Fafo AIS

The Problem of the State
Discussion note

New Security Programme[1]
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Fafo AIS's profile is built in large part on the living conditions surveys it has carried out (most recently in Iraq), an attempt to understand the social dimensions of human security, and an analysis of the international responses to transition and armed conflict. An ongoing institutional priority for Fafo AIS is use this high-quality data as the basis from which to examine and explain complex and politically important issues, such as transitions to democracy and the social underpinnings of political and economic phenomena. This entails an analysis of, for example, social networks and social practice, household coping, social capital and local government, and political participation and attitudes.

Our analytical framework seeks to explain the social sources of political power and political change. For example, transitions to democracy, for example, can be understood as the manifestations of social practice, including the struggles for survival and domination between state and society actors (Migdal, 2001), that are played out over specific issues of democratic transition and or political liberalisation. By examining the behaviour, interests, and strategies of actors – for example, in such social fields as households, civil society, and elites – research can begin to explain processes of state recession, with a particular focus on providing a grounded explanation of the neo-patrimonial rule in these countries (Bøås, 2001).

In general, our approach reflects a concern to build policies relevant for state-building and international responses to conflict from the ground up. Rather than debate definitions of state "failure" or fragility, we should, in our view, be trying to explain state recession or democratic development by asking about the social foundations of transitions already underway. What political and economic transition processes are happening in each country? What is the nature of politics in each country? How is political participation related to social organisation? Do reforms represent manifestations of political liberalisation or democracy, or are they indicators of other forms of social change?

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[1] This note was written by Fafo staff Mark Taylor, with contributions from Morten Bøås, Kathleen M. Jennings, Christian H. Ruge. The Fafo New Security Programme conducts research into the social conditions - both global and local - of insecurity, conflict and war. The objective is to assist in global efforts to improve security for affected populations through research and policy formulation activities in the areas of social and economic living conditions and responses to conflict. The research agenda will mark an attempt to understand the conditions that pose threats to the safety, security, and well being of people and the policies and practices of responses to these threats. More on www.newsecurity.info

Below we have listed several conclusions based on our own research. What follows is by no means exhaustive of the research into "fragile" or "weak" states, but constitutes the links around which the majority of our work currently is focused. A common element running through these conclusions is the need among the development and security communities for solid, in-depth qualitative and quantitative knowledge about the areas in which policy interventions are needed or underway.

1. States recede, they rarely fail entirely

The spread of insecurity and the polarisation of international politics have forced a return to state-focused security policy. This return to a focus on the state is driven by recognition that insecurity—local, regional, and global—rises as state agency is increasingly informalised.

Terms like 'state failure' or 'weak states', while intuitive, do not capture the actual recession of the state over time, a process that is a central to understanding insecurity in a number of countries and regions. Nor do these terms capture the role of development assistance in state-building as the most effective way in which to provide for human security. Indeed, the notion that states are 'fragile' or have 'failed' may privilege an analysis that does not help us very much. To speak of 'fragile' state implies that states' weaknesses are linked to the likelihood of break-up or secession. This may or may not be part of the problem. When we employ the term 'state failure' we assume that all states are pretty much similar and are supposed to function in the same way. This is not necessarily the case. Contemporary states are the result of very different historical processes, and whereas some states may be seen as failing to provide an environment of human security, they may be efficient providers of regime security. The latter may be their prime concern, not necessarily the former. Problems may emerge if we allow our usage of the term 'state failure' to focus our analysis on the state and its institutions—rules as well as organisations—when in many cases the power relations that matter for regime security are private and informalised. Thus, when we speak of failed states, we are probably referring to states in which power resides mainly outside the state's formal institutions. In other words, in 'failed' states, decisions about distribution and redistribution are taking place outside and in between official state structures. For those in power, this is not necessarily a failure; in fact, it may very well be to their advantage, by improving the security of the regime in power.

We therefore suggest that if we are to continue to employ the concept of 'state failure', it should be as the basis for investigations into human security—that is, a state's ability or willingness to function in a manner conducive to the welfare of the majority of its citizens. In this sense, we should be asking not which states are failed states, but—for whom is the state failing, and how? By asking questions about the people and communities that the state is failing we open up an analytical perspective that can inform us about the dynamics at work that undermine both social and economic development and state and human security.

2. Economies do not cause conflict, but they can sustain them

In the context of largely unregulated global markets, economic opportunity provided by access to natural resources or other forms of wealth in a number of developing countries intersects with conflicts over power and identity, the informalisation of the state, distribution of resources, and human insecurity. Commodities that would otherwise provide the basis for economic and social development instead become illicit conflict commodities, the life-blood of informal markets and shadow networks.

