

The Missing Link—Fostering Positive Citizen-State Relations in Post-Conflict Environments



The “conflict trap” is a widely discussed concept in political and development fields alike. Though extensive research has been undertaken and books written, policymakers are still looking for answers to the challenges observed. Unable to respond effectively we continue to witness a large percentage of post-conflict countries slide back into violence and tragedy.

To help these countries and societies emerging from violence climb out of the conflict trap, the international community not only needs to redefine its focus and priorities, but also must break out of its stove-piped assessments and operations.

The *Missing Link* presents a conceptual approach to help policy-makers recognize the societal challenges of post-conflict countries and their relation to governance and long-term stability. The publication shows the shortcoming of the current state-building and reconstruction approach, and it provides policy and operational suggestions on how to design and deliver more effective post-conflict assistance.

This study calls for a change in the way the international aid community operates. It is a fresh and comprehensive look at governance issues that has been missing in the post-conflict reconstruction and state-building debate.

Practitioners will profit from the assessment guide and tool-kit included. Three case studies—Burundi,

Timor Leste and Liberia—serve as examples, illustrating how to understand and approach the policy and operational challenges encountered in the field.

Key Challenges Observed

Severed citizen-state relations, lack of public trust, high expectations for a peace dividend, and a fragmented and traumatized society pose governance challenges that are particular to countries emerging out of violent conflict.

These challenges affect political and social developments, and they can constitute a threat to stability. Their importance is often reflected in “lessons learned” exercises, at a time when it is too late to act.

The *Missing Link* argues that a well-placed series of strategic and coordinated activities can help manage expectations, alter perceptions, build public trust in state institutions and repair citizen-state relations. At the heart of these activities lies the construction or restoration of national dialogue mechanisms and processes that are central to reconnecting citizens with each other and with their state, to rebuilding public trust and to managing expectations after conflict. It is a functioning public sphere that helps to close the space that gives room to peace-spoilers and undermines the success of the transition processes.

A functional public sphere helps to close the societal space that gives room to peace-spoilers and undermines the success of transition processes.

Key Questions:

- What is the public sphere?
- How is the public sphere related to governance and post-conflict recovery?
- How is a national dialogue built?

What Is the Public Sphere?

From a democratic perspective, the study illustrates that the ideal public sphere encompasses a legitimate, inclusive and transparent state that informs the public of its undertakings, political debates, administrative decisions and legislative acts, and provides entry points for public participation.

Further, the ideal public sphere has an active and inclusive civil society that not only empowers citizens to participate in and respond to public discourse, but also can relate to the media and the state. The media is a self-regulated and professional system that has the capacity to objectively collect, analyze and present information to the public. The public is media literate, shares and discusses information, and forms an opinion—a public opinion—about state performance.

Public opinion, articulated by civil society groups and channeled through the media, reaches the state apparatus and influences the acts and decisions of public decision-makers. All this takes place within an enabling environment based on the rule of law, which is shaping constructive relations.

Any practitioner knows that post-conflict environments are far from this ideal. Most often neither state, media nor civil society has the capacity for such dialogue. Participation in decision-making is rarely practiced: more often the government is aloof from the people. Reliable information is unavailable, rumors abound and the environment is not enabling but is defined by uncertainty and lawlessness. Relationships among the different public sphere actors are rarely constructive, and public discourse is shaped by hostile attitudes and interactions.

As the *Missing Link* demonstrates, these exact structural governance challenges are commonly found in post-conflict countries and are at the very heart of the dynamics threatening stability. Addressing them is essential.

How Is the Public Sphere Related to Governance and Post-Conflict Recovery?

In the long run, participation is fundamental to sustainable governance. Robust public sphere dynamics are essential for a participatory political system with a responsive state and an engaged

and trusting citizenry. Building the national public sphere is good for development in all cases, not just in war-to-peace transitions; yet it is here where it acquires critical importance.

As a consequence of violent conflict, state abuse and exclusion, people in post-war areas have little trust in the fair functioning of state institutions and rely on personal networks: tribes, clans, family, religious groups. The fabric of society is torn by displacement and fighting. Government is absent and non-state actors play an important role.

