

Post-Conflict State Building: The Academic Research

A report on the workshop held at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

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Participants' names have been eliminated from the report below in order to encourage a free flowing discussion.

Susan L. Woodward begins by describing the motivation for organizing the workshop: to address the gap between academic knowledge on post-conflict state-building and operational practice. In particular, she sees that much of the important work, in terms of concrete findings, as being done by young scholars, such as those attending this workshop. By bringing together scholars and practitioners from NGOs and international organizations, the workshop seeks to identify strategies and mechanisms for further connecting the policy and academic worlds. The participants also discussed the existing state of knowledge in the area of post-conflict state-building, fruitful areas for future research, and ethical and logistical dilemmas confronting researchers and practitioners.

Following rich discussion, the group arrived at two principle goals for a future network of scholars working in the field of post-conflict state building or peace building. The first is to develop and sustain a network of scholars to improve research through the sharing of knowledge and by facilitating the logistics of research. The second goal is to link scholars to policy makers in order to present relevant research findings as "food" for policy recommendations. These two priorities are mutually supporting. Creating better links between academics also has policy benefits. By accessing one scholar a policy maker can access a whole network of scholars. Also, developing links to policy makers can provide researchers with avenues to information and resources. However, given the different needs of the two communities, different means should be used. For scholars, breadth and diversity are important, while, for policy makers, more emphasis needs to be given to brevity and operational implications.

The first steps toward achieving these goals have already been taken. The project began by creating a data set that describes what young scholars are working upon. This data set includes classification by countries and topics, which enables it to be a resource for people in operational activities. For instance, one can identify the scholars working on the Congo or on specific topics such as justice or policing. Perhaps because the field is still relatively young, this data set is unique in identifying what is still a limited number of scholars. The data set may also be expanded to include more senior scholars, researchers in post-conflict countries, and more young scholars from around the world who were not identified by the initial search for dissertation abstracts.

The data will be made available on line (stateandsecurity.org) for practitioners and other scholars. Each of the scholars will also be invited to participate in an online network that will share research findings, tips for doing research in different countries, opportunities, and methodological approaches. The network will also provide a forum for discussion, which can serve to improve the study of post-conflict state-building. Another priority for the network is to increase and make more accessible the diversity of knowledge on post-conflict questions, in order to insure a plurality of methods and research questions. To ensure the utility of the network, ethical guidelines for the interactions within the community of scholars and between scholars and policy makers/practitioners will be drafted. These guidelines should serve as a charter that helps define the project and should specify important values such as the independence of academic research and the rights of confidentiality. The network will also require monitoring mechanisms to insure the quality and scientific value of information.

This network will also be connected to the policy community. One participant provided a concrete set of proposals for mechanisms that would be useful for the DPKO Best Practices Unit and for the wider community of policy makers: 1) Links to the latest papers on issues, or reviews of recent work and on literature covering specific topics 2) The ability to search the database of scholars in order to recruit experts for specific tasks or "interns" to work on a short-term basis with missions in the field 3) A place to propose questions to the network of academics to research or to ask for feedback anonymously through a moderator 4) A place to get policy recommendations.

What does the academic community think that the policy community is missing or should be considering? The kind of research most helpful to policy makers includes distilled case studies that can be used in trainings, strong articulations of things that should never be done, consideration of the by-products and externalities of missions, and critical thinking on the practices of missions. In turn, the policy community can provide information on the activities of their organizations and ongoing internal debates.

The group considered the benefits of sharing knowledge. For policy communities, academic debates and even disagreements can transform institutional contexts that are often characterized by too much consensus and not enough knowledge of local contexts or previous successful practices. Research can assist efforts to reform policy and institutions. Often, external voices are heard more clearly than internal ones. Scholarly research can also benefit from interaction with the practitioners. In the field, this can take the form of logistical aid and access to insightful first hand accounts and other research data. One suggestion is that practitioners can provide research questions, which helps focus the work of scholars and provides a measure for the usefulness of research.

There is however also a need to craft scholarly work in a way that it can be used in contexts dominated by time constraints. One model can be found in the Center of Global Development, which requires a short statement of the policy implications of papers posted on their web site, while also providing the complete work. Such a model enables scholarly work to serve multiple audiences. While summarizing a lengthy work may raise the risk of misinterpretation, concision is integral to the utility of information for practitioners.

