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State building at the grassroots:

Community-based approaches in conflict-affected states

Community-based approaches (CBA) to post-conflict development and recovery are in vogue. Community-based programmes have been implemented in a range of post-conflict countries, from Timor Leste and Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. CBA are increasingly viewed by the donor community as an effective instrument for promoting development in contexts where the reach of the state is weak or non-existent. Operating outside of formal state structures, they have the potential to support community mobilisation in places where the state lacks the capacity to play a positive role or where it may even provoke feelings of hostility and fear. As such, CBA are a potentially valuable state-building tool. Yet, in advocating the empowerment of non-state actors, CBA do not necessarily sit comfortably with other, more mainstream, state-building instruments focused on bolstering official institutions. Combining the two is likely to create difficulties that need to be addressed head-on by both donor governments and implementing agencies. Most of all, governments and agencies need to engage proactively with the political challenges of implementing CBA and recognise that they are a political undertaking as well as a technical one. These challenges call for a rethink of the type of support donors bring to local state-building processes. CBA require qualitative forms of support, such as diplomatic assistance, rather than the predominantly financial support that is more commonly provided.

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Introduction[1]

Community-based approaches (CBA) to post-conflict development and recovery are challenging conventional methods of post-conflict state building. Comprising a range of methods, including community-driven reconstruction (see box), CBA seek to promote functioning decision-making and administrative structures in places where state authority is weak or absent. In doing so, they offer a complement to more common approaches to state building, which emphasise the importance of bolstering state bodies in order to promote stable and legitimate governance. Advocates of CBA argue that state-centric approaches alone are unsuited to contexts where there is little tradition of legitimate state rule or where the presence of state institutions may even provoke fear or hostility.

1. Some of the evidence presented in this brief was collected by the author during his research on CBA-based programmes in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for Stichting Vluchteling and the International Rescue Committee in 2010. He would like to express his sincere appreciation to these organisations for their support.

In these situations, they maintain, it is necessary to build on local capacities for governance, fostering community structures that are able to substitute for state authority pending the (re-) establishment of constructive links between state and society.

Community-driven reconstruction

Community-driven reconstruction (CDR) is a post-conflict development methodology developed by the World Bank. It involves the setting up of elected local community committees responsible for implementing local development projects under the oversight of an external development partner that provides training, accompaniment and funding. Stressing local ownership and local decision making, CDR programmes typically pursue three objectives: social cohesion, socio-economic development and good governance. The assumption is that these three aims can be simultaneously advanced by giving conflict-affected communities the opportunity to work together in pursuit of shared development gains through committees that operate according to standards of good governance. CDR programmes usually include safeguards for the adequate representation of marginal and vulnerable groups, such as widows and displaced people. They also encourage community members to form grassroots organisations that fulfil watchdog capacities vis-à-vis the development committees.

Targeting the grassroots

The emergence of CBA as a programming tool should be viewed in the context of a growing focus in policy circles on the local dimension of instability. Recent years have seen an increased concern with the local drivers and consequences of violent conflict and, as a correlate to this, greater attention to local opportunities for stemming social collapse. Illustrative of this growing trend is the increased attention paid to the situation of jobless youth who, in certain poor and unstable contexts, may choose to join armed groups as a way to secure an income. Another area of concern has been festering inter-community tensions at the local level, which may feed into broader social cleavages or even become politicised nationally, as has happened in numerous countries plagued by ethnic or other forms of conflict.

If left unaddressed, instability is often self-reinforcing, which increases the risk of violence becoming repetitive. In response to this, some researchers have argued that the best way to interrupt patterns of conflict is to strengthen legitimate institutions in a way that enables them to address local needs effectively and equitably while also letting them command loyalties across the governed territory. The 2011 *World Development Report* stresses that 'strengthening legitimate institutions and governance to provide citizens security, justice and jobs is crucial to break cycles of violence.'[2]

Yet achieving this is easier said than done in many places that have suffered violent conflict. In communities where the state is seen as a source of insecurity or where the very concept of state authority is alien, the building blocks of formal institutional rule are often absent. How can a state presence be built in places where the state is met with apprehension and resistance? Any attempt to roll out state institutions is unlikely to be appropriate in contexts where the very legitimacy of the state is in question.

2. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011 – Conflict, Security and Development*. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011 – Conflict, Security and Development*, Washington DC.

Building states from below

CBA were devised in order to support development in contexts of weak state authority and aim to make up for the shortfall of state power by building on the governing capacities of local non-state actors. These non-state actors may include traditional institutions, such as village committees and councils of elders, but more commonly consist of entirely new bodies set up under the community-based programme. With support and accompaniment from the implementing agency responsible for the programme (typically an international non-governmental organisation or a foreign government agency), it is hoped that the local bodies will be strengthened and enabled to play a lead role in managing local affairs in the absence of state power.

Over the long term, the new local bodies are, as a rule, expected to forge ties with official state institutions, thereby ensuring their inclusion within an official framework and arguably also their greater longevity. Indeed, many community-based programmes in post-conflict countries have been implemented as elements of wider decentralisation drives. In Rwanda, community-based interventions were undertaken to enhance participatory governance at the local level in anticipation of the establishment of electable local government bodies. Here, a legacy of strong government meant that relatively close relations existed between community-based structures and official bodies at the outset, although the programme expended considerable energy on trying to deepen these relations further.

There is reason to be optimistic about the effectiveness of community-based programmes. Programme evaluations suggest that community-based interventions have generally been successful in advancing socio-economic recovery, social cohesion and good governance standards,[3] although a major caveat to this is that most of these evaluations were carried out before or shortly after the end of the programmes, limiting what they can say about the long-term impact of CBA. Within their short time frames, however, community-based programmes have been remarkably successful in helping to set up new community structures closely embedded with local communities, despite problems of elite capture and non-representativeness persisting in many places.

On the back of their achievements, CBA have received increased attention and support from donors, and there is a growing view in policy-making circles that they represent a flexible instrument for promoting recovery and development in particular post-war contexts. A range of programmes have been implemented in post-conflict or otherwise unstable contexts in recent years, including Rwanda, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, Burundi, Timor Leste and Liberia. Two of the largest programmes were carried out in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Here, consortiums that included numerous Western states and inter-governmental organisations supported programmes reported to have targeted some 25,000 and 1,250 local communities respectively.[4]

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3. For a comprehensive review of the literature on CBA see Haider, Nora. 2009. 'Community-based Approaches to Peacebuilding in Conflict-affected and Fragile Contexts,' *Governance and Social Development Resource Centre*.
4. Official website of the National Solidarity Program of Afghanistan, http://www. nspafghanistan.org, and Humphreys, Macartan, Raul Sanchez de la Sierra and Peter van der Windt. 2012, 'Social and Economic Impacts of *Tuungane,*' p.7. Available online at: http://www.oecd.org/countries/democraticrepublicofthecongo/drc.pdf.

Facing the challenges

State-community relations

The growing interest in CBA has not always been accompanied by a clearer understanding of its potential as a state-building tool. CBA are founded on new assumptions about state building, divergent from those of more mainstream approaches. Where the focus until recently lay on institutional strengthening and state-centred interventions, CBA push for bottom-up measures that emphasise the need for collective mobilisation outside of formal state structures. Responding to discussions on state fragility and state resilience, they advance a view that the latter is a product of effective bargaining relationships between state and society, made possible by the empowerment of non-state actors.

In spite of this, community-based programmes have often been implemented as elements of state building drives without due regard to some of the key problems that can arise. These problems relate to the difficulties of marrying interventions that seek to strengthen the capacities of non-state actors with a more conventional focus on bolstering state institutions. While there is scope for reconciling the two objectives, efforts to do so are likely to fail as long as insufficient attention is devoted to the political and practical complexities of attempting to foster a new, more resilient relationship between state institutions and local structures.

