

Fixing Obstacles Blocking a Multi-Stakeholder Approach to Peace and Development

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1. Introduction

Fostering peace and development in conflict-affected regions requires a citizen oriented state working in partnership with an active civil society. The slow progress toward both peace and sustainable development is due in part toward conflicting and uncoordinated approaches between these diverse stakeholders. While some governments are eager to link with nongovernmental groups in a “whole of society” or “comprehensive approach,” many civil society organizations around the world challenge this approach, calling for more separation between government and civil society. They fear that short-term military and political imperatives and corporate interests are hijacking funds needed for a long-term approach to sustainable peace and development.

Moving toward a comprehensive approach requires first diagnosing the key issues and obstacles to stakeholder coordination. Current obstacles include unbalanced approaches to statebuilding, faulty conceptions of civil society, and fundamental disagreements about the overall mission or goal. This essay describes these obstacles and then outlines how to address these issues.

2. Conceptions of Statebuilding

The tasks of fostering governance, development and peace are sometimes referred to as “statebuilding.” The international community’s statebuilding efforts overwhelmingly focus on building state structures and capacities while often doing relatively little to support or make room for civil society. State structures and capacities are important. But this “statebuilding” approach does not on its own foster good governance, development and peace.

Ideally, a citizen-oriented state fulfills basic functions in service of its citizens. Yet too often the state serves elite interests at the expense of a disempowered public. Without pressure from civil society, state institutions have free reign for corruption and ineffective services. State building exercises in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from this distorted strategy that fundamentally misunderstands and underestimates the role of civil society in fostering development, peace, stability, and democracy.

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3. Conceptions of Civil Society: From “Pacification” to “Force Multipliers”

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are groups of citizens not in government that organize themselves on behalf of some public interest. As opposed to “uncivil society,” CSOs foster democratic dialogue, tolerance and trust between groups, work in partnership with the state to carry out important public services, and hold the state accountable for its responsibilities to citizens and transparent governance. An active local civil society at the national and community levels is an indicator of a functioning and democratic state. Just recently this has been recognized by the OECD in their Statebuilding Guidance.

But historically, government and military manuals rather provided guidance on how to “pacify” civil society. Pacification strategies lacked an understanding of the contributions civil society makes to peace and development.

More recently, some government and military officials enthusiastically refer to civil society as “force multipliers” or “project implementers.” This conception treats civil society as government contractors or agents. Too many governments still actively exclude civil society from assessments, planning, and policymaking related to governance, development and peace. Civil society organization adamantly contest being called “force multipliers,” asserting that it makes it impossible for civil society to play an independent role in providing humanitarian assistance to all sides in a conflict or a role in challenging government policy or monitoring government corruption.

Pacification and force multiplier conceptions both harm civil society. Civil society is best able to contribute to stable governance and durable peace when there is adequate civil society space for CSOs to operate independently. On this basis it will be possible to bring different entry points and knowledge together and to develop a real comprehensive approach.

4. Stability for Whom and What Purpose?

A third challenge to state–civil society coordination is conflicting definitions of terms and missions. When national interests contradict local perceptions of human security, government and civil society are at odds.

For example, in the early days of the popular uprising in Egypt, powerful Western governments called for “stability” even though Egyptian citizens were clearly calling for “change.” The discourse of stability requires democratic accountability; a questioning of “stability for whom and for what purpose?” Instead, civil society asks for a more principled approach supporting movements for regime change and genuine democracy.

A state that is not citizen-oriented will inevitably come under public pressure. In this situation “stability” must not compete with the human security of local people. Not heeding local citizen’s calls for change undermines the legitimacy of the international communities’ stated interests in supporting democracy and freedom. Governments cannot maintain their own legitimacy if they support these values only when the values are convenient to their short term political or economic interests.

Perceptions of illegitimate and unwelcome interventions are widespread. Local civil society leaders complain the international community fails to listen to them as they assess factors driving conflict or the types of programs needed to build peace.

5. Shared Understanding and Inclusive Planning Required

Current antagonism between some governments and civil society stakeholders results in a lack of shared understanding of the factors driving conflict, an inability and unwillingness to plan their programs together, and ultimately uncoordinated and sometimes competing programs on the ground. Creating a truly multi-stakeholder approach requires several key steps:

1. Recognize the historic tensions between state and civil society definitions of peace, including past attempts at pacification and failures to support an independent civil society. Given past experiences, civil society will question government motives to work for peace without a transparent discussion of the state's other interests and how these either support or undermine human security.
2. Develop more rigorous criteria for assessing civil society's consent for international interventions. Fostering democracy requires international interveners to practice what they preach by listening more closely to local civil society leaders.
3. Aim to develop shared assessments or understanding of driving factors and shared missions or purpose rather than seeking 'whole of society' joint action without civil society input at earlier planning phases.

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FriEnt – as an established state-society partnership on equal footing - is a perfect platform in which to address these issues and promote joint learning and critical reflection.

Imprint

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