



# 1 Addressing Social Grievances

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*“Nonviolence does not always work – but violence never does.”*

Madge Micheels-Cyrus

Many current violent conflicts are rooted in group-based grievances arising from inequality, exclusion, lack of opportunities to satisfy basic needs (food, healthcare, education), poor governance or feelings of injustice. When an aggrieved group is mobilised and assigns blame to others (to an ethnic or religious group or to an authority or state) for its perceived political, economic or social problems, those grievances can cross the tipping point into social upheaval and violence. However, there are numerous non-violent ways for those in-

**SOCIAL GRIEVANCE** | the perception of a socially defined group that it suffers from systematic inequality, exclusion, lack of opportunity to satisfy basic needs, and other disadvantage. Social grievance is often at the root of conflict. When groups mobilise, they may take violent or non-violent action to address social grievance. Conflict transformation and peacebuilding support groups and mobilisers in choosing non-violent means while taking grievances seriously.

**NON-VIOLENCE** | a philosophy and practice that holds the use of force to be morally and politically illegitimate or counter-productive and strives to find non-violent expressions of resistance to oppression.

**VIOLENCE** | harmful and damaging behaviour of a physical, structural or cultural nature, which prevents human beings from reaching their full potential.

involved of addressing social grievance and conflicts over (in) equality.

### **Drivers of social grievances**

To turn into social grievances, latent inequalities have to be politicised. Three factors stand out in this process. First, there needs to be a perception of clearly distinguishable “groups” in society. Second, groups must be able to compare each other’s objective or perceived characteristics. Third, inequality or exclusion must be seen as unjust and another group must be blamed for this unfairness (as argued by Lars-Erik Cederman and his colleagues in 2013). These “groups” are not fixed in time; rather, identities are fluid and constantly being shaped and reshaped.

Many social grievances are rooted in exclusion and oppression, which can serve as a basis for collective mobilisation and therefore become drivers of conflict. Perceptions of exclusion can also

**For example ...**

Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta provides an example of how inequalities and social grievances can drive people to support violence against the state. Past decades in the Delta have seen an increase in violence and insecurity, fuelled by income inequality, poverty and frustrated expectations. A lack of political rights, the socio-economic discrimination based on religion or ethnicity, and the experience of injustice are examples of vertical and horizontal inequalities (United Nations and World Bank 2018). In the Niger Delta, unfair distribution of oil revenue and destroyed livelihood opportunities have resulted in social grievances.

play an important role in turning grievances into violence. As noted by the United Nations and World Bank (2018, 122, with reference to research by Ted Gurr), "perceptions of exclusion and inequality" appear to be central for building up grievances, even when these perceptions do not align with objective inequalities.

Before exclusion patterns and grievances turn into outright violence, they often foment over a long period. In Lebanon, for instance, Lebanese young people and the Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities feel particularly marginalised and deprived due to their political, social and economic exclusion. The resulting disenfranchisement may be the same; the drivers, however, are different. In the case of the Lebanese youth, who face high levels of unemployment, the issue is primarily about state-society cleavages. In the case of the refugee communities, it is mainly about the lack of legal and political recognition: for example, Palestinian refugees are legally excluded from the job market. This combination of factors has led to a wave of radicalisation. In the 2010s, this resulted in an increase in local clashes between supporters of extremist groups and the security forces.

In situations of protracted conflict, there is also a high risk of violence becoming a vicious cycle, for those exposed to violence, especially at a young age, are more likely to turn to violence themselves. (An example is the recruitment and abuse of minors by adults who were child soldiers themselves, aided by a degree of habituation to violence as normality). This is particularly true if groups or whole communities are exposed to violence over time, a connection underlined by a 2016 Berghof Handbook Dialogue on post-war healing and dealing with the past.

### **Addressing social grievances through violence: social upheaval**

Addressing horizontal and vertical inequalities and social grievances is key to preventing conflicts from turning violent (→ Preventing Violence). Yet in societies where the root causes of social grievances remain unaddressed, or where avenues for non-violent collective mobilisation are few, groups that are excluded socially, politically or economically may begin to view violence as the only viable option for redress. One factor that heavily influences this dynamic is the use of repression, for example by state security agencies against aggrieved groups' non-violent dissent, since repression tends to create a cycle of violence.

