

## Policy Brief

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# How horizontal inequalities lead to conflict in migration countries

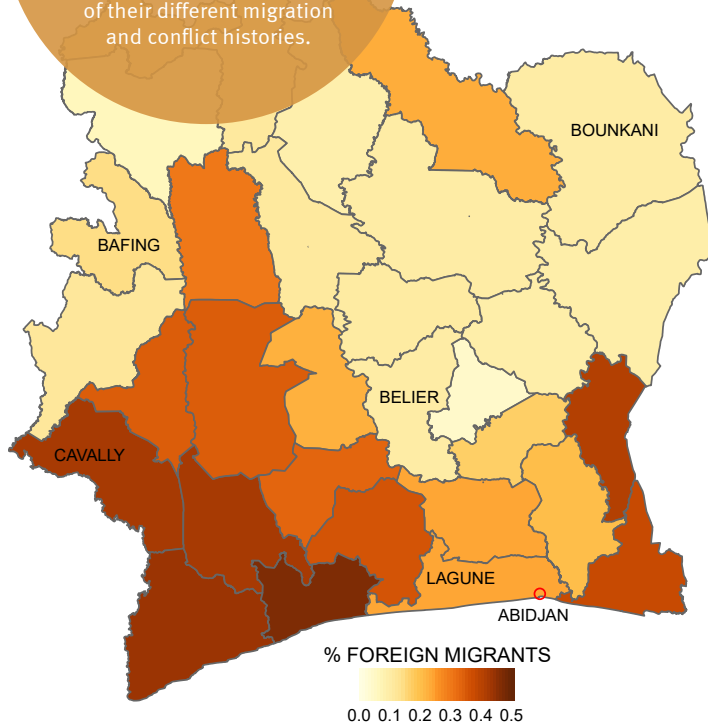
Structural horizontal inequalities in contexts marked by sustained migration flows contribute to the increased chance of nativist violence. The lack of attention to these two issues has hampered efforts to promote peaceful relations between migrants and natives, as our research in Côte d'Ivoire shows.

The picture above was taken at Grand-Berebi on the south-east coast in Côte d'Ivoire. It shows a village where most males are fishermen. Their boats carry flags of different countries for decorative purposes and as a reminder of their places of origin or dreams. © Abbas Makke

### KEY MESSAGES

- Political violence between natives and immigrants has been observed in many countries. However, the mechanisms underpinning the link between migration and political violence remain poorly understood.
- Horizontal inequalities, between natives and migrants, are key factors in understanding when and where violence against migrants breaks out.
- In order to prevent the outbreak of nativist violence, we recommend that policy-makers take steps to promote the political and economic inclusion of indigenous groups, specifically in the context of high-migrations.

Field research took place in five different regions of Côte d'Ivoire: Bafing, Béliér, Bounkani, Cavally, and Lagune. The study sites were selected on the basis of their different migration and conflict histories.



The West African Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, a former French Colony, is a country of migration. Historically, the country has been an oasis of stability and economic development in the region, but since the 1990s several episodes of violence have attracted international attention.

While episodes of nativist violence were perhaps most evident in the 1990s and early 2000s, the political significance of migration has remained high to this day, as the recent outbreaks of violence in the western and northern regions of the country show. Between 2012 and 2018, we counted about a dozen individual cases of communal violence in Côte d'Ivoire (Glodé et al. 2018).

Migration is often accompanied by political unrest, but little is known about the underlying mechanisms. We have therefore decided to investigate the case of Côte d'Ivoire, as migration and inequalities between different social groups are relevant for understanding local processes of violence.

Using a case study from Côte d'Ivoire, we show how horizontal inequalities and their perceptions are an important missing link in understanding when and where nativist violence erupts.

### Overview of the history of migration

The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire is situated at the Gulf of Guinea. The country is about the size of Poland and is home to over twenty

**Horizontal inequalities** are inequalities in the economic, social or political spheres or in cultural status between ethnic groups. In other words, they are structural inequalities between clearly defined ethnic and religious groups, for example in terms of political rights or economic wealth. Although conceptually similar, they differ from individual inequalities, inasmuch as the unit of comparison is the group, and not the individual (Stewart 2008). Recent research has found robust evidence for a link between horizontal inequalities and civil wars (Cederman et al. 2013).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research is based on a qualitative research approach and explores two main research questions. Firstly, we are interested in understanding when immigration results in violence between native and migrant people, and secondly, we try to explain how inequalities between different ethnic groups condition the emergence of nativist violence.

Our study was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Data were collected in the main regions of the country (Bounkani in the north-east of the country, Bafing in the north-west, Béliér in the Centre, Cavally in the west, and Lagune in the south). Study sites were selected because they have witnessed episodes of nativist violence in recent times, specifically after the 2010/11 electoral crisis.

Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted during field research in 2017/18 to capture perceptions of political, economic and social inequalities in Côte d'Ivoire. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with local administrative authorities, village authorities, community leaders and members of different local and migrant communities.

Focus groups were held separately with members of indigenous and non-indigenous communities (natives, internal migrants, foreigners).

million people. The borders of the former French colony were arbitrarily drawn, with little attention to the pre-existing settlement areas of the various African ethnic groups living in the region.