For example, most community-based programmes in post-conflict areas foresee an eventual rapprochement between community bodies and official institutions. However, achieving this is not normally within the powers of the programme; it will usually involve decisions taken at top political levels. A community-based programme in the eastern DRC, for example, was thwarted in its attempts to promote ties between community bodies and local government institutions due to considerable delays in the planned decentralisation process in the country, largely as a result of political obstruction at the state level. As the decentralisation drive was a cornerstone of programme planning, its postponement meant that the programme was un-able to meet all of its aims before it ended.[5]

Even where the rapprochement between community and official bodies proceeds to schedule, it can come at the expense of weakening the voice of local communities in official decision making. Under cover of strengthening state-community relations, state institutions may squeeze out local bodies or turn them into instruments for state policy. In Burundi, a programme partly based on community-driven reconstruction methodology assisted local communities in listing their development concerns as the basis for local development policy. However, the commune council responsible for implementing the policy had the prerogative to freely select which concerns to focus on, and concentrated on those most closely aligned with the central government's development priorities rather than local priorities.[6]

The Burundi programme highlights the importance of establishing viable funding lines for local structures in order to increase their autonomy from central government bodies. Community-based programmes tend to have little influence over how community bodies are funded after the close of the programme, even though this is of enormous importance in shaping power relations between local and state bodies.

5. Research conducted for Stichting Vluchteling/The International Rescue Committee on CDR-based programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi in 2010.
6. Idem.

In Burundi, the central government resisted devolving fiscal powers to communes, making the communes entirely dependent on external funding from development organisations or national ministries. In this situation, the local development bodies had little power to promote their own development agenda over the wishes of the national government, weakening the voices of the communities the local bodies were supposed to represent.

Such outcomes risk undermining the role community-based programmes can play in strengthening the position of local communities in state-society relations. Rather than empowering communities to act as assertive and proactive partners of the central government, the programmes may instead facilitate the extension of state control. This is at odds with the deeper purpose of CBA, which is centred on promoting effective and constructive partnerships between state bodies and local society, a process that is increasingly viewed as fundamental to achieving true state resilience.

One of the basic challenges for community-based programmes is that they operate in political environments that are beyond their influence but which are frequently hugely influential on programme outcomes. This issue has to be addressed, and donor governments need to be mindful of the political support they can bring to programmes in addition to the material support they provide. In cases where failing political will or political capacity on the part of national governments threatens to thwart the objectives of community-based programmes, one resort is often for donor governments to exercise their diplomatic clout on behalf of the programmes and targeted communities. In Burundi, for example, effective top-level diplomacy might have helped to persuade the central government to honour its prior commitment to establish a special fund for commune support and partly freed the communes from financial dependency on line ministries.

Local politics

For all its effects on state-society relations, the greatest impact of CBA is on political relations in the local communities where interventions take place. Here, too, CBA are intensely political and should be recognised as such.

Despite frequent suggestions that CBA (such as the World Bank-sponsored community-driven reconstruction methodology) are mainly concerned with recovery and reconstruction, they tend to be forward-looking in a radical way. This is partly because there is no going back to the time before a conflict. In places where violence and upheaval have unravelled the fabric of communities, including by generating large shifts in their populations, the challenge is to promote effective local politics within the new realities rather than to restore past dynamics. Indeed, the very concept of 'community' is often vague and contested in places where the population continues to change due to the influx of displaced people, not all of whom have lived in the area previously. In such a situation, CBA may be less about restoring past community workings than about helping to foster a new understanding of the community, spacious enough to include displaced people and other marginalised groups.

Another important way in which CBA are forward looking is that they seek to promote new, more resilient political relations at the local level and proactively tackle the patterns of exclusion and inequality thought to have contributed to social conflict in the first place. They attempt to advance more inclusive politics by seeking to introduce standards of good governance and greater representativeness in local decision making.

These aspects render CBA a political intervention as well as a technical one. Their goal, after all, is to support the transformation of political dynamics in a way that fosters more resilient communities, capable of acting effectively at the local level as well as in relation to other societal actors, most particularly governmental bodies.

