

Horizontal Inequalities in Transition Countries: Guidelines for Better Practice

This IFIT Policy Brief reviews the importance of addressing horizontal inequalities in countries undergoing a transition. It offers analysis and recommendations based on a comprehensive review of existing literature and lessons learned from diverse country experiences, including IFIT's past and present engagements.

Introduction

Horizontal inequalities (HIs) are political, economic, social, and cultural inequalities between socially significant groups in a particular country. This type of inequality is usually differentiated from *vertical inequalities*, which pertain to income inequalities between individuals or households.¹

While HIs were initially predominantly associated with inequalities between culturally-defined or ethnic groups, today there is recognition of a wider range of group affiliations—including racial, religious, gender, rural-urban, age and ideological—that may be important for understanding inequalities in a particular society.²

HIs may occur along the following dimensions:³

- *Political HIs* include inequalities in the distribution of political, administrative and military power as well as in people's opportunities to be represented and to participate in politics at every level.
- *Economic HIs* include inequalities in income, economic conditions, employment opportunities and ownership of assets.
- *Social HIs* include access and outcome inequalities in education, health, housing and social networks.
- *Cultural status HIs* include the unequal treatment and recognition of different groups' cultural or religious norms, customs, languages and practices.

There are different reasons why addressing severe HIs should be a major policy objective for countries undergoing transition from violent conflict or authori-

tarianism—including increasing economic efficiencies, promoting a more just and fair society, and reducing the risk or recurrence of political instability or violent conflict.

A wealth of research and evidence in the last 15 years has shown that severe HIs significantly increase the risk of political instability and violent conflicts, both at the national and sub-national levels. For example, HIs were a major driver of violent conflict in places such as Sri Lanka (where severe political and economic HIs between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities contributed to the violent conflict which ravaged the country between 1983-2009), Central African Republic (where severe regional and religious HIs contributed to a violent uprising by the Muslim-dominated *Séléka* insurgents in September 2012), Nepal (where a complex mix of overlapping geographic, ethnic and caste HIs contributed to the birth of a Maoist insurgency which lasted from 1996-2006) and Nigeria (where the persistence of severe socio-economic HIs between the Muslim-dominated northern states and Christian-dominated southern states has contributed to the country's persistent instability).

The risk of violent conflict increases when HIs are severe and consistent across different dimensions.⁴ Cases in which a specific group is both socio-economically disadvantaged *and* politically marginalised are considered particularly explosive. Yet, importantly, conflicts are not necessarily started by such groups. There are numerous examples where groups have employed violence in order to safeguard and maintain a comparatively advantaged position (eg, the Basque conflict in Spain, and the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Burundi).

In any case, the presence of severe HIs does not always result in violent conflict. Among other things, the introduction of certain HI-reducing policies and changes may contribute towards defusing some of the anger and discontent associated with severe HIs. For example, the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programme, which was introduced in South Africa in 2005, initially helped to reduce some of the grievances and discontent engendered by the severe HIs caused by decades of apartheid (especially among the Black middle class).

Likewise, severe HIs may not result in violent group mobilisation if an authoritarian regime is able successfully to repress any organised expressions of discontent. Yet, once such regimes disband or collapse, grievances caused by the HIs among the relatively disadvantaged groups (as well as fears among the relatively advantaged groups of losing their privileged position) may rapidly produce severe political and social tensions that lead to violent conflict.

Nevertheless, periods of political transition offer a unique opportunity to fundamentally rethink many policies, and a chance to start addressing the most flagrant HIs—or at least create a strong social consensus on the importance of doing so. The more the commitment extends beyond any individual government, thereby becoming a societal rather than a specific government commitment, the more likely any effort will be sustained. That is usually necessary, because severe socio-economic HIs require long-term policy interventions that cannot be addressed in a single electoral cycle.

While people belong to different groups and hence have multiple identities, it is often quite clear which are the politically and/or socially most salient groups in a country—particularly in fragile and conflict-affected societies. Indeed, political tensions and violent conflicts associated with severe HIs usually have the adverse effect of hardening group boundaries, thereby making group differences more salient, socially relevant, and visible at the onset of a transition.

Naturally, there is great variation across countries concerning the group identities that matter most.⁵ While racial groups are a highly salient dividing line in South Africa, ideological and rural-urban differences stand out greatly in Colombia and religious differences in Northern Ireland. Yet, the importance that people attach to different group identities is not set in stone and can shift over time, due to changes in political institutions and cultural, social and economic circumstances. For example, while religious differences between Catholics and Protestants were for many centuries at the heart of Europe's political tensions

and conflicts, they have had little relevance in mainland Europe in recent decades.

