

Statebuilding, ownership and legitimacy: the dilemmas and contradictions of external state building

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Donors have become increasingly involved in state building, both in countries that have experienced violent conflicts and elsewhere. Generally speaking, I think it is fair to say that the results of these efforts have been disappointing. In the following, I will discuss some of the possible reasons for the lack of success in statebuilding efforts, of which several are related to issues of ownership and legitimacy.

First, however, a brief description of the typical model of state building that underlies donors' engagement. At a minimum, state building involves establishing the state's monopoly over the means of violence with control over the country's entire territory and with an effective administration. Thus, a strengthening of the state's security sector (police, army) and administration are central elements of state building. To achieve such a strengthening, state building programmes include integration of all armed groups into a national army, strengthening of police and military capacity and general capacity building of the public sector.

However, existing programmes of state building do not simply aim to build a state in this minimal sense. They seek to establish a particular kind of state, a liberal one. Liberal in this context means a state that a) upholds the rule of law; b) is democratic; and c) is based on a market economy. This is clearly revealed by the type of activities that are undertaken. In addition to capacity building in the security sector, projects of state building typically include support to 'good governance', rule of law, democratization and elections and protection of human rights.

We may identify four reasons why attempts at state-building have failed. First, the resources made available have been insufficient. Second, donor policies have been hampered by a lack of knowledge of local conditions and unwillingness to adapt policies to local context. Third, the model of state-building on which the effort has been based has been flawed and contradictory. And fourth, the attempts at state-building have run counter to the interests of key domestic actors.

Resources and organisation

The first and probably least important explanation for this failure could be that donors have not had sufficient resources. However, there was never a realistic chance of obtaining sufficient resources. For political reasons, it would seem extremely unlikely that the peacekeepers would be given anything like the resources needed. This is especially so when the fate of the country has no direct bearing on what is seen as the donor countries' own national interests. While donors may have a genuine wish to help recipient countries, it is a fact that donor policies and actions are always to some extent shaped by other considerations as well. These may include economic or geopolitical interests as well as a wish to enhance their own international standing by being seen as generous or compassionate. Thus, while policies of development, including state-building policies, are always justified with reference to moral concerns and the best interests of recipient countries, donors may be equally motivated by a wish to promote their own national interests.

More importantly, the idea that donors have failed because of a lack of resources implies that it could have succeeded if it had been given more resources. Whether this is the case depends on what one means by 'success'. If success means prevention of violent conflict, an increase in resources could probably have led to success. But if success is to be measured by the standards of the liberal peacebuilding model, it is highly doubtful that more resources would have led to a successful outcome. While some violent conflict could have been prevented by stationing a large number of soldiers in different parts of the country, it would not have led to effective states.

The same applies to explanations of failure that focus on how donors have organised their efforts. Thus, even if donor efforts had been better organised or coordinated, or if the sequencing of activities had been different, it is not likely that the outcomes had been significantly different.

One Size Fits All

The second reason for failure is that external actors tend to rely on standardized approaches to state-building across countries. Thus, it is assumed that the same model of state-building can be applied everywhere, regardless of local circumstances. This is the assumption underlying the liberal peace model as well as

donor programmes of capacity building, good governance and the like. Such a standardized approach tends to lead to the neglect of the specific conditions found in each state.

However, while this critique is valid enough, one should not draw the conclusion that the main problem with external state-building is that it has relied on standardized strategies. This would imply that the problem could be overcome if donors were more knowledgeable of local conditions and adapted their strategies accordingly. Such adaptation is fundamentally compatible with the current, depoliticizing approach to state-building. The only difference is that it requires more sensitivity to context in the choice of means to be employed. It does not suggest that there is anything wrong with the basic model itself. However, taking context seriously implies that it is not just the means (policies, strategies) that must be adapted to context, but the ends as well. Context should not only determine how donors seek to help build liberal democratic states, but also determines what type of state one can reasonably expect to help build.

A Flawed Model

The third explanation is that the model of state building on which donor policies have been based is flawed and contradictory. In these programmes, the end state is taken for granted, as are the means to be applied to achieve that end. The end is to create a liberal state (with rule of law, protection of human rights, good governance, market economy), and the means employed are: establishing a government of national unity, capacity building, training of officials, financial support and human resources. This support to a government is to be provided on conditions determined by the donors.

This implies that the absence of anything like a modern state in many countries is seen as a problem to be addressed, in order to enable a 'normal' state to emerge. What is never questioned is the aim of creating a liberal–democratic state. Instead, this aim is treated as a given, determined prior to and independently of the political process. The state will then be seen as an external imposition, since it is not allowed to emerge through a political process that involves key domestic actors and to take root in domestic social relations. If it turns out that governments and citizens in the countries concerned do not want such a state, it is seen as a problem of local 'perceptions' that need to be changed. The question then becomes how local perceptions can be changed, and how domestic actors can be brought to support the

aims of the state-builders.