Individual and group mind-sets are framed by the conflict experience, shaping the way they think, act, speak and view themselves and others. Poverty is deep and destruction large-scale. Expectations for a tangible peace-dividend are high. Under such conditions, reconnecting people to the state and managing expectations through inclusive dialogue become priorities.

Post-conflict governments are elected because they promise change toward a better life and accountable public service delivery. Even if supplemented by political will, such a change agenda is likely to be challenged by slow aid delivery and by resistance from those profiting under status quo.

Citizens who are not informed enough to understand the reasons underlying such delays are likely attribute the lack of visible improvements to a lack of political will. The consequent loss of trust in the fledging state institutions can be easily exploited by those with a vested interest in renewed unrest.

Building an inclusive public dialogue and giving a voice and a stake to a wide group of societal stakeholders is essential to avoid renewed fragmentation and violence. In the end, it is the citizens' cumulative decision to trust the state's

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How Is a National Dialogue Built?

Power-holders are unlikely to put political will behind the implementation of transparent and participatory governance unless they are convinced that it will contribute to the long-term stability of their own political survival. Understanding both the need for information sharing and the value of participatory processes for stability requires a change of mind-set.

Many stakeholders fail to recognize how profoundly conflict and military background affect the way actors perceive information and dialogue. It is here where the building of a national dialogue has to begin.

Crucial steps to facilitate public sphere processes are establishing dialogue mechanisms and capacities. The public sphere is systemic: unless all actors—state, civil society, and media—have an enabling environment to engage their "speaking" and "listening" capacities, the public dialogue will not function.

Building comprehensive parallel societal and environmental capacities is essential to ensure sustainability and avoid imbalances.

Policy Recommendations

Current donor policy places great emphasis on the importance of state building in post-conflict assistance. Restoring public sector capacity and service delivery is recognized as central to long-term stability. Similarly, donors acknowledge the relevance of a vibrant civil society and a professional media sector for successful war-to-peace transitions.

Operationally and conceptually these two areas are treated as separate sectors. Current stove-piping practices leave no space for a “big picture view” and coordination across program areas. They fail to support the synergistic processes that serve as connective tissue, linking state institutions, civil society and media together. This oversight is responsible for incomplete governance assessments, loss of synergies, reduced impact and, most importantly, missed opportunities.

If overlooked, the damage done by dysfunctional public sphere dynamics makes any later intervention difficult and costly. Incorporating the public sphere framework in early post-conflict needs assessments and intervention frameworks will enable donors to comprehensively and strategically repair citizen-state relations, manage expectations and build trust in the fledgling governance institutions and the reconstruction process. This is the missing link in the current state-building and governance agenda.

To help post-conflict societies more effectively, donor assistance policy should incorporate the

following elements to support public sphere dynamics:

- Apply the public sphere governance framework early in post-conflict assessments.
- Think systematically. Ensure cross-sector planning and donor coordination to create synergies and to capture public sphere dynamics.
- Work with civil society, media and government to ensure a common understanding of and respect for their respective roles. Promote programs to increase interaction.
- In building state institutions, pay particular attention to the creation of entry points for public participation and to the “listening” capacity of both, central and local structures.
- Pay attention that media sector development and communication capacity within government go hand-in-hand, as one outpacing the other carries the risk of manipulation or alienation.
- Promote inclusive national civil society networks and internal, downward accountability within these networks.
- Support civic education programs that promote public understanding about the right to information.
- Develop legislative frameworks and cultivate political will and resources—engage in strategic advocacy.
- Do not accept the purely political nature of language choices; provide evidence and advice on the economic and social cost of exclusive language policies.
- Donor behavior tends to be exclusive and to lack transparency: practice what you preach!

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

CommGAP is funded through a multi-donor trust fund. The founding donor of this trust fund is the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

CommGAP has launched a blog entitled *People, Spaces, Deliberation* to share ideas about the role of the democratic public sphere in governance among a growing global community of practice with members who are united in their commitment to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. The blog is addressing issues such as accountability, governance, media development, anti-corruption, post-conflict environments, and public opinion.

Join the conversation at <http://publicsphere.worldbank.org>.

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