In general, where group boundaries are less rigid, people may have a greater tendency and ability to switch their affiliations. In such cases, HIs are unlikely to cause profound grievances. But in the opposite cases, in which boundaries are more rigid, affiliation is more likely to matter a great deal—especially when members of certain groups are treated inferior or are trapped in a lower status.⁶

For countries undergoing transition from an authoritarian regime to a more democratic dispensation or from armed conflict to peace, it is extremely important to address HIs in a systematic manner. Current practice, however, is mixed. On the one hand, HIs have been recognised by national authorities and international agencies as an important cause of conflict in a number of reconstruction and peacebuilding environments (eg, Nepal, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, South Africa and Burundi).⁷ On the other hand, positive rhetoric relating to the necessity and urgency to address HIs has rarely resulted in systematic policies or programmes to reduce these inequalities.⁸ As such, very few post-conflict countries have successfully reduced their HIs; to the contrary, in most cases, HIs have actually worsened—thus creating a long-term source of instability and threat of conflict renewal.

While addressing HIs in countries undergoing transition is crucial, it is an inherently complex process requiring policymakers to balance the need to address HIs with the risk of triggering a backlash from advantaged groups and a consequent hardening of group affiliations. Politically-informed finesse is essential. While local politicians and policymakers will usually play a leading role, other actors and stakeholders—such as civil society groups, private companies, labour unions, the media, artists, journalists and educators—also have an essential role to play. International organisations and donor agencies may likewise have an important and constructive voice in terms of policy.

With this in mind, this practice brief proceeds to analyse 1) key policy options for addressing HIs, 2) trade-offs between HIs and other policies, 3) how to time HI policies, and 4) how to make change politically acceptable.

Addressing HIs: Policy Options

The list of HI policies and measures adopted by different countries is very long and offers a useful policy toolbox for political, social and business leaders in contexts of transition. The list can be broadly di-

vided into three approaches: direct, indirect and integrationist.⁹

- **Direct policies** explicitly target disadvantaged groups. While they may be relatively effective in helping to reduce HIs in a specific area, direct policies usually increase the significance of group affiliations and divides. The extent to which this occurs depends to a large extent on the nature of the groups targeted. Thus, while ethnicity-based affirmative programmes often increase the salience of ethnic identities (rigid attachments), the risk is often lower with programmes aimed at reducing rural-urban HIs (looser attachments).
- **Indirect policies** do not use group affiliations as such, but because of their design disproportionately benefit relatively disadvantaged groups. While these policies are often less effective in the short term in reducing HIs, they are less likely to harden group boundaries, and thus are beneficial for long-term inter-group relations.
- **Integrationist policies** are not directly concerned with reducing HIs, but are instead aimed at reducing the salience of group affiliations.

The chart below lists examples of what policies and measures for each approach look like.

An in-depth analysis of the specific nature, severity and origins of the HIs in a particular transition context is necessary to determine the appropriate mix of di-

rect, indirect and integrationist policies. This requires examining 1) a country’s ethnic, religious, cultural and political demography and geography, especially with regard to the most important social groups; 2) the absolute and relative situation of each of these groups with respect to the different dimensions of HI; and 3) the nature of the economy and political system, and the way in which different groups are integrated into it.

Building on this analysis, three important guidelines are worth highlighting:

- *First, direct policies should be used cautiously.* As noted, a serious drawback of direct policies is the risk that they may increase the significance of group identities, which in turn may increase the risk of a backlash against these policies by members of relatively advantaged groups. The latter may feel threatened in their position or feel unfairly disadvantaged by or excluded from these policies. In addition, if direct policies end up benefitting only the top layers of disadvantaged groups, they risk undermining their purpose and can rapidly lose legitimacy and support among both advantaged and disadvantaged groups. Both Malaysia’s New Economic Policy (NEP) and South Africa’s BEE are examples of affirmative action programmes which ended up politically unsustainable because they became perceived as a tool of the privileged few and political elites.¹⁰ However, if direct programmes or policies are principally targeted at the poor, much of the risk can be reduced.¹¹ Otherwise, indirect policies can

