» What is state building and how do we promote it in fragile countries?

One Pager

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'State building' is a general term used to describe the (re-)construction of functional countries, in other words countries that are capable of providing their citizens with basic functions and services and that meet their responsibilities and obligations as members of the international community.

Essential components for state building in fragile countries

Typically, fragile countries are those that are unable to guarantee the aforementioned functions to a sufficient degree. The same factors used to define fragility, namely weaknesses in the areas of legitimacy, authority and capacity, which are also the central points addressed when building functional and resilient states. State building is always an endogenous process that must be borne at local level. External parties should provide support only.

Legitimacy: Strengthening the 'social contract' between state and society

In the strictest sense of the word, legitimacy means the legality of a government (e.g. granting of authority through fair, democratic elections). However, in the broader sense, it refers to the legitimacy of the relationship between the state and society ('social contract') and, in particular, the government's capacity to solve conflicts of interest consensually on behalf of its citizens. Participation and transparency are both important factors and can reinforce trust in the state and acceptance of the government. Conversely, however, imbalanced favor towards certain groups can also undermine legitimacy. Consideration of the 'do no harm' principle (in other words, the conflict-neutral establishment of measures) is therefore particularly important during the planning and implementation of projects in fragile countries.

In the field of foreign affairs and development policy, legitimacy can be promoted with the following measures, for example:

- Strengthening/establishing democratic processes that help to build trust (election support, mediation/ reconciliation, transparency, accountability, anti-corruption campaigns, etc.)
- Working closely with legitimate local institutions (projects should be perceived as projects set up by the government as opposed to donors or local NGOs)
- Strengthening pluralism and civil society
- Getting the population involved in the planning and implementation of policies and measures (participation)

Authority: Securing a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the rule of law

Many fragile countries are involved in violent conflicts. In many cases, governments are unable to guarantee or maintain their monopoly over the legitimate use of force in their capital cities and key urban centres. Other areas of the country are controlled by rebels or terrorist groups. Authority is also reflected in an ability to guarantee constitutional relationships (also a key requirement for legitimacy).

As soon as the legitimacy of a government has been clarified, the following security, foreign policy and development policy measures can help to restore authority:

- Political mediation in crises
- Legitimate UN peacekeeping missions
- Reinforcement of the military and civil security sector
- Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combattants
- Promotion of the rule of law, e.g. through legislation, courts and the administration of justice
- Promotion of human rights organisations and the free press

Capacity: (Re-)establishing basic governmental and administrative capacities at state level

The functioning of the administration and public services at all levels are basic requirements for the comprehensive fulfillment of state duties. This is also a very effective way of supporting the reinforcement of legitimacy and establishment of authority. (Re-)integration into the international community may also be an important factor in the sustainable protection of stability and prevention of conflicts. Typical approaches for foreign and development policy measures include:

- Supporting the provision of important basic social and economic services at a municipal level (primary education, basic health services, energy and water supply, etc.)
- Promoting decentralisation and the reinforcement of municipal structures
- Using local structures when implementing measures (local planning and budgeting processes)
- Incorporating the government into international and regional peacekeeping structures and dialogues

Conclusion: state building calls for integrated approaches, patience and realistic expectations

State building is essential if we are to overcome fragile states over the long term and halt the risk of plunging permanently into spiralling conflicts ('stabilisation'). In light of the various interdependencies, we particularly need integrated approaches that simultaneously address weaknesses in the areas of legitimacy, authority and capacity in equal measure. These approaches also need to complement measures for establishing and maintaining peace (see Peace and Statebuilding Goals – PSG). State building processes tend to be very lengthy and are often marked by temporary setbacks due to the limited degree of control. Patience is therefore important to promotional measures, as are realistic expectations of results. ∎