



## Building on what works – service delivery in fragile situations

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**Focusing on and working with local service providers is one pragmatic way to translate the concept of ‘good enough governance’ into practice. By juxtaposing ‘good enough’ and ‘what works’ it is possible to maintain the qualification and gradation of good enough governance and a more realistic view on what we might expect from development programming in fragile situations.**

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### THE SLOW PACE OF CHANGE

International programming around service delivery in fragile situations should focus on what are considered legitimate, endogenous and relevant providers of service in a given locality. Focusing on what works and on incremental change is important because wholesale transformation in the short-term is not feasible. Indeed, even if it was, abrupt change would not be sensitive to the potential for conflict that this would trigger in fragile situations.

Development programs and activities at the local level should therefore concentrate reform efforts on strengthening and consolidating already existing institutions. With this approach, the incremental nature of change is taken seriously, as is the way in which power and authority are distributed at the local level. The focus is changed from a set of assumptions about the conditioning role of the national political and institutional environment to the micro-politics of incentives and relationships between actors at the point of service delivery. Local actors such as traditional leaders become the point of departure, but based on the assumption that they are linked to a set of

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Local actors must be supported to build relationships with centrally governed institutions, because such relationships are the foundation of long-term sustainability and accountability.
- In designing programs, donors must accept that it takes time to build linkages between centrally governed institutions and local actors.
- Support must be technically motivated, even if it intends to cause social transformation, which as a rule has political implications.
- Program success is based on building up activities around already existing local structures of authority.
- Private interests should be accepted as part and parcel of what is entailed in engaging and supporting the establishment of local institutions.



## WHO ARE THE LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS?

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).** NGOs often provide services in fragile situations where state institutions are considered incapable of doing so.

**Grass-Roots Organizations and Community-Based Organizations (GROs and CBOs).** As sub-categories of NGOs, GROs and CBOs are primarily membership-based and dependent on donor funding channeled through international and national NGOs.

**Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs).** An unknown proportion of NGOs combine aid with a religious agenda, thereby seeking the conversion of an individual or a group to a particular faith.

**Traditional Voluntary Organizations (TVOs).** TVOs are family-based trusts or voluntary organizations that rely on donations from the general public in their locale and often run community schools.

**Customary Organizations (Chiefs and Tribal Leaders) (COs).** COs are often the main service providers in fragile situations. They derive their authority from family relations and geography and are part of long-term processes of state formation (rather than state-building as the result of external intervention and support).

**Religious Leaders.** Religious leaders are a primary source of guidance to local populations, and are therefore important development partners, notably in education and public health.

centrally governed institutions. Precisely what it might look like cannot be pre-determined, but takes shape in the implementation process.

## CHANGE IS CONFLICT AND POLITICAL

Because interests are always at stake when changes are being pursued, conflict and politics are key elements of that process. It has been well-documented that peacebuilding-as-liberalization is everything but a technical process as it exposes the conflictual character of democracy and capitalism, because they catalyze societal competition. This circumstance is reinforced because fragile situations are often characterized by a lack of institutional structures to peacefully resolve internal disputes over access to what are often scarce and always unevenly distributed resources. Therefore, efforts to transform fragile situations through liberalizing politics and economic activities may exacerbate rather than moderate societal conflict. These are commonly acknowledged observations in the debate on fragile situations, but the key message – that change entails the displacement of positions of power and authority – is crucial to keep in mind, because it prevails both at the national and the local levels.

Emphasizing the need to focus on what works rather than on what ought to be is not an argument for liberalization (nor is it the opposite). Local actors and institutions – and the focus on them by donor agencies – are not necessarily the result of (global) processes of liberalization. However, the argument that conflict and competition are inherent to change processes in peacebuilding efforts is closely aligned with the

argument for focusing on and working with local actors in fragile situations. A trickle-down effect from working with national institutions is often assumed in state-building, but even if reforms are accepted and implemented centrally, and this is by no means a given, it is highly likely that local actors will resist if they stand to lose resources or political power as a result of the proposed changes.

Vested interests of individuals and groups may and often do come under threat in the event that reforms are pursued. Development concepts such as ‘political will’ and ‘national ownership’ revolve around whether these interests may be deflected so that the reform process is accepted rather than resisted by political elites. However, individuals or groups generally push back against reforms in an attempt to retain control over part or all of the institutions that deliver a particular service. Such resistance occurs in service provision because reformed service providers could threaten to expose a group or individual’s activities or threaten to identify the shortcomings of another organization or individual. Reform processes include a reshuffle of how resources are distributed, which institutions or individuals will lose out from.

There are therefore good reasons why reforms might be openly challenged, contested, ignored or rejected, and why the starting point for change is necessarily that which works. In turn, programming that works (or ends up working) engages local institutions, actors and structures of authority that are integral to a functioning order. This is not a matter of what is sometimes referred to as benign neglect or tolera-

tion (by the state and donors) of non-state systems until the state can take over service delivery. Service providers never exist as states and non-states, but as an interlinked system of locally embedded and nationally defined centrally governed institutions. These links are often weak in fragile situations, and it is therefore the role of donor agencies to support their strengthening.

