The Concept of "State Failure" and Contemporary Security and Development Challenges
Written by Johanna Moritz

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The Concept of "State Failure" and its use for Understanding Contemporary Security and Development Challenges

'State failure' and security and development challenges have been commonly linked since the creation of the concept in the 1990s. An inherent link becomes particularly evident when looking at the definition of 'state failure' by Robert Rotberg, which revolves around two central aspects of the concept. According to Rotberg states are considered failed 'when they are consumed by internal violence and cease delivering positive political goods to their inhabitants'.[1] For Rotberg, the primary public good is the provision of security within a territory.[2] Once this good is provided, a number of other goods can evolve, such as, for example, dispute settlement, the rule of law, political participation, education and health care.[3] Consequently, violence is idiosyncratic for 'failed states'. Other indicators would be a predatory government, loss of control over territory, criminal violence and the rise of warlords, lack of medical and educational services and a declining GDP per capita.[4] While weak states may perform well in some of the political goods mentioned above, overall failure relates to all of the categories.[5] The benchmark, on which generally a state is measured, is thus the western nation-state with its three core functions: representation, security, and a concern for welfare of its population.[6]

Rotberg's symptoms of state failure overlap with the Millennium Development Goal's (MDG) aim of reducing infant mortality, AIDS and the guarantee of education.[7] From the definition above, it becomes clear that it is perceived as a state's core duty to provide political goods linked to development. In fact, the establishment of a functioning state itself is often regarded as a development challenge.[8] In its traditional role as a guard of security, a state is responsible for the protection of the national territory and state institutions. As postmodern states are often of a more intertwined nature, national security issues do seldom stay within a nation-state's borders.[9] In this sense, the state's lack of domestic security may transform into transnational security problems.

In order to assess the concept of state failure with regards to security and development challenges, this essay will critically reflect on the role of the state in the provision of goods to its public. The emergence of informal actors challenges the assumption of a complete absence of governance in failed states. Following the definition of Rotberg, certain conceptual problems of the qualities attributed to a state will be discussed and different forms of governance by informal actors in failed states will be explored. Examples for this will be taken from the education sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Somali sub-state entity Somaliland. Finally, an analysis of different problems posed by state failure, especially in terms of transnational security, will demonstrate the importance of the state as a provider of these services.

The state, state failure and governance

State failure was first seen as a post-Cold War phenomenon. With the terrorist attacks of September 11th, however, concerns of policy makers and scholars shifted to security problems related with weak states and terrorism.[10] Albeit mainstreamed with regards to security and development policy, the concept was subject to a considerable amount of critique. Generally, there was a call for further refinement of criteria in order to localise failure more precisely and

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avoid a broad label for hardly comparable cases for state malfunctions. Charles Call, for example, subdivided the concept of state failure into 'security', 'legitimacy' and 'capacity' gaps.[11]

Another strand of critique, looking mostly at post-colonial states in Africa, addresses the understanding of the western-style state and questions its universal applicability as an instrument of government.[12] The argumentation not only revolves around the Weberian idea of a monopoly of force, but also around the concept of democracy and the concern about the wellbeing of its citizens.[13] Arguably, the genesis of the European state is the outcome of very unique historical processes.[14] For instance, European states were in constant competition for territory and trade, which drove the creation of a central authority.[15] In this context not only the formation of a state territory is crucial, but also the ability to physically control it. This suggests that modern states and their characteristic aspects are not a universal form of governance, but they have been built to fulfil a certain purpose.[16] Christopher Clapham describes how European colonial powers were forcing a state upon traditionally hardly governed areas.[17] The imposed nation state was, however, not held up long enough to erase traditional forms of organisation.[18]

In the light of an artificial genesis of former colonial states, western expectations of a state and actual governance might not correspond.[19] State functions seem to be the outcome of a process of state formation, rather than its consequence.[20] In this sense, the existence of state institutions fails to transform into the provision of security and positive political goods.[21] In turn, state failure does not lead to a complete absence of these goods. A focus on governance, defined as the ability of the 'making and implementing of collectively binding rules and the provision of collective goods', permits to gain a more appropriate view of the services provided in the context of state failure by distinction from institutional statehood.[22]

