

Scoping a long-term research programme on conflict, state fragility and social cohesion

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Annex B: Key concepts and definitions

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“Conflict”

The definition given in the 2007 DFID policy paper “Preventing Violent Conflict” is useful:

“Conflict exists in all societies at all times and need not necessarily be negative or destructive. Conflict is the pursuit of contrary or seemingly incompatible interests – whether between individuals, groups or countries. It can be a major force for positive social change. In states with good governance, strong civil society and robust political and social systems where human rights are protected, conflicting interests are managed and ways found for groups to pursue their goals peacefully. Where there is poor governance, however, grievances, disillusionment, competition for resources and disputes are more likely to become violent”. We therefore use the term “violent conflict” to refer to latter type of conflict.

There is agreement in the research community that conflicts are rarely one-off events, and often result from longer-term, structural processes of social and political disintegration. Neither do they typically occur in a linear cycle, but rather coexist in varying degrees of intensity over different time periods.

“The state”

This is perhaps one of the most contested concepts of all. Although at a broad level, it is agreed that the state is a political organisation which exerts control and authority over a defined territory, its resources and population¹, there has been a tendency to see the state in narrow terms as the set of formal structures and institutions (e.g. executive, parliament, judiciary. military) that exercise authority and are the visible embodiment of the state. However, recent work by social scientists have stressed the context-specific nature of the state and that the state is embedded in wider society. Thus, it is also important to understand the informal social and political practices, networks, power relations, relationships and cultural meanings that shape formal state institutions and thus also constitute the state in practice.

“State Fragility”

DFID defines fragile states as occurring where ‘the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor’ (DFID 2005) although this definition is quite narrow. The fragility provided by the OCED-DAC (2007) is broader:

“Fragility arises primarily from weaknesses in the dynamic political process through which citizens’ expectations of the state and state expectations of citizens are reconciled and brought into equilibrium with the state’s capacity to deliver services. Reaching equilibrium in this negotiation over the social contract is a critical determinant of resilience, and disequilibrium the determinant of fragility”.

We find that this definition is usefully complemented by the definition given by Stewart and Brown (2008)² – “states that are failing, or at risk of failing, with respect to authority, comprehensive service entitlements or legitimacy” as this also emphasizes situations where the state is unable to protect its citizens from violence and situations where the state enjoys limited legitimacy in the eyes of the population i.e. it lays stress on whether the population (rather than international

¹ Max Weber’s classic definition is that a state is an organisation that has a “monopoly on legitimate violence”. In practice and juridically, however, an entity is state in international law if it is recognised as such by other states, even if it does not have the monopoly on the legitimate use of force over a territory. Thus, there are entities that exercise legal order over a territory, but are not recognised as a state by other states (e.g. Somaliland).

² Stewart, F. and Brown, G. (2008) Fragile States, CRISE working paper no. 51



donors) think a state is fragile.

“State building”

DFID defines state building as “the process through which states enhance their ability to function” (DFID 2008) and stress that statebuilding is an iterative process shaped by elite interaction and state-society relations. For this reason, the term “state transformation” is preferred by many, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts where the emphasis is on the dynamic change from one type of state (and social contract) to another aimed at building the foundations of a peaceful society. For this reason, the recent OCED-DAC (2008) ³ definition is more widely accepted and is the one that we use to scope out the research programme:

“We define State building as the purposeful action to develop the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state in relation to an effective political process for negotiating the mutual demands between state and societal groups. While support to state building is thus increasingly seen as a means to assist in responding to and preventing fragility and conflict, it is a relatively recent and as yet loosely defined concept in the context of development assistance. State building needs to be seen in the broader context of state-formation processes and state-society relations. State building is seen as a primarily endogenous development founded on a political process of negotiation and contestation between the state and societal groups. The idea of state-society bargaining as the basis for building more effective, legitimate and resilient states provides a particularly useful lens for thinking about situations of fragility, but also about governance and development more generally. It helps to shift thinking from a focus on transferring institutional models, towards a focus on the local political processes which create public institutions and generate their legitimacy in the eyes of a state’s population”.

“Political settlement”

DFID defines the “political settlement” as “the forging of a common understanding, usually among elites, that their interests or belief are served by a particular way of organising political power” (Whaites, DFID 2008). DFID stresses that political settlements are not static but evolve. Some political settlements last for centuries, but within that time decision-making power is likely to transfer between different elite groups. Many commentators stress that although political settlements may adopt the structures of the ‘modern’ state and be underpinned by a constitution, in practice the power relations and ethos behind the settlement may be very different.

“Social contract”

The basic idea of the “social contract”⁴ is that people give up some rights to a government in order to receive certain entitlements and jointly preserve the social order. It is related to the notion that legitimate state authority must be derived from the consent of those who are governed. DFID and other donors stress the importance of taxation and service delivery to the social contract.

A helpful definition of the social contract in the context of understanding conflict, fragility and state building is provided by OECD/DAC, which defines the social contract as emerging from the interaction between a) expectations that a given society has of a given state; b) state capacity to provide services, including security, and to secure revenue from its population and territory to provide these services; and c) elite will to direct state resources and capacity to fulfil social expectations.

³ *Concepts & Dilemmas of State building in Fragile Situations, OECD/DAC discussion paper 2008*

⁴ The notion of the “social contract” has a long history dating back to Locke and Rousseau.



“Social cohesion”

There is no one agreed definition of “social cohesion”, but common definitions include the following constituent elements (Beauvais and Jenson 2002):⁵

- *Common values and a civic culture*, i.e. society’s members share common values allowing them to identify common aims, share common moral principles and codes of behaviour.
- *Social order and social control*, i.e. absence of general conflict within a society or any serious challenges to the existing order and system.
- *Social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities*, i.e. the harmonious development of society and constituent groups towards common economic, social and environmental standards characterised by equal opportunities and a reduction in income inequality, social exclusion and unemployment.
- *Social networks and social capital*, i.e. the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s interactions.
- *Territorial belonging and identity*, i.e. social cohesion as a sense of belonging to a group or place (although allowing scope for multiple identities).

We find the following definition provided by Colletta and Cullen (2002)⁶ to be the most useful:

“Social cohesion refers to two broader intertwined features of society: (i) the absence of latent conflict whether in the form of income/wealth inequality; racial/ethnic tensions; disparities in political participation; or other forms of polarization; and (ii) the presence of strong social bonds—measured by levels of trust and norms of reciprocity; the abundance of civic society associations and the presence of institutions of conflict management, (i.e. responsive democracy, an independent judiciary, an independent media).”

⁵ As Beauvais and Jenson (2002) point out the definition employed affects what is analysed or measured and what policy action is recommended.

⁶ Colletta, N. J. and Cullen, M. L., 2000, *The Nexus between Violent Conflict, Social Capital and Social Cohesion: Case Studies from Cambodia and Rwanda*, World Bank, Washington DC

