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Why inclusion and equality pay off for all of us

Fostering inclusion and combating inequality should concern everyone — the resulting long-term problems affect society as a whole

In February 2020, one major factor that has been nearly forgotten by now contributed to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus in northern Italy. Tens of thousands of Chinese garment workers without valid residence status, who were working in the country's major fashion capitals under sometimes inhumane conditions, had neither health insurance nor access to healthcare. When they became infected, they could neither be tested for free nor adequately isolated.

Because of high costs and fear of deportation, their illness remained untreated and the virus was quickly passed on in the cramped dwellings and workplaces. This had dramatic consequences not only for the affected group of marginalised, undocumented migrants, but the entire Italian population.

This example from the beginning of the corona crisis makes it clear how important low-threshold access to the healthcare system is for everyone living in the country, regardless of residence status. At the height of the first wave of Covid-19, an article in the renowned medical journal *The Lancet* concluded that 'health protection relies not only on a well functioning health system with universal coverage, but also on social inclusion, justice, and solidarity.... Division and fear of others will lead to worse outcomes for all.'

Inequality harms everyone

But even when there is no global pandemic, it's in our interest to reduce inequalities and to ensure that 'We' includes previously excluded persons and groups. There is ample empirical evidence to support this: if we end exclusion and strengthen the weakest members of our society, we strengthen everyone.
At first glance, this may seem to be a far-fetched fantasy of social

romanticism. After all, from a purely pragmatic point of view, when you are a member of the top income bracket it doesn't matter how much (or little) your fellow citizens earn, whether they enjoy the same access to basic rights as you, and whether they have been born with the same opportunities. What's most important is that you have your swimming pool, your villa, and your SUV.

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But if the result is that you can only enjoy all this luxury within the narrow confines of your gated community – as is the case, for example, in South Africa or parts of the US – then the question arises as to how you benefit from belonging to the privileged 'We' when so many other people are blatantly excluded.

Crime rates rise with inequality

In fact, numerous empirical findings show that countries with greater social inequality also have a higher crime rate. The higher the so-called Gini coefficient, an index for measuring the (in)equality in the distribution of wealth or income within and between individual countries, the higher the murder rates. This simple statistical correlation – proven many times, including in extensive studies by the World Bank – relates to the fact that an increase in inequality causes low-skilled men in particular to lose certain social status markers, including a good job, a secure income, and the opportunity to feed their families.

Unemployment and the associated loss of status provide an ideal breeding ground for crimes that arise from the feeling of not belonging. These include, first and foremost, murder and manslaughter, which are often based on emotional rejection or an offended sense of honour. An analysis by the FBI shows that around half of all US homicides are not associated with another crime (drug dealing, robbery, domestic violence or financial disputes), but rather fall within the category of 'other argument' – the simple fact that the killer's sense of honour was offended.

The rate of possession of arms and the social significance of 'honour' rise with increasing social inequality and are thus caused more by exclusion than cultural or religious factors. When the exclusion of people deprives them of the opportunity to gain social status and social recognition and to advance personally and professionally, men in particular resort to other ways of gaining respect that are rooted in deep-seated patriarchal structures.

The systemic costs of structural racism

In the US, there is now a separate field of research devoted to the systemic costs of structural discrimination and inequality borne by all citizens (and not just Black people). There are countless drastic examples in the 250-year history of the United States. For example, as part of the constitutionally mandated desegregation in the late 1950s, when faced with the prospect of opening up to Black people, numerous publicly financed facilities, from swimming pools to parks, were instead closed – contrary to the intention behind desegregation legislation.

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City officials preferred to accept the fact that white people no longer had recreational areas available than to agree to shared use of those facilities and, along with it, increased contact between people of different skin colour. To this day, many of the facilities that were closed back then, including entire zoos and amusement parks, have never been reopened or rebuilt.

This course of action cannot be explained either economically or rationally, but it does show how pervasive and lasting structural racism is and what its real cost is for all people, even if some individuals benefit from it because they are white.

Towards expanding the 'We'

The list of negative effects of exclusion and inequality for all inhabitants of a country, regardless of their actual skin colour or their specific wealth and property situation, could be continued indefinitely. Exclusion and marginalisation of individual social groups erode trust in laws and institutions, damage mental and physical health, increase excessive consumption, drug dealing and obesity, have a negative effect on working hours and lead to a higher rate of incarceration. They result in poorer policymaking and poorer economic conditions.

Therefore, it is not only those who were previously excluded that benefit from a larger, more inclusive 'We'. Even those who, because of their ethnic origin, gender, skin colour, religion, or other characteristics, have always been part of this 'We' and were allowed to enjoy the privileges that go along with it, also derive immediate benefits when the formerly 'others' are accepted are part of 'We'.

To put it bluntly, it's important to stand up for the radical opening and expansion of the 'We', not only out of noble motives of moral courage and solidarity, but simply because of ordinary self-interest. As the above examples clearly illustrate, it can be empirically proven beyond doubt that everyone benefits when not only privileged groups, but each and every individual has access to education, health and, employment. After all, a more equal world is also a safer, healthier and more liveable world – for everyone.

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