

61. Inequalities and protests

Isabel Ortiz and Sara Burke

In recent years, the world has been shaken by protests, from the Arab Spring to the 'Indignant' in Europe, from Occupy to food riots. There have been periods in history when large numbers of people rebelled about the way things were, demanding change, such as in 1848, 1917 or 1968; today we are experiencing another period of rising outrage and discontent, and some of the largest protests in world history.

An analysis of 843 recent world protests reflects a steady increase in the overall number of protests every year, from 2006 (59 protests) to mid-2013 (112 protests in only half a year). Following the onset of the global financial and economic crisis, there has been a major increase in protests, beginning in 2010 with the adoption of austerity measures in all world regions. The major grievances of protestors relate to economic and social justice, and range from demanding real democracy, public services and civil rights to opposing international financial institutions, corporate rent-seeking and corruption (*Figure 61.1*).

Not only is the number of protests increasing, but also the number of protesters. Crowd estimates suggest that thirty-seven events had 1 million or more protesters; some of those may well be the largest protests in history (for instance, 100 million in India in 2013, and 17 million in Egypt, also in 2013).

A profile of demonstrators reveals that it is not only traditional protesters such as activists and union members who are demonstrating. On the contrary, middle classes, young people, older persons and other social groups are actively protesting in most countries because of lack of trust and disillusionment with the current political and economic system. They are increasingly joining activists from all kinds of movements, not only in marches and rallies (the most common methods of civil protest, in 437 events), but also in a new framework of civil disobedience that includes occupation of squares and road blockades to raise awareness about their demands (a total of 219 occupations of public spaces).

Contrary to public perception, violence and vandalism or looting appears in only 8.9 per cent of world protests. Of violent riots, 48 per cent occurred in low-income countries, mostly prompted by spikes in food and energy prices.

Demonstrators mostly address their grievances to national governments, as they are the legitimate policy-making institutions that should respond to citizens. But it is also worth noting the rising number of protests on global issues. Protesters demand that policy-makers at national and global levels take public responsibility for economic, social and environmental policies that benefit all, instead of just the few.

However, governments often respond to protest with repression. Repression leading to arrests, injuries and deaths is well documented in over half of the protest episodes between 2006 and 2013.

If governments aim to be legitimate, they need to listen to the messages coming from protesters and act on their demands. The majority of grievances, from reducing inequalities and corporate influence to promoting jobs, social protection, public services and racial justice, are in full accordance with United Nations proposals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

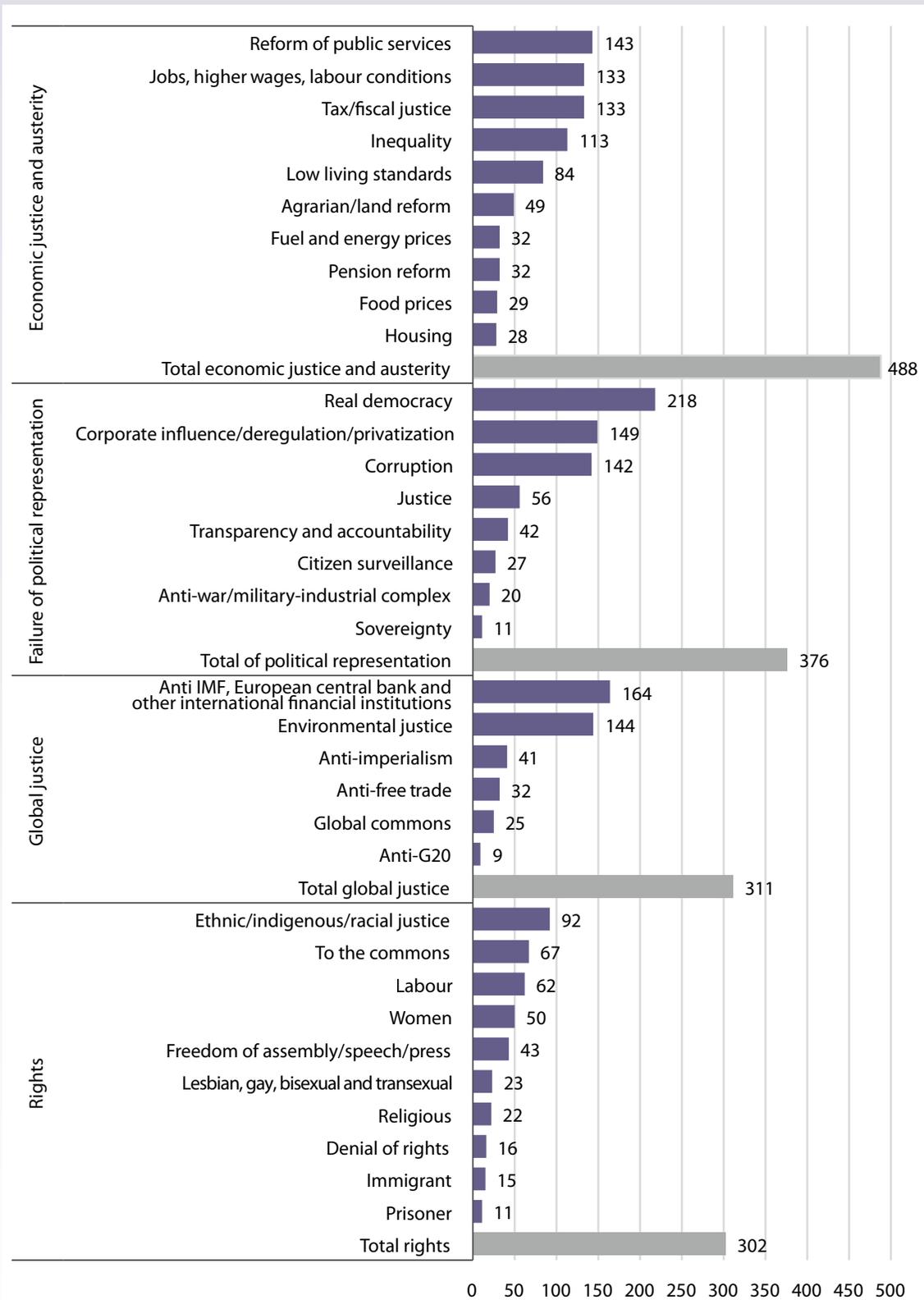
Acknowledgement

This contribution is based on *World Protests 2006–2013* by Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Hernán Cortés, published by the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia University and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York in 2013.

■ **Isabel Ortiz** (Spain) is director of the Global Social Justice Program at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue, Columbia University, New York.

■ **Sara Burke** (USA) is senior policy analyst at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New York.

Figure 61.1 Number of protests by grievance or demand, 2006–13



Source: I. Ortiz, S. Burke, M. Berrada and H. Cortes. 2013. *World Protests 2006–2013*. New York, Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Data correct to 31 July 2013.

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.

© ISSC, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and UNESCO, 2016

Original title: *World Social Science Report 2016 –*

Challenging Inequalities: Pathways to a Just World – ISBN 978-92-3-100164-2



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO, the ISSC or the IDS concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The *World Social Science Report 2016* editorial team is responsible for the choice of articles and the overall presentation. Each author is responsible for the facts contained in his/her article and the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO, the ISSC or the IDS and do not commit these Organizations.

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

Hard copies are available from UNESCO Publishing:

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.



SWEDEN

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