The fact that there is economic activity in a conflict zone does not mean that informal economies, or even illicit commodities, cause conflict or insecurity. Nevertheless, these economies can become a focus of conflict. In a number of cases, factional military power has been deployed to take advantage of natural resources and other forms of wealth, both licit and illicit. In the particular dynamics of economies in war zones, the threat or use of force—coercion—can become integral to the production and marketing of commodities. In a number of cases, armed force has become central to the viability or profitability of specific business entities, and economic activities have in turn become central to the tactical or strategic considerations of belligerents, thus sustaining conflicts.

The ability to move commodities and funds between illicit sources and legal markets is crucial to the profitability of conflict zone economies. There can be criminality involved, often recognisable as so-called 'white-collar' crime or other nonviolent economic crimes. It is via such market-based crimes as smuggling and sanctions busting, export fraud, and money laundering, that links are established between the (licit) global trading system and international criminal networks. This also makes existing informal economies in conflict zones vulnerable to processes of criminalisation.

The market-based dimensions of a conflict-affected economy can be seen as an alternative networked economic system depending for its profitability on the informalisation of the state and its structures. Such economies often take on a regional dimension. In many parts of the world, and particularly in conflict areas, smuggling and other illicit trans-border economic activity constitute one of the major coping strategies. As such, we also believe that binary oppositions such as 'greed vs. grievance' are often misleading as they tend to blur the complexities and ambiguities of war zones. Here, the case of coltan from Eastern Congo is instructive. The exploitation of coltan fuels insurgency warfare, but at the same, it also constitutes one of the most crucial elements in the coping strategies of thousands of households in Eastern Congo. We would therefore suggest an approach that understands these economies and the networks that comprise them in their own right.

These networks do not emerge from nowhere; they build on existing structures, both material and ideational (e.g. identity-based). Understanding cultural practices and traditional structures is therefore a prerequisite for understanding how illicit or informal networks come into being and how they work, and should also inform policy responses to the challenges created by conflict economies.

3. Violence takes place in a lived social space

Ultimately, the victims of violence do not distinguish between small arms or tanks, smart bombs or dirty ones. It may seem to outsiders that they know only that they have suffered and experienced loss. But, as survivors, they may also know who has caused that suffering, what it means for their lives, how they will cope, and how they have responded or will act. Violence and the responses to violence are, in this sense, local. A state, a region, or a conflict zone occupies a territory—material or imagined—and, as a territory, it is delimited not by official borders, but by social practice. The locality or region is a dynamic entity and a social construct. It is both formal and informal. And the moving bodies that inhabit the space are knowledgeable actors who manoeuvre in what is an environment of great uncertainty. To understand insecurity from this perspective, we must understand agency and context.

Direct violence, whether political or criminal, is only part of the story. The famine in the Horn of Africa in the 1980s generated awareness about the links between war and famine. Since then, we have come to realize that the 'secondary effects' of war constitute a far more deadly form of violence. Nowhere in recent times has this reality been more grimly demonstrated than during the wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the effects of violence rippled outwards, destroying health and food systems and killing an estimated three million people in four years.

Because violence, insecurity, and conflict occurs in a specific context that predicates and shapes the way people living in those situations cope and make decisions, it is crucial that development and security actors in countries undergoing or emerging from conflict understand the local contexts and the coping strategies that have been developed in order to effectively target, design, and implement sustainable programs.

Whether implemented by multilateral organisations or domestic NGOs, whether focused on individuals or communities, the integration of security and development activities must recognise that security is in the eye of the beholder. This points to the need to use social data as the basis for planning. The policy community—both researchers and practitioners—has yet to fully grasp the significance of people-centred data and information for how we think about security or the implications for states and state-building policies. We have not yet comprehensively thought through how people-centred approaches to mapping insecurity should inform policies and practices of human security, conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peace operations. Decisions are being made about the strategy or design of international or national responses to insecurity in the absence of any real data. There is a real-world demand, a pressing need, for data and information that describes the landscape of insecurity. To practitioners in the field, that need is obvious. It would seem obvious that these complex situations require good data in order to plan national or international responses to insecurity. In some places it is being generated. There are an increasing number of examples of sectors or countries where data and information have played a key role in shaping decision-making.

Community-centred approaches and the use of solid social data in planning can improve the coherence of international and national responses to security and develop-

ment issues. In programmatic terms, much of the best evidence for concrete contributions to human security comes from community development approaches to problems of insecurity or peacebuilding. Not surprisingly, the bulk of this work is found in efforts to deal with small arms and light weapons, trafficking in human beings, and landmines, where initiatives are often based on a community's desire to address the destabilising effects of the uses of force. These same initiatives often find that to be effective, or to have a sustained impact, they must address the sources of the problem, not just the symptoms. These root causes are driven in large part by individual, household and communal perceptions of economic and physical insecurity and competition, not state-centred definitions of security. This tends to be true both for countries or communities emerging from prolonged conflict or dictatorship, or for those places where conflict threatens to weaken the state's capacity to protect its citizens.

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