

**AGENCY AND GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEXT
OF CIVIL CONFLICT**

POLICY BRIEF No.1

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS CAN LIMIT
NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS'
POWER AND EXPANSION

MAY 2013



Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID



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Research Grant RES-167-25-0481

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MAY 2013

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Summary

One of the key ways in which non-state groups gain power and expand is by infiltrating communities, transforming their formal or informal institutions, and becoming *de facto* rulers. Such power transforms local life in a myriad of ways and makes civilian cooperation with combatants more likely. Supporting legitimate and effective local institutions is essential to strengthening communities *vis-à-vis* these actors. Such local institutions may be formal or informal and do not necessarily come from the state. Hence, pursuing new initiatives from below to improve local governance, collective action or conflict resolution can strengthen communities' capacity to limit the influence of non-state armed actors.

Introduction

One of the key ways in which non-state groups gain power and expand is by infiltrating communities, transforming their formal or informal institutions, and becoming *de facto* rulers. Such power transforms local life in a myriad of ways and makes civilian cooperation with combatants more likely.

Although macro-level solutions are important and needed, they are limited by agencies' capacity to implement changes on the ground. These policies need to be complemented with smaller interventions at the local level that facilitate citizens' capacity to limit the intervention of armed actors in their communities. Local level institutions that are legitimate and effective are crucial for allowing people to organise and respond to the presence of armed organisations in ways that limit their influence. By reducing these groups' influence on the economic, social and political life of the community, good institutions can help to reduce their capacity to recruit, victimise, grow and expand.

These institutions may or may not be the formal institutions that the state would wish to establish; good institutions often come from indigenous practices, traditions, and civic movements. Identifying institutions that work and supporting new initiatives to strengthen shared norms and conflict resolution schemes among locals can allow communities to limit the intervention of non-state armed groups and, by so doing, diminish the latter's capacity to gain power over a territory and its inhabitants.

Non-state armed groups in local communities

Non-state armed groups often gain immense influence in communities living in the territories where they operate. They infiltrate local populations and amass power by relying on a myriad of strategies such as using violence, providing public goods, allying with politicians, offering rule enforcement where it is lacking (in particular to control crime), and eliminating detractors. In some cases, these organisations become so powerful that they become *de facto* rulers, shaping formal and informal institutions and transforming the social, political, and economic realms of local life. This influence soon translates into higher recruitment, greater civilian cooperation, and a higher capacity to grow stronger and expand.

When a group manages to infiltrate a community so deeply, it becomes very hard to limit its activities and protect the population. Because territorial control is so important for many of these groups—they need it to move valuable illegal resources, weapons, and money around—in as far as they succeed in controlling populations, they succeed in expanding and growing stronger. It is essential to identify potential interventions that can help shielding communities from the influence of these organisations.

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When armed groups attempt to enter and conquest a new territory, they exploit institutional vacuums: delinquency, unenforced contracts, uncontrollable youths, sub-provision of public goods—all these are spaces that aspiring rulers can fill. When institutions are poor, people do not have an interest in preserving them; what is more, they may even demand radical change. In these contexts, illegal armed groups can easily enter the scene, establish new norms, infiltrate different sectors of the population, and slowly gain power to control the territory and its people.

However, when local institutions work well—people recognise them as legitimate and follow them—combatants face obstacles. People do not want norms to change; furthermore, the very fact that norms are shared and supported facilitate collective action—that is, engaging in a common cause despite the individual costs that it may entail. The better a community's institutions are, the less likely it is that armed groups establish norms, make alliances with sectors of the population, and become a *de facto* ruler. Civilians can—and often do—organise resistance against those groups that insist on imposing a new social order and, despite the power imbalance, they often succeed in limiting these groups' aspirations.

While good local institutions often do not expel these groups from a given territory, they do limit the amount of power these organisations gain. And in so doing, they limit their capacity to use violence, recruit new members, and evade the authorities.

Policy implications and recommendations

There are two common state responses to the presence of non-state armed groups: confrontation and institutional reform.

Confrontation consists of fighting against these groups through the police, the military and the justice system. Given systemic institutional weaknesses and the growing bribing capacity of these groups, this approach often faces many obstacles including violations of human rights, corruption, and scarce resources, which limit success in the short-run. Furthermore, developing countries seldom have the level of state capacity required to be able to respond to challengers in many parts of the country at the same time. While a given territory might be temporarily recovered from the hands of illegal groups, as soon as the state's coercive forces leave the community is likely to be ruled, once again, by combatants. And if those state forces abused the population—a common feature of military recovery of territories—even more locals are likely to cooperate with the illegal groups.

The second common response, reform at the national and regional levels of the justice system, the police, the military, and other public agencies, is also crucial. In order to decrease corruption, strengthen public authorities, and protect citizens from organised violence, countries must work on the long-term improvement of their institutions. However, it often takes much time for changes at the national level to reach the periphery. Although these reforms should be pursued, they should be complemented with other interventions that can have more direct effects in the local territories where illegal groups operate.

Supporting legitimate and effective local institutions is a key way to strengthen communities *vis-à-vis* armed actors. Such support should not be directed only to state institutions as in developing countries good institutions do not only come from the state. In many countries the state has different kinds and levels of presence throughout the territory, and the norms and regulations that structure human interaction come from a myriad of sources including indigenous practices, tradition, churches, and civic movements. States should not demonise these forms of local governance but, rather, support them wherever they count with broad support. Even more, pursuing new initiatives from below to improve local governance, collective action or conflict resolution can strengthen communities' capacity to limit the influence of non-state armed actors and, by so doing, their power over a people and their land.

Key references

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