



Helpdesk Research Report

Lessons from governance interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states

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Question

Please identify key literature and summarise any recent evidence (since 2011) on lessons from donor attempts to improve, reform and transform governance in developing countries, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS).

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1. Overview

This rapid review identifies literature and lessons from governance interventions, with a particular focus on fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS). It primarily draws lessons from the existing the body of GSDRC analysis in this area, and highlights some prominent additional texts published since 2011.

Governance programmes include a broad range of issues, from support to parliamentary processes and elections, to state-building and rule of law interventions. The evidence base on governance interventions is fairly broad and rigorous, incorporating a mix of academic, policymaker, and think-tank literature. Details on lessons, however, tend to be limited. Much of the readily available literature provides only a short description of lessons, with few details expanded upon.

Common lessons across different types of governance interventions include:

- **Understand social, historical and political context:** The importance of understanding social, historical and political context is highlighted across governance interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states (see for example Brown et al. 2013; Tostensen and Amundsen 2010; Domingo and Denney 2012; UNDP 2012). Social, political and conflict analysis tools can provide useful contextual data (Luchsinger 2010).
- **Get the right staff:** The capacity of staff is consistently mentioned throughout the literature as an essential component of good programming. Staff should be experienced and have the appropriate expertise and networks to engage in the specific type of programming (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Brown et al. 2013).
- **Be flexible:** Flexibility has been proven to be beneficial. Particularly in FCAS, programmes and staff often need to adapt to changing contexts and new opportunities (Brown et al. 2013; Lucas 2014).
- **Provide long-term engagement:** Long-term engagement has yielded better and more sustainable results across a variety of interventions, including in politically smart and locally-led approaches (Brown et al. 2013) and parliament and electoral assistance (Tostensen and Amundsen 2010; Rao 2014b).
- **Adhere to do no harm principles:** This is particularly important in FCAS. Do no harm approaches have been crucial in state-building and in support to parliaments and elections (Mcloughlin 2012; OECD DAC 2010).
- **Country ownership and leadership:** There is a strong consensus among the literature that capacity building initiatives for government institutions in FCAS should be nationally owned and led (Lucas 2014). Country ownership includes identifying priorities, development policies and programmes, and coalition building (Lucas 2014).

2. ‘Politically smart, locally-led development’¹

There is an emerging, albeit limited, body of evidence on the impact of political economy analysis on donor action or development outcomes (Mcloughlin 2014). Isolated case studies identify lessons from ‘politically smart, locally-led’ governance interventions (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Booth and Unsworth 2014; Brown et al. 2013). Some of the key lessons identified are:

Get the right people to deliver programmes. Delivering support to governance can be human resource intensive. It requires local team members with the expertise and networks to work with, and build bridges between, local partners (Brown et al. 2013). It is useful to have an **experienced programme team**, with space to elaborate and refine its model (Booth and Unsworth 2014).

Context is important. Interventions deliver better tangible governance when they are ‘well informed about government realities and savvy about how to handle them’ (Booth and Unsworth 2014, p. vi). Understanding the **social and political context** is a crucial starting point for engagement. This can be strengthened by ‘strategic social and political analysis’ (Brown et al. 2013, p. 8).

¹ ‘Politically smart, locally-led’ is an emerging approach which is led by researchers from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Further details can be found at: <http://www.odi.org/projects/2781-politically-smart-locally-led-development>

Invest in relationships. Programmes have been most effective when they have invested in relationships between government actors, partnership organisations, and donor staff (Brown et al. 2013, p. 6). Practitioners can collaborate closely with, and embed themselves within, partner governments or organisations. This can help build greater trust and understanding of the partner and their operating environment (Denney and Kirwen 2014; Rao 2014a).

Flexibility is beneficial. Programmes need to adapt to changing contexts and acknowledge and pay attention to unintended consequences (Brown et al. 2013). They also require flexibility in people, finance and systems to respond to new opportunities (Ibid, p. 11).

Longer-term engagement generally yields better and more sustainable results (Ibid, p. 11). Experts emphasise the benefit of a **long-term results horizon** that is characterised by patience, a high degree of trust between funders and implementers, and an acceptance that there will be failures as well as successes (Rao 2014a).