But by operating with the fixed, non-negotiable conception of what the state eventually should look like, and by refusing to let the domestic political process determine the nature of the state, donors in practice undermine self-determination and national ownership in the states they seek to strengthen. States become accountable towards donors rather than towards their own citizens, thus undermining the links between state and society that could help strengthen ownership and legitimacy. By refusing to let the domestic political process determine the nature of the state that should be built, they undermine the prospects for building domestic support and legitimacy for their project. And without such support, the project cannot succeed.

Domestic politics and interests

The fourth reason for failure is related to power and political economy. For state building to succeed, key domestic actors must share the goal of creating the type of state that state-builders want. Successful state-building depends on the existence of a domestic social base that makes it possible to maintain stability without using state resources to buy support through patronage. The possibility of succeeding in such a project will depend mainly on internal power relations, and on the creation of a political alliance consisting of social forces with both an interest in strengthening the state and sufficient power to do so. If we assume that regime survival will be a, if not the, primary concern of rulers, it follows that state formation depends on the compatibility of regime interests and power on the one hand, and state formation on the other. Thus, if regime interests are best served by strengthening state institutions, it is likely that such a policy will be attempted.

Conversely, if there is a real or perceived contradiction between regime interests and state-building, it will not. If regime survival does not depend on strengthening the state, and may in fact be threatened by it, while regimes have alternative strategies for political survival (patronage, corruption, aid, mineral extraction), state-building is not likely to be pursued. In many countries, ruling regimes have maintained control by incorporating existing elite groups into the patronage networks inherited from the colonial era, laying the groundwork for the emergence of weak neo-patrimonial state. Regimes of neo-patrimonial states secure the support they need, not through the pursuit of state policies, but by using state

resources to offer material rewards to clients in return for political support.

Governments in weak states have strong interests in simultaneously preserving the government and preserving its weakness. The preservation of the government gives them access to state resources and donor funds and maintains their formal political power. At the same time, the state's very weakness is a resource, both because it makes it possible for elite politicians to get access to economic resources, and because it enables them to maintain their own armed groups (sometimes even within the formally integrated national army). It is well known that many actors (states, companies, warlords) profit from dealing in (and with) weak, conflict-ridden states. Many groups therefore see continued conflict as being in their interest. Thus, donor policies contradict the interests of key actors. In such situations, the prospects of donor success in promoting state-building are bleak. Establishing a government of national unity will not remove the underlying causes of conflict. Instead, the outcome of power sharing is that the different factions divide the state and its resources between them, thus reproducing the patrimonial system, which caused the state's weakness in the first place. This means that the price one may have to pay for peace, at least in the short to medium term, could be the reproduction of state weakness. Thus the state will persist, but so will its weakness.

Concluding remarks

Of these four reasons for failure, I think the last two (the contradiction of building liberal state from the outside and domestic political interests) are the most important. Both of these are related to the idea of national ownership.

National ownership implies self-determination. Further it implies that the ruling regime is committed to the policies it follows and that it sees these policies as compatible with its interests.

I think that donors are right in believing that national ownership is a condition for successful statebuilding/peacebuilding. One reason for this is that without real ownership, statebuilding will not be seen as legitimate. But if statebuilding of the kind initiated by donors is not seen by the regime as serving its interests, national ownership cannot be created by donors. This is a contradiction in terms, since a programme imposed by external actors will not be considered as nationally owned. And if the regime considers a programme of statebuilding as an external imposition, it will not be committed to the programme.

The only way donors can contribute to establishing national ownership is by designing programmes in ways which allow domestic actors the freedom to determine what kind of state they want. Only then is there a chance that the state and statebuilding will be seen as legitimate. But if local power relations are such that it is impossible to create a political alliance with an interest in and sufficient power to enforce policies that can lead to the establishment of an effective state, there is little donors can do about it.

This points to the need to question two of the basic assumptions underlying contemporary state building. First, the idea that a liberal state can be created anywhere, regardless of the specific social and political conditions found in a given country must be rejected. In conflict-ridden societies where many groups benefit from the reproduction of conflict and of state weakness, and where there are no strong groups with an interest in the establishment of such a state, this may simply be impossible. In other words, the model of a liberal democratic state may not be as universally applicable as assumed. Second, and related, the possibility of externally driven state-building may have been seriously overestimated. While it is clearly possible for donors to alleviate suffering and to prevent (or at least contain) violent conflict, the possibility of building a liberal democratic state from the outside is far from clear.

Implications for donors

Necessity of political economy analysis
Feasibility studies in advance
A warning about alignment and coherence