State consolidation in hostile post-conflict environments

State-building in post-conflict environments is a delicate affair when the state is regarded as the enemy by many people. Recent experiences from southern African countries emerging from war suggest that intermediary institutions can play an important role in state consolidation.

October 2008

Attempting to produce legitimate statehood in post-conflict nation states is a messy affair. At the level of everyday social interaction, it can take a variety of forms that involve actors that one might not normally associate with the expansion and consolidation of formal state practices and institutions. Experiences from two southern African countries emerging from war, namely Angola and Mozambique, suggest that different types of 'intermediary institutions', such as traditional authorities and national NGOs, can become nested within state forms of authority and, importantly, can spearhead state expansion and consolidation.

This suggests that formal state consolidation and outreach in former war or conflict areas should not be approached solely from the viewpoint of rolling out formal state institutions. Instead, the capacity and presence of state institutions, whether in their symbolic form or as techniques of government (taxation, population registers, schooling, health, democratic governance etc.), are complex and amorphous, and more often than not thrive on activities initiated by NGOs and local authorities that can spearhead state consolidation.

THE PROBLEM
Attempts at state formation and consolidation in post-conflict nation states have often been confronted by the problem that our normative image of the modern state and its institutions as a neutral arbiter and authority positioned outside and above social and political struggles is severely contested. Southern African states emerging from colonial and postcolonial encounters, as well as from conflicts driven by

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- External engagement in post-conflict societies should be accompanied by an awareness that the state may be viewed as an enemy by the population in certain areas, and external actors should not mechanically push for the extension of formal state structures before conditions are ripe.

- In situations where the state is regarded as part of the problem, actors like traditional chiefs and NGOs may pave the way for state consolidation by managing and implementing functions typically ascribed to the state.

- In fragile situations where mistrust and volatility flourish, donor agencies should support many different initiatives because no great plan can foresee and master the changes needed. By supporting a multitude of initiatives, donor agencies enable the best to show their worth.

the Cold War, were often at the forefront of these conflicts (and often as the main vehicle of war efforts by one of the sides). The establishment of the state's institutional presence in former war areas or in areas that have been under the control of rebel or warring parties is consequently highly contested and often even downright impossible, as state institutions and their incumbents are mistrusted.

In this predicament, the question is: How have de facto state expansion and consolidation taken place? The answer is that NGOs have often spearheaded state expansion and consolidation, even though these were not planned. One reason for the success of NGOs is that hostile populations have had positive experiences with service delivery – health, education etc. – in internal and external refugee camps. The provision of such 'soft' services can spearhead later 'hard' security expansion and consolidation. Two

examples from Angola and Mozambique illustrate the point.

ANGOLA: COINCIDENTAL EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION

Since 1997, the Swiss Humanitarian Agency has supported the work of a local NGO, Okutiuka, in Umbundu, a town in the province of Huambo, one of the epicentres of the war between the MPLA government and its UNITA opponents. Initial support was minimal (5,000 to 10,000 USD) but it allowed the NGO to establish a home for orphans, run cultural festivals aimed at street children and gain experience with community mobilisation as part of the Swiss-financed Bridges for Peace programme. The NGO gained invaluable experience, as it had to negotiate with both MPLA and UNITA officials when local workers were hired for both construction work and security.

BOX 1.

THE DIFFERENT EFFECTS OF THE SAMBOTO HEALTH CLINIC PROJECT

- The health post played an integral part in triggering the return of internally displaced people

- The project provided jobs for returnees

- The World Food Programme used the project as a springboard for the distribution of food to workers and returnees

- Seeds were distributed, allowing agricultural production to take off

In 2002 the NGO received a grant of 31,000 USD from the Swiss programme to build a health clinic for a community called Samboto in Hungulo, the main city in the municipality of Tchikala-Tcholohanga. The community had been almost totally destroyed during the war. The Swiss programme took a huge chance in supporting the NGO, as it could not visit the area, which had been "red-taped" by the UN due to landmines. In addition, there was no state presence in Hungulo.

The construction of the clinic was a sign to internally displaced people that developments were taking place back home and that the security situation was improving. With the NGO came the World Food Programme returnee packages, as well as an agricultural cooperative and micro-credit programme funded by external donors that had had no presence in Huambo during the conflict period. When the clinic was ready, the first state health employees arrived, followed by state-paid teachers, as education was being requested locally. At the end of 2003 a small police station was set up, which by 2007 had a staff of more than 25. Today, Hungulo hosts a thriving market place which provides the local administration with locally generated revenue through market fees. By mid-2007 a new school had been approved after one had been proposed by the population.

When the state itself is considered partisan, local NGOs can spearhead state expansion and consolidation in hostile areas where the state has little or no physical presence. For this to succeed, the local NGO must be considered legitimate and non-partisan by all the parties to the conflict. In this case, the NGO had to negotiate continually with both parties, since it was looked upon with suspicion by the MPLA government when it began working in an area the latter considered hostile, as well as by UNITA because it arrived from an MPLA-controlled area.

