

Stabilization Lessons from the British Empire

Roger Myerson
University of Chicago
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"[General David Petraeus] told me that the cooperation I had engineered from the Iraqis had helped him understand how Britain had ruled half the world with a handful of Foreign Office folks and the odd sergeant major. Embarrassed, I told him that it was just about relationships, building trust and listening."

Emma Sky, *The Unraveling* (2015), p 201.

<https://tnsr.org/2022/11/stabilization-lessons-from-the-british-empire/>

http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/sblessons_ppt.pdf

When did state-building become so difficult?

Today many believe that even a global superpower with military supremacy cannot undertake missions to establish stable government in foreign countries.

But 19th century European colonizers made state-building look easy.

What can we learn from late 19th-century imperial state-builders?

(Question raised by Rory Stewart in *Can Intervention Work*, with G Knaus.)

In colonizing Africa, Britain applied & refined techniques developed in India.

Sources on state-building methodology of high imperialism in Africa:

F. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922).

A. Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority: British District Officer in Africa* (2006).

M. Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (1937).

<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/perham1937ch21.pdf>

M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996).

Management of a foreign mission for political development should rely on a decentralized team of plenipotentiary agents who monitor and respond to local political issues. (Decentralized political engagement.)

British Colonial District Officers: their roles and training

District Officers were the essential backbone of British colonial rule.

The DO's primary job was to oversee political and legal affairs in a district where he was the local plenipotentiary representative of the colonial government.

An average district often had about 50,000 inhabitants, but it had to be small enough that the DO could visit most of it in a couple of months touring on foot.

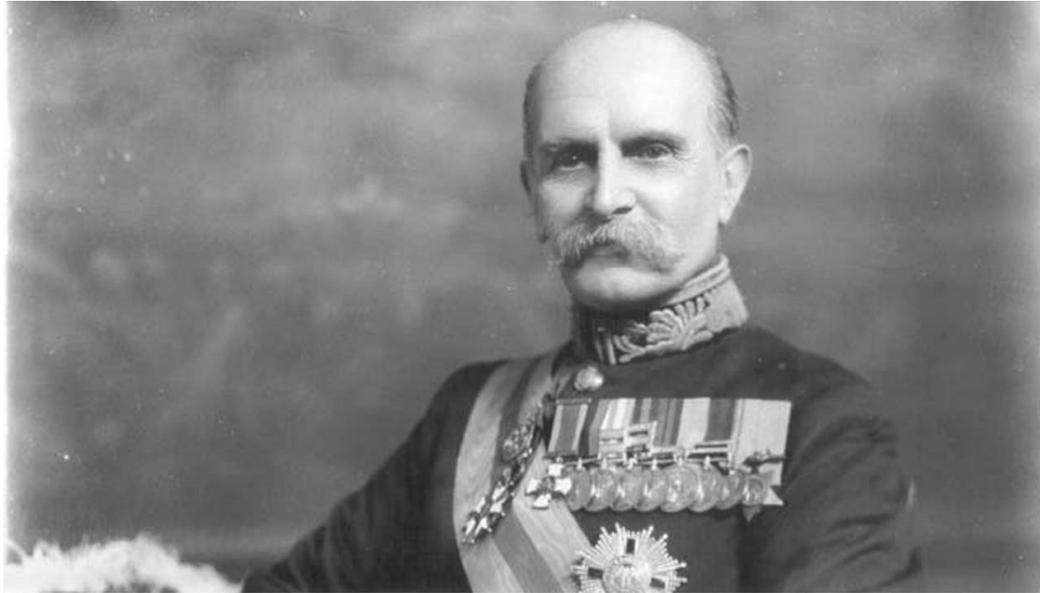
Most work done in district HQ, with indigenous clerks & messengers, but touring was also essential. (***Unrest => questions about enough touring?***)

DOs were recruited from college or army, got short courses on colonial accounts, tropical economic products, criminal law and Islamic law, hygiene & sanitation, surveying, ethnology, and languages.