Informal actors and governance in situations of state failure

Many examples show that weak states can lose their monopoly of the provision of public services and security, which can happen to various degrees.[23] As pointed out by Christian Lund, a state's struggle to fulfil its duties can result in an 'amalgam' of actors between state institutions and local, more 'traditional' institutions.[24] These different groups negotiate varying alliances in different policy areas to exercise public authority and thus provide a form of governance.[25] The case of the education sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo clearly highlights how state functions can be negotiated. Due to measures taken within, what was then, Zaire's structural adjustment program, the budget for education was dramatically cut. When teachers could not be paid any more, the Catholic Church and the parents stepped in and created a system to top up the teachers' salaries.[26] Important to note is that the absence of the state does not translate into a vacuum.[27] The fact that non-state actors stand in for the state raises a question with regards to the measurement of state failure. Pointing out characteristics of the state stripped from a context may cause an idealisation.[28] Measuring against an ideal definition of a state as a provider of sophisticated political goods, a great number of states must qualify as 'failed'.[29] Surprisingly, although the state retreated from the education sector, in terms of schooling the DRC scored above average compared to other sub-Saharan African states.[30] Subsequently, the definition of a state as something fixed denies its continuous institutional evolution and the open ended nature of the process which constitutes state formation.[31]

While in the example of the DRC, the state structures were interfering with informal actors, governance can also be provided in the absence of a state. Chojnacki and Branovic describe how the monopoly of violence in a defined territory can become lucrative for rebels through the provision of security in exchange for taxation of the civilian population.[32] Warlords, for instance, provide infrastructure and develop a tax system, which could be regarded as a certain degree of governance.[33] Eventually, such limited institutionalisations can evolve. For example, if the armed group perceives the need to further legitimise itself by providing health services, education and financial services.[34] An impressive example of the institutionalisation of informal governance is Somaliland. Although the Somali central government effectively collapsed in 1991, followed by numerous unsuccessful international state-building efforts, an astonishing level of governance developed.[35] Somaliland has not only provided peace and security, it developed a working government and administration with several ministries. It provides schools, entertains an army and a police force, and it was even able to hold elections.[36] Although, the central government failed, political goods and security have been provided by informal actors to an extent that seemingly refutes the diagnosis of a failed state – at least on a local level. To a certain degree these alternative governance structures question the legitimate sovereignty of a

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state which is not able to provide any of those services.[37] Indeed, the example of Somaliland seems to confirm the argument of Jeffrey Herbst. He holds the notion that states incapable of imposing authority and providing basic goods should be deprived of their sovereignty and new functional states should get the possibility to secede.[38]

As the example of Somaliland shows, informal actors can provide state functions on a level that is comparable to other sovereign states.[39] However, the provision of services by informal actors can be described as a cost-benefit calculation. Essential is the assumption that security permits civilians to pursue productive work which, in return, can be taxed.[40] It can be argued that some states base their performance on this cost-benefit relation. Robert Bates argued in the case of African states, that peace is only given when the leaders of a state can gain from protecting its subjects.[41] Declining revenues, the prospect of gain through natural resources and threat of the leader's position can, however, trigger state failure and turn the state into a predator.[42] In this context, the intention of leadership becomes essential. The fact that a state does not fulfil its duties can be caused by the lack of will to do so.[43] While the intention to act in the public interest is not needed to provide political goods, its absence indicates the private nature of these services, which are therefore based on particular interests.[44] In the absence of institutions to constrain the power of misplaced leadership, such as the rule of law or political representation, the distinction between private and public actors can become blurred.[45]

The state, public goods and transnational security

Although certain services of a state can be taken over by informal actors, their quality must however be questioned. Through a comparison of the CIFP fragility scores of 2007 with the likelihood of states to meet the Millennium Development Goals, David Carment and Yiagadeesen Samy find that low ranking countries such as DRC, Afghanistan and Haiti are lagging behind in the fulfilment of the goals.[46] In a western-style state, services are provided collectively for citizens living within their territory.[47] As Thomas Risse argues, if statehood is limited territorially, temporarily, to certain social groups or policy areas, the collective nature of governance cannot be assumed.[48] To a certain degree, a normative comparison with the western-type state in order to point out qualities to serve a 'common interest', therefore, cannot be avoided.[49] As Charles Call explains, the privatisation of public goods is often connected to corruption and nepotism of weak state institutions, and it is desirable for a state to control informal actors at least.[50]