Several existing mechanisms provide a possible model for how a web site or email forum could function. **LiCEP**, Laboratory in Comparative Ethnic Processes, is a successful model for linking scholars, which became freestanding after an initial five year grant. The **GRC exchange** (Governance Resource Center), funded by DFID, provides documents, but it is more relevant to policymakers than to academics. The UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations Best Practices Unit (BPU) found the GRC site useful initially, but hasn't used it much recently. This highlights the benefit of having an interactive network that is updated with the latest information from policy and academic work. Another possible model is moderated email discussions that provide summaries of ongoing email debates, although this is more limited than a web site that is generally accessible. A **Wikipedia** format shares knowledge through a web site that encourages input from various sources on specific topics. Designed for the UN, such a web site could have researchers plug in information that could be used by UN staff looking for answers. Wikipedia makes their user-friendly software available. For such a site to work, a moderator would be needed.

In the short term, the group was confident that gains could be realized by sharing existing scholarly work on a web site. Further development of the site could be gauged upon the level of resources available for employing site monitors, commissioning work, and even funding collaborative field research projects. However, the goal here is not to establish a think tank, but to rely on a more informal network of scholars.

The Need for Scholarly Knowledge and Points of Entry

The group identified the use of such a project on the basis of the limited use of academic knowledge in current policy environments. While one might imagine well-informed policy makers and decision makers, often the primary resource is a scattershot "Google search." Driven by time pressures,

practitioners often do not have time to raise questions or access in-depth knowledge of the local context. Structural issues within organizations such as the UN can also prevent the sharing of knowledge up or down the administrative hierarchy. Institutional learning is often informal and not durable with changes in personnel, which makes a durable web site where knowledge can be shared a more valuable resource. Also, structural issues of institutions require scholars who seek to influence the policy process to consider possible points of entry. Considering points of entry allows for different levels of involvement by scholars with the policy community, from direct participation to external criticism. Staff trainings and mission planning are two possible points of entry for academic knowledge. A new development is the formation of the UN Peacebuilding commission, which seeks to coordinate future missions. While its role has yet to be determined, it is a possible forum for applying academic knowledge.

Field Research in Post-conflict Contexts

The first basic recommendation of the group is that researchers seek help from people who had already been in the field. The network of scholars is intended to facilitate such connections. A second recommendation is that researchers be wary of affiliating themselves too closely with international actors. Research can be skewed if locals perceive researchers as an extension of international forces. Academic integrity can be a means of gaining respect from people on all sides. It is important to be aware of both how one is perceived as a researcher and of the importance of knowledge in what are still tense situations. Sharing information can have material repercussions, and this dynamic needs to be considered when interpreting data and in developing an ethical methodology as to how information will be used by the researcher.

Randomization is an approach that can provide meaningful results for the study of the effectiveness of policy implementation. Randomization can elide ethical issues as to the distribution of goods, although it requires attention to the specifics of each case in order to control for different variables. Too often evaluations of policies are done without a control group that would indicate the effect of policies. More generally, the evaluation component of programs is under funded. When practitioners are faced with a choice between possible policies, randomized implementation can indicate which one works better.

However, the question arises as to how research findings will be used. For instance, if studies show one group can be more successfully reintegrated, aid groups may chose to focus on this group to the exclusion of more difficult groups, thereby serving their own interest of showing positive results. To some extent, the use of research is outside the control of the researcher. The group debated to what extent researchers should consider the ends to which their research may be put. While all agreed that careful consideration should be given to the implications of research, some found that there are limits to the control a researcher has over the use of a finished product. Thus, the researcher's primary obligation is to carry out good social scientific research. As an individual, one can argue for specific ways that research should be translated into policy, but this advocacy should be divorced from the pursuit of research. Some participants view these two roles as more intrinsically connected. Another participant worries that "the default position in dealing with this problem is to criticize, to critique, critique, critique what policy is doing. My own sense is that that is too easy, or often counterproductive." Rather more productive ways of engaging with policy makers are needed.

