Whose Statebuilding? Western Ideology at the Core of Statebuilding Operations

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Statebuilding, principally led by the UN, is the most prevalent answer to state failure and demand for it is rising as the tendency to terminate conflicts in negotiated settlements rises simultaneously (Paris & Sisk, 2009, p. 1). However, empirical results of recent statebuilding operations are mixed (Bleck & Michelitch, 2015; Richmond, 2012, p. 354). Susan Woodward (2017) calls "failed states" a Western ideology and argues that statebuilding interventions that are aimed at reversing state failure are largely unsuccessful because they are based on a Western-dominated, rarely questioned concept, authorising what Harland (2004, p. 15) calls "illegitimate" intervention in developing countries. Woodward points to the inevitable normative character that statebuilding operations carry. Nevertheless, this does not imply that statebuilding operations are inherently "bad". Doyle and Sambanis (2000, p. 779) argue that sustainable civil peace is contingent upon its successful reconstruction. However, especially in weak states, the design of statebuilding is flawed, as it is often imposed from outside and top-down, with little local consultation. The balance between an external actor "doing harm" through further exacerbating division in a society and acting as a catalyst for peace and development is difficult to strike. There is an established consensus in academic and policy circles that the lack of genuine local ownership is the biggest challenge to statebuilding interventions (Donais, 2012, p. 1) and thus likely a contributor to its failure. Why, then, is local ownership in so difficult to achieve?

This essay aims to determine the following: to what extent is the lack of genuine local ownership in statebuilding the result of the Western conception of statehood that shape statebuilding operations? The following thesis statement will guide this analysis: Top-down, external statebuilding operations are largely ineffective in promoting development and can, in some cases, do unintended harm, due to a lack local ownership. The unwillingness to operationalise local ownership originates in a Western normative vision of statehood that delivering institutions embody, which creates tensions between international self-interest and local ownership. This essay will analyse this statement by first summarising the debate around statebuilding and local ownership, to subsequently discuss the conflict of interest between UN missions and local ownership, before concluding with consequences the lack of ownership entails for post-war reconstruction. This analysis will draw examples from UN-led statebuilding missions in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Kosovo (UNMIK) and Mali (MINUSMA), by extending other scholars' analyses on ownership in these countries.

Context and definitions

The academic literature on the definitions and impact of statebuilding and local ownership is abundant. In this section, each concept will be defined, and its context placed in the wider debate. As a detailed discussion on the definitions and the challenges of the concepts used would go beyond the scope of this essay, definitions that have been widely agreed upon among scholars will be favoured.

Statebuilding

Statebuilding is defined as the construction of legitimate governmental institutions in countries emerging from conflict (Paris & Sisk, 2009, p. 14). It is an "endogenous process of strengthening the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state driven by state-society relations" (OECD, 2010, p. 149). Extending from this definition, the discussion arises

as to the differences between statebuilding and peacebuilding. The two concepts are related but distinct. Statebuilding is a particular approach to peacebuilding, which claims that sustainable security and development can only be achieved if capable, autonomous and legitimate governmental institutions are present (Paris & Sisk, 2009, p. 2). The literature provides a wide array of explanations for its perceived failure, ranging from commitment problems, spoilers, lack of resources, state circumvention and security dilemmas (Bleck & Michelitch, 2015; Malejacq, 2016, p. 86). More recently, the inherent normative contradictions of statebuilding have been discussed by a range of scholars who assert that Western values that are intrinsic to statebuilding operations cannot be exported to other countries and expected to be successful (Paris, 1997, 2002; Richmond, 2006). Thus, a consensus emerged that statebuilding should be better adapted to non-Western societies. On how this ought to be achieved, opinions diverge. Fearon and Laitin (2004) propose a model of neo-trusteeship, which Krasner takes further with the idea of shared sovereignty: to create joint authority structures in specific areas such natural resource management, for example (Krasner, 2004). By some scholars, this is seen as neo-colonialism (see, for example, Bendaña, 2005). Herbst and Mills view the elimination of external statebuilding as the most favourable option to allow for new forms of authority to grow without outside direction (Herbst & Mills, 2003). This, however, is generally not discussed as an option: Post-war statebuilding efforts are too important, locally and globally, to counteract and prevent millions of people living in predatory states. The lack of assistance, among other things, may create spillover effects and regional instabilities (Paris & Sisk, 2009, p. 14). However, the lack of successes of statebuilding operations raises significant questions. To date, no serious critique of statebuilding operations has questioned the deeply embedded normative vision of statehood on which the UN missions base their operations – a gap this essay seeks to fill.

