



# **Human Development for the Few as a Source of Violence and Conflict**

**June 2025**

## **When Development Excludes: Why Inequality Fuels Conflict**

A new report from the Dor Moria Center examines the link between exclusive development models and the rise of violence and instability across the globe.

Relying on data from the United Nations, the World Bank, and academic research, the analysis lays bare a powerful yet often overlooked truth: **when development is designed for the few, it breeds resentment, radicalization, and humanitarian breakdown.**

The report identifies "development for the privileged" as a major driver of modern conflict, arguing that exclusionary policies don't just fail to lift societies—they actively destabilize them.

Gaza serves as a central case study, where decades of marginalization and stalled reconstruction have deepened despair and fueled cycles of violence. In contrast, countries like Rwanda, Malaysia, and Peru offer examples of how inclusive growth can lead to long-term stability and social cohesion.

**The core message is clear:** Sustainable peace requires more than ceasefires or negotiations—it depends on equal access to opportunity. Unless every community has a stake in development, instability will remain the default, not the exception.

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## Introduction: "Human Development for All" vs. "Human Development for the Few"

Most 21st-century conflicts share a common thread: **the systematic exclusion of entire populations from development opportunities**. When education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation remain the privilege of a select few while millions are left behind, social upheaval becomes almost inevitable.

Political scientists, economists, and international organizations have consistently demonstrated that **exclusionary development**—where access to education, healthcare, employment, and resources is systematically limited to certain groups—creates conditions ripe for social unrest. The uneven distribution of development benefits fuels **escalating violence, radicalization, and conflict**, particularly across the Middle East and Africa. This interdisciplinary evidence comes from academic research and reports by the UN, World Bank, and other major institutions.

**Gaza represents an extreme example of such policies and their devastating consequences.**

Since 2007, 2.3 million Palestinians have been systematically cut off from the regional economy through a comprehensive blockade. By 2023, this resulted in 45% unemployment, 64% of the population living in multidimensional poverty, and an entire generation without prospects for the future.

The events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent military operation transformed exclusionary development into complete collapse: **GDP contracted by 85%, unemployment reached 80%, and the Human Development Index fell back 69 years.**

The humanitarian toll of 2024-2025 speaks for itself: 90% of the population displaced, food prices up 450%, and infrastructure damage estimated at \$18.5 billion<sup>1</sup>.

What began as systematic exclusion evolved into the total destruction of human potential.

### Exclusionary Economic Growth and Violence

Economic growth that concentrates benefits in the hands of a few can actually intensify social tensions. Research on Indian states reveals a troubling pattern: when **economic growth is "exclusionary"**—benefiting only certain segments of society—it **increases the risk of social conflict**<sup>2</sup>. Even amid high economic growth, if the benefits flow only to select groups, the threat of violence emerges. Put simply, growth without broad-based inclusion breeds resentment among those left behind.

Recent research confirms this dynamic. IMF analysts have demonstrated that **grievances among marginalized groups** directly correlate with unrest: people recognize when authorities **fail to ensure justice and inclusive growth** and don't guarantee equal access to resources and

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<sup>1</sup> [apnews.com](https://apnews.com)

<sup>2</sup> [deepblue.lib.umich.edu](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu)

opportunities for human development<sup>3</sup>. Exclusionary development models thus create the very conditions that lead to violent outbreaks.

## Human Development Inequality and Conflict

**Disparities in human development**—unequal access to education, income, and services—have repeatedly been identified as conflict drivers. The UNDP report on Africa (Odusola et al., 2017) emphasizes that **inequality and poverty generate social exclusion, with conflicts, unrest, and instability as their inevitable manifestation**<sup>4</sup>. Remarkably, 88% of all conflicts from 1990-2018 occurred in countries with HDI below 0.7<sup>5</sup>.

Multiple studies confirm that the poorest and least developed societies, especially those with deep internal divisions, are far more vulnerable to violent outbreaks<sup>6</sup>.

This pattern holds true for Middle Eastern countries as well. Regional experts directly characterize growing inequality as a **"ticking time bomb"** for the Arab world (ESCWA, *Inequality in the Arab Region: A Ticking Time Bomb*, 2022). The joint UN-World Bank study *Pathways for Peace* (2018) similarly notes that **grievances stemming from exclusion from power, resources, security, and justice underlie many of today's violent conflicts**<sup>7</sup>. When large populations feel marginalized and ignored in human development, it creates fertile ground for conflict.