Be selective in issues and sectors. Practitioners should only work on issues or sectors where effective staff are in place and the timing is right for change (Denney and Kirwen 2014).

Purposive muddling. It is useful to make numerous ‘small bets’ as opportunities arise, to address multiple angles of the same problem. This involves a greater tolerance for risk. However, as bets are small, shortened feedback loops and regular learning and adaption can take place (Rao 2014a).

The scale of challenge in delivering politically smart, locally-led development means it is often wise to **consider alternative models** of support. This can include the donor agency delivering ‘arm’s length’ support through a trusted intermediary organisation, which may face fewer operating constraints (Booth and Unsworth 2-14, p. vi).

3. State-building

State-building is typically understood as ‘an ongoing, long term, and endogenous process of establishing and/or developing effective and legitimate state institutions and state-society relations’² (Mcloughlin 2012, p. 49). Though some international donors have applied a state-building lens to analysing and addressing fragility, state-building as a framework for development assistance remains controversial. Many caution that international actors can, and should, only have limited influence in endogenous processes of state formation (Mcloughlin 2012).

Lessons identified in the literature on state-building include:

- **Appropriate prioritisation and sequencing** of state-building processes and functions is important where capacity is low. In such contexts, resources are likely to be limited, creating a high need for donor coordination (Mcloughlin 2012; OECD-DAC 2008; Herbert 2014).
- A **‘do no harm’ approach** to state-building helps mitigate the risk that external actors’ aid will have unintended harmful outcomes. To achieve this, interventions need to be based on **sound contextual analysis** (Mcloughlin 2012; OECD DAC 2010).

² The GSDRC topic guide on Fragile States includes detailed lessons and guidance from state-building (See Mcloughlin 2012).

4. State legitimacy

Insufficient state legitimacy is broadly considered a **major driver of state fragility** (OECD 2010). An OECD (2012) review of evidence on donor interventions in state fragility notes that donors should recognise that attempts to strengthen state capacity and legitimacy by imposing the creation of rational-legal political institutions will be problematic (OECD 2010). **Westerns ideals of statehood fundamentally differ from those in non-western states**. In the latter, public and private spheres typically overlap (OECD 2010). Donors need a detailed, empirical understanding of how multiple and conflicting sources of legitimacy play out in a given context (OECD 2010). Top recommendations from the OECD (2010) include:

- **Perceptions:** Donors should begin by seeking a better understanding of the diverse perceptions and beliefs of local people in what constitutes legitimate political authority.
- **Donor's own legitimacy:** Donors should pay attention to their own sources of legitimacy and to how local populations perceive their influence and ability to operate effectively.
- **Impact of donor activities:** Donors should be aware of how their activities affect internal sources of legitimacy, including how they confer or withhold international legitimacy, channel resources, demand accountability or impose conditionality.
- **Debate and interaction:** It is recommended that donors facilitate debate and interaction between groups representing different interests and perceptions of legitimacy.

In a literature review on the role of international donors in supporting legitimacy in **Afghanistan**, Herbert (2014) notes that rigorous literature on the international community's influence is limited. Some specific guidelines for the international community in Afghanistan emerging from the available evidence include (Barfield and Nojumi 2010, pp. 47-51):

- 'Recognise and strengthen informal community mechanisms that deal with dispute resolution at the village level.
- District administrators and provincial governors must obtain the consent of the governed through election for periods that are term-limited.
- Establish effective ministry representation in Afghanistan's major cities beyond Kabul to better meet local need.
- Grant district administrators and provincial governors the authority to raise revenue and spend those funds on local services or development projects'.

In a peer-reviewed article, Mcloughlin (2014) challenges received wisdom that the **provision of public services** improves the legitimacy of a fragile or conflict-affected state. She finds that in practice 'the relationship between the state's performance in delivery basic services, on the one hand, and its degree of legitimacy, on the other, is nonlinear' (Mcloughlin 2014, p. 2). Key factors influencing how citizens evaluate the state's right to rule through service delivery include shifting expectations of what the state should provide, subjective assessments of impartiality and distributive justice, and the technical or political characteristics of the service (Mcloughlin 2014, p. 2). These findings suggest a **case for opening the 'dominant institutional model underpinning the contemporary aid debate** which reduces the role of services in (re)building state legitimacy to an instrumental one' (Mcloughlin 2014, p. 3).

