Chapter 20
Inequality as Driver of Conflict:
Insights and Reflections From the Horn of Africa

Osman Mohammed Babikir
IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development (ICPALD), Kenya

ABSTRACT

The Horn of Africa is a region that faces a number of challenges including fatal conflicts. The root causes of these conflicts are many, inter-related, and complex in nature. The purpose of this chapter is to review and give evidence to inequality as a driver of conflict in the region. Among its findings, the chapter argues that one of the pressing problems in the region is the prevalence of several categories of conflicts that are linked to various forms of inequalities, as well as other root causes that fuel the persistence and continuity of most of them. The reviewed evidence from the two case studies (Kenya and Sudan) show that there is unequal access and distribution of resources such as land, presence of group formation, their mobilization, and the presence of inequalities among them, which might support the hypothesis of inequality-conflict nexus.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the documented progress on poverty reduction around the globe, yet social and economic inequalities persist and in some cases at an alarming rate. The United Nations report on the World Social Situation (2016) indicated that this documented progress has been uneven. The gap between rich and poor is still wide, and in addition to the rising trends of unemployment, inequality persists in all spheres, social, economic, political, cultural and environmental.

The topic of inequality usually viewed as an unwelcomed and politically sensitive issue, and it received little attention in international fora for decades. However, in the recent years research and reports from many United Nations Agencies and research institutions around the globe indicate that it is not possible to avoid any more the issue of inequality in research and policy debates. In Africa for instance debate around this issue has also started by some circles of research and organizations that advocate for equity and social inclusion.

The implications of rising inequality for social and economic development are many. There is growing evidence and recognition of its effects on economic growth, poverty reduction, social and economic stability and socially sustainable development (UNDP report, 2013). In its various forms, inequality is a major source of poverty, injustice, and sometimes of conflict (Stewart, 2013). The links between inequality and violent conflict is one of the oldest concerns of political economy (Crammer, 2005). The importance of inequalities as a cause of violent conflict has long been recognized from Aristotle to the United Nation Charter (Brinkman et al, 2013). It is almost universal to assume that an inequitable distribution of resources and wealth will provoke violent rebellion (Crammer,2005).

Recent estimates showed that middle income countries appear the most unequal. Gini index trends showed that Eastern Europe, Former Soviet Union and Asia had the largest increases between 1990 and 2008. Latin America remains the region with the highest level of income inequality. Sub-Saharan Africa remains highly unequal, but appeared to have reduced its Gini Index by almost 5 points on average since 1990 (Ortiz and Cummins, 2011).

In his recent book, ''The Price of Inequality", Stiglitz (2012) asserted that there is mounting concern about the increase in inequality and about lack of opportunity and how both are changing economies, democratic politics and societies. He mentioned three historical uprisings in 1848, 1968 and recently in 2011, when people in the Middle East, starting from Tunisia, rose up to say that something is wrong and asked for change. This was due to failures and unfairness of economic and political systems. According to him, America has the highest level of inequality and the lowest levels of equality of opportunity.

Violent conflicts of one type or another have afflicted Africa and exacted a heavy toll on the continent's societies, polities and economies, robbing them of their developmental potential and democratic possibilities (Tiyambe,2008). For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa during the period 1960 – 1990, there have been about 80 violent changes of governments, and many of these countries also experienced different types of civil strife, conflicts and wars. At the beginning of the new millennium, there were 18 countries facing armed rebellion, 11 facing severe political crises, and 19 enjoying more or less various states of stable political conditions (Adedeji, 1999).

The Horn of Africa is a region heavily impacted by wars and conflicts. In the post-colonial era, the region has experienced several devastating inter-state wars, including the Ethiopian-Somali wars (1964, 1977-78), the Kenyan Somali wars (1963), the Ugandan-Tanzanian war (1978-1979) the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war (1998-2000) and the recent insurgencies in Somalia. It has also witnessed destructive cross border communal conflicts often triggered by environmental degradation and facilitated by porous borders, which are not always respected or even recognized by pastoral communities, especially those who belong to ethnic group splits across national boundaries (Mengisteab, 2013).

This chapter presents some empirical explorations based on secondary sources of information and case studies from the Horn of Africa to shed some light on the relationship between conflict and inequalities. It emphasized the ideas that support the direct and indirect impacts of poverty, inequality and poor and unequal distribution of resources on the current conflictual situation in some countries in the region. It is actually a review of the relationship of conflicts with the heavily embedded inequalities in the region. While examining the relationship between existing inequalities and conflicts, it however tries to link that to the existing governance systems in the region that are based on exclusion, grievances and dictatorship. Section two gives the theoretical and conceptual background about inequality and conflict and their linkages. Section three reviews the existing evidence and analyze the conflict-inequality nexus with regard to Horn of Africa region. Finally, section four concludes by providing conclusion and recommendations.

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