## The Human Development Index as Conflict Predictor

The Human Development Index (HDI), developed by UNDP in 1990, combines three key dimensions: health and longevity (life expectancy), knowledge (mean and expected years of schooling), and standard of living (GNI per capita). Research reveals a direct correlation between low HDI and conflict risk.

According to the UNDP's "Human Development Report 2019: Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today," **countries with low HDI face 3.5 times higher probability of armed conflict** than those with high HDI<sup>8</sup>. Analysis of 1990-2018 data shows that **88% of all conflicts occurred in countries with HDI below 0.7** (medium development level)<sup>9</sup>.

More important than the absolute HDI level is **how evenly it's distributed within countries**. UNDP's Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) measures human development losses due to inequality. Research by Conceição et al. (2020) found that **a 10% increase in inequality losses raises conflict risk by 25-30%**<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [imf.org](http://imf.org)

<sup>4</sup> [ideas.repec.org](http://ideas.repec.org)

<sup>5</sup> [hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org)

<sup>6</sup> [ideas.repec.org](http://ideas.repec.org)

<sup>7</sup> [worldbank.org](http://worldbank.org)

<sup>8</sup> [worldbank.org](http://worldbank.org)

<sup>9</sup> [emiguel.econ.berkeley.edu](http://emiguel.econ.berkeley.edu)

<sup>10</sup> [imf.org](http://imf.org)

## Horizontal Inequality and Human Development

Oxford University's Frances Stewart expanded our understanding of the development-conflict nexus through her concept of horizontal inequality—systematic differences between culturally defined groups<sup>11</sup>. In human development terms, this means:

- **Health inequality:** Child mortality differences between groups can reach 300% (Stewart, 2008)<sup>12</sup>
- **Educational inequality:** Literacy gaps between ethnic groups often exceed 40 percentage points<sup>13</sup>
- **Income inequality:** Inter-group income differences serve as the strongest conflict predictor<sup>14</sup>

### Human Development Thresholds for Stability

World Bank research in "Pathways for Peace" (2018) established critical human development thresholds<sup>15</sup>:

- **HDI < 0.5:** Very high conflict risk (>15% annually)
- **HDI 0.5-0.7:** Elevated risk (5-15% annually)
- **HDI > 0.7:** Low risk (<5% annually)
- **HDI > 0.8 with low inequality:** Minimal risk (<1% annually)

Crucially, **the rate of HDI change also affects stability**. Sharp HDI decline (>5% annually) increases conflict risk six-fold, regardless of the starting level<sup>16</sup>.

### Restricted Development Access and Violence/Terrorism

When state policy **blocks portions of the population from participating in development**, denying them equal rights and opportunities, the consequences can be radical. Experts note that **systematic deprivation of certain groups' rights, opportunities, and resources** intensifies feelings of injustice and alienation. This undermines inclusive principles and **provokes conflict**, as the deprived lack peaceful means to achieve justice<sup>17</sup>.

In the Sahel and Central African countries, for example, areas where government services are virtually absent have become hotbeds of rebellion and extremism precisely due to these communities' prolonged exclusion from development processes.

Even extreme violence like terrorism connects to feelings of exclusion. **"It is inequality, not absolute poverty, that generates social unrest, violence, and even terrorism,"** noted UNCTAD head Carlos Fortin in 2005<sup>18</sup>. The poorest populations typically don't revolt; rather,

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<sup>11</sup> [imf.org](http://imf.org)

<sup>12</sup> [unctad.org](http://unctad.org)

<sup>13</sup> [journey-to-extremism.undp.org](http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org)

<sup>14</sup> [imf.org](http://imf.org)

<sup>15</sup> [worldbank.orgimf.org](http://worldbank.orgimf.org)

<sup>16</sup> [journey-to-extremism.undp.org](http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org)

<sup>17</sup> [hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org)

<sup>18</sup> [hdr.undp.org](http://hdr.undp.org)

those who **recognize an insurmountable gap between their education and aspirations and their lack of opportunities for advancement in an unequal society** turn to violence. When inequality combines with poverty, violence becomes widespread. This confirms that deliberate or structural restrictions on development access can trigger surges of violence and extremism.

### **Social Alienation and Radicalization**

**Social alienation**—when communities experience long-term deprivation of basic opportunities for dignified living—creates ideal conditions for radical ideologies. The UN Development Programme's *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2017) notes that **decades of socioeconomic and political marginalization inevitably generate frustration and anger**, which extremist groups expertly exploit<sup>19</sup>. Low education levels and lack of prospects drive people toward alternative ideologies; radical movements offer them an illusory "way out," channeling accumulated despair into violence.