5. Support to government institutions

Parliaments and elections

Elections can exacerbate pre-existing tensions, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (Rao 2014a). Some of the lessons identified in the literature from programmes to support parliaments and elections include:

- **Importance of contextualisation:** A 2010 report commissioned by Norad to review and synthesise international experiences in supporting legislatures emphasises that there is no generic, one-size-fits-all approach to parliamentary strengthening. Contextualisation is critical (Tostensen and Amundsen, 2010).
- **Long-term support:** long-term, comprehensive support is important (Tostensen and Amundsen 2010). An intervention should be two, preferably three, electoral cycles. As an electoral cycle is typically 4-5 years, Tostensen and Amundsen (2010) argue that a decade would not be excessive.
- **Adherence to the Paris Declaration on Aid effectiveness:** Some authors recommend that donor support to parliaments adhere to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, particularly for harmonisation, alignment and ownership (Rao 2014b; Tostensen and Amundsen, 2010).
- **Election monitoring:** Independent electoral monitors can deter fraud, which can reduce violence (Rao 2014b). But it can also publicise fraud, which can heighten tensions (Rao 2014b). Experts recommend that monitoring be continuous, particularly in volatile areas around any by-elections. They also advise to allocate adequate resources for maintaining monitoring capacity (Rao 2014b; Höglund and Jarstad, 2010). In the interim periods between elections, groundwork should be carried out to prevent future violence (Rao 2014b).
- **Voter education and public awareness:** This can involve training on peaceful campaigning and civic education. Evidence suggests anti-violence awareness campaigns can be effective (Rao 2014a). The anti-violence message is reinforced through social networks, especially family (Rao 2014a).

Capacity development

In a rapid review of literature, Lucas (2014) identifies best practice in capacity development for national-level government institutions in fragile and conflict-affected states. Key lessons include:

- **Country ownership and leadership.** There is a strong consensus among the literature that capacity development should be nationally owned and led. Country ownership includes identifying priorities, development policies and programmes, undertaking outreach and coalition-building, implementing measures to reduce resistance, involving different societal groups, and defining and monitoring progress indicators (Lucas 2014, p. 2).
- **South-south technical assistance.** There is emerging evidence that south-south technical assistance offers 'significant potential' for supporting capacity building in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (Lucas 2014, p. 4). South-south cooperation can be cheaper, southern countries can be more aware of potential governance challenges, and there can be a sense of 'cultural affinity that improves prospects for trust, acceptance and cooperation' (Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen 2013, pp. 10-12).

- **Understanding and adapting to context.** It is widely argued that ‘understanding the context is paramount for deciding on an approach, and the value of informed analysis and judgment cannot be underscored enough’ (UNDP 2012 p. 37). Capacity development works best when it is adapted to local institutional and political realities including formal and informal power relations, involves local knowledge sources, integrates with informal institutions, develops and maintains legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, and understands local needs, systems, and capacities (Baser et al. 2011, pp. 6, 24-25; Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen, 2013, p. 10). A study of successful capacity development projects in Afghanistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia and South Sudan, concluded that ‘there are rarely uniform best practices’ but that successful interventions showed a good fit with their context (Petersen and Engberg-Pedersen 2013, pp. 10-13).
- **Adaptive, flexible approaches.** There is increasing recognition that capacity development in complex systems such as fragile and post-conflict states can be better guided by adaptation and communication, rather than by comprehensive planning. There is emerging evidence that big, complex strategies are achieving limited results (UNDP 2012, p. 32). Experts suggest starting small and building on functioning pockets of expertise where they exist, rather than setting up entirely new structures (Baser 2011, p. 21; Petersen & Engberg-Pedersen 2013, p. 9).