CHART 1 APPROACHES TO REDUCING HORIZONTAL INEQUALITIES

		Policy approach		
		Direct HI-reducing	Indirect HI-reducing	Integrationist
Dimension	Political	Group quotas; seat reservations; consociational constitution; list proportional representation.	Design of voting system to require power-sharing across groups (eg, two-thirds voting requirements in assembly); design of boundaries and seat numbers to ensure adequate representation of all groups; human rights legislation and enforcement.	Geographical voting spread requirements; ban on ethnic/religious political parties (national party stipulations).
	Socio-economic	Quotas for employment or education; special investment or credit programmes for particular groups including regions.	Antidiscrimination legislation; progressive taxation; universal support programmes; regional development programmes; sectoral support programmes (eg, Stabex).	Incentives for cross-group economic activities; requirement that schools are multicultural; promotion of multicultural civic institutions.
	Cultural status	Minority language recognition and education; symbolic recognition (eg, public holidays, attendance at state functions).	Freedom of religious observance; no state religion.	Civic citizenship education; promotion of an overarching national identity.

SOURCE: Stewart F., Brown G.K., Langer A. (2008). Policies towards Horizontal Inequalities. In: Stewart F. (Ed.), HIs and Conflict, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 304.

be used, especially if they are designed in a way to help reduce HIs within a reasonable period of time (eg, certain electoral reforms). If indirect policies require a long period to be effective (eg, anti-discrimination legalisation, progressive taxation), direct policies may be necessary.

- *Second, a combination of direct and indirect policies may be the right approach.* Transition leaders who are serious about reducing HIs could decide initially to advocate or introduce a set of direct policies in order to achieve a noticeable reduction in HIs relatively quickly. Yet, such policies should include sunset clauses linked to a set of predetermined targets. Once the targets are achieved, the direct policies can be replaced by a set of indirect policies and measures.
- *Third, direct and indirect policies should be complemented by integrationist policies.* While direct and indirect policies may help to reduce HIs, they do little to reduce the importance of group identities—and in some cases, may strengthen them. Integrationist policies can play an important role in helping to reduce this risk, thereby helping to improve long-term inter-group relations. For example,

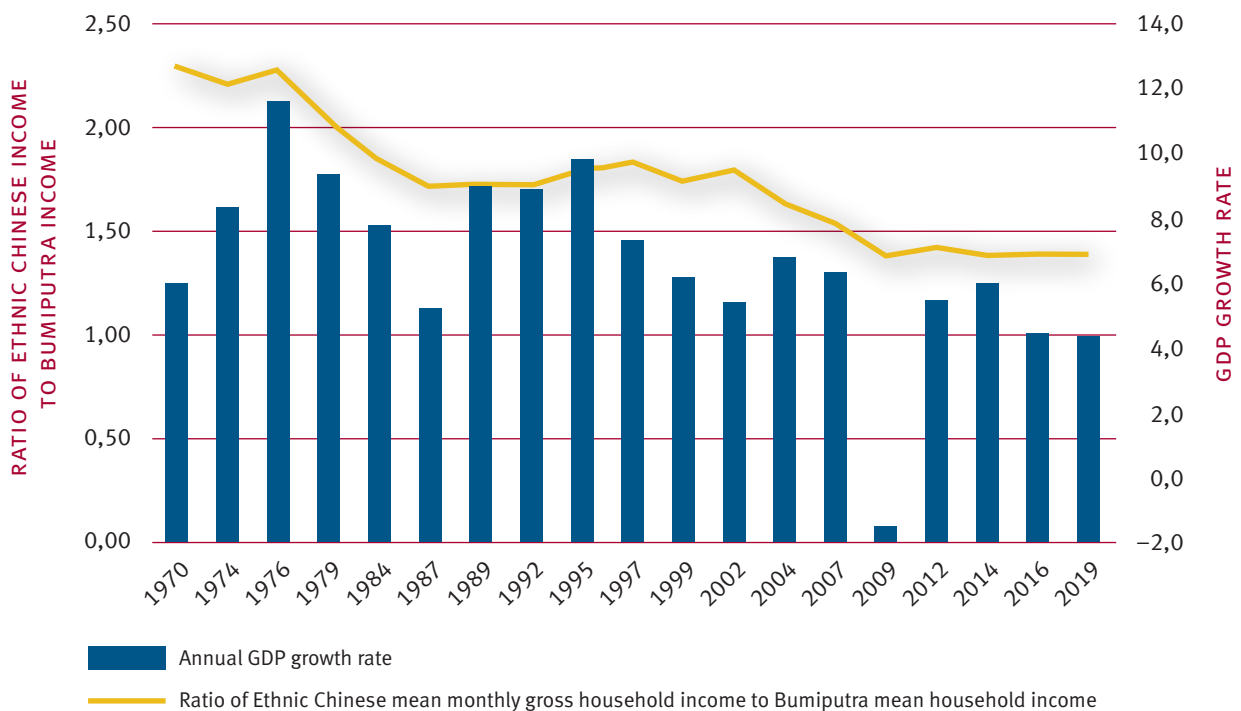
while HIs have been successfully reduced in Northern Ireland through a range of direct and especially indirect policies implemented since the 1970s, few large-scale integrationist policies have been introduced, and hence it is unsurprising to observe that the Catholic and Protestant communities remain sharply divided.

