

Abstract

From crisis response to state-building: services and stability in conflict-affected contexts

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Basic welfare and access to social services need to be given higher priority in early planning for state-building interventions, and in the 'transition' from crisis response to longer-term developmental assistance in post-conflict contexts. Meeting basic needs offers the potential for a tangible peace dividend for conflict-affected communities. It is also central to state legitimacy and to the social contract between the state and society.

While the DAC principles for good international engagement in fragile states recognise service delivery as a central part of state-building, many donors place heavy emphasis on governance, in particular building or revitalising public administration. This risks creating a 'service gap' between relief assistance and state-led service delivery. This, in turn, risks disappointing fragile hope in countries emerging from conflict and encouraging further instability. These dangers are acute as crisis response mechanisms wind down and long-term developmental approaches gear up. Finding the right balance between 'upstream' reforms and the provision of services is a key challenge. Like-wise, a balance between physical security and broader needs is also critical given ordinary civilians' perceptions of security often extend beyond protection from violence to livelihoods assurance and basic economic opportunities.

In contexts of contested legitimacy and/or weak state capacity, donors have often relied on providing humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs and provide social services. However, humanitarian assistance is based on principles of impartiality and independence, and often operates 'around' the state in order to uphold these principles. It is also highly projectised, relatively uncoordinated, patchy and largely commodity-driven. This implies that humanitarian approaches that are appropriate when there is widespread threat to life are often insufficient to meet broad-based needs in a predictable and dependable way. Communities require reliable, consistent

and long-term support to enable them to reinvest in livelihoods and improve their material wellbeing. Similarly, stability requires the state to take increasing responsibility for its' citizens' well-being. This is beyond the remit of humanitarian actors.

Clarity on the value of humanitarian action and discipline in its use are important to ensure its quality and effectiveness. Alternative mechanisms are required to provide assistance once life-threatening needs have been addressed and violent conflict is largely absent, but state capacity remains very weak. New mechanisms for closing the service gap and providing predictable assistance are being tested. These include efforts to integrate the military, police and civilian aid workers in deployments, and experiments in joint programming, transfer mechanisms and community-driven development.

The discussion paper on which this abstract is based outlines some mechanisms that may be of relevance in contexts where Australia operates. We argue that *how* assistance is provided is just as important to stability as *what* that assistance is. In the transition period, aid should be delivered in such a way as to maximise the role of the state in delivering basic welfare and access to services. This requires effective harmonisation and alignment of external assistance, which is best achieved by joint, national programmes.

Making basic welfare and access to social services central in transition and state-building strategies has implications for the initial crisis response. Effective and large-scale emergency responses in conflict-affected countries interplay with populations' perceptions and expectations. These in turn influence the social contract and citizens' views of the state's legitimacy. While the humanitarian imperative is paramount in situations where there is life-threatening need and ongoing conflict, early consideration of how and when relief assistance will wind down, and how the gap created by the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance will be filled, is essential.

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