Another issue addressed by the group is the difficulty of translating insights gained in local contexts more generally. There was a general agreement that close attention needs to be given to local contexts in order to understand the dynamics of post-conflict state-building. One failing of policy has been to apply a blanket model of the state, without enough consideration of local factors. An emphasis on the local has long been present in the field of anthropology, and anthropological methods can be useful in

post-conflict environments. Researchers should "nurture the use of ethnography as a part of the methodological toolkit," because it provides unique insights and a means of evaluating policy. Close attention to context is also increasingly being applied to the institutions intervening in conflict situations, exemplified by ethnographies of the World Bank, for instance. Studies of international actors can offer one means of comparing the results of local studies and drawing more general conclusions that are attuned to both local contexts and international influences.

Defining the Field: State-building or Peacebuilding?

Woodward begins the consideration of the definition of state-building by highlighting the fact that it is only recently that state institutions have been considered vital to establishing peace. In the mid-1990s, political science's conceptualization of the institutions of state still "went over people's heads." "Now, one almost needs to say that institutions are not everything, because there has been such a turnaround at the rhetorical level."

"In an ideal world we would be talking about socially embedded states and would not have this society/state divide." Institutions can also be considered more generally, without attention to just the state. However, a focus on just the state "creates artificial divides" that may keep different scholars and practitioners from talking to each other. Thus "peacebuilding" as opposed to "state-building" may be a more inclusive term. Too much focus on the state may also lead scholars to miss other important forms of social authority. An example is "specific networks among civilians," such as youth gangs that need to be understood in order to accurately assess post-conflict environments. State-building also is too often taken to mean just elections, which are increasingly seen to be insufficient in themselves for the maintenance of peace.

One participant provided a useful typology of the use of different terms. "On the very use of the word state-building, I was surprised to see in East Timor or even Kosovo, the phrase itself is rarely used in UN circles. To me, it only came as response to use of the term nation building by the Republican administrations, with a very negative subtext. I wonder if it is the phrase we really want to use, because in UN circles, peace building is the standard way of referring to it. When I hear state-building, I think that is the academic, when I hear nation building I think it is from the media, and when I hear peacebuilding, that is the UN." Moreover, state-building seems insufficient to some specific cases. "For instance, the World Bank, with the community environment projects, has consistently insisted on looking away from the state to non-state forms of authority and social participation. In Burundi, the World Bank financed a project that was out to establish a complete, comprehensive, alternative government system at the local level, within very tiny communities with alternative mode of elections. This was definitely a non-state or almost anti-existing state project."

Another consideration is the aptness of the term "post-conflict," when a more flexible continuum may be appropriate, given the importance of the dynamics of war for the post-conflict situation. Also, how long does the "post-conflict" period last? "The academic may consider the historical process of state formation, where one really doesn't see much unless a span of 50 years is examined. But there is also a shorter form, perhaps governance or the triage version of state building that happens quickly. The same argument applies to building peace: Is it really a three-year operation or a long historical process?"

Continuing the interrogation of terms, another participant raises the point that there is often little agreement on "the fundamental question of what is the state. There is an historical literature that is never brought to bear on policy. What ends up being used is a reductive understanding of the state as a collection of institutions on the European model, a symbolic checklist if you will. A number of scholars

have already said that this doesn't get us very far empirically. There is a theoretical literature on what the state is, but it is disconnected from operations."

One response is that "there is an emerging consensus on the limits of a rapid transition to a liberal economic and state model. But there is disagreement on what is then the next step." One can hope that "international policy makers move towards providing several, or at least 3 or 4 different options, on the state that can be used in post-conflict situations." Part of the task for young scholars in the field of post-conflict state-building is to investigate such models and consider their implementation while remaining attuned to the constraints and exigencies of the difficult and ongoing practice of post-conflict state-building. Another perspective is that "states emerge when people are trying to do other things entirely, like making war. The scholar Jim Person's point is that there is not a single external intervention that has not had unintended consequences. The contexts for intervention are incredibly complex, determined by path dependence and perhaps at critical junctures as well. It's like throwing a rock into a moving stream. So there is a certain hubris in the concept of state building." Woodward closes the meeting with the hope that learning can take place. "I think analytically, as scholars, we can study some of these unintended consequences, rather than approaching them as assumptions that cannot be controlled."