



Effective statebuilding?

A review of evaluations of
international statebuilding
support in fragile contexts



Evaluation Study

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statebuilding support in fragile contexts**

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Executive Summary

Statebuilding has become a major concern of OECD donor countries in recent years. However, our conceptual and empirical knowledge is still rather limited as to which approaches and instruments work and which do not. A growing stock of research and evaluation studies should provide urgently needed information, enabling donors to learn from past experiences in order to improve the effectiveness of their interventions in the future.

The present evaluation study suggests that the current body of research and evaluation documents does not yet fulfil this task. The study surveys existing knowledge on the experiences with assistance to statebuilding in fragile contexts. For the period under review (2005-2011), the study identifies some 100 documents that assess international activities which are explicitly and primarily aimed at addressing issues of statehood/fragility, peace and security or governance. Some 40 studies were selected for in-depth analysis, either major (cross-country or multi-donor) evaluations or outstanding case studies. In order to allow for the triangulation of findings, the universe of available case studies was narrowed down to eight countries: Afghanistan, DR Congo, Haiti, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan (including South Sudan) and Sri Lanka.

Methods

As a general observation, we feel that the “conventional approach” to evaluation has to a certain extent reached its limits. Many studies analysed in this report attempt to establish credible findings and recommendations, but very few meet the standards of academic scrutiny. Most studies fail to establish a transparent link between the information presented and the conclusions drawn from that information. Given the considerable effort evaluators put into data collection, it is surprising how little truly comparative information is generated, especially in the context of cross-country or multi-donor evaluations.

The vast majority of documents assessed for this report rely on qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, rather than advanced statistical methods. Some major evaluations are based on cross-country (small-N) comparisons with up to ten countries. These studies are typically confronted with a large diversity in terms of the quality and quantity of project documentation, strategic outlines and data sources, making comparisons between cases or specific approaches difficult. As a consequence, most cross-country evaluations do not exhaust the opportunities for a truly comparative analysis of the cases. The selection of countries or projects is hardly ever based on a concise conceptual or methodological argument.

Few studies address the key issues raised by the current international debate on evaluation design and methods. Above all, there is virtually no reference at all to the attribution gap between specific donor interventions and observed developments in statebuilding. Also, basic features of scientific research, such as the replicability of results, the validity of data, the isolation of variables in complex causality chains or the construction of counterfactuals and baseline data are hardly ever mentioned. As a result, this type of evaluations has an in-built tendency to be rather mainstream-oriented and overly focussed on the views and opinions of the development expert community (including evaluators) and their immediate counterparts.

Some studies analysed in this report, however, clearly suggest that innovation *is* possible, especially if additional efforts are dedicated to (i) tapping local knowledge sources and intensifying exposure in the field, (ii) employing rigorous methods, (iii) supporting method-sensitive terms of reference and project documentation and (iv) ensuring comparability.

Key lessons for statebuilding assistance

With the methodological qualifications mentioned above, several major lessons can be derived from the existing body of knowledge:

Prioritisation and sequencing: Donors widely acknowledge the need to prioritise and sequence their activities, but they do not seem to rank their different objectives in a strategic and successive manner. One major challenge – for evaluators and donors alike – is the lack of a convincing theory of change.

Donor coordination, interdepartmental cooperation and aid modalities: Several studies point out that the transaction costs and the loss of flexibility resulting from donor coordination may outweigh its benefits, especially in situations where quick action is needed. Few authors, however, question the benefits of joint conflict analyses and political assessments as a means to enhance effectiveness in donor interventions.

Political settlements: Our review shows an increasing awareness of the need to analyse and understand the political foundations upon which statebuilding occurs. Those (few) studies which employ a political settlement lens report strong evidence concerning the importance of this factor for the success of statebuilding support.

Incentives and coercion: The conditionality of ODA flows in the context of state fragility and violent conflict is a widely debated issue. Yet the evaluations surveyed neither provide a systematic analysis of how incentives and coercion might impact on statebuilding nor do they report on donor attempts to set incentives or put pressure on relevant actors.

Political and social context-sensitivity of interventions: It is a common finding in evaluations and research studies that interventions fail to address the “root causes” of conflict, employ flawed analytical concepts and do not account for the specific conditions

of their political and social environment. At the same time, many studies do not even pay lip service to domestic ownership, let alone evaluate interventions from this perspective.

In sum, donors need to be more pro-active and innovative with regard to evaluations. Basic aspects of project planning and implementation, such as the formulation of objectives and indicators, the collection of baseline data and the elaboration of reports, should be reviewed with a view to facilitating future evaluations. Donors could also encourage evaluators to make use of robust statistical methods and observe the standards of sound qualitative analysis.