About a quarter of the population in Côte d'Ivoire are immigrants. Furthermore, a significant part of the Ivoirian population is descended from people who migrated earlier into present-day Côte d'Ivoire. International immigrants mainly come from the countries of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States).<sup>1</sup> In addition to international migration, there has also been considerable internal migration, especially from the central and northern regions of the country to the south and western areas. Côte d'Ivoire was already an immigration country before the country gained independence. With rapid economic development and a policy of encouraging migration to support the cacao and coffee culture industry, immigration increased rapidly after independence in 1960 (Chauveau 2000, Michell 2011). Today, the ethnic landscape in the country is made up of a mosaic of more than sixty ethnic groups, which may roughly be classified into four major linguistic and cultural groups: the Akan, the Krou, the North and South Mandé and the Voltaïque (Gur) groups.<sup>2</sup>

### Intergroup inequalities as a key determinant of migration-related violence

Migration flows in Côte d'Ivoire are predominantly rural, but unevenly distributed across the country, with a high concentration in the Abidjan District, and in the west and south-west forest regions where agricultural crops (coffee and cocoa) are cultivated. Overall, the activities of organised migrant communities are primarily employed in agriculture and trading activities.

<sup>1</sup> Burkina Faso is the first country of origin of immigrants with 61.5% of all migrants. Mali ranks second with 17.4% of these immigrants (17.4%). Guinea and Niger are in 3rd and 4th place with 4.7% and 4% of the immigrant population respectively (Institut National de la Statistique 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The Akan roughly located in the east and south-east is the largest group (39 % of the country population) followed by the Mandé in the north-east (28% of the population), the Voltaïque (Gur) in the north-west (21% of the population) and the Krou in the west and south-west; 9% of the population) (Institut National de la Statistique 2014).





As in the other regions of Western Africa, land is jointly owned by the communities and routinely administered by traditional authorities; a legacy of the colonial period. Therefore, migration-related violence in Côte d'Ivoire, as in other African countries, is strongly linked to scarce economic resources, in particular land ownership. As part of a policy to promote migration in support of economic development, the Ivorian government, after independence, facilitated migrants' access to land in the western and south-western regions of the country, often bypassing the local population (Chauveau 2000, Boone 2014).

While overt nativist sentiments were relatively muted until the early 1990s, the effects of the economic recession following the collapse of cocoa and coffee markets, and the shortage of land due to a high demographic growth, led to renewed grievances against migrants.

Resentment against migrants in the west was further reinforced by a history of political marginalisation of the Krou peoples, an ethno-linguistic assembly of smaller groups based in western Côte d'Ivoire (Bete, Guere, Krumen, Neyo, etc.), and the perception that the state had given excessive preference to migrants in terms of access to land (Akindès 2004, Boone 2014). Moreover, locals also resented the perceived economic success of migrants.

The return to multi-party elections in 1990 and the fierce political competition that followed, saw politicians making appeals along ethnic lines, including calls to revoke the citizenship of Ivoirians of northern origins. The 1998 reform of the legal framework governing land rights, which shifted state support away from migrants to native communities, marked a watershed and ushered in a wave of violence aiming at displacing migrants (Chauveau 2000, Mitchell 2018). The cause of the dynamic, which led to the outbreak of violence in the 1990s, was thus the existence of historical horizontal inequalities between indigenous and migrant groups, particularly in land ownership, which had deeply angered native residents in the west and south-west of the country.

### **Migration and intergroup inequalities continue to matter in understanding the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire**

While previous research has extensively documented how land inequalities had a dramatic effect on the outbreak of nativist violence in the 1990s, our field research in four locations shows that horizontal inequalities persist and are important determinants of conflict (Yao Gnabali et al. 2019).

As an illustration of a recent outbreak of violence that continues to have an impact today, we discuss the events of March 2016 in the Bounkani region of north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire (Yao Gnabali et al. 2019) – see example on next page.

As the example illustrates, violence is particularly likely to occur at times when changes in the political context makes it possible to challenge existing relationships between migrants and natives. We can therefore state that the unequal treatment of different population groups by the state, especially the indigenous population, in a country of migration favours the emergence of nativist violence.

These findings are not limited to Côte d'Ivoire. A number of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been affected by nativist violence in recent years. In fact, findings from recent research in sixteen Sub-Saharan African countries suggest that political inequalities have an important moderating influence in determining whether natives are likely to react violently to the presence of a large migrant community (Cottier 2018).

### **Policy recommendations**

Our research calls on policy-makers and stakeholders to promote political and economic inclusion in order to reduce the risk of violent conflict spurred by the high inflow of migrants. In particular, land right should be recognised and adequately protected by the state. In addition, particular caution is needed during times of upheaval and change in the national government, as such changes can shape perceptions and create unrest at the local level, as the Bounkani case study shows.

## HOW NATIVIST VIOLENCE EMERGES – THE CONFLICT IN BOUNKANI AS AN ILLUSTRATION

The recent conflict between the native Koulango and the Lobi migrants in north-eastern Côte d'Ivoire illustrates how inequalities between ethnic groups remain a key determinant of nativist violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Originally from present-day neighbouring Burkina Faso, Lobi people have been gradually migrating into northern Côte d'Ivoire since the 17th century and have settled in the area in agreement with Koulango traditional authorities. Although overtime the Lobi came to hold a demographic majority and dominate the local economy, political power at the local level, and more crucially, control of the land, has rested firmly with Koulango customary authorities. During the civil war, however, both groups supported the Rebels, the "Forces Nouvelles".

The aftermath of the civil war ushered a change in the relative status of both groups, mostly to the advantage of the Lobi. Under Alassane Ouattara's presidency, several Lobi were nominated to key positions in the government and central administration. While the grievances of the Lobi people centered around the continued political domination of Koulango at the local level and ownership of the land, native Koulango deeply resented the new political assertiveness of the Lobi. Specifically, attempts to establish a new chiefdom, which Koulango feared would result in a domination by the Lobi, paved the way for the outbreak of sustained violence. While the immediate outbreak of the violence is related to a local dispute between Lobi farmers and Peuhl's pastoralists, the violence escalated significantly, when the local Koulango chief refused to sanction the incriminated Peuhl pastoralists.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

**r4d Ethnic Power Relations Project Page**  
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