Related to this concept are weak or fragile states. Because the discussion around state failure is not the main concern of this analysis, the two concepts will be used interchangeably, and will be defined as states that are "incapable of projecting power and asserting authority within their own borders, leaving their territories governmentally empty" (Malejacq, 2016, p. 88).

Local ownership

Local ownership is defined by Jens Narten (2009) as the following:

The process and final outcome of the gradual transfer to legitimate representatives of the local society, of assessment, planning and decision-making functions, the practical management and implementation of these functions, and the evaluation and control of all phases of statebuilding programmes, with the aim of making external peace and statebuilding assistance redundant.

(p. 255)

A greater cooperation between local and international actors has been advocated by many scholars and policymakers (Anderson, 1999; Autesserre, 2014), but local ownership goes further, by putting local leaders at the centre of every step of the statebuilding process. From a global perspective, local ownership is important for the subsequent withdrawal of statebuilding missions, but is also seen as indispensable to guarantee the successful and sustainable implementation of post-war statebuilding (Narten, 2009, pp. 252–254). Sarah von Billerbeck (2016) provides a detailed account of the UN's discourse and operationalisation of local ownership and the deep contradictions inherent to them. Despite the widespread awareness and rhetoric of its important contribution to the success of a statebuilding process, there is an empirical lack of a genuine willingness to operationalise local ownership in statebuilding missions (von Billerbeck, 2016, pp. 5–6). Moreover, local ownership has on occasion been criticised as more of a vision rather than a practical objective within statebuilding structures (Reich, 2006, p. 7), which implies that it is not a practicable aim and should thus have no priority in statebuilding. This view reveals the tensions between international self-interest and local ownership arising from a normative view of statehood intrinsic to the UN's identity which will be discussed in the next section.

Tensions between international self-interest and local ownership

There are apparent tensions between local ownership of statebuilding and international self-interest, and local

ownership seems to get the short end of the stick, which in turn hurts the statebuilding process. Statebuilding, as described earlier, is justified on grounds of a normative belief that external actors have a catalytic role to assist local actors in reorienting the direction of social systems. However, these international actors are not, for the most part, benevolent humanitarians who feel the weight of the "white man's burden" (Easterly, 2007), but institutions that have a set agenda and interests that are often antithetical to the goal of achieving genuine local ownership. These interests can sometimes be overtly selfish, such as UN mission personnel being more interested in career advancement and a good relationship with headquarters than local success (Woodward, 2017, pp. 75–76), or more subtle, such as ideological divergences between parties over foundational norms (Collins & Thiessen, 2020, p. 217). The tensions, as addressed at the beginning of the section, refer to the underlying assumptions of statehood more generally. The assumption inherent to the UN's institutionalised ideology and the one of its high-level decisionmakers is that viable statehood is comprised of a Weberian state with a rationalised central bureaucracy that enjoys a monopoly of organised violence over a given territory and population, and, more contemporarily, provides security, representation and welfare (Milliken & Krause, 2002, p. 755) – an ideal that Western states have seldom achieved.