First assignment as assistant DO; touring as immersion course in language. Promotion depended on passing exams in law, regulations, and languages.

DOs really needed "*unlimited patience, real sympathy for the people among whom he will work,*" "*an almost passionate concept of fair play, protection of the weak.*"

Lord Lugard's essential principles of colonial state-building



"As Faith, Hope, and Charity are to the Christian creed, so are **Decentralisation, Co-operation, and Continuity** to African administration."

—Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922) p. 113.

(Lord Lugard (1858-1945) was a leader in establishing British colonial regimes in Malawi, Uganda, and Nigeria.)

Decentralization, Continuity, and Cooperation (1)

Lugard's ***Decentralization*** referred to the delegation of local authority to the District Officers.

Each District Officer had full local authority to represent the British Empire and to exercise its power in his district.

Under *indirect rule*, traditional forms of local authority were maintained, but all their decisions were subject to review by the local District Officer.

Foreigners in the district were also subject to supervision by the District Officer.

So imperial power was geographically decentralized, but within each district it was concentrated in the hands of one officer, for whom local political development was the primary concern.

Decentralization, **Continuity**, and Cooperation (2)

Lugard's **Continuity** enabled DOs to make long-term commitments.

DOs were generally rotated after 2 years in a district.

(successor as monitor against abuse of power)

They generally also served a rotation (2/10yrs) in Governor's central secretariat. *(socialization into the administrative network).*

Senior DOs were promoted to **Provincial Commissioner (Resident)**, who supervised the DOs of typically 3 or 4 districts in a province.

Provincial Commissioners were expected to stay longer in their province, and so they served to maintain continuity of policies.

DOs reported to their supervising PC about all political deals, selection of local leaders, local fiscal accounts.

PCs reported summaries of DOs' decisions to Governor, who wrote policy memoranda to codify principles from the DOs' decisions.

If Governor was not a career DO, a Lieutenant Governor would be.

Decentralization, Continuity, and **Cooperation** (3)

Lugard's **Cooperation** directed District Officers to build an inclusive coalition, by developing trust and common interests with all significant groups in the district.

Indigenous local leaders had to be assured some benefits of power.

In Lugard's view, the primary goal of political development was to **establish leadership that could collect taxes & manage budgets.**

Chiefs & village headmen assessed taxes, DO heard complaints.

Sharing of tax revenue cemented the alliance of chiefs and colonial officials; payment of taxes confirmed the community's acceptance of their authority. (DOs played "good cop" to chiefs' "bad cop".)

Lugard's colonial practice of empowering **despotic local chiefs** (*Mamdani*) was actually contrary to this expressed principle of Cooperation.

This principle could have been better fulfilled if DOs acted to empower **local councils** with representation of all significant community groups.

Then British rule might have left a better political legacy for Africa.

Perham's 1937 prescription for the path to independence

Margery Perham (1937) called for bolder steps toward the goal of building local self-government based on their traditional institutions.

Indigenous local leaders should get *more autonomous responsibilities*, but also *more public accountability*.

Then they should be *encouraged to federate*. (*Redundant capabilities; more info!*)

Colonial peace reduced chiefs' need for broad popular support.

Registered chiefs being accountable only to the DO was convenient for the DO.

Perham focused on development from traditional institutions of local government, with only weak federal institutions at first (like America in 1776).

"There is, however, one branch into which, I believe, Africans should not enter, and that is the Administrative Service [DOs]. This should aim at being increasingly advisory in its functions. It should be regarded as the temporary scaffolding round the growing structure of native self-government. African energies should be incorporated into the structure: to build them into the scaffolding would be to create a vested interest which would make its demolition at the appropriate time very difficult." (Perham 1937 p361.)