Trade-offs Between HIs and Other Policies

Transition leaders usually face a myriad of problems and policy challenges: establishing or rebuilding democratic institutions and the rule of law, revitalising the economy, achieving macroeconomic stability, reducing unemployment, increasing economic growth, rebuilding vital infrastructures, reintegrating former combatants and refugees, and promoting peace and reconciliation. The reduction of HIs is an additional policy challenge which needs to be tackled. In this regard, two preliminary points bear mention:

- *First, policies towards correcting multidimensional HIs should not displace other policy objectives.* Instead, HI considerations should be integrated into

CHART 2 CLOSING THE GAP AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN MALAYSIA



SOURCE: Constructed by the author. Ratio of Ethnic Chinese mean monthly gross household income to Bumiputra mean household income is based on data drawn from the official portal of the Economic Planning Unit of the Government of Malaysia. Available at: <https://www.epu.gov.my/en/socio-economic-statistics/household-income-poverty-and-household-expenditure>. Annual GDP growth rates is based on World Bank data. Available at: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/MYS/malaysia/gdp-growth-rate>.

policy design and implementation in all domains. In doing so, many trade-offs can be avoided or minimised.¹²

- *Second, while the political urgency and necessity of addressing HIs is usually intuitively clear to most local and international policymakers, redistribution policies and interventions are often perceived to hurt the economy and slow down economic growth.* However, there are a range of examples that actually show the contrary. For example, even though Malaysia introduced one of the most comprehensive horizontal redistribution programmes—the NEP of 1971—the country had very high economic growth rates at the very time it was sharply reducing HIs between the Chinese and the Bumiputra (see Figure 1). Moreover, the NEP might actually have increased Malaysia’s economic growth rates by enabling a significant part of the population to gain better access to education and jobs, thereby expanding the country’s growth potential.¹³ Unfortunately, the NEP became hard to reform long after fulfilling its original purpose.¹⁴ As a consequence, it eventually led to a “collective hyperconsciousness of ethnicity”, numerous corruption scandals, widespread feelings of exclusion and social injustice among Malaysian people of Chinese and Indian origin, and a worsening of inter-ethnic relations.¹⁵

To manage the trade-offs between HIs and other policies, it is important for political, social and business leaders in transition contexts to also consider the following:

- *First, a limited increase in inefficiency and bureaucracy as a result of HI policies may be acceptable in the short term if it supports a larger national transition.* Given that the paramount concern for countries emerging from authoritarian rule or conflict should be the prevention of its recurrence, some policies towards HIs may be inevitable, higher costs notwithstanding. For example, after its civil war in the late 1960s, Nigeria mandated that different ethnic and regional groups be equitably represented within all federal state institutions. As part of this policy, a new government institution—the Federal Character Commission (FCC)—was established and a wide range of rules and procedures was introduced with respect to the recruitment and promotion of public sector employees. While the reforms were largely unsuccessful in reducing HIs in Nigeria’s federal state institutions—and the FCC was plagued by serious legal and administrative constraints, chronic underfunding, corruption, and political dependence—the policy has, through its

symbolism, helped to reduce perceptions of political exclusion and marginalisation among Nigeria’s most important ethnic groups.¹⁶

- *Second, non-HI policies should avoid making existing HIs worse.* For example, market reforms often appear to worsen HIs in transition countries.¹⁷ While these can sometimes be designed to help mitigate the risk, this might not always be possible. As such, complementary and compensatory interventions may need to be introduced in such places to avoid exacerbating existing HIs.
- *Third, HI considerations should not be an afterthought.* By treating policies towards HIs in isolation from other policies, there is a clear risk that they become merely another policy. Thus, just like conflict sensitivity should be a cross-cutting concern, HI-sensitive policies and practices should be introduced across all key areas of concern. This means assessing and understanding the impact and implications of different programmatic and policy interventions on the HIs in a society.