These normative standards are perpetuated within the UN because its very conception is based on a state-centric system, even though its members often do not reflect the juridical and/or empirical statehoods on the ground. African states, for example, were expected to form Western-like statehoods within a few decades of gaining independence (Milliken & Krause, 2002, p. 762). However, unlike European state formation, where there was no image of an ideal state, the contemporary period is characterised by a vision of a state having relative "rule of law, solid democratic institutions, and market-driven development"(Barnett & Zürcher, 2009, p. 28). Because of the UN's intrinsic normative values, post-conflict statebuilding practices are informed by these principles, even where juridical states do not match empirical ones. Structural adjustment programmes, for example, are based on the view that large bureaucracies are inefficient, and thus "bad". However, by shrinking bureaucracies in fragile states such as Somalia, entire state structures disappear, which may plunge the country into chaos (Mayall, 2003, p. 9). In Afghanistan, a brutally enforced Western vision of statehood has failed. Historically, the Afghan central state has been weak, leaving the country with a fragmented political landscape. After the 2001 invasion by the US, Afghanistan absorbed large aid flows that did little to strengthen the authority and legitimacy of the present government. Due to a superficial willingness to allow for some degree of local ownership, expatriate Afghans were flown into Kabul to rebuild government institutions, providing little to no skills transfer to a local population unfamiliar with a strong centralised authority (Suhrke, 2009, pp. 228–236). These examples show that fragile states may potentially get stuck in a vicious circle: a state may "fail" because of intervention, which then requires statebuilding intervention, which, if imposed externally, without genuine local ownership, is set to fail.

Local ownership is not embraced because it may question the liberal peacebuilding agenda. Agents of statebuilding missions believe that because their vision of neoliberal norms and institutions is the "best" way forward for the country in transition, imposition is justified. Local ownership is dismissed, as little trust exists in local actors to "know" what is best for them (von Billerbeck, 2016, p. 48). This leads to inevitable tensions and often goes against the will of the local leaders who have different expectations of political processes and a deep desire to shape their country's future. In Kosovo, many have seen UNMIK as an obstacle for gaining independence. The antagonistic set of expectations creates an inevitable dissonance, what Collins and Thiessen (2020, pp. 217–224) call a meta-conflict, a conflict over conflict. This competition regarding the practice of statebuilding is visible in the statebuilding experiment in Mali. Bleck and Michelitch (2015, p. 599) argue that in the 2012 crisis, domestic perspectives on the crisis went unheard, even though the local rural population had divergent views on the priorities of the statebuilding process. The consequence of the lack of local ownership was that mistrust by local actors towards statebuilding missions became entrenched because local leaders knew it was impossible to challenge the overarching goals of the liberal peacebuilding agenda and could become likely to oppose the statebuilding process (Collins & Thiessen, 2020, p. 231).

Local ownership "on our terms": How ideology hinders statebuilding

The preceding section has shown that a Western conception of statehood can interfere with statebuilding processes. This section will uncover some of the mechanisms through which this ideology produces ineffective statebuilding processes. Contemporary UN missions often try to integrate local actors into the statebuilding process. However,

even where some degree of local ownership has been granted, it is either adopted superficially and/or for strategic reasons. Several examples and mechanisms will be discussed below.

Difficulties of finding appropriate actors

Statebuilding operations encounter serious difficulties, especially in fragile contexts, in finding the most legitimate local voices in societies with whom they want to partner up and transfer external authority to. The principal reason for this challenge is imperfect knowledge of the local contexts and difficulties within the country the operation is preparing for. Imperfect knowledge of legitimate local actors stems from the fact that local perspectives are not sufficiently taken into account. The reason can be tied back to ideology: local actors are insufficiently or not consulted because of a lack of trust in their knowledge. This may lead to empowering former entrepreneurs of violence who still have a large approval, a strategy known as "picking winners", which may send a signal that using violence is a legitimate way to achieve political goals. In Kosovo, UNMIK picked previous warring parties as local partners because they had large followerships. However, some of these local actors were responsible for war crimes. This strategy fuelled dissatisfaction and ethnic violence flared up again in March 2004 (Narten, 2009, p. 27).