6. Justice and rule of law

Justice systems in FCAS may entail discriminatory practices, corruption or abuse of power by officials, and failure to protect human rights. These factors can exacerbate or even trigger violence and instability (Crichton, Scott and Haider 2012). The evidence base on most aspects of the rule of law, particularly in FCAS, is fairly thin (Browne 2013; Carter 2013). However, it is possible to identify some lessons from available case studies.

UNDP’s work in Somalia has been notably successful in the area of access to justice (UNDP Evaluation Office, 2010). In particular, it has extended judicial outreach to rural areas of Somaliland and Puntland through mobile courts and clinics (UNDP Evaluation Office, 2010). An evaluation finds their success was **facilitated by good cooperation** with university faculties of law (Ibid).

In the Western Balkans, **local ownership and buy-in were challenges** for EU rule of law programmes, an independent evaluation found (Imagos and Berenschot, 2012). This is because political support for rule of law was not particularly strong.

The EU did, however, have some success in building capacity and in developing judicial and legal institutions. Factors of success were: long-term commitment; local capacity development; large-scale, predictable and continuous funding; transparency of the EU’s political agenda; depth of policy development combined with breadth across sectors, actors and the region. Predictable funding and permanent presence have also contributed significantly to the success of projects in situations of political instability (Imagos and Berenschot 2012).

A 2012 review of the Australian government’s package of law and justice assistance identifies several examples of good practice and success (Cox, Duituturaga, & Scheye, 2012). In organisational capacity-building, promising strategies included (ibid, p ix):

- Taking an **incremental** rather than comprehensive approach to improving capacities and functions.
- Seeking **flexible**, localised, ‘good enough’ solutions, rather than relying on institutional templates.

- Focusing on issues supported by **local constituencies** for change, who could be mobilised and supported.
- **Working directly** at the point of interaction between citizens and institutions of law and justice. This way, the causal link between the intervention and benefits for citizens was short and direct, and monitoring and evaluation could easily capture the impact.

Another example is the Democratic Governance Thematic Trust Fund (DGTTF) on access to justice and human rights. A desk-based review of assessments examined DGTTF projects in Cambodia, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. It identified key lessons (Luchsinger 2010; see also Carter 2013):

- A **human rights perspective** can help to identify problems, target groups and the most effective entry points for programmes on access to justice.
- **Analyses of context** should examine the political economy of access to justice.
- **Choosing credible partners and managing expectations** can significantly increase success.
- It is important to **empower rights-holders**, but also to ensure that duty-bearers are equipped to uphold those rights.

A recent expert meeting on security and justice programming in FCAS presents some lessons and guidance (Domingo and Denney 2012):

- **Historical context:** donors should consider the historical context. One aspect is how justice and security have influenced the formation of state and state-society relations. How different actors in society perceive justice and security also matters. Negotiations of the functions of justice and security within political settlements are another important element. Donors should also understand the root causes of violent conflict, and how legacies of violence can impact of narratives of justice and security.
- **Theories of change:** Robust theories of change should inform strategies and define realistic outcomes. These need to be in line with the particular socio-political conditions in country, and not be envisioned from institutional configurations in donor countries.
- **Transnational justice:** more politically nuanced research is needed on transitional justice.
- **Integration of political and development work:** Improved integration of political/diplomatic work with programming can help to better align approaches.

7. Service delivery

In a rapid review of literature, Strachan (2014) identifies lessons in interventions supporting the delivery of services by local governments in conflict-affected areas. Factors of success include:

- **Strategic engagement** of government agencies, local government, and civil society groups. This requires an understanding of power relationships among stakeholders to determine decision-making, allocate resources, and connect with citizens (Allen 2010, p. 37; UNDP 2010). Aid actors must determine when it is useful to work with elites as representatives of the larger community, when to involve ordinary citizens, and when to engage both groups (Allen 2010).
- **Strong peace infrastructure.** This includes networks, communities and highly trained human resources for peacebuilding (UNDP 2010).

- An **assessment of pre-existing community structures** for service delivery. This avoids tension between donors and existing service providers (Allen 2010).
- **Active civil society participation** (UNDP 2010).

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