Timing of HI policies

Before turning to the question of when HI-oriented policies should be introduced and how long they should stay in place, it is crucial to stress that socio-economic HIs are usually very persistent. While HIs often originate from a “foundational shock”¹⁸ (eg, colonialism) or an “inequality-creating shock”,¹⁹ once in existence, they are usually perpetuated by unequal rates of capital accumulation and the returns thereon; asymmetries in social capital; and past and ongoing discrimination. In some cases, HIs have been in place for decades or even centuries (eg, racial inequalities in the US or indigenous disparities in Latin America). Moreover, a country’s HIs often are *not* the accidental outcome of certain historical differences or the prevailing political economy, but the result of deliberate efforts by groups in power to maintain their advantage and privileged position by systematically subjugating other groups in society (sometimes by force or physical violence, other times through informal mechanisms of discrimination) and keeping them in a state of perpetual inferiority (eg, South Africa’s apartheid regime or India’s caste system).

Without government support, very few disadvantaged groups are likely to catch up with more advantaged groups in their societies. Yet, even with government support, it may prove difficult. For example, despite the introduction of affirmative action policies in the US in the 1960s, social and economic inequal-

ities borne by Blacks remain acute. Government initiative should therefore avoid being too limited or short-term and instead seek to transform the underlying drivers and views that are at the root of the HIs.

Bearing this in mind, three guidelines deserve mention:

- *First, socio-economic HIs should be addressed without delay—if possible, even before a peace agreement or political settlement has been agreed.* Policies that reduce socio-economic HIs in the midst of a political or armed conflict may actually increase the chances of negotiating a transition. This appears to have been the case in Northern Ireland, where the British government introduced a range of policies starting in the 1970s (eg, 1989 Fair Employment Act, anti-discrimination legislation and a more equitable housing policy) to improve the socio-economic position of the Catholic community. By the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, socio-economic HIs between Catholics and Protestants had decreased substantially, which in turn may partly explain why the Catholic community was prepared to sign and support the peace agreement.²⁰ But even when it is infeasible to introduce HI-reducing policies ahead of time, any eventual peace agreement or political settlement should ideally require the sustained commitments necessary to address the most salient national HIs.
- *Second, addressing political HIs should be prioritised at the start of a transition.* Many individuals and groups in transition countries often were (or feel) unfairly excluded from the centres of political power and need practical and symbolic reassurance of change. One way of directly achieving this is by ensuring greater representation of the groups in the main state institutions, including the government, the national assembly or parliament, the administration, the judiciary, the military and the police. Sometimes this may go as far as establishing an interim government of national unity.²¹ However, in reducing political HIs and establishing political inclusivity, it is important that no new inequalities or perceptions of marginalisation are being created or promoted. Indeed, addressing political HIs requires not only that the demographically largest and politically strongest groups be given greater representation, but also smaller or minority groups; otherwise the risks from HIs will simply be transferred and not eliminated (as is the case in Nigeria, where the three largest ethnic groups are now well integrated into the country's power structures but many smaller groups are not, contributing to rising violence in

some areas). In any case, meaningfully reducing political HIs throughout the political-administrative system is a complex and time-consuming process, because it often requires fundamental changes in terms of how people are trained, recruited and promoted throughout the public sector. As such, quick and highly symbolic executive-level appointments can be important.

- *Third, policies towards HIs should remain in place only until the prevailing HIs have been reduced.* Transition leaders should be cautioned about adopting open-ended HI-reducing policies and programmes. It is often preferable to include sunset clauses which link the phasing out or termination of the policies to the achievement of predetermined targets vis-à-vis prevailing levels of HIs. Some HI-reducing policies, such as anti-discrimination legislation, should nevertheless be open-ended, given that these types of policies aim to ensure a more level playing field between different groups in the long term.

Achieving Buy-In for Change

Whether a country's transition leaders decide to introduce HI-correcting policies depends on a range of factors and circumstances, including the origins, nature and severity of the HIs; the way in which they are perceived; the extent to which HIs have contributed to group mobilisation or violent conflict; the existing distribution of power; and a country's demography.