Local ownership aligning with Western normative standards

In Afghanistan, UNAMA followed a strategy of statebuilding at the central level. The UN and US chose a central partner named Hamid Karzai – who became Afghanistan's President – rather than supporting a range of local leaders, which arguably would have suited Afghanistan's political structure better. The statebuilding strategy and budget were completely defined and pledged by the US and he international community (Suhrke, 2009, p. 243). In the case of Afghanistan, where security structures, for example, do not exist, justice and policing systems cannot be brought in from outside and expected to work overnight (Mayall, 2003, p. 21). This hints to the fact that the US and UN were keen to predetermine Afghanistan's future state model, namely a liberal peace based on a strong, central government, which in 2006 was seen as part of the bigger problem. It also means that statebuilding operations are mainly concerned with government ownership rather than engaging all levels.

Local ownership to close the accountability gap

The contemporary principle of local ownership ascribes responsibility to host states for processes that are externally designed (Ejdus, 2018, p. 29). In this case, local ownership is an attempt to gain legitimacy for the intervention and adopted by agencies in the belief that ownership is key in winning over local actors to ensure the strategy is successful and seen as legitimate by local populations (von Billerbeck, 2016, p. 16). Here again, local ownership is only tolerated inasmuch as it ascribes to the Western "recipe" of statebuilding. If local actors are picked, they are often known to the West and follow Western rules, thus perpetuating the Western vision of pluralist democracy and market reform (Narten, 2009, p. 261). Such can be seen in Kosovo, where Agim Ceku, a former commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army responsible for war crimes, was elected as Prime Minister (Narten, 2009, p. 272). This may feed into local grievances and create spoilers if communities feel under threat of losing from post-war statebuilding, a consequence that will be discussed in the concluding section.

Consequences

Statebuilding operations, if not based on local ownership from conception to implementation to evaluation, are likely to do more harm than good. Local ownership is needed to restore public trust and legitimacy for a government whose mission is to consolidate peace to prevent resurging conflict by improving public safety, leadership and basic service provision. Legitimacy is key to building sustainable peace. Importing policy prescription and lack of local control of the process undermines the legitimacy of the mission itself and the government, and can thus create mistrust amongst the population (Barnett & Zürcher, 2009, p. 28) and may eventually cause the conflict to flare up again. A continued dependency on external assistance can also develop a structural quality and alter the social fabric of the society, as seen in Kosovo, where the influx of more than 380 NGOs has recruited 50,000 Kosovars, mostly highly talented people, which has created a local "brain drain" that deprived the local economy of prime human resources (Narten, 2009, pp. 258–259). UNMIK's high intrusiveness in the political sphere has shown to undermine the

legitimacy and social contract between the Kosovar government and the population (Narten, 2009, p. 263).

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to traverse the challenging terrain that is statebuilding and laid out how the lack of local ownership contributes to the failures of statebuilding, a shortcoming informed by a Western normative vision of statehood. In doing so, it explored the motives of institutions that provide statebuilding, before concluding with a brief and inexhaustive explanation of the consequences of the lack of local ownership.

The track record of statebuilding experiences remains mixed, and some successes such as Namibia should not be dismissed. However, underlying assumptions that inform statebuilding need to be questioned if the UN is interested in completing its missions successfully. Genuine local ownership means that local populations are free to adopt neoliberal norms that the UN has designed for them, if they deem them suitable for their country, but that they are also encouraged to modify or choose a different model to their specific local needs. There is no universal statebuilding measure that fits all fragile, post-war states, as there is a large diversity in fragile contexts, which is why it is all the more important that genuine, local ownership is introduced at the onset. Sustainable peace is built upon the extent to which people have a say in shaping their own future, and only genuine local ownership, devoid of ideological convictions, can help achieve that. The difficulty remains to find a balance between external resources which these states desperately need, and the degree of freedom international institutions are willing to grant.

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