### **THE TWO RULES OF LOCAL DELIVERY OF SERVICES**

1. Development agencies must engage with the variety of local providers that exist and are used by citizens, rather than aim to create new and/or centrally governed institutions that may be alien to the context in which they are implemented, always take considerable time to consolidate, and often fail to do so.
2. Programming centered on local actors as service providers accepts in theory and practice that while wholesale transformation is not possible, gradual changes and improvements of the scope and quality of service provision are. Often expectations of what is achievable are formulated and agreed upon far away from implementation and from a macro-level perspective. This leads to frustrations with what are considered limited results on the ground, when in fact limited and context-specific change is all that can be hoped for in the short to medium-term.

### **GOOD ENOUGH GOVERNANCE**

In the early 2000s, the ‘good enough governance’ debate emerged. It was a response to the good governance debate that called for improvements that touch on virtually all aspect of the public sector, including a focus on institutions that set the rules for economic and political interaction, the interface of officials and citizens, etc. Despite some important weaknesses in the good enough governance debate, the concept is worth revisiting in the context of local actors in service provision.

The thrust of the original good enough governance concept is that development programming must be sequenced and prioritized, because not all that is referred to as governance deficits in fragile situations should or can be tackled simultaneously. Therefore, advocating for good governance raises important questions about what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, and how it needs to be done.

The debate on good enough governance strongly emphasizes a need for developing activities that are context-specific and sensitive as well as a need to sequence activities. Even so, the underlying rationale remains that governance deficits should be tackled, but also that a deficit can in fact be detected, isolated and worked upon through external technical support. By doing so, it is presumed, programming will identify the minimal conditions of governance necessary to allow political and economic development to occur. As such, it is suggested that the good enough governance debate provides a platform from which to question the wide variety of institutional changes and public capacity-building initiatives that are deemed important (or essential) for developing stable state institutions. Most donor agencies would agree with this assessment and are realistic enough not to expect flawless results from the support they provide.

### **WHAT WORKS → GOOD ENOUGH**

All programs from the design stage through to implementation will have to – and do – think about how program activities may be sequenced to reach a degree of sustainability in the long-term. Working with the concept of what is good enough to reach that stage facilitates a more flexible and context-sensitive understanding of what successful programming might look like. However, it does not provide much guidance on how to reach such results.

More problematically, the debate seems to suggest that what is being considered is a ‘good enough’ version of the ‘ideal state’. This means that rather than taking the actors, connections and distribution of power that characterizes a system of service delivery as point of departure, the transformation process remains one of narrow state-building (focused on centrally governed institutions). The concept of good enough governance thus implies that external actors have sought to establish well-functioning centrally governed state institutions through development programming, and have failed to do so.

Therefore, the donor community, and governments receiving funding will have to expect less – that is; what’s good enough – in the short to medium-term. Apart from having a slightly derogatory ring to it, because it places all states on a spectrum between good and bad governance with the Euro-American model closest to the ideal, more importantly, it has never been entirely clear what ‘good enough’ is – that is; when and how such a level is reached. The concept falls short of being a tool to explore what specifically needs to be done in any real world context, and therefore holds limited potential to guide practitioners and policy-makers in their attempt to develop sustainable programming.

The concept of what works both substantiates what good enough governance involves in practice, and dismantles the derogatory tone of the concept. By juxtaposing ‘good enough’ and ‘what works’, it is possible to maintain the qua-



lification and gradation of good governance as well as a more realistic view on what we might expect from development programming in fragile situations (and beyond). It provides an approach to seeing the system not as broken or fragile *per se*, but as a system that inevitably has strengths which may be built upon. Any initiative that seeks to strengthen service delivery in fragile situations will have a better chance of becoming sustainable if this strategy is pursued.

The underlying rationale of what works is not that local service providers should only be engaged in reform efforts until the capacity of centrally governed institutions has been built to the extent that they might take over service provision. For instance, it has been commonly assumed that civil society organizations provide services when the state is 'weak' or 'failing', but that public institutions will gradually resume responsibilities in basic service delivery.

This assumption would imply that the state is fundamentally separate from service providers at the local level, which is a faulty way of looking at how the state is constituted in many fragile situations. Second, it is based on a quite narrow, almost evolutionary theory of how change is engendered, implying that the state as a centrally governed set of institutions constitutes a higher order of administration and organization, into which all political entities will eventually develop.

## **WORK SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH LOCAL ACTORS AND CENTRALLY GOVERNED INSTITUTIONS**

These considerations imply the need to work with centrally governed institutions and locally embedded service providers simultaneously. Such an approach does not assume a trickle-down effect of programming or that work-



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ing at the local level in and of itself will lead to better services. It acknowledges the crucial indirect role of centrally governed institutions, and that in order for any service provider to be accountable, extra-local mechanisms to ensure that this happens are necessary. This is the case at the local as well as the national level. Accountability is a reciprocal process.

It is entirely feasible that local actors determine (or co-determine) how a particular service is provided, while some specific and indirect coordination and oversight functions may be organized and/or developed by centrally governed institutions in the long-term. The direct and indirect functions they should take on depend on their willingness, capacity and legitimacy to do so, factors which can only develop incrementally. In the long-term, this leads to a governance system that strengthens locally and centrally governed institutions simultaneously.

## **FURTHER READING**

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