Implementation of HI-reducing policies is usually easier where a socio-economically disadvantaged group constitutes a demographic majority and controls the levers of political power (eg, Malaysia and post-apartheid South Africa).²² But even in cases where a socio-economically disadvantaged group is a politically powerless minority, a government may decide to introduce policies aimed at improving the relative situation of this group. The policies aimed at improving the socio-economic situation of the indigenous population in a range of Latin American countries, or the affirmative action measures that exist in India in order to improve the situation of lower caste groups, are good examples of this.

Yet, HI-correcting policies are often highly contentious and may be opposed or blocked by relatively advantaged groups who perceive themselves as losing out.²³ This resistance tends to increase the longer the policies remain in place, as happened in Malaysia, where people with Chinese or Indian origins expressed growing opposition to the NEP programme starting in the early 1980s. Such opposition not only may hamper

or block any progress in reducing the HIs, but may also lead to widespread social unrest—or worse. The terrible violence carried out by members of India's upper castes against the historically marginalised Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who are benefitting from different affirmative action provisions serves as a good example in this regard.

A number of guidelines can help overcome possible resistance to HI-correcting policies, making them more acceptable to all stakeholder groups:

- *First, when it comes to addressing social and economic HIs, make sure that the relatively advantaged groups only 'lose' in relative terms.* If advantaged groups are able to maintain or even improve their absolute level of welfare, they are less likely to feel threatened and more likely to support HI-correcting policies. Clearly, this is only possible in situations where a country's economy is growing and hence the pie to be divided is becoming larger. The size of redistribution programmes could, however, be made (partly) dependent upon growth rates. Given that the improved situation of formerly disadvantaged groups should ideally result in higher fiscal revenues over time—which may be shared widely—this could remove some of the opposition.
- *Second, where possible, use indirect policies to tackle social and economic HIs.* A major benefit of indirect policies is that relatively deprived individuals from otherwise advantaged groups (eg, poor white people living in rural areas of the US) will also benefit from them. This makes it more likely that there will be broad support for HI-reducing policies, especially when compared to direct or affirmative action-type policies that by definition exclude everyone not in the target group.
- *Third, without a critical mass of societal support for tackling HIs, interventions are likely to fail in the long term.* While government plays a crucial role in the process of addressing HIs, it cannot and should not act on its own. Given the often controversial nature of HI-correcting policies, it is crucial for a transition's political leaders to ensure that there is widespread societal support for introducing such policies. A range of mechanisms could help to build conditions for consensus, including citizen assemblies, national dialogues, commissions of inquiry, referenda, special legislative committees, and "white papers".
- *Fourth, politicians and policymakers are well-advised to temper expectations.* HIs are usually the product of long periods of economic, political and social discrimination, and it is therefore unrealis-

tic to expect that a set of HI-correcting policies or programmes will substantially reduce inequalities in a short period.²⁴ In order to keep expectations in check and avoid serious disappointment later, transition leaders should set modest HI correction targets.²⁵

- *Fifth, it is important to rectify misperceptions concerning the origins of HIs.* In many cases, large proportions of a country's population may perceive existing HIs to be mainly caused by certain negative characteristics attributed to members of disadvantaged groups. This leads them to perceive redistribution policies as unfair or wasteful, making it difficult to achieve buy-in. A government can increase support for HI policies by correcting any false perceptions concerning the origins and evolution of the HIs. Academics and international actors can sometimes help in this process by facilitating or supporting data collection on HIs, providing a more neutral assessment of their origins and evolution as well as a more objective evaluation of the needs of the populations affected.
- *Sixth, addressing HIs in a constructive and durable manner requires a re-imagining and re-education of society.* This involves breaking down entrenched barriers and powerful narratives which may have contributed towards creating, maintaining and justifying the HIs in a particular society. The process of imagining a different, more equal and just society can be a bottom-up process initiated by visionary leaders and movements (eg, Martin Luther King and the US civil rights struggle); more top-down (eg, the rethinking and denazification of the German educational system in the post-WWII period with pressure from the US, Great Britain and France); or a mix of the two. The important thing is the re-imagining.

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21. See generally IFIT, *Interim Governments: Lessons and Guidelines* (2020): <https://www.ifit-transitions.org/publications/major-publications-briefings/interim-governments-lessons-and-guidelines>
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23. In some cases, HI policies may even be opposed by the target disadvantaged groups, because they may perceive the policies and measures as not being far-reaching enough or not reducing the HIs fast enough.
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