

Strengthening Local Governance in Conflict-Affected States

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Efforts by donors to build quick state capacity unwittingly undermine their own goals by creating conditions for unchecked state power that come at the expense of indigenous local leadership. This is because the international community and national authorities often neglect local politics as they work to build fragile states. What the past two decades have illustrated is that there is no short road to accountability: trust cannot be bought through provision of handpumps. It must be earned when citizens believe officials will treat them with dignity and respect.

Drawing on more than fifteen years of experience working on Afghanistan using local languages (Dari and Uzbek), including extensive fieldwork across more than 30 villages in six provinces, elite interviews, public opinion surveys, and field experiments on governance issues, I argue that intervenors made a series of faulty assumptions that hampered their ability to build legitimacy at the local level. First, rather than create a new polity and economy that reflected the often-vibrant informal structures that emerged during conflict, state builders sought to impose a kind of uniformity that brought corrupt tentacles of the state closer to society in an environment that was deeply distrustful of such authority. Second, policymakers made assumptions about local politics that were not based on evidence. Third, when aspects of local governance were considered, they were often neutered of political elements and implemented as technical assistance programs.

The future of state-building efforts is unclear. Lessons from Afghanistan should lead to more modest and, consequently, impactful policy. A more appropriate approach in fragile states is what I term polycentric state building. It begins by identifying what governance institutions work locally. These institutions can constitute the empirical foundations of public administration and governance. Political constraints are critical, as are the creation of political institutions that allow for local self-governance. Polycentric approaches are also more feasible because they acknowledge local realities as well as the primary constraint plaguing outside actors: the knowledge problem and credible commitment deficits.

Those seeking to rebuild fragile states might save money, blood, and treasure if they considered ways to make new regimes mirror lived realities of the societies rather than serving as aspirational social engineers. Local governance assistance could be more effective if communities were empowered to constitute their own rules, while new governments learned to restrain their power. This may seem counterintuitive, as outsiders and new national authorities frequently perceive the absence of the state and service delivery as the most acute problem in such unstable environments. In many cases, the biggest threat to stability is the very state officials these efforts empower.

Building states when the state is the problem

Conflicts in many societies erupt as a consequence of predatory government behavior (Bates 2008a; 2008b). This means that when the dust of conflict settles, individuals and communities are not only deeply distrustful of the state, but they have learned to live in its absence—for better or worse. For many who have lived through conflict, the state was the cause of significant pain and personal anguish. Officials at the local level were vehicles for this alienation.

The international community intervenes with a very different understanding of the power and purpose of the state. They view the state with great optimism. They celebrate its return and seek to link central government authority with subnational units. They believe that the provision of public goods in this “golden hour” will win hearts and minds (Dobbins 2007). Consequently, state-building efforts often move

full speed ahead with very little understanding of the very deep mistrust citizens have of government authorities. This means that what people may want most from their state is not service delivery, but protection from it. This is because their experience with the state over generations has been one of dark authoritarianism and predation. In Afghanistan, this problem became much more pronounced over the years as donor funds expanded the scope of the state arming its bureaucrats with huge sums of money and power, without sufficient attention to constraints on such authority. This amplified mistrust among residents, who associated state-building efforts with continued loss of personal dignity. They trusted some people in their communities but did not trust the state. They also grew to view the intervention with extraordinary mistrust.

In states affected by conflict, there are powerful dynamics that push power to the center and away from communities. First, Weberian perspectives on state formation emphasize a monopoly on violence and uniformity of rule. Second, there are pragmatic concerns among foreign patrons who prefer unity of command rather than fragmentation. For example, it is easier to report back to their capitals when they can clearly account for their resources. This is done through centralization. Third, new political leaders in these environments also prefer centralization because they view rivals outside the capital as the primary threat to their newly established authority.

Misdiagnosing the landscape

In conflict-affected environments, independent information required to inform policy is scarce and unreliable. In Afghanistan, much of the intervention was based on deeply flawed conventional wisdom. For example, the prevailing view among policymakers and some scholars was that after the Soviet invasion, Afghan society was deeply fragmented. This meant that there was a disintegration of customary governance structures (including tribal and other forms of community-based organization) (Rubin 2002; Shahrani 1986). When the intervention began, there was no problematization of this assumption. Policymakers took it as a given. Policy then proceeded as if the country represented a blank slate that must be built “whole cloth” (Fukuyama 2004).

This led to two competing and contradictory assumptions that drove policy: on the one hand society represented a tabula rasa that must be rebuilt from scratch. Aside from the pesky warlords, community and local governance was a vacuum. Because of this diagnosis, the international community believed it needed to rebuild society one village at a time. This led to monumentally grotesque and unsustainable programs that undermined the very foundations of local governance they sought to build. A second, but contradictory assumption, was that informal governance was still present, but where it existed, it was an obstacle to development because it bred patronage and illiberal norms and values. Either way, aid and the state became important vehicles to build uniformity and help the country overcome illiberal village values.

