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international social science council

## World Social Science Report 2016

# The role of aspirations in the exclusion of Peruvian indigenous children



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(New York, USA, 2013)

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# 34. The role of aspirations in the exclusion of Peruvian indigenous children

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*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. Relying on the Young Lives dataset, I find that indigenous children do not limit their aspirations when compared with non-indigenous children with the same socio-economic background. Findings suggest that they do not have internalized racial schemas about their opportunities. However, aspirations are a channel through which inequality persists between ethnic groups, exacerbating the effect of socio-economic status on educational achievement. Indeed, socio-economic status predicts levels of aspiration, which in turn affects progress in language mastery.*

This contribution highlights a particular mechanism which underlies the exclusion of indigenous people in Peru. To be precise, it analyses how aspirations contribute to the persistence of inequality between ethnic groups.

With the adoption of the UN 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 has disclosed the large disadvantage that affects indigenous people worldwide, and in Latin America in particular.

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 between indigenous and non-indigenous people remains as high as it was ten years ago. Indigenous people have less access to education, particularly good education, and opportunities for indigenous people in the labour market are even more limited. Although inequalities that affect indigenous people are widely documented, the mechanisms at play in the persistence of these inequalities remain poorly understood.

My aim is to contribute to understanding these mechanisms by scrutinizing the role played by aspirations in the generation of educational inequality.

## Assumptions concerning the cause of low aspiration

Aspiration is commonly understood as the desire or ambition to achieve something. This concept suggests that some effort might be exerted to realize the desired aim. This suggests that 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.

The first is that being indigenous may lead to lower aspiration if indigenous people internalize the discriminatory values of the *criolla*<sup>1</sup> elite. If so, their chances of attaining a high socio-economic 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 socio-economic 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 I call the 'internal channel' hypothesis.

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 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 to the poorest parts of society, with limited access to education and other opportunities to develop their human capital, which has impeded 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 socio-economic 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.

### The research carried out

Based on these perspectives, this research investigated first whether the aspirations of indigenous people differ from those of non-indigenous people in Peru. If it found that they do, it planned to seek 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. Then it addressed the question of whether low aspiration leads to personal underinvestment in education.

To tackle these issues, I relied on a very rich data set, the Young Lives data,<sup>2</sup> for which 678 children and their main caregiver were interviewed three times, when the children were 8, 12 and 15 years old.

The analysis of this data showed that indigenous children aspire on average to occupations providing lower socio-economic status than non-indigenous children at age 8 or 12. However, the aspirations of indigenous children are quite similar to those of non-indigenous children if children of the same socio-economic status are compared.<sup>3</sup> This last finding would not support the internal channel hypothesis. Being at the bottom of the socio-economic stratification negatively affects aspirations for indigenous and non-indigenous children alike. This shows that ethnic discrimination is not important in the development of aspiration today. But over the long term, it has shaped socio-economic stratification, which seems to be the main predictor of children's occupational aspirations.

In addition, the analysis of data collected suggests 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. Progress in Spanish is measured by the variation between the beginning and the end of the academic year in a score measuring vocabulary acquisition in

Spanish (the Peabody Picture of Vocabulary Test, or PPVT test). To identify the causal effect of aspiration on these educational outcomes, we adopted an identification strategy based on the method of instrumental variable (IV).<sup>4</sup> 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 socio-economic background on educational achievement. Indeed, the socio-economic 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 socio-economic 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 that act directly on the aspirations of indigenous children could also contribute to filling the gap in education between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Peru. Expanding indigenous children's perception of the opportunities for their lives could positively affect their educational outcomes.

The validity of our 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 socio-economic 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.

### Acknowledgement

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This research has received funding from the NOPOOR project ([www.nopoor.eu](http://www.nopoor.eu)) under the FP7 of the European Commission. Full results of this research have been published in the review *World Development* (see Pasquier-Doumer and Risso Brandon, 2015).

### Notes

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1. Referring to people who are of Spanish descent but born in America.
2. Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty led by a team at the University of Oxford and funded by UK aid from the DFID and by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)). The data are collected in four countries: Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Viet Nam, with two cohorts of children being surveyed, a younger cohort and an older cohort, born in 2001–02 and 1994–95 respectively. They were first surveyed in 2002, and then every four years. Twenty districts in fourteen regions are included in the sampling in Peru.
3. More precisely, the level of aspiration is estimated with ordinary least squares (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 found that the coefficient of being indigenous becomes non-significant when proxies of external constraints are introduced into the models.
4. See Pasquier-Doumer and Risso Brandon (2015) for more details.

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**This article features in the World Social Science Report 2016, UNESCO and the ISSC, Paris.**

The *World Social Science Report 2016* was published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France and the International Social Science Council (ISSC), 1 rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15, France.

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Original title: *World Social Science Report 2016 –  
Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World* – ISBN 978-92-3-100164-2



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The *World Social Science Report 2016* is a collaborative effort made possible by the support and contributions of many people. It was financed by generous contributions from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), UNESCO, as part of its Framework Agreement with the ISSC, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), as well as the European Science Foundation (ESF), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), the Research Council of Norway, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, and the Swedish Research Council.

Graphic and cover design: Corinne Hayworth

Typeset and printed by: UNESCO

*The World Social Science Report 2016 was prepared by the ISSC and the IDS and co-published with UNESCO*

The Report is available online at: [en.unesco.org/wssr2016](http://en.unesco.org/wssr2016)  
Hard copies are available from UNESCO Publishing:  
[http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code\\_Livre=5160&change=E](http://publishing.unesco.org/details.aspx?&Code_Livre=5160&change=E)

This report should be cited as follows: ISSC, IDS and UNESCO (2016), *World Social Science Report 2016, Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris.



The Report is supported by The Swedish International  
Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)