In practical terms, achieving this requires extensive efforts of local diplomacy, and implementing agencies need to adopt a flexible approach to working with local populations, carefully adapting their interventions to power relations on the ground. Community-based practitioners are often confronted with vexing dilemmas that defy pre-written guidelines and which need to be handled according to the practitioners' independent judgement. One dilemma relates to whether elites and spoilers should be privileged for the sake of efficacy or whether political equality should be defended at all times in the name of inclusion. Another arises from the paradoxical situation where externally supported community-based programmes attempt to support communities to take charge of their own affairs. Is it possible to foster genuine community autonomy through a systematic and protracted intervention or do attempts to do so merely establish new lines of dependency?

There are no hard and fast solutions to these problems, which are highly context-dependent. Formal guidelines and standardised assessments can provide some assistance, as can the local knowledge of local consultants recruited to the programme. Experienced external staff may also have a good understanding of the possible scenarios that may play out in any given intervention. Ultimately, however, resolution of the problems will depend to a significant extent on the good judgement of programme staff. They need to acknowledge that they occupy a privileged position in shaping community affairs and recognise that they are political actors who cannot fall back entirely on a pre-written programme manual. Indeed, the programme's local staff may themselves be implicated in local power relations, which adds another level of complexity. In recognising their political position, programme staff need to wield their power in a way that best affords real autonomy to community actors.

The inevitably political contexts in which CBA operate invite a rethink of what is understood by 'support'. While it is often considered in monetary terms, community-based programmes focus on qualitative interventions, such as training, accompaniment or local diplomacy, which cannot easily be quantified in terms of outcomes and impacts. Pouring money into community-based programmes will do little to transform political processes or strengthen decision-making structures. The crucial assistance that can be provided involves less tangible measures, including appropriate forms of training, the creation of real opportunities for community bodies to exercise decision-making powers (i.e. ensuring that they are able to take decisions independently of the implementing agencies) and ensuring that community populations are effectively included in local decision-making processes.

In addition to providing diplomatic assistance at the governmental level, donor governments need to be aware of the opportunities and constraints that prevail over community-based programmes and devise their support accordingly. Practical measures include ensuring that funding is not conditioned only by tangible achievements but that value is attached also to process-based work, such as results-based training and awareness-raising. Donors must also acknowledge that considerable time is required to set in motion processes for deep structural change and avoid imposing excessively tight time frames on programmes. Furthermore, donors may consider lobbying other

development organisations active in areas where community-based interventions are underway in order to persuade them to channel some of their resources through the bodies that have been set up under these interventions. Practitioners of community-based programmes often complain that other development organisations eschew the community structures established under the programmes, instead relying on their own parallel systems for service delivery. The more resources channelled through the new community structures, however, the more the management capacity of the new structures is likely to increase. They are also likely to become more firmly entrenched as the main entry points for development work in localities. The backing of donors in these and other efforts may help to unlock more of the potential of CBA as an instrument for strengthening community capacity.

Conclusion

The focus of CBA on grassroots-based measures and community leadership makes them suitable for many post-conflict contexts where development needs are great and state capacities are low. By supporting community mobilisation outside of formal state structures, CBA are also able to promote development processes in places where the state is unable to play a positive role in the short term. Furthermore, CBA may be able to contribute to the strengthening of ties between local communities and state bodies in the long term by facilitating a gradual rapprochement between official and non-state organisations. As such, they hold considerable promise as an instrument of state building.

However, the political dimension of CBA needs to be given greater acknowledgment. In seeking to transform social and political relationships, CBA are at heart political undertakings and should not be treated as mere technical exercises free from a deeper political vision. Indeed, CBA flow from notions of state building that diverge from more traditional, state-centric approaches. If not properly managed, attempts to pair CBA with those approaches may generate tensions and confusion that risk undermining the objective of community empowerment. In this light, implementing agencies and donor governments need to acknowledge the political role they can play in the context of community-based programmes, recognising that their proactive diplomatic engagement is necessary to achieve the deeper structural change pursued by the CBA methodology.

About CRU

The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) conducts research on the nexus between security and development with a special focus on integrated / comprehensive approaches on conflict prevention, stabilisation and reconstruction in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Specialising in conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools, the CRU aims to assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organisations in improving their engagement in these complex situations.

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