State failure seems to be similarly problematic on a broader international level. As mentioned above, in a globalised world security problems can hardly be contained in the borders of a single state.[51] One of the main concerns in international security associated with failed states is terrorism. Terrorism has, in the past, been commonly linked to failed states as 'safe havens' in which terrorists can pursue their criminal intentions without fearing prosecution.[52] Stewart Patrick suggests that terrorists prefer weak states, such as Pakistan, which provide basic infrastructure in communication, transport and a banking system, but are also characterised by weak and corrupt institutions.[53] However, in the case of Somalia, the role of the country as a transit zone for arms to Kenya and its role as a temporary hideout for international terrorists has been pointed out.[54] A recent affiliation of the Islamist militia al-Shabaab with al-Qaeda and the militia's first international terrorist attack on Kampala demonstrates a more dramatic link to state failure.[55] In terms of proliferation, failed states play a key role in the spread of small arms.[56] Infectious diseases, Stewart Patrick argues, spread more easily in failed states without a public health system, even beyond borders.[57] Another problem associated with state failure concerns transnational crime. The production of drugs and smuggling are especially prevalent in 'failed states'.[58] The case of Somalia is also demonstrates the problem of refugees for neighbouring countries. Somali refugees in Kenya engage in smuggling and the trade of small arms, causing disorder and violence within Kenya's border region.[59] Piracy in the horn of Africa arising from Somali coast demonstrates another transnational threat resulting from state collapse.[60]

Informal actors and their interest in state failure

When addressing state failure, it is however important to consider informal structures as mentioned in the examples above. Certain actors have considerable interest in the maintenance of state failure and thus their own power. David Keen suggests that war economies based on economic activities that would be criminal in times of peace can become the principal motive to prolong a war.[61] This applies to the example of warlords and actors who provide

The Concept of "State Failure" and Contemporary Security and Development Challenges
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security against taxation in failed states, as they have an interest in prolonging state failure. The case of Somalia indicates two other examples of beneficiaries of state failure. On the one hand, actors discontent with their share of the central state.[62] In a climate of intense strife among different clans, the central state is seen as a tool for suppression and financial extraction.[63] On the other hand, some actors, businessmen for instance, fear the establishment of a new central government to disturb their economic and political ambitions.[64] If not taken into consideration, these actors may spoil state-building efforts. For this reason, Menkhaus suggests for the case of Somalia a 'mediated state', which reduces central state duties to a minimum of services, namely in term of security, justice and conflict resolution, not yet provided by non-state actors, while local actors are recognized as partners.[65]

Conclusion

In regard to understanding contemporary security and development challenges, the concept of state failure is of mixed use. On the one hand, a normative definition of the state, which is understood as a means and not a consequence of development, does not take into account that security and political goods can be provided by informal actors.[66] As the breakdown of the education system in the DRC demonstrates, failing states might lose their monopoly to enforce decisions, but forms of negotiated authority may emerge resulting in the maintenance of political services.[67] Even state collapse does not transform into an absence of security and political goods, as the case of Somaliland shows.[68] This challenges the assumptions of the state as sole provider of these services.[69] State failure after all depends heavily on the ideal against which it is measured.[70]

While informal actors can provide security and political goods, thus contributing to development, it must be stressed that their actions are based on cost-benefit calculations.[71] Crucial is the fact that governance and the provision of public goods in failed states cannot be assumed as collective.[72] To a certain degree, a normative definition of the state as acting for the common interest cannot be avoided.[73] Moreover, in terms of international security challenges, the absence of a state, which can impose national security, can pose problems as especially the examples of terrorism and transnational crime above show.[74]

Although informal actors cannot replace central states they must be taken into consideration for successful state-building efforts. Firstly, they may have an interest in prolonging state failure.[75] Moreover, as Menkhaus' suggestion of a 'mediated state' indicates, integrating functional structures of governance into state-building efforts may be promising.[76]

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The Concept of "State Failure" and Contemporary Security and Development Challenges
Written by Johanna Moritz

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The Concept of "State Failure" and Contemporary Security and Development Challenges
Written by Johanna Moritz

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