

DIALOGUE

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Focus:

Aspirations matter in the exclusion of Peruvian indigenous children

Inequality, a foundational notion in the economic sciences, has garnered renewed attention lately with the success of books by Piketty or Deaton published in 2013. This was also the theme chosen by the third *World Social Science Report*, published in September 2016 by UNESCO, the ISSC, and the IDS. This report adopts a holistic approach of inequalities, going beyond the unidimensional analysis of income inequalities. DIAL has contributed to the report, along with over a hundred researchers from different fields in the social sciences. Originally published in *World Development*, this contribution highlights a particular mechanism which underlies the exclusion of indigenous people in Peru. More precisely, it analyses how aspirations contribute to the persistence of inequality between ethnic groups. With the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, and the first World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in 2014, the international community has shown a strong commitment to ensuring the rights and well-being of indigenous people. Although progress has been made, recent evidence discloses the large disadvantage that affects indigenous people worldwide, and in Latin America in particular. However, the mechanisms at play in the persistence of these inequalities remain poorly understood. Relying on the Young Lives dataset, this research shows that lower aspiration of indigenous children compared to their non-indigenous peers is one of the channels for the persistence of inequality between ethnic groups, exacerbating the effect of socioeconomic background on educational achievement.

Inequality between ethnic groups remains high in Peru

Peru has the highest proportion of indigenous people in Latin America, along with Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico. This plurality of cultures, including languages, is associated with large differences in income and economic opportunity. Despite significant poverty alleviation overall, the gap



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between indigenous and non-indigenous people remains as high as it was ten years ago. The monetary poverty incidence among indigenous people was 1.6 higher than among non-indigenous people in 2004 and 1.7 higher in 2013, reaching 35.9% compared to 20.8% for non-indigenous people (INEI, 2011, 2014). Indigenous people have lower access to education as only 10.2% of them have progressed beyond the high-school education level, compared to 25.6% for non-indigenous people. Focusing on youth, only 41% of individuals aged between 18 and 20 and having Quechua as mother tongue have completed secondary education. This proportion is 70% for the youth having Spanish as mother tongue (UNICEF/INEI, 2010). Opportunities for indigenous people in the labour market are even more limited. They are overrepresented in the agricultural sector, even in rural areas, and in elementary occupations, which account together for two thirds of occupations among indigenous people, compared to only one third for non-indigenous people.

Although inequalities towards indigenous people are widely documented in Peru, the channels through which these inequalities persist remain poorly identified. The research presented in this focus aims to contribute to understanding these channels by scrutinizing the role played by aspirations in the generation of educational inequality.

Two channels can drive low aspirations of indigenous people

Aspiration is commonly understood as the desire or ambition to achieve something. This concept suggests that some effort might be exerted to realise the desired aim. Therefore, aspirations are likely to determine the level of effort provided for educational attainment. If indigenous people suffer from low aspiration, they may underinvest in their education. Two reasons may explain why they can suffer from aspiration failure.

Internalization of discrimination

The first is that being indigenous may lead to lower aspiration if indigenous people internalize the discriminatory values of the criolla¹ elite. If so, their chances of attaining a high socioeconomic status would be reduced. Racial categorization used during the colonial period, when white people dominated indigenous people, has generated stigma and stereotypes (Portocarrero, 1993). From the cognitive sociology perspective, stereotypes are an ‘outgrowth of ordinary cognitive processes (...) Stereotypes, once activated, can subtly influence subsequent perception and judgment without any awareness on the part of the perceiver’ (Brubaker et al., 2004). They can affect the decision-making processes of indigenous people, who may adapt their behaviour to the expectations embedded in the stereotypes. Indigenous children may lower their aspirations by comparison with other children with the same socioeconomic background, because the discriminatory values which they have internalized negatively affect their self-esteem and their perception of their opportunities in the labour market. This can lead them to underinvest in their education. This is what is called the ‘internal channel’ hypothesis in this contribution.

Adaptation to a disadvantaged socioeconomic context

The second mechanism derives from the fact that being indigenous is associated with other forms of disadvantage, such as being poor or living in a rural environment. These ‘external constraints’ largely result from the colonial period (1514–1821) when the Spaniards

¹ Referring to people who are of Spanish descent but born in America.

introduced discriminatory practices and developed extractive institutions in Peru. These institutions concentrated power, land ownership and access to education in the hands of a small elite. By contrast, indigenous people have been confined in the poorest parts of society, with limited access to education and other opportunities to develop their human capital, thus impeding their entrance to the modern sector and their political participation. These external constraints may be the main determinant of aspiration failure, as they limit access to information and to opportunities to invest in the future. For example, indigenous children are more likely to live in remote areas, where information about occupational opportunities and access to quality education are limited. They may receive less support for their education from their parents, who are themselves poor. As a result, they may stop aspiring to high levels of education, and to prestigious occupations, that can only be reached with family support. In addition, they are often growing up in poorer neighbourhoods. The peers visible in their ‘aspiration window’ are more likely to have occupations providing low socioeconomic status.