The line between supporting local political development and controlling it is thin! African governments chose control; indigenous DOs served the center. **[IAS]**

The great shift in development assistance after WWII

From 1947, colonial government and District Officers' roles were transformed by a ***new focus on developing agencies for a sovereign national government.***

District Officers continued supporting political development with guidance & advice right up to the day when Independence put them out of a job.

But national administration in the capital took more of the DOs time, and a flood of economic development specialists formed a "second colonial occupation."

Traditional forms of local leadership, lacking accountability to anyone but the DO, were seen as obsolete institutions that should be allowed to wither.

Instead, foundations were laid for new unfamiliar institutions of a centralized state.

Strong states depend on a balanced relationship between local & national politics.

Devolving a share of power to local government ensures that every part of the nation has local leaders with a stake in the political system.

Good local leaders can show their qualifications to compete for higher offices.

But ***national leaders may prefer a weak state*** where all power is concentrated in their hands, over a strong state where they must negotiate with local elites.

Since WWII, development assistance has generally worked with and through a recognized national government, implicitly ***supporting centralization of power.***

The old form of developmental intervention by a team of local plenipotentiary agents who focused on local political development has been largely forgotten.

A contrast between two state-building interventions in Iraq

After WWI, British state-building established Kingdom of Iraq (1921-1958).

Gertrude Bell's *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1920) shows

British administration of Iraq relied on a corps of about 70 local political officers who had experience serving as District Officers in the British Empire.

Although they came with an invading army, they formed an administrative network that could monitor and respond to local political forces throughout the country.

They were overseen by a central administration with just 5 senior British officials.

It was not until six months after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that the CPA had a network of political Coordinators in each province and began soliciting weekly political reports from these 18 Governorate Coordinators.

Insurgent violence spread across Iraq during these early months of misdirection.

As a basic lesson from the British Empire, for any such state-building mission:

- (1) a ***network of district officers should have been ready*** to start working with local leaders in every part of the country from week 1 of the occupation, and
- (2) the mission's ***overall political direction should have been guided by these district officers'*** reports and recommendations from week 2 onwards.

When the mission is to build a sovereign democratic state, it is even more essential that mission management should be responsive to local political forces!

Stabilization assistance teams for the 21st century?

A global order based on mutual respect among sovereign independent nations is better than a global order based on colonial domination of large regions.

But ***global stability may require some mechanism for repairing failed states***, to prevent the spread of vulnerable gaps in the international system.

Key lessons for state-builders today from history of colonial District Officers:

When the goal of foreign assistance is political development, all foreign assistance in each locality should be under the direction of a ***district stabilization officer***, whose duty is to monitor local politics & encourage cooperation of local leaders.

Reinterpreting Lugard's three principles for state-building missions today.

Decentralization means giving one officer full power over foreign aid in a district.

Cooperation stipulates using this power to foster a broad coalition of local leaders.

Continuity suggests that long-term direction of a state-building mission should be substantially guided by its district officers, through their provincial supervisors.

In building a sovereign democratic state, the mission's political goals should depend on input from contenders for local and national power in the new state.

The team of district stabilization officers and provincial coordinators form a mechanism to get strategic input from political leaders throughout the country.

21st-century state-builders must have an exit strategy

To defeat violent insurgents, the state's supporters everywhere need confidence that rewards for loyal service will include ***long-term protection by the state.***

Officers of a permanent colonial occupation could promise such protection.

For limited-term interventions, these promises must come from indigenous leaders who can organize protection even in remote communities.

So success of a limited-term foreign state-building intervention would depend on the new state developing strong roots in local politics.

Democratic state-building missions should have a **strategy for exit.**

After a limited period, the goal of supporting political development must be replaced by respect for national political independence.

In the transition, the portion of foreign assistance directed by the team of district stabilization officers should be reduced gradually from 100% to 0.

Independent aid organizations should be encouraged to fill in where needs are identified by the national and local authorities.

Who could take responsibility for maintaining a reserve corps of district stabilization officers, trained in local government administration and languages, so that the world can be prepared for the next state-building emergency?

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