On the part of the state, the provision of 'soft' forms of intervention (health, education, etc.) when requested locally can provide a more legitimate entry point than 'hard' security provision (police, military etc.). When 'hard' security provision is provided, it needs to be approached cautiously so that the presence of these institutions is not seen as partisan or as an imposition.

On the part of the donor, there is a need to support a variety of organisations, even if immediate benefits cannot all be predicted, because over a longer period they can become important vehicles for state expansion and consolidation, even after the donor has left the intervention area and therefore cannot claim the success.

MOZAMBIQUE: TACTICAL USE OF NGOS

The civil war between Frelimo and Renamo displaced most of the population in the district of Mechanela, situated in the southern part of Niassa province, just a few kilometres from the Malawian border. After the General Peace Accord in 1992 and the first free elections in 1994 in Mozambique, most of the population returned from refugee camps in Malawi, which had also functioned as Renamo recruitment and hide-outs.

By 1996, the Frelimo state had gained formal control over Mechanela, as the double administration pursued after 1992 was abandoned. But as the local district administration – which included the police service – began to assert its authority, it immediately ran into problems on two accounts.

First, 'youth' as a broad category – primarily young men from 15 to well into their 30s – returning from the refugee camps where they had become embedded in the Malawian economy were trading illicitly over the border, without respect for the district or state border authorities. This was resulting in numerous standoffs between the state authorities and young men, which was threatening the precarious peace. Secondly, outlying populations did not allow the local government structures to set up administrative posts in the localities, as they were considered illegitimate Frelimo institutions.

BOX 2. CHIUTA

Until 2006, the locality of Chiuta had been a no-go area for the district administrative authorities, who were either chased away or simply ignored when they entered. In 2006, after prolonged negotiation with the traditional authorities (facilitated by the state's recognition of traditional authorities as Community Authorities in 2002), the religious umbrella association managed to build a new school in the area. With the establishment of the school, the first state representatives in the form of teachers were allowed free passage into the locality. Health and agricultural extension workers have since followed, and voter registration for the forthcoming elections was allowed in 2008 for the first time since 1994.

In order to end the impasse, the local government administration asked religious leaders if they could intervene and change the situation. An umbrella association was set up with representatives from all religious groups (Catholic, Protestant and Muslim) aimed at the "moral regeneration of the youth".

Starting at the district centre, an educational campaign was initiated with parent and youth groups as well as community authorities in order to get young people into school. Initially, direct involvement by party and state administrative leaders was avoided, as they were considered part of the problem (although they supported the initiative). Following these initial steps, a community development programme was formulated aimed at local job creation in the agricultural and reconstruction sectors (carpentry, construction, etc.).

By 2008 the situation had stabilised to the extent that the police and border authorities had significantly reduced the illegal cross-border trade in maize, which the Mozambican government regards as a 'national food security' commodity.

The present donor agency drive towards the promotion of Security Sector Reforms as a whole-of-government endeavour focusing on internal and external security threats, including 'hard' security actors (military, police, etc.) and 'soft' forms of intervention (reform of the judiciary, parliament, local government, administration etc.), more often than not takes place 'after the fact'. In other words, before plans can be agreed and made operational beyond the capital or main urban centres, local responses have already structured the field of intervention based on locally legitimate forms of authority that are considered non-partisan.

The intermediary institutions occupy an important position between state institutions and local populations in post-conflict societies, a position that, seen in the context of the longer history of colonial and postcolonial encounters, is not new and has emerged under many names: 'indirect rule', 'private indirect government', 'twilight institutions'. Looked upon from a perspective of the past five to fifteen years, their emergence and participation in post-conflict state consolidation should be seen less as a sign of weakness in the concrete processes of state formation than as a particular way of incorporating segments of populations and territories in places where the state has never been in total control or particularly effective.

Present formal attempts at state consolidation and formation – Security Sector Reforms as a whole-of-government endeavour – tend to pursue furiously an ideal that social scientists only use to measure the empirical form of statehood. In this process, the valuable role that various intermediary forms of authority can play in spearheading a more gradual consolidation of the state is forgotten.

Lars Buur, research unit on
Politics and governance
www.diis.dk/lbu - lbu@diis.dk

FURTHER READING:

Helene Kyed and Lars Buur (eds.) 2007: *Case Study: Huambo Province. Independent Evaluation: SDC Humanitarian Aid in Angola 1995-2006.* Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.

Lars Buur and Helene Kyed (eds.) 2007: *State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa: A New Dawn for Chiefs?* New York: Palgrave.

Dietrich Jung 2008: *State Formation and State-Building: Is There a Lesson to Learn from Sociology?* Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.

More on fragile situations: www.diis.dk/fragile