On the external channel hypothesis, indigenous children may not aspire to become doctors because they know their chance of continuing on to further study is limited, partly because their parents would not have the funds to pay for their studies. With the internal channel hypothesis, they will not aspire to become doctors because they think that a doctor has to be ‘white’ or that they are not smart enough to succeed at medical school.

The policy implications of these two hypotheses are dramatically different. ‘Levelling the playing field’ for indigenous people – to quote the metaphor that Roemer (1998) used to define ensuring equality of opportunity – would reduce inequalities only if the external channel hypothesis is correct. If the ‘internal channel’ is predominant, policies providing equal access to human and physical capital to indigenous people would not be sufficient to break the vicious circle of poverty for them.

Aspirations are mostly shaped by the socioeconomic context rather than by discrimination

Based on these perspectives, this research investigates first whether the occupational aspirations of indigenous people differ from those of non-indigenous people in Peru, and seeks to identify the respective relevance of the internal and external channel hypotheses in the Peruvian context, while acknowledging that these two channels are not mutually exclusive. This research relies on a very rich data set, the Young Lives data, for which 678 children and their main caregiver were interviewed three times between 2002 and 2009, when the children were 8, 12 and 15 years old.

The analysis shows that indigenous children aspire on average to occupations providing lower socioeconomic status than non-indigenous children at age 8 or 12. For example, the most desired occupation at 8 years is teacher for indigenous children (41%) while non-indigenous children most often aspire to be a doctor (31%). However, the aspirations of indigenous children are quite similar to those of non-indigenous children if children from the same socioeconomic status are compared.² This last finding would not support the internal channel hypothesis. Being at the bottom of the socioeconomic stratification negatively affects aspirations for indigenous and non-indigenous children alike. This shows that ethnic

² More precisely, the level of aspiration is estimated with OLS and probit models to test whether the internal channel hypothesis is verified. Ethnic group and proxies of external constraints are introduced in the models as explanatory variables. If ethnic belonging determines youngster behaviour and decision-making as a result of the internalization of discriminatory values (the internal channel hypothesis), being indigenous should negatively and significantly affect aspirations, once external constraints are taken into account. We find that the coefficient of being indigenous becomes non-significant when proxies of external constraints are introduced into the models.

discrimination is not important in the development of aspiration today. But over the long term, it has shaped socioeconomic stratification, which seems to be the main predictor of children's occupational aspirations.

Aspiration impacts learning achievement

In addition, we show that high aspirations at age 12 have a positive impact on progress in the mastery of Spanish, the official teaching language, for children between ages 12 and 15. Our estimates indicate that the lower the aspiration of the children, the lower their progress in language. This means that aspiration failure is an additional channel for the persistence of inequality between ethnic groups, exacerbating the effect of socioeconomic background on educational achievement. Indeed, the socioeconomic background of indigenous children affects their school learning in a direct way, as demonstrated in the literature, but it also has an indirect effect by shaping the aspirations driving their effort to study in school.

Consequently, policies that aim at alleviating the external constraints faced by indigenous people are likely to contribute to enhancing their aspirations. They could have an incentive effect on the effort that children make to improve their socioeconomic status, as well as a direct effect on their educational achievement. In other words, influencing aspiration may have a multiplier effect on policy which seeks to break the vicious circle of poverty for indigenous people by levelling the playing field for them.

Policies which act directly on the aspirations of disadvantaged children, including indigenous children, could also contribute to reducing educational inequality. Expanding disadvantaged children's perception of the opportunities for their lives could positively affect their educational outcomes.

The validity of these results should be tested in other contexts. The challenges that indigenous people face in Peru are shared with other indigenous populations in Latin America, and evidence for the internalization of ethno-racial discrimination in aspiration formation may be found in other countries. But the prevalence of a contemporaneous hierarchy mostly based on socioeconomic status could be specific to Peru, where the concept of ethnic identity is particularly fluid. Peru has a low level of politicization of ethnic cleavages, and by comparison with Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia and Ecuador, has few important social movements based on ethnic identity (Sulmont, 2011). Peru's low levels of mobilization on the basis of ethnic identity may be associated with a lack of resonance of the ethnic group notion among indigenous people themselves. This would suggest that ethnic-based hierarchy is unimportant in shaping aspiration. This article opens up a new research avenue in order to understand the persistence of major disadvantage among indigenous people worldwide, and calls for empirical studies of their aspiration in other contexts.

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