The empirical foundations of this assumption were wrong (Murtazashvili 2016). First, the country never had the kind of well-organized informal structures that mediated national politics as some imagined before the conflict. Certainly, Afghanistan was largely peaceful, but it was a deeply authoritarian country that provided very little to citizens. There was an informal social contract that allowed for a modicum of local autonomy. Second, customary authorities were not destroyed by the war. Instead, they changed and evolved because of it. In my own comparative research across dozens of villages around the country I found that these organizations changed to respond to citizen demands. Some became more democratic. Others became more diverse to include migrants. On whole, the system became more participatory. It evolved to reflect the needs of citizens. Yet, these groups were left out of most conversations. Donor projects sought to build around them or replace them. At the height of the counterinsurgency effort, US military forces did recognize the importance of customary authority, but their strategies were ineffective.

The broader lesson from Afghanistan is that those seeking to help build stability in conflict-affected areas should recognize that war and conflict displaces and disrupts social networks, but it also leads to new opportunities to recreate or reimagine resilient structures at the local level. Individuals grew to have much more trust in customary authority than the state. But they did not believe that the state and custom cannot coexist. On the contrary, when they had greater trust in their customary authorities, they were more likely to trust the state. This is because they believed that such authority provided them with a bulwark of protection against rapacious bureaucrats.

Of CDD and SDGs

The problem of local government was exacerbated because the tools the donors chose to implement their vision did not address the primary maladies in society. If the problem was lack of participation and predation, then citizens needed a seat at the decision-making table. They needed to be involved in policy and real budget debates in their communities, districts, and provinces. They needed to have their interests represented in politics and have their rights protected by the state. They needed a state that could tie its hands. Instead, the international project resurrected the old authoritarian, centralized system, and put it on steroids with billions of dollars of technical assistance through “capacity building.” This led to hollow capacity with few constraints. For example, donor assistance brought in expensive consulting firms in to resurrect the old, dysfunctional, Soviet-inspired system of public finance that was based on central planning. Rather than use aid to leverage reform, as it might in other context, donors became content with what they thought were quick wins.

Instead of insisting on meaningful political participation at the local level, donors in Afghanistan did what they do in most conflict-affected and developing countries and look to Community Driven-Development (CDD) programming as a vehicle to build local governance through service delivery (Mansuri and Rao 2013). In this view, donors together with authorities create new community councils (ostensibly to avoid patronage and ill effects of customary bodies) to help deliberate on the disbursement of donor grants and projects. In Afghanistan, donors created more than 30,000 such bodies that were implemented by an army of more than 30 (mostly) international NGOs. Government officials and donors loudly proclaimed how this new program would replace traditional authority. It would also link Kabul to the countryside.

Donors ended up creating rentier local bodies that disappeared as soon as the donor funds dried up. On the local governance dimension, much of this aid was delivered through NGOs. Individuals understood that these outside actors who came bearing assistance were not their own government. They may have provided some short-term relief, but they were not a substitute for the state. In Afghanistan, anger towards NGOs and contractors who implemented these programs escalated as the effort wore on.

A second challenge is that the service delivery approach created the scaffolding for an expansive state, with insignificant consideration to constraints on state power. This created enormous tension at the local level. Afghanistan should always be a painful reminder to policymakers about the limits of their ability to understand conflicts and effectively intervene. This was just as true on the civilian side as it was on the military dimension. Donors came into Afghanistan armed with laudable Millennium/Sustainable Development Goals, which placed a heavy burden on a new state. A glance at the Afghan constitution provides insight into this. It promised a formidable bundle of positive rights to citizens. Yet, this was a hollow promise from the beginning as the state was never in a realistic position to deliver many of these goods including free health care, shelter for nomadic populations, access to education, etc.

This created two problems: it raised expectations of accountability while creating the machinery for an expansive and bloated state structure that had few checks on its authority. State builders paid lip service to issues such as the rule of law and corruption but fed it through aid it could not monitor at every

opportunity. A military surge was met with a civilian surge that poured billions of dollars into the Afghan economy with little accountability.

I found that the creation of these new community councils came at a high political cost. Most notably, I found that they increased conflict in communities where they were implemented and undermined the provision of local public goods that were already being produced by communities without external intervention (Murtazashvili 2016).

It's not just about us

Social scientists have institutional incentives to ignore local politics. For example, fields of International Relations/Organization typically focus on interventions as the unit of observation. Analysis then evaluates the intervention. Furthermore, as social scientists we often study what it is we can touch, feel, and easily comprehend. Those of us who are products of educational systems in developed countries have easy access to policymakers, diplomats, donors, and implementers. We study what we can understand. This is even more acute in the world of field experiments where we study what we can control.