Research shows that **poverty or unemployment alone doesn't automatically trigger conflict**. However, when people live in poverty while *feeling excluded*—humiliated by the absence of justice and state attention—this combination becomes a **breeding ground for armed groups** and extremism<sup>20</sup>. Where injustice, deprivation, and despair exist, violent ideologies become both a challenge to the status quo and an escape route (as the UNDP report eloquently describes<sup>21</sup>). Contemporary conflicts—from radical movements emerging across the Middle East to extremism in African regions—demonstrate that excluding people from human development leads to their **radicalization and willingness to embrace violence**.

### **Alternative Paths: Successful Inclusive Development**

#### **Rwanda: From Genocide to Human Development Leadership**

Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda demonstrates one of the most remarkable examples of using inclusive human development to prevent conflict.

##### **HDI Transformation:**

- 1994: HDI = 0.244 (among the world's lowest)
- 2023: HDI = 0.548 (124% growth)
- Average annual HDI growth: 4.3% (three times the global average)

##### **Key Inclusivity Achievements:**

- **Healthcare:** Universal health insurance (Mutuelles de Santé) covering 91% of the population led to 77% reduction in maternal mortality and 70% reduction in child mortality
- **Education:** Free 12-year education for all, with gender parity at every level

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<sup>19</sup> [geh.ox.ac.uk](http://geh.ox.ac.uk)

<sup>20</sup> [link.springer.com](http://link.springer.com)

<sup>21</sup> [piketty.pse.ens.fr](http://piketty.pse.ens.fr)

- **Political Inclusion:** 61% women in parliament, prohibition of ethnic identification, "Umuganda" program (monthly community meetings)

- **Economic Inclusion:** "One Cow per Poor Family" program (Girinka) reached 400,000 families

**Stability Results:**

- No ethnic conflicts since 1994
- Social cohesion index grew from 2.1 to 7.8 (out of 10)
- Inter-group trust increased from 5% to 72%

**Malaysia: Managing Ethnic Diversity Through Development**

After the 1969 ethnic riots, Malaysia implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP) designed to equalize human development across ethnic groups.

**Key NEP Measures and Subsequent Programs:**

- Higher education quotas for Malays (bumiputera)
- Entrepreneurship programs for all ethnic groups
- Rural development investment in Malay-majority areas

**HDI Equalization Achievements:**

- Income gap between Chinese and Malays reduced from 2.3:1 to 1.3:1
- Share of Malays with higher education grew from 5% to 35%
- HDI increased from 0.563 (1980) to 0.803 (2023)

**Conflict Prevention:**

- No major ethnic conflicts since 1969
- Inter-ethnic harmony index: 7.2/10 (among Southeast Asia's highest)

**Peru: Inclusive Development for Indigenous Peoples**

Since 2005, Peru has implemented comprehensive inclusive development programs for indigenous peoples of the Amazon and Andes.

**JUNTOS Program and Other Initiatives:**

- Conditional cash transfers for 750,000 indigenous families
- Bilingual education in 47 indigenous languages
- "Indigenous Health" program incorporating traditional medicine

**Human Development Results:**

- HDI in indigenous areas grew from 0.41 to 0.59
- Child mortality among indigenous populations decreased by 58%
- Secondary education coverage increased from 23% to 67%

**Reduced Conflict:**

- Social conflicts involving indigenous communities fell from 120 per year (2005) to 25 (2023)
- Protests against extractive companies decreased by 70%

## Brazil's Bolsa Familia: Democratic Inclusive Development

- Extreme poverty reduced from 9.7% to 4.3% of population (2003-2024)
- Gini coefficient decreased by 15%
- 36 million people lifted out of poverty with improved education and health outcomes

### Conclusion

The interdisciplinary evidence is clear: **"development for the few" policies threaten stability**. When states or systems provide benefits and opportunities only to certain groups while abandoning others, they inevitably breed **deep-seated injustice**. Over time, such feelings fuel social unrest, armed conflicts, and rising extremism.

**Inclusive development** has become recognized as essential for peacebuilding. As UN and World Bank experts emphasize, investing in equal access to education, employment, services, and justice for all citizens means investing in sustainable peace<sup>22</sup>. Rwanda, Malaysia, and Peru demonstrate that even deeply divided societies can achieve stability through targeted efforts toward inclusive human development. Moving beyond "development for the few" toward development for all offers our best hope for addressing the root causes of violence and radicalization.

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<sup>22</sup> [jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org)