as noted earlier, intensifies the disadvantages associated with income inequality and social identity. So for instance, the incidence of workers earning 'poverty wages' in Bolivia rose from 50 per cent among non-indigenous men to 55 per cent of non-indigenous women to 80 per cent of indigenous men and 86 per cent of indigenous women.

In Brazil, the incidence of poverty wages rose from 35 per cent of white men to 43 per cent of white women to 60 per cent of Afro-Brazilian men and 67 per cent of Afro-Brazilian women. Similar patterns were reported for Peru and Guatemala, for which comparable data were available (Duryea and Genoni, 2004). Poverty data for 1993, 2000 and 2008 in South Africa show that the incidence and share of poverty were higher for Black Africans as a group than for other groups in the population, and that among Africans, both the incidence and share of poverty were consistently higher for women than for men.

Groups at the intersection of inequalities are also likely to be disadvantaged in relation to other measures of deprivation. Their education levels are lower, infant and child mortality rates higher, and they are less well served in the distribution of social services, reflecting the difficulties of the terrains in which they are located as well as the discriminations built into policy decisions and market provision.

When intersecting inequalities are reproduced in the exercise of political power and access to public institutions, they undermine the confidence of socially disadvantaged groups in the government's ability to rule fairly. Excluded groups are often minorities, and there is little incentive for political parties to take their interests into account.

The conflicts, group violence, riots and civil wars that feature in the literature on horizontal inequalities can be seen as the 'noisy' consequences of social exclusion, but there are other more 'silent' and ongoing consequences. Denied a voice in the affairs of their communities, and overlooked in the provision of basic services and social protection, these groups are often characterized by high rates of crime, alcoholism and other forms of addiction, violence, depression and alienation. Such behaviour undermines the democratic process and serves to reproduce divided and fragmented societies over time.

Responsive states and active citizens

The intersecting nature of the inequalities under discussion makes it clear that they have to be tackled on a number of different fronts – political, economic, spatial and cultural. While different institutions in society can all play a role, the role of the state is central because it is the only institution with the mandate to respond to the claims of all citizens. At the same time, not all states are equally or always responsive to these claims.

Citizens have an indispensable part to play in exercising pressure to hold their government accountable. Intersecting inequalities are most likely to be addressed when responsive states act in tandem with active citizens.

Macroeconomic policies could create an enabling economic environment for tackling inequalities at sectoral and local levels. Broad-based, employment-centred patterns of growth are a critical precondition, but have to be accompanied by redistributive measures if they are to address the hardest-to-reach sections of the poor. Similarly, measures to decentralize and democratize local government must be accompanied by special measures which seek to increase the political participation of excluded groups. Public policies could also be made more inclusive through the targeting of social services to underserved areas or underserved groups. Most governments committed to overcoming historically entrenched patterns of inequality have made use of affirmative action in education, politics, employment and development programmes to help kick-start a process of change.

Such policies rarely occur without active mobilization of marginalized groups. They are most in evidence where such mobilizations have helped to put in power regimes which are representative of their needs and interests. Mobilization and collective action have also been important at the level of micro-politics, acting as a powerful countervailing force against the arbitrary use of power on an everyday basis.

Conclusion

Socially diverse societies do not have to be socially divided societies. But left to themselves, group-based differences can harden into inequality, exclusion and conflict in the face of systematic discrimination. At the same time, there are enough examples of progress around the world to suggest that change is possible.

These efforts may need to be framed in the language of rights. The rights discourse has proved to be a powerful mobilizing force in bringing marginalized groups together in their search for justice. In contexts where intersecting inequalities run deep, and are reinforced on an everyday basis by culture, religion and long-standing traditions, the language of rights may be the only one available to excluded groups to articulate their demand for equality.

While building inclusive forms of citizenship requires the transformation of the relationship between state and citizens, it also requires a transformation of relations between citizens themselves. Along with changing laws and policies, efforts to tackle exclusion must also challenge taken-for-granted norms and practices that make up the mindset of a society.

It is also essential to balance equality and difference. Universalist approaches are essential to building a sense of social solidarity and citizenship, particularly critical for excluded groups. Universal coverage also gives privileged groups more of a stake in policy outcomes, a greater willingness to contribute to them, and hence the possibility of cross-subsidizing marginalized groups. At the same time, 'universality' should not be taken to imply 'uniformity'. There are strong grounds for plurality and diversity within universal frameworks of provision.

It is important to go beyond ameliorative approaches that address the symptoms of the problem to multi-pronged transformative approaches that address its root causes. Transformation is more likely to be achieved by using group-based approaches to tackle group-based problems. This calls for approaches that can help challenge the internalization of inferiority, to create a shared understanding of oppression and the solidarity necessary to challenge existing systems of power.

Finally, we need to work towards a new social contract that recognizes the increasingly interconnected nature of the world we live in. The problems of poverty and social exclusion are not confined to the individual, and are not purely national in their scope. They are also the product of structural inequalities at the global level. The new focus on sustainability in the SDG agenda highlights the stake that all countries have in the future of the planet. An explicit concern with inequality in all its forms, both within and between countries, can unify countries around a shared agenda at global, national and subnational levels. A concern with sustainability and social justice would remind us of the common challenges we face and provide the basis for a more genuine collaboration across national boundaries.

Note

1. The empirical findings cited in this paper can be found in Kabeer (2010), Paz Arauco et al. (2014), Kabeer (2014) and Duryea and Genoni (2004).

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