The “local turn” in the study of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction communities (e.g., Autesserre 2010; 2014) was incomplete. While it brought a welcome window into how the international community interacted with communities, it retained its primacy on the success or failure of the international intervention as its primary outcome of interest. While efforts of the international community are important, political legitimacy in new states are shaped by the state and how it treats its citizens. By focusing so much of our attention on interventions, we fail to understand dynamic forms of economic, social, and political mobilization taking place at the local level. It just may be the case that the intervention itself is not the primary determinant of outcomes at the local level. Donor projects may be effective, but that may not lead to trust or stability in the long run.

Finally, outside actors involved in state building, especially democracies, face commitment problems as they seek to rebuild societies. This becomes acutely important in local governance issues where understanding dynamics is challenging and actors are aware that outsiders have very short time horizons (Coyne 2007). Similarly, it is difficult for policymakers in any environment to overcome information deficits as they make public policy. This information problem is challenging in conflict-affected states where highly dynamic and violent environments makes it almost impossible to understand local issues. Simply put, it is hard for intervenors be particularly good at local interventions because it is so difficult for them to obtain information and to convince citizens and local authorities that they are in it for the long haul.

Ways forward

In their own ways, Douglass North (1990) and Elinor Ostrom (1990; 2005) recognized that the most formidable challenge to long term development is the alignment of formal (de jure) and informal (de facto) institutions in society. State-building efforts typically view de facto arrangements as flawed. Rules must made to ensure society reflects the state. But there is a challenge with this approach. During conflict societies learn to cope in new ways (Trefon 2004). They can build practices based on local trust in environments characterized by the its large-scale absence. Most interventions view informal organizations as an obstacle to state consolidation rather than a worthy asset that should be built upon. These may seem like second best solutions (Grindle 2017), but they are effective because these local rules are created and sustained by citizens. To build sustainable governance, donors and new governments must be more willing to do the opposite of what they have done for generations: they should consider having de jure arrangements reflect the imperfect de facto rules that society may view as more legitimate.

While there is a substantial focus in the conflict literature on rebel governance and warlords, this is not the only form of self-organization that emerges during conflict. Customary authority is often neglected as a legitimate source of authority in states suffering from prolonged conflict. If we consider countries that have suffered from the most protracted conflict (e.g., Somalia, Yemen, and Afghanistan) we find that they are not fragmented, but governed by customary authorities at the local level (Murtazashvili et al. 2010). Such authority is not genetically predisposed to fight state authority but oppose it when they seek to rule them without consent. All three countries have had very centralized forms of governance that allowed very little participation of politics—at least formally.

Customary and other forms of informal authority can become pivotal in supporting peace because they provide two important functions. First, they provide small scale public goods and services such as the resolution of property disputes and management of natural resources. Second, they provide an important but often unappreciated political function neglected in the broader literature: they protect citizens against encroachments from government predation. This can be done through what I call polycentric state building. It means three things: 1) recognizing either tacitly or formally the ability of communities to provide public goods and services in the absence of the state at the local level; 2) placing a primacy on building state constraints (not capacity!) in the aftermath of conflict; 3) creating real opportunities for political and civic participation.

The most important element of polycentric state building is to anticipate that in many societies, informal order may emerge or strengthen during conflict. Rather than brush it aside, work with it. This does not mean indirect rule, it means allowing messiness or simply doing less. It means that where possible, rely on customary forms of land adjudication, dispute resolution, and other forms of justice. It also means creating the space for forms of natural resource management and other small-scale provision. Although temptations to work at the community-level are high, focus infrastructure investments at the edge of communities—at the limits of self-governance. Donors can win hearts and minds respecting what really matters: dignity. People want to be treated as citizens. Aid can be overbearing and patronizing. NGOs are usually not accountable to citizens. Customary authority is often effective because citizens share resources with leaders and can hold them directly accountable. They can punish them for transgressions. Donors rarely have such accountability.

Second, promote limited government, especially in the short term. The first casualty of building quick state capacity are meaningful constraints on the state. For a state to be effective in the long term, you need both (Weingast 1997). The knee-jerk reaction of donors is to provide resources for service delivery. The US must acknowledge its mixed track record in public goods investments. Providing such massive resources in the absence of effective constraints on state power only drives corruption and predation. Donor efforts that seek to increase the scope of the state (e.g., SDGs) only exacerbate this problem. Poor states are saddled with an enormous budgetary burden of huge positive rights they must provide to citizens. This creates ineffective and bloated bureaucracies, unfunded mandates, and unfulfilled promises. Focus on strength in a few key areas. Save the scope for later. Afghanistan should remain a painful example of doing everything and underperforming given that massive investment.

Finally, create opportunities for real political participation. In states affected by conflict decentralizing authority is important for both building trust and confidence. These considerations should outweigh other efficiency concerns in the long run because the trust deficit is the hardest to build. Trust cannot be rebuilt through infrastructure provided by international NGOs; it can only be built when people learn that their local officials will not trample on their dignity and rights.

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