Peace and conflict research has tried to elucidate the origins of violence, especially the phenomenon of escalation from latent to violent conflict through ethnopolitical mobilisation of aggrieved groups (→ Working on Conflict Dynamics). As Johan Galtung argued back in 1969, systematic inequality, generated by allowing some groups access to resources while denying it to others, is a pervasive, normalised and largely invisible form of violence. Cultural violence, driven by differences over religion, ideology, language, art or science, generates abuse against "others". Taking these prevalent but non-physical forms of violence in consideration, Simon Fisher and his colleagues (2000) offered a definition of violence as "actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevent people from reaching their full human potential".

Strategies to deal with such multifaceted violence need to focus on individual factors, structural factors and the enabling environment – often simultaneously (→ Preventing Violence).

Since 2006, through its work on resistance and liberation movements, the Berghof Foundation has striven to understand why these groups, which draw on the social grievances of parts of the population, shift from non-violent to violent conflict strategies and vice versa. Participatory studies on the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) in Colombia, the Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (CPN-M) and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), among others, show that these groups viewed armed action as a last resort in the face of state repression of non-violent protest. These resistance and liberation movements considered violence (e.g. through guerrilla warfare) as a legitimate form of political action and as one means of self-defence and struggle (among others) in the face of human rights violations. These means, violent and non-violent, were employed, sometimes simultaneously, by the groups in response to a changing political environment. Our approach aims at enabling such groups to overcome grievances through means of non-violent conflict transformation rather than the use of force.

### **Addressing social grievances through non-violence**

Non-violence can provide an alternative strategy for aggrieved social groups to seek redress against inequality or oppression. Rooted in the conviction that use of force is morally illegitimate and/or strategically counterproductive, non-violent resistance aims to achieve social change and to resist oppression and violence in all its forms.

Historically, non-violence has included various methods of direct action. Gene Sharp detailed actions ranging from symbolic protest and persuasion to social, political and economic non-cooperation, civil disobedience, confrontation without violence, and the building of alternative institutions. Non-violent methods

have achieved change through the productive demonstration of “people power” against autocratic or repressive regimes and human rights abuses in many places across the globe, for example Tunisia in 2011 and Armenia in 2018.

Although non-violent resistance magnifies existing social and political tensions by imposing greater costs on those who want to maintain their advantages under an existing system, it can be described as a precursor to conflict transformation. Non-violent techniques can enable minorities or dominated groups (“the underdogs”) to address their grievances and to mobilise and take action towards empowerment and a restructuring of relations with their powerful opponents (power-holders or pro-status quo forces, “the elites” or “top dogs”). The aim is both dialogue and resistance: dialogue with the people on the other side to persuade them, and resistance to oppressive structures to compel change (→ Empowerment and Ownership).

Building on its track record of investigating non-violence, the Berghof Foundation’s current research aims to paint a more comprehensive picture of the social and political processes which connect non-violent methods to democratic consolidation, in order to foster constructive social change.

### **Challenges and ways forward**

The success of non-violent approaches can only be judged by carefully assessing their outcomes and effects over the long term.

A new area of critical inquiry in this context is social media. Social media have proven to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, they offer new avenues for expressing grievances and engaging in constructive dialogue. On the other hand, they can become a platform where grievances are actually channelled toward violence, for example by extremist organisations intent on fomenting hate, fear and mistrust and exploiting local grievances to recruit globally.

Moreover, non-violence may not always work to overcome social grievances, for example in highly polarised conflicts involving seemingly non-negotiable issues. If power structures and practices do not allow for non-violent transformation, parties to a conflict may stick to violent options, out of despair or because of a lack of other opportunities. In some of these cases, dialogue and conflict mitigation methods may successfully complement non-violent tactics, emphasising the prevention of violence while striving to redress the structural inequalities which led aggrieved groups to resist in the first place. Moreover, conflict resolution methods can help turn achievements of civil resistance into commonly accepted, negotiated agreements, mending polarised relationships through non-violent conflict (Dudouet 2017). All methods need to be applied within conflict parties and violent groupings as well as across divides. Third parties, such as the Berghof Foundation, can be helpful in creating spaces for dialogue, negotiation and mediation for non-violent interaction among the conflict parties.

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